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Performance Through Relationships. Towards a Cohesive Virtual Intercultural Team

1. Virtualization at Workplace

“Results through teamwork” – a slogan present at many global layers of the contemporary world. For many, this is also a core value defining the model of working, and the desired form of relationships between employees. Yet, as a result of global expansion, team members are more and more frequently dispersed in different locations, sometimes even in different time zones. In many cases, various locations mean crossing cultural borders. The world starts working in the mode of virtual intercultural teams.

Geographically distributed work is not new but it has received increased attention in recent years. Why is it becoming more widespread? There are three important trends towards explaining it. The first one: large and also smaller companies in well-developed countries have increased their outsourcing of tasks to contractors in other countries, the model which is known as offshoring. Currently, there is a trend towards offshoring knowledge-based services. The second one: multinational corporations have shifted employment within their own boundaries. They are increasing their employment in developing countries through new investments designed to provide more market opportunities. The third trend: all types of enterprises take advantage of lower costs and improved performance of information and communications technology [MacDuffie 2007, p. 550]. Next to team members themselves, technology plays a key role in communication in a virtual work environment.

The degree of diversity has probably reached its highest level ever. In the circumstances of global expansion, no other means have proven so effective as the creative use of diversity: diversity of perspectives, ways of thinking, preferences, opinions, education, and cultures. Diversity is an asset not easy to use. Like fire, it needs to be handled carefully. Used in a proper way, it will produce results that few other factors could generate.

Why would the diversity of cultures in a team be an exquisite asset? If handled with care, different opinions, preferences about ways of working, various mindsets will result in understanding various markets and diverse customers. Teams whose members have various backgrounds will be more creative, more flexible, and more responsive to the needs of the fluctuating environment. How to get and maintain these positive outcomes of teamwork? The baseline for effective and smooth teamwork of a virtual and intercultural team can sometimes be challenging to obtain: its cohesion.

2. Virtual Team Cohesion

In any environment, teamwork is fundamentally social and bases on relationships between and among team members. Cohesion is critical for team functioning in both collocated and virtual environments. How to create relationships among people who have never seen each other, never met face to face? How to have good communication, effective problem solving, proper customer care? In a virtual setting, it needs special attention – this is another reason why virtual team leaders need to develop extra competencies [as in: Chutnik, Grzesik 2009, pp. 87–89].

Building cohesion of virtual intercultural team is a process which encompasses various aspects, such as team atmosphere, learning and information sharing, self-image and team identity, personalities and habits, practical tools, team development and planning processes [Nemiro, Beyerlein, Bradley, Beyerlein 2008, pp. 93–96]. Let us have a closer look at them.

2.1. Team atmosphere

Team atmosphere is both the baseline and the outcome of team cohesion. How to establish and maintain good team atmosphere in a team whose members are working in different regions, countries or even on different continents? The process can turn out to be quite challenging. Usually, it is necessary to plan time dedicated specifically and exquisitely to team building. During team building activities team members have the opportunity to get to know each other and learn about common interests, goals, or even fears. Wisely applied, such activities will not only bring team members together on the personal level but will also enrich their cultural sensitivity. Cultural knowledge can be increased by providing information about the local customs, traditions, geography, government, economy and current events of a country. Team members should gain this

knowledge, discover common areas and become more skilled at cross-cultural communication and adaptability [Combs, Peacocke 2007, p. 28]. Understanding each other on the personal and on the cultural level can help to build good and open atmosphere among team members.

Good atmosphere in a team is also connected with trust. What is not easy to observe in a collocated team, can be even more difficult to influence, develop or just steer in a virtual setting. What is more, depending on the culture of origin, the intensity of demand for trust can also differ. Information technology used in virtual teams can change the context of human relationship and trust [Jarvenpaa, Shaw, Staples 2004, p. 250] but it would not eliminate the need for it. Building and maintaining trust in virtual teams requires much more effort than in face-to-face teams but is necessary for gaining benefits of teamwork.

2.2. Learning and information sharing

Team members as individuals and as a group constitute the biggest part of any organization's intellectual capital. This capital plays an essential role in achieving key objectives of an organization. To work well, team members need to learn good teamwork practices. If the team wants to create competitive advantage, it is necessary to use knowledge cumulated in team members' minds.

