

Leading and motivating virtual teams in volunteer organizations

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Dedication

This paper is dedicated to all of my friends, both online and offline who have helped me refine this paper in record time. It is also dedicated to my patient partner, Jeb Parr; who has had to put up with me for the last 6 years of my life here in United States with him.

Writing this paper has been an exercise of working virtually with people from all over the United States and all around the world. Jayne Cravens took time out from her busy schedule in Bonn, Germany to answer my emails about volunteer virtual teams. My brother Vincent Wong, in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia took time out to read the paper and added his comments. Orlando Cordero, my external reviewer, in San Jose read my paper for content. Chris Gray in Chicago read the paper for grammatical and spelling errors. Mark Hahn and Tom Myers team members in Los Angeles from my virtual team added their input. Arthur LeBon in Dallas read my drafts and was instrumental in helping me clarify my thoughts through IM and video conferencing. Tan Truong of Antioch Seattle, took time out to do a critical review of my drafts. And last but not least, Susan Cannon, my faculty advisor in Seattle who actually liked what I wrote and helped me refine it even more.

It has been a fun experience. I enjoy working virtually, and this was certainly another actual example of working successfully in a virtual environment because I got to work with a wonderful set of ‘team members’ who were all willing volunteers and participants to this cause: Helping Andrew write the best paper he can in the shortest amount of time.

Thank you everyone.

Abstract

This paper is an inquiry into the challenges associated with leading and motivating virtual teams in volunteer organizations. It is based on a review of relevant literature on the topics of leadership and motivation, virtual teaming, voluntarism, and a personal reflection of the hands on experiential involvement of the author in such a team.

Successful leadership of volunteer teams, virtual or not depends not only on the quality of the volunteers, but also the quality and maturity of the leadership. Leaders must have the ability to create a shared vision, and an inspirational environment that taps into the top three person-centered motivational factors: a sense of personal growth, a sense of self-worth and a feeling of accomplishment. In an article for World Volunteer Web McKee wrote “researchers Patricia Penwick and Kedward Lawler took a survey from 28,008 readers of Psychology Today and found that money and status were not motivational, but the top motivational factors were personal growth, a sense they are worthwhile and a feeling of accomplishment (McKee, 2004).” Leaders have to be able to manage volunteers by objective and this was put succinctly by Drucker in “Managing in the Next Society” when he wrote, “Without market discipline, they need a focused mission and a results orientation as their bottom line (Drucker, 2002).” In fact it is especially important if leaders are leading volunteers remotely.

The author posits that the unique characteristics of volunteer virtual teams create distinctive challenges in leadership and motivation for leaders. These challenges require special considerations because traditional approaches will not address them adequately. Challenges in communication due to distance, time, and cultural diversity, and challenges

in technology due to technical abilities, equipment costs, and meeting base technology requirements need to be specifically dealt with.

To address these challenges, leaders need to be equipped with special techniques, special tools and special understandings in virtual teams. They must understand and know about the plethora of enabling technologies that provide the infrastructure to create and support vital functions of a virtual team.

Knowing what tools are available, what their capabilities are, and knowing how to utilize the right tools, at the right time, to create the environment required to produce an effective virtual team is critical. Leaders must also ensure that training be provided to participants so that the tools will be used effectively. They can do this by providing online training materials that can be accessed by the volunteers. However, all this technology would be useless if the social aspect of virtual teamwork is not recognized.

Team members must be encouraged and nurtured in the use of these tools for social purposes so that the problems of isolation, team cohesion, and team identity is minimized. Events should be sponsored to promote these activities. Training in interpersonal and intercultural communication must also be emphasized. Leaders must understand that relationships build social capital that is required for teamwork. And finally, periodic review to fine-tune the effectiveness of the team must be incorporated into the overall leadership and management of the team. All these factors add up and must be considered if the leader is to lead and motivate an effective virtual team.

Following a discussion of how these special challenges should be considered, the author concludes that the traditional approach in leadership when combined with the special considerations that are required to lead virtual teams, will produce effective virtual teams that can maintain their effectiveness through to the end of their purpose.

Preface

The overall premise of this Personal Excellence Project is borne mainly from my experience in the process of trying to achieve a balanced work-life that I have been pursuing since 1995. For me nothing is more important than having time to do the things I love. In order to make that a reality, I quit my job in the high-stress crime-ridden environment of Port Moresby, Papua New Guinea and flew home to Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia.

Having an entrepreneurial streak made that change from working for someone to running my own business an easy one for me. I trod down this new path with gusto by grabbing the bull by its horns. The Internet was just beginning to blossom in Malaysia and I decided to ride the wave by starting a web design and consulting company. Within a year, I had established clients in Kuala Lumpur as well as in the United States of America. The Internet is indeed a wonderful tool!

This naturally leads to the question of how I dealt with working with clients in the United States seeing that I was in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia. I solved that dilemma by working offsite or remotely/virtually as I certainly did not meet any of my American clients in person, it would not have been feasible for a small company of only one person. The costs would be too prohibitive. Working virtually gave me the benefits of the balanced work-life that I was searching for, as it was very flexible.

