Chapter V
The Building Blocks for Creativity in Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

As the popularity of virtual teams continues to rise, those who manage and are part of virtual teams must be aware of how to enhance the effectiveness of and foster creativity in virtual teams. To provide assistance, this chapter presents a model that outlines five building blocks for enhancing and supporting creative work in virtual teams. The five building blocks are—design, climate, resources, norms and protocols, and continual assessment. By building and maintaining each of the five building blocks discussed in this chapter, virtual teams may move to higher levels of creativity and ultimately success. The chapter begins with a review of the relevant literature, including prominent models of virtual team performance, and factors necessary for creativity in teams in general. The second section in the chapter describes the methodology that guided the current research from which the five building blocks model emerged. The third section of the chapter offers a detailed description of each of the five building blocks for creativity in virtual teams. Lastly, an integrative model is proposed which links the five building blocks back to the earlier discussed models of virtual team performance. The chapter closes with a discussion of the current research's limitations and ideas for future researchers of virtual team creativity.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations across the globe, and the leaders that guide them now recognize that they do not have a monopoly on all knowledge and wisdom. These same leaders also realize that business innovation, which is increasingly becoming more complex, is and will continue to be critical for company survival. To address these challenges, and strive for continual creativity and innovation in a competitive market, managers, leaders, and employees are becoming aware of the need for new forms of collaborative work structures that require working with others who cross time, geographic, and cultural boundaries.

The myriad of group collaborative structures available today include formal collaborative structures, such as teams and work groups, and informal structures, such as communities of practice, learning networks, and professional societies (Beyerlein & Harris, 2004). Advances in information technology have made feasible and more widespread the use of *virtual* group collaborative structures. In these types of collaborative structures, team members may reside across the globe and can join together and work through information technology, achieving high levels of collaboration, creativity, and productivity, without being colocated.

In addition to the challenges of global competition, the nature of work in contemporary organizations has and will continue to change. Contemporary work has been classified on a continuum from routine to nonroutine activities (Mohrman, Cohen, & Mohrman, 1995). Routine work is conceptualized as work that is programmed, involves repeated patterns, is static and can be easily understood. Nonroutine work, on the other hand, is emergent in nature, varied and unique, interdependent, dynamic, complex, and uncertain. Today, routine work is becoming automated, and much of the work that remains is knowledge-based and nonroutine.

As the popularity of virtual teams continues to rise, those who manage and are part of virtual teams must be aware of how to enhance the effectiveness of and foster creativity in virtual teams. To provide assistance, a new area of study has emerged, in which team researchers and practitioners are developing theories and tools for creating effective virtual teams. This chapter presents one such theory—a model that outlines five building blocks for enhancing and supporting creative work in virtual teams.

In the first section of this chapter, relevant background literature is reviewed, including prominent models of virtual team performance, and factors necessary for creativity in teams in general. The second section describes the methodology that guided the current research from which the five building blocks model emerged. The five building blocks are described in detail in the third section. Finally, an integrative model is proposed which links the five building blocks back to the earlier discussed models of virtual team performance. The chapter closes with a discussion of the current research's limitations and ideas for future researchers of virtual team creativity.

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

Although theoretical models of virtual team effectiveness are in their infancy stages and more are forthcoming, current researchers have identified several important factors that influence virtual team performance. One of the first models of virtual team effectiveness was outlined by Lipnack and Stamps (1997, 2000). In their model, four elements form the foundation for virtual team effectiveness—purpose, people, links, and time. All effective virtual teams, they suggest, begin with the first element—*purpose*.

Purpose is the element that sustains and initiates the work process. For Lipnack and Stamps (2000), purpose is the "source of life and inner fire" for effective virtual teams. They use the term purpose to encompass a broad range of terms—from the abstract vision to the more increasingly concrete mission, goals, tasks, and results.

The second crucial element for effective virtual teams is the very *people* that make them up. People includes team members, team leaders, the level of number of people in a particular team (rings of involvement), and the roles people play in their teams.

People in virtual teams must be connected together with the third element—*links*. Each type of link (media or communication tool) can be evaluated for features that influence its effectiveness, cost, and accessibility. Links can be classified by the criteria of interaction, speed, and memory.