

ON THE CHALLENGES OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION IN MULTICULTURAL SEMI- VIRTUAL TEAMS

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Summary:

Effective communication is one of the major challenges in managing a multicultural virtual team. The findings discussed in this paper show that the members of semi-virtual teams struggle with communication issues even if the task they have to accomplish is accompanied by training sessions on virtual teamwork. The tendency to favor the local in-group is more difficult to overcome than are the barriers to successful teamwork presented by different languages and cultures.

Keywords:

Semi-virtual teams, communication, subgroups, training

Introduction

There is an abundance of literature on teams working in multinational organizations. Over the last few years, the focus of research has shifted to virtual teams as these are taking over 60 % of the work (Connaughton & Shuffler, 2007: 389) to replace expatriates and decrease the frequent traveling of engineers and managers in an attempt to cut costs. According to estimates, more than 40 million people work virtually (Connaughton & Shuffler, 2007: 387), and many of them work in geographically dispersed teams. Some years ago, when virtual teams, i.e. teams that work together across space and time, were first implemented, they were expected to bring all the advantages regular co-located teams were not able to achieve, such as the possibility to profit from continuous work around the clock on a specific project, the inclusion of different local and cultural perspectives, access to different ways of problem solving as a result of diversity, and others. However, practice has shown that many of these teams fail to realize their potential and do not accomplish their tasks according to expectations (Kealey et al., 2005; Connaughton & Shuffler, 2007; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). Zakaria, Amelinckx, and Wilemon (2004) point to the problem that “50 per cent of virtual teams ... fail to meet either strategic or operational objectives due to the inability to manage the distributed workforce implementation risks”(p.

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18). Also, workgroup effectiveness is often diminished as a result of conflicts arising from social, interpersonal and affective levels. In particular, the different language systems, cultural values, beliefs and norms and the culture-specific conventions concerning interaction can have negative effects on teamwork (von Glinow, Shapiro & Brett 2004). Thus, the reasons for failure are manifold, with one of them being the lack of awareness on the part of the team members concerning the challenges and pitfalls virtual teamwork can involve.

Virtual vs. Semi-virtual Teams

Even though the distinction is not always made clearly in the literature, many of the teams working in multinational companies are not truly virtual, with each member working from a remote location, but rather semi-virtual or hybrid, i.e. the teams consist of a local subgroup as well as geographically dispersed team members. According to Webster and Wong (2008) it is important to consider the difference between the individual contexts of teams, as they have found semi-virtual teams to be even more prone to conflicts than virtual teams.

Student Teams at Universities – Research Question

The author claims that cooperative behavior in multicultural teamwork and the ability to respond to the needs of diverse team members is not a skill that is innate. Even though many universities require their students to do team projects, very few actually provide them with the necessary training to work successfully in these teams. Frequently, some of the students – usually those who are more eager to earn good grades – cover up the inefficiency, the low quality contributions or the free-riding attitude of other team members by putting in more work than the rest of the team to ensure a positive outcome of the project. In many cases, these students do not hesitate to point out at the end of the project that they would have come up with a higher quality result by doing the work entirely by themselves. This implies that the teams were not able to analyze the strengths and weaknesses of their team members at the initial stages of the project and make full use of the inherent potential of the team. Clearly, if the project is carried out in diverse teams consisting of members from different cultural backgrounds, this is a challenging task, particularly for inexperienced team members. The question is therefore whether multicultural (virtual) teamwork can produce better outcomes if an integrated training program that raises awareness about the hidden difficulties of multicultural virtual teamwork complements a team project. While Kealey and his co-authors (2005) make a strong point for specific training programs that accompany international projects, many arguments gained from the present study also speak in favor of training programs for multicultural

virtual teams. The present paper will focus on the issue of communication in semi-virtual teams, as communication seems to lie at the root of numerous problems in teamwork. In particular it will investigate whether the quality of communication or the media used have a direct influence on team processes, whether communication training can help team members prevent problems in teams, and finally whether it is preferable for virtual teams to restrict themselves to task-related communication.