Fast-forward to present day... Having worked in a virtual office environment for a number of years, mostly alone, I've gotten used to doing things my way. Recently

however, I had become more involved in a church here in the United States. This increased participation in the church's activities has me working with a group of volunteers in a virtual team setting (detailed in mini case-study). A setting that I am intimately familiar with, or so I thought.

It has been a learning experience working with a *group of people* whom I have yet to meet face to face. Working with a group of people in a virtual environment has been a very different experience as I've almost always interfaced with only one person even when working with an off-site team. I also learned what it meant to be thrust into a leadership position within that team. I was not its initial leader. Suffice to say, I had to learn very quickly how to lead and motivate a group of people that were not only separated by time and space but also by skills, cultures and experiences.

This project paper is a combination of phenomenological and theoretical research based on the synthesis of concepts and ideas from my reflections, research, and of my learning experience in the Graduate Management Program at Antioch University Seattle. It documents the learning experience and understandings that I gained from my change project of working within that virtual team of volunteers and the research I undertook in order to understand my experiences.

I will not be making an exhaustive exploration into the topics of leadership, motivation, and virtual teams due to space and time constraints; however, I will outline the salient issues and suggest some solutions extracted from my research.

Introduction

*Progress is impossible without change,
and those who cannot change their minds
cannot change anything.*

— *George Bernard Shaw*

The progenitor of the virtual team that I am working with, the Regional Elder for Region One, the Rev. Elder Debbie Martin, uses that quote in her signature for all her emails. It encapsulates the basic premise that change is a necessity for growth.

The role of the team leader is changing to accommodate the evolution of how teams are created. Change and growth due to globalization, and the advancement of technology have driven the development of the virtual team.

To examine what changes must be implemented in the leadership and motivation of teams in volunteer organizations that choose to use virtual teaming, we will trace the progress of this change and growth that leads up to the genesis of the virtual team.

In doing so, we will have a better idea of why such teams are formed. We will learn what the benefits are, and also about the potential pitfalls. This will allow us to understand better why there has to be some changes in the role of the team leader when it comes to leading a team that is virtual in nature.

One of the biggest examples of this change and growth is the emergence of the mega-conglomerate. These organizations have grown exponentially, expanding into different areas of expertise and global markets. They tend to have subsidiaries in most of the cities

of the world. The most common examples of these organizations are banks and financial services institutions. These global giants have people working across time, distance, cultures, languages and organizational boundaries.

It is the fierce global competition between organizations like these and the need to provide efficient customer service in their target markets that continue to drive this wave of expansion in ever-faster business cycles.

This need to respond as quickly as possible to dynamic market pressures, and to produce ever increasingly innovative products and services have pushed these organizations towards adopting new ways of working for efficiency, innovation and cost reductions.

Innovation requires diversity, and organizations like these benefit from the fact that they are able to draw from people with the best expertise, skills, education and experience from anywhere in the world. However, having said that, these organizations need to have some way of allowing the people at their various subsidiaries located in diverse locations a way to work together with headquarters.

Before the Internet, people had to travel, or teleconference. Today, this need has been addressed to a certain extent utilizing new technologies that have been developed to exploit the Internet. The new capabilities of technology have given rise to new ways of working together as a team. Travel is minimized and the costs associated with it like time and money has also been reduced or eliminated.

Organizations with the capability of utilizing virtual teams are able to adapt to different needs rapidly to leverage company-wide expertise. Required task forces can be created as

needed regardless of the team member's locations. Lipnack & Stamps (2000) describe these types of teams as virtual teams. They suggest that virtual teams that work well could distinguish themselves by lower travel costs, reduced communication and decision-making time and faster project completion than traditional co-located teams.

Nortel Networks Corporation is a company that creates Internet technologies. It has over eighty thousand employees located in one hundred and fifty countries. It is an example of one of the dramatically increasing number of organizations now conducting business twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week with people on different continents and in different time zones. As businesses become more interconnected and more global, they must be able to make faster and smarter strategic decisions, and to take advantage of technological advancements.

As these technologies and virtual teaming methods; — that will be discussed in a later chapter; — mature and become easier to use and implement, volunteer organizations have begun to realize these same benefits of using the technologies and established virtual teaming methods that have been enjoyed by the corporate world. They have begun leveraging these technologies to recruit volunteers virtually to advance their missions. Among the more prominent examples of these volunteer organizations that work with virtual volunteers are the United Nations Volunteers Program and the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Open Source communities that develop LINUX and other open source initiatives.

Much research has been published about managing virtual volunteers and virtual teams in corporate settings; however, very little has been written about managing teams of

volunteers in the virtual environment. In an email correspondence with Jayne Cravens the Online Volunteering Specialist at the UN Volunteers program in Bonn, Germany, who is the acknowledged expert in managing virtual volunteers within the non-profit world has this to say about that:

“‘Virtual teams’ is, indeed, happening in the nonprofit world, but it is not tracked in any way. While corporations have the luxury of having a staff person devoted specifically to the set up and management of virtual teams, and marketing and research departments to track and report on the activities of virtual teams, the vast majority of nonprofit organizations have no staff to devote to such endeavors. They have virtual teams — but probably don't call them that, nor think of them in that way.

