

CHAPTER 6

Recommendations and Conclusions

This chapter provides recommendations and conclusions that were derived from observations from both the case and Delphi studies and some final concluding remarks.

Recommendations

Include Face-to-face Time

Have an initial face-to-face team meeting for the team members to get together, meet each other, and socialize. Meet face-to-face periodically throughout the life of the project. These meetings will help to establish ties, relationships, and trust among team members which are important for an effective team. In addition, many problems can be resolved when people meet face-to-face.

Keep the Project Visible

Many team members consider overall project visibility important. This includes the overall schedule, progress toward goals, and how each team member fits in. Team leaders can send team members copies of the project schedule or provide an electronic view of the project schedule on-line using the Internet. For example, project management schedule charts can be published on the Internet using the teams web site. The primary idea here is to improve the quality and type of communications with all team members.

Avoid or Reduce Communications Delays

Team leaders should recognize that the combination of multiple time zones, busy team members, and electronic communications will likely result in communications delays. This may become a significant problem. One way to begin to address this problem is with the establishment of ground rules or group norms. The team could establish ground rules that could include a principle of acknowledging a request for information with 24 or 48 hours for example. A complete response to a request might require more time, but at least the person requesting the information would know that the request was received and would be worked. Note: this will probably require peer pressure to be effective, and there are no guarantees.

Keep Team Members Visible

Use the Internet or work-group calendaring software to store team members calendars. While this could be difficult to maintain on a daily basis, it should not be difficult to keep up with scheduled out-of-town absences such as vacations or business travel. Another approach is to include in the ground rules that when a team member is going to be out of town that other team members will be notified by electronic mail or telephone. Electronic mail with a distribution list is both effective and efficient.

Augment Text Only Communications

Text only communications is good for basic communications, but it is not a replacement for graphics or images for many purposes. For example, a diagram illustrating a conference room layout can be very effective in communicating

seating arrangements. If graphical forms of communications are important, there are several ways this can be accomplished: (1) some email systems will support graphics, but this can be limited if different types of email systems are involved; (2) Federal Express or U.S. Mail works even if it is slow by electronic standards; (3) FAX; and (4) electronic publishing on the Internet. The key is choosing the appropriate means of communications and following through.

Use Computer Supported Cooperative Work Technologies Where Possible

Computer supported cooperative work applications are designed for people working together in a variety of times and places situations. Unfortunately for many distributed teams, there is no common information and communications technology infrastructure available except for basic email or the telephone. Lotus Notes is probably the most widely used application, but not everyone has access to it. The World-Wide Web is the closest universal application that most people have access to. The Internet/World-Wide Web combined with email can provide reasonable communications capability and visibility to many teams today.

Establish Ground Rules or Group Norms

Ground rules are important for teams to establish. They are useful in determining how team members interact and what kind of behavior is accepted. These ground rules assist in preventing misunderstandings and disagreements (Scholtes, 1988).

Take Time Out for Self-assessment

Periodic assessment is important to determine where the team is vis-à-vis where it is going. Team leaders should periodically stop to examine how well the team is functioning and see if anything is interfering with its effectiveness (Parker, 1996). Early detection of problems combined with early correction will save the project time and money later.

Recognize People

If team leaders recognize peoples' contributions to team goals, people will respond to recognition. Recognition does not have to be in the form of a raise, a promotion, or stock options; recognition can be as inexpensive as a simple "thank you." Recognition should be public. Organizations and teams can adopt and adapt the example of recognition from Military organizations where recognition in the form of medals and insignias is given in a public setting. Kouzes and Posner (1995) make the point that, "public recognition also builds commitment, because it makes people's actions visible to their peers and therefore difficult to deny or revoke" (p. 287). In a virtual environment, where the team cannot physically meet, recognition could be given in a voice or video conference setting or perhaps even more informally using email with all team members copied in a distribution list.

Learn from Experience

Team leaders can learn from other team experiences. Data collected over time can be organized into knowledge bases, FAQs can be established, and other useful forms of information can be made available for sharing. For

example, collecting information about hosting a conference and storing it in a data base, and refining it over time would most likely improve the ability for new teams to be successful. Finally, keep a well documented project workbook and turn it over to the next team.

Conclusions

The following observations are noted by comparing the outcomes of both the Delphi study and case study.

There were few major leadership differences between the teams studied in the Delphi study and the case study. There was more variation in perspectives and responses in the Delphi study possibly because there were more than one team studied. Most teams studied meet face-to-face at least once and it was important in team building and in creating trust. Some communications problems and difficulties were attributable to time and distance. Information and communications technologies used by the teams were the same.

Some implications for virtual teams are the following.

1. Virtual teams are effective. Virtual teams work. With one exception, virtual teams achieved the targeted goals of the project.
2. People can be trusted in a virtual environment. This is related to the finding above on effectiveness. Team members were given significant tasks and these tasks were accomplished without being directly observed by a manager.

3. Electronic mail and the telephone were the primary information and communications technologies used. These information and communications technologies will change over time as new technologies such as Internet access, desktop conferencing, and electronic whiteboards become widely deployed.
4. Few virtual teams were 100% virtual. Most teams had at least some face-to-face interactions. Face-to-face interactions were considered very important in most teams studied. In teams that were essentially work groups with little interaction required between team members and where team members produced primarily independent work products, face-to-face interaction was not as important.

Concluding Thoughts

Two concluding thoughts regarding the study are as follows:

First, this is one of the first studies on leadership in virtual teams this researcher is aware of in the public domain. This study only touched on a few aspects of leadership such as the importance of face-to-face contact, information and communications technologies used, and rewards and recognition. There are many other aspects of leadership in virtual teams that could be studied such as setting and shaping mission statements, setting goals, and establishing ground rules in a virtual environment, leading virtual teams with team members of different cultures, leadership of virtual teams where security issues such as access to computers and team members maintaining “confidential” or “limited” materials at

home is important, power and influence or charismatic leadership in virtual environments, education and training requirements of team members in a virtual environment, and education and training delivered electronically to virtual teams.

Second and last, the pace of change is quickening today driven by transportation, information, and communications technologies which in turn support the forces of change we see around us: globalization, population migrations, increasing gaps between rich and poor, and the shift to knowledge based economies to name a few. “In a future of compressed time windows and dwindling margins and budgets, where ad hoc teams are formed overnight to solve problems the next day, teams will be unable to physically materialize from the far corners of the earth” (Knoll, 1995, p. 2). Virtual teams are here to stay. As information and communications technologies advance over the next few years enabling real-time video conferencing virtual teams will tend to become almost real, as team members will be able to see each other at the same time and work on the same documents at the same time using all the normal social cues. Where differences in time and space prevent teams from coming together in real-time, technologies will enhance this virtual environment as well. Teams are able to work together anytime and anywhere today—it is only going to become easier.