Team learning is essential to accelerating organizational results. The team learning concept is vital when [Moran 2005, pp. 459–460] diverse perspectives are needed to have the knowledge and skills to meet the deadlines, when a cross-functional team is working on a new problem outside the scope of other issues, when the deadline is tight and people have limited resources to get the project done, or when innovation is essential to design and implement new products and services.

Team learning goes hand in hand with skills such as listening, giving feedback and presenting ideas to other team members. Another desired skill is the ability to reflect on one's own and team experience. Reflection is the time for the team to share what went well and to identify changes necessary to keep the team moving forward [Moran 2005, p. 460].

Sharing information can be connected with the need to become more competitive by bringing innovative products and services to the global market better and faster than competitors. Bringing together a wide and diverse range of knowledge, expertise, competencies and skills gives opportunity to create culturally synergistic solutions and operate better than competitors.

Because of the complex nature of virtual context, the ability to communicate effectively and then sharing knowledge can become a daunting task in a virtual setting. Teams may create mutual knowledge. This mutual knowledge is an important aspect of engendering effective virtual team interactions and, ultimately, team performance [Davis, Khazanchi 2007, p. 57].

2.3. Self-image and team identity

To achieve the benefits of cohesion, separate members first need to understand themselves not only as a group of individuals working together – they need to understand themselves as a unique entity: a team. This means that the relationship to the external environment needs to be clear. A team needs to have a clear understanding how it can relate itself to the external world, how it is most likely perceived by others and – what is maybe even more crucial – how it *wants to* be perceived. Creating the team's self-image should not be a result of a coincidence but needs to be taken care of from the very first days of the team's existence. The very first step towards creating the team's self image would be to create a **name** for the team – an excellent opportunity for a discussion about how the members want to feel about their affiliation. A good team name can be a vehicle for positive identification, energy, professionalism, customer focus, etc.

The other aspect of team identity is the answer to a basic identity question: Why do we exist? What is the purpose of our working together as a team? What do we want to achieve through working together? Answering these questions could easily be compared to working out the **vision and mission** of a company – on a smaller scale. It is important that all team members agree with and accept this vision and mission [as in: Dewar 2006, p. 23]. In a virtual and intercultural context, it can mean that sometimes very long discussions are needed so that everyone's voice is heard. Ideally, a part of such discussions could be run in a face to face setting. What consumes more time and effort in the creation phase saves time and effort in the future: team members' actions are aimed at the same direction and it is easier for all to identify priorities. For members joining the team in the future, a ready vision and mission will support the enabling process and will speed up their identification with the team as a whole.

2.4. Personalities and habits

Working in a team is a challenge even in a collocated and monocultural setting. Different personalities and habits can make it difficult to remain effective or to maintain good relationships. In an intercultural setting, the cooperation becomes even more challenging. Let us consider such simple aspects like understanding of time, which has a direct effect on the approach to organizing work (are many things done simultaneously or are tasks done in sequence one after another?) or understanding of what 'punctual' or 'deadline' means in practice (Is it the first possible date of having a task ready or rather the last possible date to be ready with a task?). Simple differences can cause huge misunderstandings and tensions. In both virtual and collocated setting, this would result in communication barriers, doubts about mutual respect, and ultimately – low team performance.

Cross-cultural differences between virtual team members can also be connected with the absence of non-verbal cues. Visual cues such as a posture, smile, nod, voice and eye contact provide important indications and meaning to

understanding of what is communicated by another person. Members coming from culture which relies on body language, gestures, facial expressions and proximity can have difficulties in communicating. What is more, they can have difficulty in establishing trust and relationships with the diverse team members. It is important to know and understand these cross-cultural differences [Zakaria, Amelinckx, Wilemon 2004, p. 23].

What could clarify, or best – prevent such tensions would be working out a common understanding of crucial terms (What do we mean in our team when we say: the deadline is...?), conscious articulation of differences in personalities and habits with both advantages and risks for teamwork, and common clear rules of communication. As members of virtual intercultural teams tend to be rather independent, the recommended option for working out the rules would be to facilitate a discussion among team members and encourage them to find a way that would be most convenient and most effective for all. Good and open team atmosphere will strongly support this process.