The nonprofit world... avoids that "jargon" and talk in terms nonprofits can understand — *volunteer teams* (emphasis: Cravens), who happen to spend part or all of their work for a nonprofit organization via the Internet. Also... most nonprofit organizations involve local volunteers, not volunteers at a distance, and the appeal for these volunteers is coming onsite as part of their contribution. So small nonprofits are not going to engage in much online volunteering involvement, because there is no need (Cravens, 2004).”

Having said that, as the larger volunteer organizations start to build virtual teams, I am sure there will be many questions about how you would lead and manage such teams.

How do traditional teams differ from virtual teams? How do volunteer virtual teams differ from virtual teams put together by corporations? Do you lead these teams differently, or do you utilize the same approach?

In exploring some of these questions that will lead up to the main inquiry of this paper, “How do you lead and motivate virtual teams in volunteer organizations?” I hope this inquiry will become an early if not a primordial guide that can be used as a basis for further study into this exciting and developing field that is growing in importance.

Virtual Teams

An examination of the basic concepts of teams is required before I launch into an exploration of virtual teams.

Katzenbach & Smith (1993) in *Wisdom of Teams* defines a team as a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

So then judging from that definition, a group of people is not a team if they did not come together in collaboration to reach a shared goal or task for which they hold themselves mutually accountable. A group is just a number of people with some unifying relationship.

In a team, each team member is strongly dedicated to one another's personal growth and success. It is a commitment that usually transcends the team. All members of a team not only cooperate in all aspects of their tasks and goals, the team is self-organizing and shares the functions of securing resources, organizing, planning, strategizing, setting performance goals and assessing each other's performance. Each member of a team is coached and led by all members of the team. Both successes and failures are equally shared. The team does not blame individual members for failures. This gives them the courage to show what they can do. The best example of this kind of team performance can be found in the US Marine Corps. They have incredible discipline and have a kind of peer-approval that reinforces performance, raises pride, and ensures real team performance where it counts.

A team will outperform a group and exceed all reasonable expectations given to its individual members, In other words, when you add one and one, you get more than two.

But what about virtual teams?

Lipnack & Stamps (2000) describes a virtual team as “a group of people who work interdependently with shared purpose across space time and organizational boundaries.”

According to Gundry (2001) in his white paper “Managing Through the Internet”, the term virtual teaming was probably coined in the early 1990s at DEC by George Metes who wrote a book about virtual teaming that had a subtitle “working together apart.” The term describes a team that collaborates closely, but whose members are not co-located.

As we can see from the casual and cursory comparison of the three definitions, a traditional team differs from a virtual team only in that the members of the team are distributed or geographically dispersed. Team members do not work together in a co-located space. However, are virtual teams really that similar to traditional teams as not to require a new paradigm in leadership? Let’s examine this further by looking at the different types of teams.

There are different types of traditional teams, and it is no different with virtual teams. According to Stohr and Peterson (2000), virtual teams can be categorized in to seven categories. They are networked teams, parallel teams, project or product development teams, work or production teams, service teams, management teams and action teams:

“Networked Teams consist of individuals who collaborate to achieve a common goal or purpose; membership is frequently diffuse and fluid.

Parallel Teams work in short term to develop recommendations for an improvement in a process or system; has a distinct membership.

Project or Product-Development Teams conduct projects for users or customers for a defined period of time. Tasks are usually non-routine, and the results are specific and measurable; the team has decision-making authority.

Work or Production Teams perform regular and ongoing work usually in one function; clearly defined membership.

Service Teams support customers or the internal organization in typically a service/technical support role around the clock.

Management Teams work collaboratively on a daily basis within a functional division of a corporation.

Action Teams offer immediate responses activated in (typically) emergency situations.”

These different types of teams mean that the membership of virtual teams will differ according to function. They may be composed of full-time or part-time employees. They might have a global reach, or involve combinations of local telecommuting members and more traditional in-house workers. A senior executive might be on one planning committee for a product release, for example, another for identifying minority vendors, another to study relocating a plant, and another to evaluate software tracking. He may deal with key players who not only are out of the country but also are working for another company, or perhaps as suppliers who are on the virtual team to add information and technical support.

Virtual teams offer many advantages and benefits. Virtual teams can report at least double the productivity of dispersed teams, with dramatically reduced travel, and greater innovation, quality, and personal satisfaction (Gundry, 2001).

It is possible to work round the clock with virtual teams when you have team members located around the world. For instance when members in Los Angeles stop work for the day, members in Kuala Lumpur, can continue where they left off. This gives virtual teams the ability to maintain close contact with customers around the world.

In terms of financial benefits, many of the expenses associated with travel, lodging, parking, and leasing or owning a building may be reduced and sometimes eliminated. And finally, a major benefit can also be realized by people with some types of physical handicaps as can find employment more easily and would be hired for their expertise. Their handicaps would become less of a factor.