Research Setting

The topics raised in this paper are based on a longitudinal study conducted with business students at Johannes Kepler University Linz, Austria (JKU) and the University of Cincinnati, Ohio, USA (UC). The findings obtained from this research will be compared with relevant literature. The study was conducted between 2004 and 2010 with multicultural semi-virtual teams. Courses on "Working in Virtual Teams" were offered at both universities and extended over one semester (14 weeks) at JKU and one quarter (10 weeks) at UC each spring. In total, 291 undergraduate Business students from over 20 countries and cultures took part in these courses. As English was the only language the team members shared, it was used as the working language in the teams. The instructors were responsible for assigning the members to the teams to ensure that there was a cultural mix in each group. However, no other criteria such as specific skills or personality features were used as selection criteria to determine the composition of the teams. Over the duration of the course, the teams were required to accomplish two tasks: The first one was a case study that dealt with problems a multicultural virtual team was facing. The teams had to analyze the problems and provide suggestions for solutions. For their second task, each team was given a scenario of a joint venture between two international companies. The teams needed to pinpoint to the potential difficulties that might arise in this cooperation and design ways to avoid them. Given the differences between cultures, the teams had to decide upon the governance structure of the joint venture, design an organization chart and discuss operational issues related to management, production, and accounting issues. They had to figure out in what way the cultural differences between the employees of the two companies might have an impact on running the joint venture on a day-to-day basis and provide suggestions on creating synergies between the respective cultures.

Parallel to the tasks the teams had to fulfill independently outside the classroom, in-class meetings were used to discuss issues related to virtual teamwork to highlight problems that may arise in the teams. For this purpose the students had to read a number of relevant articles that were subsequently discussed in class and enriched by personal accounts of experiences

individual students had made when working in teams as well as previous observations from the perspective of the course instructors. In addition, the instructor at JKU provided a number of training activities aimed at raising awareness about possible conflicts that might occur during teamwork as a result of ill-reflected behavior, miscommunication, culture-blindness or differences in motivation, whereas the instructor at UC helped students with task-related advice. In this way the instructors wanted to make sure that the experiential learning that was taking place during the team projects, was complemented by an active reflection of team processes and some discussions on theoretical work published in relation to multicultural virtual teams.

The findings discussed in this qualitative study are derived from three reflective essays the students had to write during the semester, a final peer evaluation provided by each team member, and on teacher observations during class discussions related to the team processes.

Team Communication

In the above-described setting, the teams were free to decide on the means of communication they were using to accomplish their tasks, but were encouraged to experiment with a variety of media. As the teams were mainly working in an asynchronous mode due to the time difference between Austria and Ohio, the preferred method of communication for all teams was e-mail. However, most groups also tried to hold Skype sessions and many of them used Facebook and Google docs as well as the Internet platform Blackboard provided by the University of Cincinnati. In addition, the instructors organized three videoconference sessions in the course of the semester, one at the beginning of the semester, one after the first project, and one shortly before the end of the second project. In this way, the students were able to meet virtually face-to-face, get in contact with technology hitherto unfamiliar to them and could find out about the pros and cons of the different media.

Efficient task-related communication in semi-virtual teams is regarded as a prerequisite for structuring the task, agreeing on ways of task completion and negotiating the best possible solution. At the same time, effective group work seems to call also for non-task-related communication which acts as the social glue that binds together the team members, fosters commitment to the team and increases motivation. Hence, communication is the only means for the team members to develop shared mental models and establish a group identity. As Bachmann (2006) puts it: "A shared mental model regarding the group's non-task-related, social domain contains group members' representations of each other's personalities, social lives, privately held world views and norms pertaining to the social or affective manner in group interactions. These shared perceptions promote consideration and mutual

personal understanding between members, and strengthen positive affect" (p.732).

