Chapter 8
Facilitating Virtual Collaborative Writing through Informed Leadership

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ABSTRACT

With the right combination of writers, collaborative writing may grow organically in a team. But it is more likely that managers need to set the expectation that collaboration is requirement, provide strong leadership in an organization to make it happen, and measure its effectiveness. Managers need to lead writers down the path to writing collaboratively, finding effective ways to support the implementation of new writing methods. This chapter provides practical approaches that will help develop a manager’s skills for leading virtual collaborative writing teams. The techniques described in this chapter were developed and tested by actual collaborative writing teams, most notably by the Information Engineering team at NetApp, Inc.

INTRODUCTION: WHEN COLLABORATION NEEDS HELP

The writing team has been assembled carefully for “the big project.” There are several strong first-line managers who know the technical material in their respective areas. They understand their writers and are respected by them; in fact, in many cases, they have worked together for many years. Equally important, the managers can work the politics of the company. The writers are a diverse group bringing varied skills. They have different areas of product expertise, tools knowledge, leadership, and emotional intelligence. The writing team recently has moved to a collaborative work environment, and most of the team members are over the initial training—thankfully, they “bought in” to the new system. Everyone seemed excited about this shift in practice.

Well, everyone was excited and everyone was making progress, but something has changed and the excitement has diminished. Perhaps people are somehow feeling stuck because suddenly stress signs have been popping up in various places—
short tempers and irritated comments. Stress is also apparent within subgroups of the overall team. For example, managers have gotten testy about work not being completed by some writers in other teams. Writers are becoming territorial and complaining about not letting other writers put content in their books because of improper planning. What is going wrong? And, what can be done to set things right?

**FACILITATING VIRTUAL COLLABORATIVE WRITING AMONG LEADERS**

Some writers and writing teams have not ventured far down the collaborative-writing road, but they notice that projects are taking longer to get started. In fact, these projects seem to require that writers cover more ground in the published deliverables than ever before. In such cases, writing teams may benefit from putting virtual collaborative techniques in place. This chapter provides suggestions for helping the team optimize virtual collaborative practices and to identify pitfalls before venturing too far down this road. One key way to get virtual collaborative writing teams up and running is to develop the skills of managers and other leaders as well as the uses of tools and processes. Accordingly, this chapter addresses a number of the principles of collaboration that ground this book—creating a culture of collaboration (Principle 1), finding and promoting leadership (Principle 2), using tools effectively (Principle 4), creating structure (Principle 5), and measuring and tracking performance (Principle 6).

**Model the Solution**

“We just aren’t getting anywhere with this project even though we have a bunch of people on it. What is wrong?”

Designated team managers and leaders are a big part of the solution, but so is every manager and leader-without-a-title of-leader on the team. By identifying how the entire leadership team (including the leaders doing the identification) can work collaboratively and by modeling those changes to the team, change will filter down. The efforts that leaders make in learning virtual collaboration themselves will help all writing team members to develop trust in their managers and in each other, but most of all in themselves. All of the suggestions in this chapter directly apply to the manager and leadership team—by providing specific ways to apply collaborative techniques especially during initial learning phases. What follow are suggestions for helping managers lead and helping them understand what signs point to the need for more collaboration.

**Be (and Practice) the Change**

Create a collaborative workspace for the management team. As Chapters 9 and 10, this volume, suggest, there are many computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools available for virtual collaborative writing teams. Among the ones most often employed in various work settings are content management systems (CMSs), e-mail, instant messaging (IM), desktop sharing, and voice over the Internet conferencing. After reviewing the discussion of CMC tools (particularly see Chapter 1) and speaking with the information technology (IT) staff about what is affordable and available in the organization, it becomes possible to choose the tools for starting the collaborative process.

Beginning to work virtually and collaboratively means developing a culture of collaboration, one of the first principles that ground this book
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