We have looked at the benefits of virtual teaming, however, as with all things, there are a number drawbacks as well. Virtual teams are inherently more difficult to form and require more energy to sustain (Rayner, 1997). Virtual teams are subject to all the challenges that traditional teams face. However, their “virtualness” heightens many of those challenges, and also brings additional ones. In fact, everything that makes virtual teams advantageous also makes them challenging to implement. Distance creates isolation, a lack of team identity and team cohesion, and most of all a lack of trust.

Most people have difficulty in establishing trust when there is no face-to-face meeting.

When people have to work collaboratively and interactively with others whom they have never actually met before, trust becomes a major factor.

People are used to traditional mechanisms of trust building that is usually created through face-to-face meetings that develop into relationships. The complexities and subtleties of working across widely different personalities, cultures, and languages make communication far more difficult among virtual team members and therefore more difficult to establish trust. Duarte and Snyder (2000) identify trust as ‘a critical structural and cultural characteristic that influences the team’s success. Without trust building a true team is almost impossible’ (p. 139).

In the absence of visual cues such as body language, virtual team members have to rely on other trust building mechanisms. In general trust is fostered by reliable performance, integrity and showing concern for others (Duarte & Snyder, 2000, pp. 139 ff.)

Trust is the critical component when working in any type of team, but it is absolutely essential in virtual teams as it enhances risk taking (Gundry, 2000)

Clearly defined core values and team boundaries, coupled with actions that are consistent help build trust. When there are defined rules, and team members stay within the boundaries of those rules, and not break them. Trust builds. Also, if team members keep to their word, trust builds. The team leader must facilitate the development of trust by being fair, not favoring a specific team member, giving each team member equal opportunity to shine, confronting non-performance with urgency, and holding each team

member accountable. Information must be accessible to all in the same way, agreements should be clarified and communication must be an ongoing process (Kostner, 1994)

When team members are encouraged to frequently communicate in an open, honest, and real way amongst themselves, and socialize, deep relationships that build commitment through the sharing of life stories can develop. This also builds trust and intimacy between the team members.

I have come to realize that community and connectedness is formed through relationships that build trust, and I believe that the process is a positive feedback loop. The more connected you are, the more trust you build, and the more trust you build the more connected you feel.

Leaders need to build in the context for, and legitimize, and create opportunities for their team to communicate, in every sense of the word. The big difference between traditional face to face teams is communication. Communicating through tools has to be deliberate. Everyone on the team has to make an effort to communicate with each other frequently and to socialize at every opportunity. It is through communication that team members get to know each other better and develop those deep relationships that build its social capital to sustain it through tough times.

According to one study (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998), trust can exist in teams built purely on electronic networks. The case studies portray marked variations in the levels of communication richness across teams, suggesting that the information richness is an

interaction between the people, tasks, the organizational context, and perhaps familiarity with the technology in use.

It is in my opinion however that the trust issue is probably ultimately a generational issue. As more Gen Ys enter the job market, replacing the baby boomers and the Gen Xers. these problems will probably go away, and the Gen Ys will wonder why we even had that problem in the first place. Why? The reason is because Gen Ys grew up with the Internet, computers, cell phones, MTV, instant messaging, PlayStations and XBoxes. Generation Y practically live their lives online and are totally comfortable with technology and virtual environments, they have a better understanding of how to communicate virtually and are able to understand the subtle nuances in virtual communication. They would know which technologies to use to facilitate better communication. They would have less need to meet a person face to face. I think that because of that they will have no problems establishing trust fairly quickly. In fact you can even count many Gen Xers in this group as some Gen Xers like me grew up as geeks who live half of their lives virtually and are totally comfortable with the virtual world. Does comfort equal trust? No, but it does mean that being comfortable makes it easier to establish trust. For example, you're comfortable with using your gun and so you trust that you won't hurt yourself with it.

In a telephone survey supplemented by interviews conducted by the Mercury News in partnership with the Kaiser Family Foundation of more than 800 Silicon Valley children ages 10 to 17 and their parents, David Plotnikoff (2003) reported that, the Internet is a powerful and often ubiquitous presence in school, at home and in the social lives of almost all. There were key findings in the survey that support my opinion. They were:

- Skills that just a few years ago were considered the exclusive province of hard-core technophiles, such as building a Web site, have become common and unremarkable for this generation.
- Instant messaging and chat rooms are staples of teen communication, with half of all kids using IM or a chat room at least once a week. At the extreme, one in four online said they rely on chat, instant messaging or e-mail as the primary way to keep in touch with friends.

Gundry (2001) maintains that managing or leading successful, high performing virtual teams is different from leading traditional teams because you have to deal with virtual teams in a new context with tasks, technology and teams.

In terms of task, virtual teams need to have firm objectives, focus and milestones clearly communicated, delineated and continually reinforced when they change, or confusion will reign. It is much more difficult to sort out misunderstandings later.

