

Virtual Teams

How to Achieve Business Results Across Time, Space or Function

Jimmy Roberts was a star today! At the tender age of 9, Jimmy broke free from the crowd, ran across the field and scored the winning goal in the Saturday's Kiddy League Soccer match.



In kids' soccer, players mature from "Herd Ball," where they clump together and chase the ball en-masse, to a "Spread the field offense." It's amazing to watch. Kids figure this out at different times, but sooner or later an enterprising kid will pop her head up — even if only for a second — and understands that eventually the ball will break out, and if she can position herself in the right spot, she will have an open field in front of her to run to the goal and shoot. Get to the right spot too early and she'll look silly, too late and the herd will roll right past her.

Twenty-first century business success parallels this shift from Herd Ball to strategic engagement, but it goes far beyond learning how to play better together. Expertise and knowledge are scattered across a broad business network. With increased complexity in our jobs, almost insurmountable competition for available resources, and the never-ending need to improve performance, we need people who can break free from traditional practices; people who know how to run to the right places and perform more effectively.

Unfortunately, too often we mistakenly believe that all we need to do is hook up a Polycom, create a web conference and link subject matter experts electronically. In actuality, what tends to result from this is an "Electronic Herd" stampeding recklessly toward miscommunication, costly rework and last minute meetings urgently called to make sure customer relationships are not further compromised.

Organizations must develop new ways to manage performance and make decisions. We call this new emphasis on collaboration "Virtual Teaming," a process that fosters communication, increases accountability, and leverages today's technology.

Definition

Virtual Team: Two or more people who share accountability for deliverables, but cannot consistently meet face to face.

When the work must get done and you cannot meet face to face, where do you turn? What change can we make that will — or could — enable better problem-solving? Expedite work flow? Facilitate collaboration?

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Navigating Your Organization's Future

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Against a backdrop of collaboration, Virtual Team development draws upon a unique, interdependent framework of skills, structure and systems. While not new, this framework requires processes not traditionally within the experience of management staff.



Let's review the new leadership agenda...

Collaboration.

The full impact of your business is distributed across multiple disciplines and experts, often located in different departments or possibly different regions of the country. Today, the customer satisfaction stakes are high; the ante is collaboration. Skills, structure and systems blend to make work happen in new, faster and cost effective ways.

Skills

Training and development provide critical updates for managers. In most cases, virtual teams can move toward greater collaboration with existing skills, but an expectation should be set for continuous improvement in the following areas:

- *Project Management* — While PERT charts and heavy-duty resource allocation may not be required for virtual teams, team members must learn how to manage their work in stages against predefined deliverables. The ability to spec work, charter teams and manage risk is Virtual Teams 101.

- *Process Management* — Understanding from where work comes, what is done to it, and where it goes next defines true

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Facilitation is Good for Your Health!

Training for new managers in process improvement techniques had been provided to managers at the Texas Children's Health Plan for many years. But President, Christopher M. Born was faced with the common problem of ensuring his team was fully utilizing their newfound skills. The solution came through formalizing the team process via the use of a facilitator.

The TCHP strategic plan dictated that several processes should be targeted for improvement, so teams were formed to get it done. Each team spent a full day with an Orion facilitator as a kickoff, developing an action plan, mapping the "as-is" process, and identifying key metrics. Subsequent meetings led to dramatic results in a very short period of time, including:

- *The number of days required to add a provider to the network was reduced over 50%*
- *The member retention rate was increased from 65% to 76%, resulting in a significant saving, in both medical expense and marketing cost, to the Health Plan by keeping members enrolled.*
- *The number of claim errors due to provider selection was reduced by 48%.*

What a great example of putting training into practice. Congratulations, TCHP!

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24x7 work. Virtual team members must learn how to analyze processes, recognize where value is created and associate cost to each segment.

- *Team Management* — People are people, with a myriad of personalities, styles and habits. It is easier to work with some than it is with others, and often, those with exceptional expertise act individually. Getting high performers to play together virtually requires new techniques.

- *Conflict Management* — It is inevitable that goal-oriented people will collide with one another. In and of itself, conflict is neither good nor bad, but what team members can do to each other can be horrible. Since most team members will live to work on another team, techniques that bring issues to the surface must be learned.

- *Outsourcing/Networking* — Capacity to meet deadlines and expand expertise are waiting for virtual team members who learn how to partner effectively. Virtual teams never have to say “No,” to a customer.

- *Cost/Risk Management* — Team members cannot make good decisions unless they know what something costs, and the risks associated with stopping, delaying or placing extra resources against work.

Structure

The traditional silo structure of leadership, with its well defined span of control, fails to deliver the needed results in most virtual settings. Rarely does a virtual team have the luxury of dedicated resources. Instead we have half of one person, an arm of a second and one-day-every-two-weeks from a third. To expand collaboration, team members draw their identity not from the people to whom they report or the job title they hold, but from the groups with which they associate. Indeed, in some cases organizations discover that reward and compensation no longer support need levels

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While you're there, please visit the Orion Development Group exhibit and tell us how your firm's process management journey is progressing.

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of collaboration. Virtual team leadership hinges on one's ability to tap expertise when needed, sustain commitment until work is completed, and the building of coalitions. In a virtual team structure, people are selected for team engagement, not "stuck" on another team. They are chosen based on their merit, not reporting structure.

Systems

Great leaders including Julius Caesar and Saint Paul managed dispersed teams quite effectively, all without benefit of a wireless device. While collaboration is not about technology, as teams form and learn to engage technology certainly makes it easier. For many, team meetings have never been a high-point of a work day. If traditional meetings are considered bad, throwing technology at them can make them even worse. Virtual teams must re-learn how to manage their data, engage one another in new ways, and support the work of other people as if it were their own.

Virtual teams begin by asking each member to think of him/herself as the architect of a new business. This may be a new role for many team players, especially those with very high technical skills. Balancing skills, system and structure will help the team build a context for emerging collaboration that shifts emphasis from controlling activities to enabling team members to manage their own businesses.

Upcoming Virtual Teams Seminars

New Brunswick, NJ	April 20-21
Minneapolis, MN	April 26-27
Austin, TX	May 18-19
Troy, MI	June 7-8

Visit http://odgroup.com/seminars/virtual_teams.html for more information.

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