Chapter 5
Forming Trust in Virtual Writing Teams: Perspectives and Applications

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ABSTRACT
This chapter explores collaborative writing in virtual teams, and, particularly, trust formation in virtual writing teams, to help those who create or work in virtual writing teams to understand the importance of trust. In order to build the case for trust as the key component in teams, the chapter presents important background on teams as a general concept. In particular, it considers the constituents of quality teams, which include small team size, diverse team membership, interdependent relationships, shared team vision, articulated processes, and performance orientation. The chapter then elaborates on the role of trust in teams, presenting it as the key feature for any type of team environment. Based on this background, the chapter then differentiates the general concept of teams from virtual teams in particular, arguing that virtual teams must address specific considerations in order to build trust. Such considerations include the composition of the team, where team members possess a propensity to trust; the proper use of technology in the virtual team, so that the medium matches the communicative need; and social presence, or the ways that virtual teams can build trust by using communication behaviors to demonstrate to others that they share understanding. The chapter combines the general team considerations with the virtual team considerations into a rubric for building strong virtual teams based upon four major categories: team traits, team actions, individual traits, and environment traits. The chapter concludes with suggestions for future study.

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INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Imagine this situation as I experienced it:

A contract technical writer is hired as an outside expert to manage a documentation project for a large bank; the bank management hopes to bring some order to the documentation concerning a specific internal product. The team brings together a group of subcontracted writers and some members of the internal communications group from the bank—12 people in all—with a goal of delivering 900 pages of documentation in less than 3 months. The subcontracted technical writers are located in three different states, the client is in another state, and the project manager resides in a fifth state—all of which make face-to-face collaboration nearly impossible. To complicate matters, some of the documents provided by the bank are in “old” word-processing formats, such as Word Perfect® format, while others are handwritten or in PowerPoint®, MS® Word, or Adobe® PageMaker® format. Finally, the documents contain large numbers of figures and tables, all of which are numbered inconsistently at best. Combine the complexity of the documents facing the team with the multitude of formats, the challenges of working remotely, and the pressures of completing the project under a tight deadline, and one can imagine the stress the team feels as it squanders hours debating inconsequential things, such as how to format headings or what software to use for creating figures. These small stresses escalate into disagreements about the distribution of work within the team, some members resorting to silence as a form of protest and outright competition between the team of internal bank employees who “know the bank way” and the contractors who know “the best way.” As a result of the team’s various dysfunctions, key deadlines pass and ultimately the team fractures into two autonomous work groups. The project manager is left compiling the separate pieces into some cohesive documentation over a series of three very long weeks without assistance from the other team members, who by this point have all but given up on the project. Let us say that the result of this chaos is that the documentation is substandard and that the project manager never will be invited to bid on another project for this client.

Admittedly, this situation is about as bad as it gets: A group of individuals who are supposed to work together to achieve a shared purpose instead compete with one another and undermine each other’s work as bad feelings mount and communication breaks down among the team members. The team misses deadlines and blame-based e-mails fly from keyboards because individuals feel like their expertise is not being respected. Compound these challenges with the difficulties of collaboratively writing through electronic media—with the choice of collaboration medium itself a point of dispute—and we have all the ingredients for the catastrophic failure that befell this writing team.

Yet, virtual teamwork does not need to be that way. Successful teams appear in almost every facet of society and workplace. From athletics to industry, to government and nonprofit agencies, there are myriad different incarnations of cooperative groups. Groups such as, “committees, task forces, blue-ribbon panels, quality circles, employee-participation groups, joint union/management leadership teams, action committees, project teams, supervisor councils, autonomous or self-directed work teams,” and collaborative writing teams are a few examples (Huszczo, 1990, n.p.). Most often, teams are implemented because they are perceived to possess a wide array of benefits including increased employee buy-in, greater responsibility, improved productivity, better product quality, increased employee satisfaction, higher quality of work life, and enhanced efficiency (Gustafson & Kleiner, 1994; Neck, Manz, & Anand, 2000; Purdum, 2005). Companies use teams because the advantages of teamwork translate into increased cost savings and greater employee satisfaction—assuming that the teams