In terms of technology, virtual teams need to adopt collaboration tools such as audio and video conferencing as well as instant messaging. Leaders need to understand what tools are available and understand how they are used.

In terms of “teams”, which is being used as a short hand for all the factors affecting people, the most pressing challenge is the discomfort of working with people they don't know and might never meet. People have the need to build and maintain relationships. Many leaders do not recognize this need and so do not address it.

These new challenges require many different leadership and management skills, such as the ability to determine the best technology to facilitate communication, and the ability to engender trust and productivity among team members even when there is no direct supervision. Organizations that have successful virtual teams have team leaders who understand the unique characteristics of electronic communication. They are able to create a sense of communal experience so that interaction yields creativity and knowledge sharing. They are aware of the arsenal of tools at their disposal and have learned to use the appropriate technology to communicate and collaborate so that individual team members feel connected to one another (Solomon, 2001)

And finally, leaders have to manage their remote team members based on objectives and have their accountability be based on measurable outcomes. The shift here is the movement to a results oriented paradigm. (Stohr & Peterson, 2000)

Volunteer team leadership and motivation

It is important to understand what voluntarism is before we launch into the topic of volunteer team leadership and motivation. One of the best definitions can be found in the United Nations Volunteers publication “Measuring volunteering: a practical toolkit”.

According to the United Nations Volunteers publication “Measuring volunteering: a practical toolkit” voluntarism has many benefits. It brings people together to act for the good of the community. It creates bonds of trusts and encourages cooperation; creating social capital. Social harmony can be created if the participants of the voluntary action happen to be of different ethnic origins, religions and economic status. Voluntary participation in public affairs can also help create a politically literate public, which is important for the preservation of democratic principles.

Powerless individuals are empowered when they volunteer and work together as one. Volunteering also helps build skills for the unemployed and allow the retired to feel that they still have a role to play and has been shown to promote good health and emotional well being.

The publication specifies that basic blocks for the definition of volunteering include three criteria that distinguish volunteering from other forms of behavior that may superficially resemble it:

- It is not undertaken primarily for financial gain. The monetary reimbursement cannot be equal to or greater than the market value of the work. However, it is

important that volunteers get reimbursed for all legitimate expenses arising out of the volunteer activities.

- It is undertaken of one's own free will. Free will is the basic tenet of voluntary action. There is no explicit coercion from external sources.
- It brings benefits to a third party as well as to the people who volunteer.

It also outlines four types of volunteering:

- Mutual aid/Self help, participants of this form of volunteering rarely describe what they do as "volunteering."
- Philanthropy or service to others, participants of this form of volunteering visit, befriend, mentor, teach others of a group whom they do not belong to.
- Campaigning and advocacy. Participants of this form of volunteering are carried out of a desire for social change.
- Participation and self-governance. Participants of this form of volunteering are involved in the process of governance.

With this in place, I will proceed to discuss the topic of leadership. As my research into the topic of leadership deepens, I have found that leadership is a very complex topic to discuss and define. Everyone has his or her own take on what leadership is. There are as many definitions and models out there as there are leaders; having said that these models do their best to aid us in the understanding of what makes leaders act the way they do in

certain situations. Some of these theories include House's Path-Goal Theory, Bolman and Deals's Four Framework Approach, Blake and Mouton's Managerial Model, Tannebaum and Schmidt's Leadership Continuum.

However, there are two key factors that everyone seems to agree upon. People want to be guided by those they respect and who have a clear sense of direction. According to Bill George (2003), these two factors can be further expanded into five qualities of what he refers to as authentic leadership:

Leaders need to understand their purpose and develop a passion for it. They have to practice solid values by being true to them and exercise integrity. They have to lead with heart and develop compassion by following their own path and being open to all of life's experiences. Leaders must establish connected relationships where trust is built and sustained, and commitment is strengthened. They have to demonstrate self-discipline by having consistent habits that provide the self-discipline.

In short the basis of good leadership is ethical and honorable character, selfless service, and a sense of purpose and direction that is achieved by the ability to convey a strong vision of the future to the followers.

In the chapters above, I have discussed dealing with the major issues of virtual teams in corporate settings, and it has shown that leading virtual teams is different from leading traditional teams.

What about leading virtual teams of volunteers? How different is that from leading corporate virtual teams?

Unlike team members in a corporate environment, volunteer team members participate in an organization's activities because they want to. There is no coercion involved, therefore it is critical that a leader of a volunteer virtual team be aware that retention and productivity issues are different and often more challenging than with a corporate team.

It is up to the leader to make sure that the volunteer continues to 'want to' contribute. To do that, recognition must be an integral part of the management process so that volunteers feel valued within the organization they work for. Volunteers must be made to feel that they are equals and are respected partners of the organization.

If the leader is successful and has implemented an effective and properly managed targeted recognition program, then, he or she would have a program that will motivate volunteers by satisfying their individual needs while supporting the organization's goals. Productivity, retention and morale would each be boosted.

Having said that, leadership of a volunteer team is no different from leading a corporate team except for a few special considerations.