Research conducted by Moore et al. (1999) in a negotiation setting with students showed that dyads that had communicated informally prior to the negotiation were more likely to come to an agreement than dyads that had not had any contact before. In contrast to this, a study by Cohen et al. (2010) showed that in a laboratory setting in a prisoners' dilemma game, task-unrelated communication was "likely to activate norms of politeness, but not fairness or trust" whereas "task-related communication increased cooperation" (p.40). Hence Cohen et al. (2010) found that "Fairness and trust norms are unlikely to be activated by task-unrelated communication because discussion of resource distribution and expression of cooperative intent does not occur in this context. Without discussing the task, there is little reason to become concerned with fairness and little information upon which to base trust. Although it is possible that task-unrelated communication could promote liking that could foster trust indirectly, it seems doubtful that liking promoted by task-unrelated communication would be sufficient to make many individuals expect cooperative behavior in a situation in which cooperation can be exploited" (p. 40).

Research findings

In the following, the author will provide some quotes that were taken from the reflective essays and either support or contradict findings from the literature cited above. According to one student, communication adds a human and personal touch to the requirement of task completion and therefore makes it more meaningful for the team members to collaborate:

Finally I am still enjoying working in this multicultural virtual group, especially because we reached a new "personal level" by now. A lot of private communication is going on, just to get to know each other and to learn from new friends thousands of kilometres away.

There may, however, be individual as well as cultural differences as to the team members' needs to find out more about their (distant) counterparts:

From working on this project I have learned that Europeans want to learn about their counterparts on a personal level when working with you. Before we started working on our first project my counterparts in Austria wanted a mini biography of each of us in the US. In the US we don't care about the people we are working with on a personal level. The only thing we care about is whether or not that person is going to get their part of the project completed.

Even though this may be a highly simplified perspective of cultural differences, observations from the course instructors have shown that, in general, the need for social contact among team members tends to be stronger among European students than among North Americans, although some US

students also recognized the value of social interaction with a view to increasing the level of trust among team members:

I'm currently learning about my peers through Facebook. The group thought this would be a good way to better understand each other and gain each other's trust. Speaking of this, I noticed during our videoconference that R (a UC student) seemed ready to move onto the work side of things more quickly than I myself and the Austrian group who saw it necessary to build higher levels of trust. This may show an imbalance of formality in the group as far as priorities may go.

In case the social element in the interaction among the team is missing, some team members may regard this as a major deficiency:

Unfortunately, it was a relatively minimalist cooperation. As we had task-oriented contact most of the time, it was difficult to establish a relationship. I have to say that the end of our cooperation annoyed me a little bit. On the day of the presentation I sent an E-Mail to wish our UC members best of luck. There was no communication until the weekend when we got the final paper for proofreading before it was handed in. No further information about their presentation or if their professor had said anything important. I returned the revised paper, again asking how the presentation went. The only response was an e-mail from L just to inform everyone quickly that she had handed in the final paper including all revisions.

Even though the students in the course knew that the aim of the projects was to arrive at a high level of team effectiveness, the social element turned out to be an important factor for many individuals to reach this goal. Thus, in cases where this social need was not fulfilled, there was great disappointment on behalf of some team members.

I saw the communication with the students overseas as a possibility not only to work together. I expected to build up kind of a relationship, something like a friendship. Isn't it a good idea to get in contact with people from all over the world while studying at university? Obviously, they did not think this way, because after sending my on-format-proof-read paper back to them, I did not get any answer from the students at UC. They did not tell us anything about their presentation or how they liked working with us, they even did not attach any comments to their presentation, when they sent it to us.

For some students the lack of social interaction even made it psychologically very difficult to complete the task:

Well, now the teamwork is over, or should I say finally over. I will have to say that overall, working in my team really strained my nerves and sometimes it was really difficult to decide how to manage. I think the main reason for these difficulties is that we never really got to know each other and communication was very impersonal.

Although the overall quality of performance in the present study provides few cues as to the correlation between task-unrelated interaction and team effectiveness in semi virtual teams, the level of motivation and individual commitment seems to increase with more frequent social interaction. This supports the findings by Moore et al. (1999).

