

## PM TIPS & TECHNIQUES – AUGUST 2007

### Virtual Teaming Soft Skills Relevant to all Projects

*By Brian Irwin*

One of the most critical aspects of project management leadership is the effective use of communication to facilitate the team process. Effective communication is one of the key enablers of building cohesive teams and is critical to the successful management of key stakeholders. The probability of communication breakdown is intensified in the virtual environment. Consider for a moment that the majority of virtual project teams will never meet face-to-face. Because over fifty percent of communication is nonverbal, we lose a significant amount of message content if we cannot view the other party we're attempting to communicate with. Significant feedback can be gathered by paying attention to body language and facial expressions while we're communicating.

Due in large part to corporate downsizing, strategic outsourcing, and reallocation of organizational human resources due to mergers and acquisitions, virtual project teams are becoming more the rule than the exception. When we think of a virtual teaming environment our thoughts often gravitate toward globally-dispersed projects. In global project environments virtual teaming and leadership skills are an absolute necessity for the project manager and the team.

Cultural diversity was once one of the largest differences between a traditional project team and the virtual project team. Today, cultural diversity is the normal team composition which has introduced a greater degree of tolerance amongst people who realize that the person they are dealing with may or may not know their cultural norms. Consequently, the problems that do arise are much more severe as they are now beyond the tolerance limit already expended. Even if a team is not geographically dispersed, it's likely to be comprised of team members representing a multitude of cultures and backgrounds. Differing backgrounds and experiences is a great advantage which diverse teams have over others as diversity leads to diverse thoughts and creative action. It also presents a challenge for the project leader. The challenge is ensuring that every team member is listened to, respected, and has his or her suggestions seriously considered.

Increasingly, virtual teaming skills are becoming critical to the management of projects even if the project team resides within the same geographical region or, even if the team is collocated. I've personally been involved in several projects in large organizations with the majority of the project team residing in one building and the remainder only a building or two away. This lack of immediate collocation can result in team members feeling disconnected and misunderstood which is a significant problem for the project leader. When a team member perceives they're not being taken into consideration their communication has a tendency to stop and information is often guarded.

Recognizing individual identity and taking the time to entertain all viewpoints is the keystone of building positive working relationships and trust. The trust which team members have in their leadership, and in each other, is paramount to project teams performing effectively. This trust is one of the elements which energizes and empowers every team member. The longer this happens cycle recurs, the greater the team synergy.

When it comes to building trust, treating your collocated team as if it were a virtual team can be a very effective way to help you expedite the process. Remote team members typically lack the face-to-face time which is so instrumental to building rapport, understanding individuality and enhancing relationships. To overcome this barrier, remote teams must extend respect and train themselves to refrain from making assumptions or jumping to premature conclusions. Teams are especially susceptible to premature assumptions being made in multicultural team settings. Virtual teams are able to more readily overcome this barrier because they are inherently more aware of this dynamic when engaging in team discussions. How many project teams have you led, or been a member of, that could have used this technique more effectively?

All of the preceding discussion items have been challenges which the virtual project team must work to overcome that collocated teams take for granted although they face many of the same challenges. However, some very specific advantages related to these challenges exist which the virtual team has over the collocated team.

First, consider that, in addition to communicating message content, an individual's body language and facial expressions also serve to communicate social status, personality, and position within the organizational hierarchy. These cues are less likely to affect virtual teams. What this relates to is that virtual teams can be less apprehensive when it comes to speaking what's on their mind or challenging an idea which has been put forth by an individual higher up in the organization. The bottom line is that typical hierarchies, both formal and informal, are less evident in the virtual environment. If handled properly by the Project Manager, this "less-evident" hierarchy can potentially turn every interaction in to a synergized brain-storming. This can be a great asset to every team.

Another advantage enjoyed by virtual teams is that team members will be less likely to be judged on the basis of sex, race, religion, national origin, class, or age. Regardless of what we'd like to believe is the case, humans still judge based on appearance first and content second. This is largely due to past experience, our childhood, and other internal belief factors. Having the ability to remove this personal filter is a very powerful advantage and, quite frankly, one that we can all benefit from if we take the time to actively remove it, i.e. – understand that it's at work and reduce its impact.

Since virtual teams are fast becoming the rule rather than the exception, we will all be required to use these skills at some point in our project leadership careers. As project managers, we may as well all learn and utilize them sooner than later as our project teams, our organizations, and our projects themselves all stand to gain from their implementation.



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