In my experience, there are a few major issues that leaders of volunteer virtual teams have to watch out for and address:

The leader needs to ensure that he spends more time and energy to select self-motivated individuals to be part of the team. It would be difficult for the leader to inspire from afar, so it is a critical prerequisite, and if however, a wrong selection is made after all, the leader should engage a humanistic or appreciative approach such as appreciative inquiry

regularly to coach the volunteer who may not be performing up to expectations. If all else fails then the leader needs to be prepared to let the volunteer go.

It is very difficult to standardize the technology used by team members. The tools that team members use may not match up and connection speeds to the Internet are too variable. This would usually mean that the whole team would have to work with the lowest common denominator especially when trying to arrange a virtual meeting. For example, it is not possible to have an audio conference let alone a videoconference if one of the team members is on an old Intel 386 PC with only a modem connection to the Internet. This is a non-issue with corporate teams who are typically well funded and are equipped with standardized tools.

Distance makes it more difficult for the team leader to keep virtual team members motivated through traditional means like organizing a celebratory gathering to celebrate and enjoy each other's success in person after a successful project. It is just not possible nor practical if team members are located more than fifty miles away. Leaders must have the ability to create a shared vision, and an inspirational environment that taps into the top three person-centered motivational factors online. Volunteers typically volunteer because they want to feel a sense of personal growth, a sense of self-worth and a feeling of accomplishment and satisfaction when working for a cause they believe in, therefore, the leader has to make a special effort to make sure that the team member knows that he or she is appreciated and is being heard and recognized. Successes need to be celebrated both online and offline by putting up celebration web pages that highlight the

contributing volunteer, and perhaps even mailing a gift certificate in appreciation for a job well done.

Team members of volunteer teams will tolerate less “stuff” such as bad behavior from other team members. Leaders have to work harder to make sure that such ‘stuff’ does not come up or be proactive about it by being observant for potential conflicts and ‘cut it in the bud’ or so to speak, to retain the participation of volunteer team members. Leaders must remember that it is much easier for a volunteer to just drop off and no longer participate especially at a distance, so it is very important that the leader manage conflicts well.

Leaders need to make sure that volunteers report back weekly with the number of hours worked, the amount that’s left to do on the assignment, how ‘on track’ the volunteer feels, what tools and resources are proving most valuable in completion of the assignment, any obstacles/problems the volunteer has encountered in completing the assignment. (UNV, 2004)

Leaders need to work harder at making sure that volunteers are coached and mentored and given guidance to allow them to work better. It is not as easy to coach someone at a distance as it is to coach someone one on one in person. Visual cues and body language would not be there to aid the leader in his coaching role. Clear and concise guidelines on where to find resources, on what to do if a problem surfaces, all need to be communicated as clearly as possible.

Honesty is critical, if an assignment is not working out; the leader needs to let the volunteer know about problems and challenges. Ellis and Cravens(2000) advises that “if something isn't working out during an assignment, for whatever reason, [the leader needs to] talk to the volunteer about it, either via phone or via e-mail. Even electronically, people can get a sense of something amiss with someone else. Treat the volunteer with the honesty you would want as a volunteer yourself.”

Mini Case Study

This mini case study is approached from a chronological perspective.

As in all organizations that experience growth, change happens. Metropolitan Community Church or MCC had to go through major restructuring in 2001 to accommodate a worldwide growth in its membership.

The previously US centric geographic district structure that MCC employed in its political and administrative business was no longer relevant since the church now had a growing international membership. The leaders of the church decided to do away with the old district structure in favor of a new global structure that addressed the needs of the growing organization. The administrative and political structure of church was reorganized into eight larger regions some of which are multinational to address growth and global outreach.

The region that I will be focusing on in this paper is Region One. Region One is composed of thirty countries that include: Australia, Bangladesh, Brunei, Cambodia, Western Canada, China, Micronesia, Fiji, Hong Kong, India, Indonesia, Japan, Laos, Malaysia, Mongolia, Myanmar, Nepal, North Korea, Pakistan, Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, Philippines, Eastern Russia, South Korea, Sri Lanka, Taiwan, Thailand, Vanuatu, Viet Nam and the U.S. states of: Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, Washington. However, as it stands at the moment, church membership within Region One is only found in Australia, New Zealand, the Philippines and the United States.

The formation of the new regions resulted in elections of new regional leaders. The event for Region One took place at Long Beach, California in the fall of 2002. The Rev. Elder Debbie Martin was elected and appointed as the new leader for the region.

As the new leader, she announced a new vision to utilize resources created through team ministry and identified the virtual team as a means to crystallize her vision. She challenged the church to step forward in the field of advanced technology and take advantage of the incredible resources that can be created through team ministry.

In her keynote to introduce her vision, she said that networking and team building would be a high priority in her vision for Region One. She said that the vision would be realized through the utilization of technology and the creation of virtual teams. She expressed that virtual teams are the wave of the future and will provide the tools the church can use. She also said that virtual teams would be a key factor in the bridge building that would allow MCC to communicate and collaborate effectively in the global community. With that she proposed the creation of numerous virtual teams, and one of the teams that were proposed was the Technology Team.