Not only the quality but also the frequency of communication is a major issue in semi-virtual and virtual teams. Webster and Wong (2008) point out that the co-located members of semi-virtual teams tend to communicate more frequently among each other than with their dispersed team members. Frequent communication results in higher levels of trust among the members of the local subgroup (Jarvenpaa, Knoll and Leidner 1998, Polzer et al. 2006), but in turn creates faultlines (Lau and Murnighan 1998, 2005) between local and remote team members. Even though these dangers were discussed with the project teams in class, most teams fell into the trap and were unable to establish the same amount of trust in all team members. Likewise, relationships became closer within local subgroups, although even the co-located members frequently worked via electronic media rather than face-to-face. In many instances the study showed that the development of subgroups was almost instantaneous:

Much to my regret two subgroups have formed from the beginning.

This impacted heavily on the quality of the relationship and the amount of trust established between the team members.

I believe that both sub-teams developed better relationship between themselves. My relationship with S and A was much better than with the other team-members. This better relationship was created through open and frequent communication. The possibility of meeting in person contributed very much. Moreover, we developed a certain degree of trust which did not exist within the entire team.

The formation of subgroups in semi-virtual teams is strongly affect-based and reflects negatively on the quality of communication. For instance, if one of the co-located team members gets hypersensitive about the way messages are formulated by members of the other subgroup, this sensitivity quickly spreads among the members of the local subgroup, thereby enhancing the "us vs. them" feeling. Likewise, feelings of distrust regarding the remote team members as well as loyalty restricted only to the local subgroup decrease overall motivation of all team members:

It was weird but also very interesting to observe how our frustration concerning our remote team members influenced our motivation, mood and efficiency over here. Although our local group meetings always had been very productive and fun, after experiencing some setbacks and

disappointments with the others, the good mood within our local group became less and less. Also our motivation lacked and working on the project turned from being an interesting experience into an “unpleasant duty”. This affected our output severely: Our brainstorming sessions were not as creative as at the beginning anymore and it took us twice as long to work on a task than at the beginning. I had the feeling that also the quality of our output declined.

Inclusion of all team members in the communication loop proved to be an important factor in many teams and turned out to be a decisive element in avoiding the development of faultlines between subgroups. Thus, the "reply-to-all" button when sending e-mails plays an important role when trying to ensure that all team members stay connected and dedicated to the task. Likewise, a quick response to messages reassures team members that their ideas and contributions are taken into account.

In both projects I communicated more with my local partners and I did establish more trust and positive feelings with them. If someone from the remote team members was not working or needed help, we only found out about that in the very end. If someone had a great idea, it took much time to communicate that idea to the remote team members and then we had to wait for their answers. For me the only reason for this is that there was a huge geographical distance between us and the remote team members. It was simply impossible to meet them face-to-face in order to get to know them better, assist them or discuss new ideas.

The above findings confirm the results of Wildschut et al. (2002) who observed that intragroup communication can increase competition between groups by activating in-group preferences.

Conclusion

The findings of the present long-term study confirm results previously described in the literature about multicultural semi-virtual teams. These teams are particularly difficult to manage because they are prone to the formation of local subgroups. Therefore team members need to pay special attention to the way in which they communicate. However, even though teams are made aware of the potential dangers and pitfalls of working in semi-virtual teams through parallel training, reflection and group discussions, they often find it difficult to apply this knowledge in practical project work. Particularly when under time pressure, team members tend to forget about the fragile relationships in semi-virtual teams and fall back into behavioral and emotional patterns that should be strictly avoided when working across cultures, space and time.

In spite of numerous problems that most teams have to surmount in semi-virtual teams, training which accompanies the experiential learning

seems to have some positive effects for the team members. Most of them confirm a higher degree of mindfulness concerning the other team members' needs and greater commitment to complete the tasks successfully. They also become more alert to the dangers lurking behind a project in a semi-virtual team and endeavor to communicate in ways to take cultural differences into account. Despite some of the positive effects of training, the issue of intergroup faultlines remains a challenge that is yet to be met successfully.

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