Chapter VI

The Glue That Binds Creative Virtual Teams

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This chapter describes an exploratory, qualitative research project that investigated the work environment necessary for virtual teams to be creative. Nine different virtual teams, with a total of 36 virtual team members (33 of which completed the full study), participated in this study. Three teams were organizational consulting firms, two teams were educational consortiums, three teams were on-line service provider teams, and one team was a product design engineering team. One semi-structured, telephone interview was conducted with each participant. Team members also completed a background survey. Grounded theorizing was used to generate an in-depth understanding of the phenomena under investigation. Connection, defined as the elements that need to be in place for a team to develop and maintain identity and a sense of community, emerged as a key category important to the realization of creativity in virtual teams. Connection was further subdivided into task connection (made up of dedication/commitment, and goal clarity); and interpersonal connection (made up of information sharing, trust, and personal bond). Suggestions for how team designers, team leaders, or managers can establish and develop connection in their own virtual teams are offered.

Creativity is increasingly becoming a critical topic for contemporary organizations. Perhaps one of the most crucial reasons for organizations to promote creativity has been global competition. To meet the demands of fierce global competition, organizational structures are changing, becoming increasingly more flexible. These structures are characterized by such terms as virtual, boundary-less, or networked (Davidow and Malone, 1992; Galbraith, 1995; O’Hara-Devereaux and Johansen, 1994). Advances in information technology have made feasible these types of organizational structures, in which independent firms across the globe join together and function as if they were a single corporation.

Global competition has not only created a dire need for organizational creative
efforts; it has forced companies to get products out faster. Teamwork in the virtual corporation is essential to tap into the best talent to create the highest quality and fastest response to customer needs. Virtual teams are groups of geographically dispersed organizational members who communicate and carry out their activities through information technology (Kristof, Brown, Sims, and Smith, 1995; Lipnack and Stamps, 1997; Nemiro, 1998). Alas, the traditional office, conceptualized as a collection of cubicles in a high rise, is shrinking as individuals are finding themselves working in an “anywhere/anytime” mode, connected to coworkers through information technology (O’Hara-Devereaux and Johansen, 1994).

Virtual team structures may lead to higher levels of team creativity as a result of more openness, flexibility, diversity, and added access to information as compared to more traditional group structures. However, it may be extremely difficult to build a sense of personal connection and trust in these types of structures—elements crucial to high levels of creativity (Ekvall, Arvonen, and Waldenstrom-Lindblad, 1983; Geber, 1995; Nemiro, 1998). In designing virtual teams, we cannot ignore the social context of such arrangements. Technology allows for the electronic connection of geographically spread out individuals, but it does not necessarily lead to effective personal connection, communication and creativity. Virtual corporations and teams cannot function without information technology. But technology alone is not the answer to the problems of working across geographical and cultural boundaries. The ultimate answers to these problems lie in the realm of human and organizational relations and creating work environments that bring out the best in people involved in these virtual structures.

What then can team designers, team leaders, and managers do to create a work environment that will help virtual teams realize their creativity? The answer to that question is relatively simple—create a connection between team members. Connection involves both task connection (made up of dedication/commitment, and goal clarity) and interpersonal connection (made up of information sharing, trust, and personal bond). In this chapter, I will describe a research project that explored the work environment necessary for virtual teams to be creative. The major focus of this chapter will be to illustrate the concept of connection, and the accompanying dimensions, and to offer suggestions on how managers can establish and develop such a connection in their own virtual teams. (The concept of connection was only one of three key categories for a work environment conducive to creativity in virtual teams. For a detailed explanation of the entire model, including the other two major categories—raw materials, and management/team member skills—and their accompanying dimensions, see Nemiro, 1998).

BACKGROUND LITERATURE

The Context for Creativity in Traditional Organizational and Team Structures

As early as 1954, Carl Rogers talked about the social conditions necessary for creativity, which included creating an environment characterized by psychological safety and freedom, high internal motivation, and the absence of external evaluation to allow creativity to flourish (Harrington, Block, and Block, 1987). Since that time, the literature investigating the influence of the social environment on creativity has further demon-
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