In May of 2003 a few months after the conference, I was contacted and told that I was selected from a pool of volunteers as a potential member for the technology team as I had expressed my desire to volunteer within such a group during the first Region One conference that was held at Long Beach.

The Elder selected six people and herself to form the team from the pool of volunteers, and I think while trying to create a good mix for diversity, and to get better representation from the various member countries, the team that was finally formed was international.

Team members were widely dispersed and were located across the states of California, Washington State, and the Hawaiian Islands, including the country of New Zealand. To be specific, there were two team members in Los Angeles, one in Maui, one in Santa Rosa, two in Seattle and one person in Auckland, New Zealand.

The MCC Region One Technology Team's stated purpose was to be the provision of resources throughout the region to:

- Set up web sites
- Set up and administer group e-mail lists
- Set up e-newsletters
- Provide PowerPoint training
- Provide Audio/Visual expertise
- Provide photography services
- Provide videography and duplication services
- Create, monitor and update the Region One web site
- Create and maintain the online Region One e-newsletter

The team was officially launched in June 2003; the team members were introduced to each other via email. I was appointed web manager and was charged with designing the new regional web site. I quickly designed and put the new site together and was beta

testing it by July. It was officially launched in August. In October, I received praises for the site from headquarters, the mother church in Los Angeles. However, between November 2003 and March 2004 there was no activity whatsoever, there was no communication from the leadership, there were no instructions to work on any specific meaningful task, there were no concrete plans or goals. No deadlines, nothing. It was dead air.

I was personally starting to get frustrated during that period. I decided to see if the rest of the team felt that way and contacted each person personally through AOL Messenger and found out that many of us had similar feelings. We felt that there was no direction and goals. This void created frustration and people were starting to lose their motivation.

I feel that perhaps the reason for this situation was caused by the team leader's lack of experience and unfamiliarity with the management of virtual teams.

Heifetz and Linsky (2002) say that “the single most common fault in leadership failure we’ve have been able to identify—in politics, community life, business or the non-profit sector—is that people especially those in leadership positions of authority treat adaptive challenges like technical problems.” Many times, technical fixes are used in place of adaptive solutions to solve adaptive challenges. An adaptive challenge requires the people with the problem to learn new ways to address a situation instead of looking towards an authority to fix the problem who will only do what they know with a technical fix.

The situation that I was involved in required an adaptive solution. In fact, I identified many adaptive challenges. Among them was a desperate need to bridge cultural, communications and technology gaps. There was a strong sense of people feeling that they were out of the loop. There was also a feeling of the complete lack of team cohesion or no sense of team at all. Everyone on the team needed to learn how to interact with each other in the virtual environment if the team was going to be able to work together.

I felt that the team members did not really trust each other. There was little or no communication between and among team members. This resulted in low levels of collaboration between all of us. All this happened because there was lack of direction, there wasn't any encouragement from the leadership, and there was no sense of purpose.

The lack of leadership created a situation where people were not feeling terribly motivated to do anything, and strangely enough, there was also a measure of technophobia and unsophisticated use of technology by a team that was supposed to spearhead technology use in the organization for Region One.

These were all challenges that had to be addressed if the team was going to be successful in achieving the tasks for which it was formed and set out to do.

In order to create change within the system, the first thing I did was to begin communicating effectively across team members to increase information flow. I did my best to encourage and develop frequent communications between team members to foster relationship building, community and trust by having conversations with each member of the team using AOL Messenger, a cross platform instant messaging application.

I did this because in my ten years of personal experience of creating virtual relationships, I have learned that it is important to create trust by communicating as much as possible because there is very little opportunity to meet face to face. It is also important to break the ice early on by revealing something personal so that the other party would let their guard down as well.

At a later stage, I talked to the Elder to express my concerns regarding the lack of motivation and leadership, and because of that conversation I had with her, things began to change. I was made the new leader of the team. This decision to speak to the Elder was borne from my conversations with my professor, Don Comstock, who helped me realize that it was important for me to take charge of the situation and not wait. He helped me see the differences between western and eastern culture.

As the new leader, I am now doing my best to provide guidance, clarity and direction in terms of tasks to complete and I am also moving people to the right technology that will enable better communication between team members. By building the infrastructure to enable better communications I hope to increase trust and build community among team members.

I am also delegating responsibilities to create sense of shared responsibility and ownership and am creating opportunities for personal growth and development. On top of that I am also doing my best to be the advocate for the team, to make sure that we get

enough support in terms of equipment and backing from the regional Elder by having regular communications with her. Submitting requests and getting feedback for our work.

I am hoping that by creating projects that have targets and deadlines, and getting team members to take ownership of them, I will have created a motivating and supportive environment that will nurture their inherent motivation as volunteers. I have also made it a point to provide feedback within 48 hours or sooner so that a person does not feel disconnected and out of the loop. I am also devising performance appraisals to recognize the contributions of team members.