2.5. Practical tools

Any virtual team, be it mono- or multicultural, needs to overcome the barrier of space – and frequently also of time. To do it effectively, it needs to have a whole range of communication tools at hand. Fortunately, they are easy to find and obtainable not only in modern rich corporations. It would not be justified to say that face to face communication is the only really effective one. It is more adequate to state: means of communication need to be adjusted to the communication content and context. Long discussions, especially those of strategic importance, would best be run face to face. Most updates, current project information exchange, small brainstorm and questions can be clarified via other synchronous channels: phone or instant messages. Although a conversation by phone can give more personal feeling or more instant feedback, text chatting is an excellent aid in overcoming the difficulties caused by strong accents or insufficient vocabulary in a frequent case of using a foreign language for communication. For communication loaded with data it would be more convenient to use an email or even a shared web space. So, the use of technology should be matched to the needs of the situation in a team. It means that the communications tools need to be integrated with the team's task, the type of project, the type of team and the level of technological advance of team members [Duarte, Snyder 2006, pp. 18–19].

2.6. Team development

Teams may include members who come from different cultures and organizational backgrounds or members who have no previous experience in virtual work. There are many areas for training that can support the work of virtual teams. For example, a team can need some help with learning how

to use modern communication technologies, with developing social capital, monitoring group processes or offering feedback. In addition, monitoring each member's activity in teamwork and fulfilling responsibilities for team's tasks creates opportunity for the right development of the whole team.

Creating a cohesive virtual team takes time and effort but is an important factor enabling taking the full advantage of the team's current and future development. Each of team members is interested in their development and career planning. Promotion and career development policies and actions fair to people who work in a virtual setting help to reinforce the perception that working virtually is an accepted career option [Duarte, Snyder 2006, p. 11]. If virtual team members see that they have promotional opportunities, they will become more involved in teamwork. The development process should be connected with the team diversity.

2.7. Planning process

Planning starts from the very beginning: from the moment when a team has been established. What is needed first are basic ground rules, which will help the team members to get some orientation and will be a springboard for future stabilization. Ideally, team members should be very clear about the team's goals, norms, decision-making processes, problem solving practices, etc. They all would be established via dialogue, asking for possibilities, norms and habits of individual members, and on the other hand, by a guiding voice of the leader in care of whom one is. In the team formation process team members' cultural differences, which directly influence work cycles such as deadline adherence or project management style, need to be made transparent to the team and a synergistic team approach to each concern should be mediated and agreed on [Zakaria, Amelinckx, Wilemon 2004, p. 19]. Developing and implementing standard team processes can help reduce the time for team startup and may eliminate the need for unnecessary reinvention of operating practices each time a team is chartered. Standard technical processes might include the following: definitions of requirements, estimates of costs, procurement, team charters, project planning, documentation and document sharing, reporting, controlling [Duarte, Snyder 2006, p. 17].

A success of a virtual team requires establishing clear communication etiquette. It defines ideal behavior concerning audio and video conferencing, meeting facilitation, the ways of using email and technology. The communication etiquette should be seen as one of the most important factors for a virtual team's success [Combs, Peacocke 2007, p. 27].

3. Conclusions

It is evident that the results of teamwork have the potential to exceed results of individual work. What teams offer to organizations is the potential for combining

various talents, skills, experiences and perspectives of individuals to achieve set objectives. The value of team performance diversity comes from increased creativity, innovation and flexibility. Whether a collocated or a virtual team, it can create synergistic solutions – and the more the diversity is recognized and valued, the higher the team's potential for flexibility and creativity is.

In this sense, the potential coming from diversity can be much higher in virtual intercultural teams. On the other hand, also the risk of mishandling this potential is much more serious than in a collocated setting. Therefore, it is worth investing time and effort to work consciously on developing team cohesiveness and to ensure team performance by taking care of relationships between and among team members. It is an activity to which the team leader and all team members bring equal shares.

The desired synergy effect is possible only when a team is cohesive enough to enable creative exchange and effective cooperation. Basing on a literature review, several areas have been suggested which could help to obtain cohesion of a virtual intercultural team. Would mastering these areas be enough to ensure the success of a virtual intercultural team? Be it so! There are still many questions open about how to build the cohesion properly.

Abstract

Virtual teams create challenges both for their leaders and members. What positively impacts such teams' performance is their cohesiveness. Team cohesion is rooted both in activities of the leader and the members. Basing on literature studies, the article presents a few ways how to build cohesion of a virtual intercultural team. Specifically, it covers aspects such as team atmosphere, learning and information sharing, self-image and team identity, personalities and habits, practical tools, team development and planning process.

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