

Building organizational trust in virtual teams

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A virtual organizational project team can consist of members from all parts of the world. What makes virtual teams succeed or fail? This article contends that trust is the root of any team's success and will show that cross-cultural understanding and communication play significant roles in building organizational trust.

The article briefly discusses prevailing theories about cultures in organizations, in order to establish a baseline of understanding of cross-cultural views on trust. I will use this information to make recommendations on specific steps to develop trust in building successful virtual teams.

Keywords: virtual teams, communication, cultural understanding, trust, project team

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Introduction

People's sense of trust is developed with every interaction with one another. Trust cannot be "designed into" an organization. It is built, like a brick wall, layer-by-layer, with shared experiences as the mortar. A project team, brought together to complete a major task, does not have these "walls" to build a foundation upon and therefore starts its project without established trust. Many researchers feel that trust is main foundation of successful teams (Bennett, 1996; Hart & Saunders, 1997).

Today's virtual project teams are at a disadvantage because they are not working face-to-face. Further, the building of organizational trust, especially at a global level, is impeded by cultural and communication difficulties. Trust then must be built by frequent interaction, shared information, and the development of a joint organizational culture (Badaracco, 1991; Bennett, 1996).

To build trust in virtual teams, we must first understand the cultures involved.

Communication and Culture

When partnerships emanate from different cultures (global, national and organizational), the cultural differences in communication can create hurdles (Kim, 1991; Mohr & Nevin, 1990). It can be influenced by the fit between national and organizational cultures (Fox, 1997; Li, 1999), as well as by the cultural diversity of members and ownership structure of the relationship.

When business partners come from very different national cultural backgrounds, inconsistencies in communication may hamper performance. An understanding of national culture provides some understanding relating to expected behavior in a variety of situations, including communication (Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Moon, 1996). Differences in organizational cultures can lead to miscommunications and the deterioration of joint efforts (Veiga, Lubatkin, Calori, & Very, 2000).

As no two cultures are identical, negotiation of communication and cultural protocols must occur (Kim, 1991). A new, unique communication environment must be created within the partnerships involved. Casmir (1999) indicates that protocols, appropriateness, monitoring, and feedback mechanisms must all be dynamically adjusted, thus suggesting not only communication interaction, but also cultural interaction.

Understanding Organizational Culture

Edgar Schein (1996a) believed that there are three types of culture evidence that exist in all organizations: *Artifacts* - physical, visible, audible, and tactile evidence of underlying cultural assumptions; *Shared values* - why things remain as they are; *Basic assumptions* - the invisible but identifiable reasons why group members perceive, think, and feel the way they do about external survival and internal operational issues

Artifacts include such things as behavior that can be seen (i.e.-"This is the way we do this"), the physical environment (i.e.-who get's an office? who get's a cubical?) and the standards of behavior (i.e.-dress codes, preferred parking). Artifacts also include shared stories, and myths. Shared values include such things as codes of ethics, company value statements,

mission statements and vision. Basic assumptions comprise such things as a mission, means of problem solving, relationships, time, and space. Schein (1996b) further contended that these categories were true of all cultures globally, but cultural differences lie in *interpretations* of these categories.

Heenan & Perlmutter (1979) contend that global organizations can also have an operational culture. They might be *home country oriented*, where they operate independently and autonomously and focus on local objectives; *regionally oriented*, operating interdependently within a limited area and focusing on regional issues; or *globally oriented*, operating interdependently on a worldwide basis, with worldwide objectives and extensive cultural diversity.

Richard D. Lewis (2001), in his book When Cultures Collide, contends that the national and regional cultures of the world can be generally classified into three groups; *Linear-Active*, *Multi-active*, and *Reactive*. These classifications consider such things as being task oriented or people oriented, highly organized or loosely organized, introverted or extroverted, time-oriented or task oriented, confrontational or reserved. He offers examples.

Fons Trompenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner (2001) look at culture from the aspect of how "problem solving" occurs. They define seven value dimensions that shape how a culture approaches problem solving. Does the organization firm in setting rules and standardization? Do they tend to think of themselves as individuals or part of a group? Do they contain emotions or express them freely? Do they see their life as segments, each unique unto itself or do they see their life segments as parts of a whole? Do they value social position or performance? Do they look for short-term or long-term success? Do people view themselves as part of nature or as masters of nature?

Geert Hofstede (1980) found differences existed in four dimensions that were typical for each country; *Power distance* - the extent to which the less powerful accept power distributed unequally, *Individualism* - Does the society value the good of the few or the good of the many? *Masculinity* - The extent to which social gender roles are distinct within a society, *Uncertainty avoidance* - The extent to which a group feels threatened by the unknown.

Conclusions

These scholars and others have recognized that each culture, including our own, has its own unique characteristics that function as a "moral compass" guiding the way they meet the challenges of life. To paraphrase Ernest Hemingway, it is critical that all virtual partners seek "not to judge, but to understand" and use this understanding to help all partners to establish clear goals and objectives, to communicate a commitment that is highly relevant to each member, to encourage compromise on less important issues and to clearly understand and accept the rules and procedures of the organization.

Recommendation

This suggests the following course of action when preparing your organization for global partnerships:

1. Enlist outside experts to help you establish an honest assessment of the cultural identity of your individual group. Impartial third parties offer the best opportunity for an unbiased review. To

paraphrase Robert Burns, it is almost impossible to “see ourselves as others see us”. (Holsti, 2008)

2. Encourage/require your potential global partners to also enlist outside experts to help them establish an honest assessment of the cultural identity of their individual group, for the same reasons (Holsti, 2008).
3. Each group then develops their vision of the other groups’ cultural profile and, more importantly, the reasons they think “why that other group thinks and acts the way they do.”
4. At this point, a joint meeting of the groups must be held. Ideally, it would be a “face-to-face”, or by closed-circuit television or webinar. The impartial third party, supported by senior management of both groups, would present the misconceptions that each group has about the other. Hopefully, all could recognize their prejudices, and proceed to plan accordingly.
5. Proceed to jointly develop the combined teams goals, objectives and long-term plan.
6. Jointly develop very clear goals, objectives and long-term plans. Each should include WHO (the specific people who will take action), WHAT (the intent of the objective), and WHEN (specific times for Who to accomplish WHAT). Goals should be specific and realistic, attainable and measurable, have completion deadlines. Measure and evaluate success.

When all parties “seek not to judge but to understand”, real success begins.

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