As stated in the previous paragraphs, there was a change in the leadership. I became the new lead and chair. New relationships were formed. Communications between team members were improved, and everyone on the team has started using the recommended instant messaging system to communicate with each other. The performance of team members is gradually improving and there is better clarity and direction with firm objectives and focus. All of which is contributing to a team that feels more connected and energetic ready to take on more projects. The team is also using better technology to communicate to enable spontaneous conversations. The technologies utilized and to be used now include AOL Instant Messenger and MSN Instant Messenger for text, voice and video chats on top of E-Mail. Web logs which are a kind of instant web-page are now being used to disseminate information quicker as it allows easier updating of news web pages. A content management system has been set up to expand the functionality of the main regional web site. (<http://www.mccregion1.org>) What is a content management

system? A content management system (CMS) supports the creation, management, distribution, publishing, and discovery of corporate information. It covers the complete lifecycle of the pages on your site, from providing simple tools to create the content, through to publishing, and finally to archiving. It also provides the ability to manage the structure of the site, the appearance of the published pages, and the navigation provided to the users.

My prognosis for the future of this organization is that it will succeed in learning to empower its members through virtual teaming initiatives through members who are willing to learn and take risks. However, there's still a long learning curve that needs to be overcome by certain members in the team in terms of technology use. There is a need to get more comfortable communicating virtually. Overall though, once the learning curve is overcome, the effectiveness of virtual teaming will improve, and things will begin to fall into place. As people get over their fear of learning to use newer technologies like videoconferencing, and the content management system, I believe that the team will begin to reap some productivity gains.

My next steps would be to encourage participation from other countries as the church grows within Region 1 to increase team diversity. I am committing to the completion of the objectives outlined for the team, and I will be evaluating the team skills against team needs to see where the strengths and shortcomings are. The long-term goals are to educate and train future leaders and to continue investigating cost-effective (free/low cost) technologies to improve communications even more.

The most important learnings

Virtual teams require trust among members to enhance risk taking (Gundry, 2000)

Trust is built through frequent communication, deep relationships and the camaraderie of team members. Integrity and reliability is also crucial in establishing trust.

The realization that building trust is a positive feedback loop was a great aha! moment for me... Community and connectedness formed through relationships build trust, the more connected you are, the more trust you build, and the more trust you build the more connected you feel. I have also found it extremely important to make sure that there are firm objectives, deadlines and roles. Without these nothing gets done. My experience in the team that I was working with illustrates this quite well. The leadership of the team did not have specific objectives, deadlines and roles assigned to team members and this resulted in stagnation. Nobody did anything, as there was no direction.

Leadership, purpose and challenge are critical, as without these, the team stagnates and motivation dies. People don't like to have their time wasted and not have any purpose and challenge (Grazier, 1997.) I also learned that volunteers have to be already intrinsically motivated. To nurture and harness this intrinsic motivation, what the leader has to do is to create a holding environment that maintains or spurs this intrinsic motivation further. In short, the leader has to be able to inspire from a distance (Ellis and Cravens, 2000.)

Conclusion

In ending, I would like to state once again that there is very little research if any on the topic of leading volunteer virtual teams. I hope that in some small way I am contributing to the literature that will define this field of growing importance.

Successful leadership of volunteer virtual teams depends on the quality of the volunteers and the maturity of the leadership. Leaders who can create a shared vision, and an inspirational environment online that taps into the top three person-centered motivational factors of personal growth, self-worth and accomplishment, and who can be results oriented will be successful leaders of volunteer virtual teams.

The challenges that are created by distance, time, cultural diversity, and technology have to be addressed with special techniques, special tools and special understandings in virtual teams. Leaders of volunteer virtual teams must especially understand, know about and be able to use correctly the plethora of enabling technologies that provide the infrastructure to create and support vital functions of a virtual team as they usually have to work within extremely tight budget constraints.

These leaders must also understand that relationships build social capital required for teamwork by promoting and sponsoring such activities. The social aspect of virtual teamwork has to be recognized and addressed by encouraging and nurturing team members in the use of these tools for social purposes to minimize the problems of isolation, team cohesion, and lack of team identity. Training in interpersonal and

intercultural communication must not be forgotten either as it will teach team members lessons in communicating tactfully across cultures.

Above all volunteers must feel that they are having fun and enjoying their work, as after all, they volunteer for the feel-good feeling of personal growth, satisfaction, and the accomplishment of doing something worthwhile.

Recognition and retention, which are backbone of volunteer management, have to be correctly implemented online and executed well with periodic review to fine-tune its effectiveness in leading and managing volunteer virtual teams. A targeted recognition program when done correctly will effectively contribute to the productivity, retention and morale of the volunteer team members.

In short, leaders of volunteer teams must be prepared to work with the adaptive challenges of working in the twenty first century, and give the work back to the people. Team members must be prepared to take the work back and learn to adapt and become more resourceful.

Having gone through this experience of leading a volunteer virtual team, I would have to say that I now have even more confidence in myself to take on risks and be more assertive. I know what it means to be an authentic leader and this experience will serve to guide me in my future dealings with other virtual teams that I am sure to encounter along this bumpy road of life.

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