VIRTUAL TEAMS
MEETING THE NEXT CHALLENGE FOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual reality. Virtual organizations. Virtual education. Wherever one turns today, there is a virtual *something* emerging. Not the least of these virtual phenomena is the virtual team. Where did this new organizational form come from? is it going to last? how is it unique? And how can educators prepare students to cope with the problems and function effectively in the unique environment presented by virtual teams? This paper will address these issues along with the skills employees and managers must have so they can achieve team and organizational goals.

DEFINITION OF VIRTUAL TEAMS

Restructuring, or changing an organization's structure in an attempt to improve and enhance performance, is an ongoing activity. Changing external and internal environments and technological innovations offer a rationale for continuous organizational rearrangements. The functional and divisional structures which dominated management history have morphed into more hybrid structures which emphasize teams, networks, fewer levels of management, improved communications technologies, wider spans of control, more delegation, and empowerment. The reality today is employees in both large and small businesses are less and less likely to see each other day-to-day. Employees and managers may be distanced across the world, the country, or simply work in different parts of the same city. These distances may be exacerbated by time differences. One solution to this problem of separation by time and distance is the formation of virtual teams.

`THE CHALLENGE FOR EXPERIENTIAL EDUCATION

Virtual teams are not an "if." They are already here and in use by many organizations. Successful virtual teams do not happen just because someone gets a computer, a modem and a yen to work with someone at a distance. Successful virtual team management requires that the team manager understand the significance and interaction of the ingredients that make virtual teams productive, the Six Ts of Virtual Teams:

- Team formation
- Training
- Task definition
- Telecommunications
- Tools
- Trust

Just like face-to-face teams, virtual teams evolve through the developmental stages of team evolution. The successful virtual team manager purposefully steers team members through these stages of team formation.

Training implies instructing the members of virtual teams, not only on how to use the new technologies, but also how to adapt to new organizational structures and goals. These new organizational structures are shifting away from hierarchies with strict reporting relationships toward hybrid structures in which team membership spans organizational boundaries and blurs static reporting relationships.

Successful virtual team performance requires the elimination of ambiguity through the explicit definition of task objectives and clear

establishment of team member roles and responsibilities for those objectives.

Telecommunications is the underpinning of virtual teams; the technology that builds the framework and allows one worker to communicate with another at a distance. It allows extensive person-to-person links, information sharing and real-time collaboration. Virtual team technology includes both the computing devices and the communications networks necessary to provide the infrastructure for virtual team to operate.

The tools for virtual team success are the groupware collaboration tools that enable the team to work together as a unit. These groupware tools let multiple group members work together on the same project component by supporting shared effort, collaboration, and cooperation.

Virtual teams must develop trust among their members since they operate in an environment dependent on the performance of persons outside their sphere of influence.

The challenge for educators is how to revamp existing team building classes and exercises to emphasize the Six Ts for VT success and at the same time not introduce any more artifices than necessary. For example, consider the following ethical discussion question: Is it ethical for a teacher to monitor student email messages to insure that there is no unapproved collaboration taking place. Experience has shown that students almost unanimously consider monitoring of email to be unethical. Even when the email occurs on university provided computing systems. Follow that discussion with the following question: Is it ethical for a VT manager to monitor a team's email archive to determine if there are nascent conflicts developing. Also, if that is not ethical, how is the manager to discover those conflicts before they disrupt team harmony and productivity.

A major challenge to experiential exercises for VTs is the question of how to compensate for the different time, different place virtual team environment. For example as stated previously, VTs miss the valuable face-to face cues (e.g., facial expressions, gestures, and vocal inflections) easily observed in traditional team meetings. Without these cues communication is more difficult and participants must reconstruct communication patterns in ways that give them the information these cues provide. VT exercises require innovation in creating this virtual environment in the traditional classroom. One example of this innovation is the Global Virtual Team Exercise at the University of Texas http://www.bus.utexas.edu/~jarvenpaa/gvt/gvt99/index.html .

CONCLUSION

Virtual teams are an organizational transformation whose time has arrived. Effective management and team member participation in virtual teams requires an adaptation of current experiential exercises to incorporate the knowledge and behaviors required for successful virtual team performance. There is a broad spectrum of available options from changing the format of existing experiential exercises to the creation of entire virtual team worlds such as the University of Texas Global Virtual Team Exercise.

References available upon request.