An Evidence-Based Model of Virtual Team Training and Development

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this article is to outline a training regimen for virtual team members and leaders, based on prior literature on the particular issues and unique skills necessary for individuals who work in this type of environment. The training program proposes four main modules, beginning with introductory training via a kickoff meeting, followed by subsequent modules that delve into factors that have been shown to be crucial for virtual team success. The study’s approach provides guidance on the design and execution of various in-person and virtual training sessions, including content, potential delivery modes, timing, and assessment of learning objectives. In total, the proposed training program is designed to be flexible in terms of project types (e.g., engineering, information technology, product development) but is well-suited for virtual teams and employees who work extensively in a virtual environment.

KEYWORDS

Computer-Mediated Communication, Soft Skills, Team Performance, Training, Virtual Teams

INTRODUCTION

The Value Proposition for Virtual Team Training

In the past two decades, the use of virtual teams has increased as organizations and teams become more geographically dispersed. Recent advances in technology further improve the potential for quality communication and collaboration between team members as well as the ability for members to work efficiently and productively in a virtual environment. Yet, virtual teams have different requirements and characteristics than traditional teams, resulting in the need for inexperienced virtual members to receive extensive training (Ford, Piccolo, & Ford, 2017). Relatedly, it has been noted that virtual teams account for several potential disadvantages in team performance. The biggest threat is that it requires a high level of coordination; for teams to be effective, an organization must account for getting “people to work together compatibly and productively, even though face-to-face contact is limited and communication is confined to [electronic means]” (Thompson, 2008, p. 366; see also Ford et al., 2017; Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005; Baumeister & Floren, 2011). Marotta (2006) acknowledges that another disadvantage is miscommunication due to limited opportunities to meet face-to-face. Humans inherently communicate more effectively with body language, or information that is not easily conveyed through most forms of communication technology. In turn, the reliance of most virtual teams on low richness media results in greater difficulty understanding and translating messages (Serban, Yammarino, Dionne, Kahai, Hao, McHugh, & Peterson, 2015; Beranek, & Clairborne, 2012). Poor leadership and management constitutes another disadvantage. In virtual teams, leaders may have difficulty finding ways to support a geographically
dispersed team, which hinders overall communication and understanding. Another disadvantage is the loss of project visibility because of team dispersion. The team may struggle with understanding how members are part of the “bigger picture” (Marotta, 2006). A final disadvantage is that it is more challenging to logistically schedule meetings and coordinate member timelines.

Ford et al., (2017) suggests that several threats may impact virtual team processes. One involves motivation and effort, in which “the physical distance and asynchronous aspect of communication may both act to dampen” them (Ford et al., 2017). A decrease in effort or motivation by one member can lead to the same amongst other members. Another threat is that virtual teams may not optimize on member knowledge and skills. In a virtual setting, members may not have access to each other’s task-relevant abilities. Hertel et al., (2005) notes that a team must be aware of two knowledge types: tacit and codified. Tacit knowledge is “hard to articulate and [is] acquired through experience. In contrast, codified knowledge refers to knowledge that is transmittable in formal, symbolic language” (Hertel et al., 2005). Thus, members must know each other’s skills, as they relate to both tacit and codified knowledge, so that task assignment is optimized.

Today’s marketplace drives organizations to utilize virtual teaming to better meet customer demands. While technology improvements and the ability to tap a wider geographic range of talent provide the potential to make virtual teams effective and successful, it is critical that organizations understand the potential disadvantages and threats of such a team, and thus take the proper steps to mitigate them (McEwan, Ruissen, Eys, Zumbo, & Beauchamp, 2017). Therefore, this paper proposes a training program focusing on the vital characteristics and factors of a virtual team that typically lead to team success. The author outlines the skills, knowledge, and abilities targeted in the program through four phases of execution. In this manner, the author extends prior work that either discusses training for the virtual workspace at a high level (e.g., Majchrzak, Malhotra, Stamps, & Lipnack, 2004), provides advice for leaders of virtual teams (e.g., Mitchell, 2012; Mulki, Bardhi, Lassk, & Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009), or focuses solely on a particular facet of training that is relevant to virtual work (e.g., Ford et al., 2017; Greenberg et al., 2007).

GENERAL TRAINING ELEMENTS

Prior to implementing any training structure, there are some key elements that need to be addressed and designed. For the scope of virtual team training, a program ought to be designed that outlines the following elements:

- Topics and content covered in each training session.
- Delivery method(s) of each training session.
- Duration of each training session.
- Method of assessment (i.e. how to assess the effectiveness of the training methods and content).

The training program outlined in this paper is presented in four modules. For each module, it is begun with a discussion of the topics to be covered, based on a review of existing virtual team research. The author then presents a section on delivery recommendations specific to each module, including potential delivery methods per content and topic, suggested durations per segment, method(s) of assessment for learning objectives, and the general approach for each module.

MODULE ONE: KICK-OFF MEETING

The proposed virtual team training program considers both internal team members and external leaders. Internal members are direct reports while external leaders are supervisors that do not have full-time roles in the team. Internal members complete project tasks while external leaders provide
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