What are the greatest challenges of working with virtual teams?

answers

VIRTUAL = FACE-TO-FACE Statement:
"The greatest challenges of working with distributed teams are the same challenges as working with face-to-face teams."

Detail

Question: What are the challenges of working with face-to-face teams?

Examples

IDENTIY
The need for all members of the team to be comfortable and confident in their own identity, the identity of their role within the team; their identity as a team, etc.

Other and more comprehensive lists of conditions or features are around! E.g. those by JR Hackman's six conditions that lead to better results (...).

TRUSTFUL COMUNICATION CONTEXT
The need to establish a communication context in which the flow of emerging tensions and ambiguities is surfaced, considered, and addressed.

REASONS FOR FAILURE
Whatever makes team fail in a face-to-face setting will also make it fail in a virtual setting.

The location of people, the processes, tools or systems they use also contribute to enabling or disabling conditions too. (E.g. waterfall approaches to project delivery tends to put people into a blame apportionment/ cover your ass mode of thinking and acting. Agile approaches without collaboratively mature people or compelling direction can equally disable things too – otherwise there would be no need for Agile coaches!)

Pro

Evidence: Expert opinion

Are there other sources of evidence?

Possible approach (not yet put in action): Explore and understand the underlying conditioning and belief systems. Why do people instinctively prefer "face-to-face"?

Anything missing on the list?

Task:

How should items on the list be prioritized?

How do these challenges translate in virtual environments?

Proposals:

VALUES
Culture walks on 2 legs (at least): beliefs and behaviors (2B). It's the way we do things around here and what beliefs we share. Those beliefs direct behaviors – so shared beliefs are important.

Examples: Do we value timely results or perfect results? Do we spend more time – or do we share things earlier or try to sell them before they're perfect?

VISIBILITY
People must be able to literally SEE it each other to feel connected, start to trust each other and get cues from non-verbal communication, and thus a sense of who the other person is, how they do their work and what they deliver.

How?

SYNCHRONOUS AUDIOVISUAL
Skype, teleconferencing, regular face-to-face meetings

DETAIL:
"We used Blackboard for the "live" sessions which combined audio/ video and chat functions. Weekly classes brought us together and anchored the experience in a consistent way. Group work was accomplished using Drive, Wiki pages, Moodle, email, Facebook, Skype and shared websites. One of the key things that seemed to make all of this work was that each class required a full day, in-person class session on campus."

Misc.

Often (but not necessarily) roles and identities of team members are not as clearly shaped in 'virtual' settings

CHOICE OF TOOLS
"I think it helps to appoint some sort of technology stewards - people who monitor the toolset and use of the tools. Often there are many tools available but they are not well used."

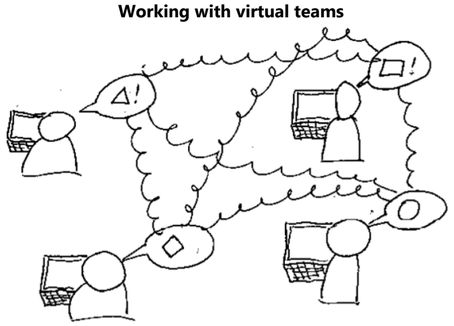
ROBUSTNESS
"The two most useful tools to in making this work as well as we did were a very robust communications infrastructure for conference calling (video was conceptually nice but not available to all and always more trouble than it was worth), and a integrated calendaring function (in this case powered by an enterprise system with Microsoft Exchange and Outlook) that allowed everyone involved to see each other's availability AND to schedule meetings when a discussion was needed for whatever reason.

E.g., members will be distracted more easily by other priorities

E.g., time zones. If it is global, it poses higher risks that people will not attend.

Anything missing?

Working with virtual teams



Will virtual teams ever be able to replace old fashioned communication culture in organizations?

answers

NEVER!
Assumption: "Virtual teams cannot replace face to face working groups."

Pro

ESSENTIALS MISSING
Central features of communication (which are necessary for knowledge work) are missing in digital "communication" because:

(1) Digital communication tools do not allow for the kind informal and personal interaction which we experience frequently when working in the office.

Evidence: Personal observation. Digital communication offers less channels of communication. (Just think about how much less you can do in a video-conference compared to a face-to-face meeting.)

(2) Informal and personal interaction are central features of communication and knowledge work.

Detail: It's a misconception to think of human beings as mere intellectual problems solvers. In most situations, the immediate actions which we are involved in are social actions: we put forward a proposal, we support or attack the proposal of a colleague, we seek to express personal opinions.

"Some people simply need to feel a personal connection to co-workers to put in their best effort. "

Detail: Informality is not much needed for when the task is just "getting the job done". But things are different when tackling with ill defined issues. In situations of these kind, virtual teams will probably not perform very well.

"Creative tasks, feedback, things that require visual input, and issues that require a lot of back and forth tend to suffer."

Ancecdotal evidence: "We did not experience results before the working groups met face to face, interacted and started to collaborate according to capabilities." (anecdotal evidence from personal experience)

contra

"For most projects, and certainly in most companies or organizations, the majority of time is spent on 'getting the work done' and virtual collaboration can be quite effective for that purpose."

follow-up

Is there a fix for this problem?

"CONTRIBUTING"
Change from "collaboration" to "contributing":The problem owner presents a complete issue analysis and asks the group for comments about single components.

"If we've come to know 'collaboration' as an interaction with multiple avenues for communication in the face to face world, perhaps we shouldn't be looking quite yet to replicate that in the digital world but more simply change the language to 'contributing.' It may just be a slight-of-language but the outcome will be the measure of effectiveness not the extent to which one combination of interactions replicates another. "

Contra

Working in virtual teams is already being practiced. This is a proof that is does work.

Anecdotal evidence. Example: Atlassian - headquartered in Australia, with locations around the globe.

Anecdotal evidence: "I have been working with a 5 to 7 people virtual group for three years and a half. The experience has been a success. We all had different backgrounds, ages, nationalities, mother languages, and skills. With one acting on coordination, each of us played a specific role, all the decisions were made on consensus in a democratic way. English was the language for all comunications."

EXPLORAT