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White Paper

Virtual Teams

The “Virtual” Environment is
Replacing the Office

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Introduction

In recent years, the traditional organizational structure has changed and has given way to one where employees are more often spread geographically. Many employees are now working from home or offices miles from the company's headquarters. Additionally, the continual merging and conglomeration of separate business entities is forcing companies to rethink their business structure and find ways for employees to collaborate effectively despite distance restraints.

What are Virtual Teams?

Such increasing decentralization of workforces has changed the way teams within organizations work together. The days of interacting face-to-face with a consistent group of people at the office are giving way to various means of virtual collaboration. Virtual, or remote, teams are workplace teams made up of people who communicate mainly by electronic means. According to Management Issues contributor John Blackwell, by 2012, 95 percent of employee time will be spent on projects that involve collaboration with people located outside their physical workplace. In addition, an estimated 17.2 million Americans work from home or some other remote location according to Eric John Abrahamson, in his book, *The New Pioneers*.

How is Virtual Team Leadership Different?

One of the benefits organizations are associating with virtual teams is the ability to recruit and employ talent from various locations without the expenses associated with relocation and office space. Workers also benefit from less travel and commuting time. However, virtual teams bring challenges to team leadership and management.

Leading a team of people who are dispersed across the country or even the world is quite different than leading a team of people whom leaders see every day. Virtual teams bring the added complexities of distance between team members, including differing time zones, cultural differences, and significantly less face-to-face dialog among members. These complexities further leaders' struggle to maintain balance between those who are remote and feeling out of the loop with those who are face-to-face and might feel less privileged than their virtual counterparts. In addition to these complexities, virtual team leadership also involves overcoming obstacles resulting from managing differing personalities, assuring clarity of expectations, enabling effective collaboration, and providing recognition based on individual and team results.

With these challenges, leaders must be willing and able to adapt to differences in communication, motivation, and recognition. "Management by walking around" is no longer applicable. Leaders of virtual teams must develop their virtual leadership strategy based on each teams' opportunities and then create action plans that support the implementation of those strategies. It is when the unique challenges and opportunities of the virtual team are addressed head-on that the best results are realized.

What are Best Methods for Effective Management of Virtual Teams?

The challenges of managing virtual teams can be categorized into three areas: identity, integration, and intent. Each of these can have a positive effect on the successful leadership of virtual teams.

Establishing Team Identity involves creating a singular team vision that connects each member to the team's common culture and method of operating. In order to create a successful team identity, the team's electronic and telecommunications technology must allow members of the team to communicate, collaborate, and take action on projects. It is important that leaders establish a method for communicating in the virtual setting. Conference calls, web conferencing, live webcams and virtual portals are all tools virtual teams can use to establish the connection among members that drives team vision. Without face-to-face interaction, these technical environments become the virtual water cooler that supports a sense of unity and establishes team identity.

The virtual team must also establish ground rules for meeting either face-to-face or virtually on a regular basis in order to complete projects on time and within the planned scope. Best practices for meeting within virtual project teams vary depending on the distance, size, and timeline for the specific project but can be generalized to include bi-weekly meetings for smaller projects and weekly meetings for midsize to larger projects. Communicating regularly and understanding the tools that support the virtual team collaboration enhances positive results and team identity.

Creating Team Integration is vital to the success of virtual teams and establishes the framework needed to manage the virtual team. This framework includes the necessary administrative tasks needed to manage a virtual team and the establishment of clear, concise goals and expectations that are aligned to both the team's identity and the company's strategy. For example, conducting weekly team updates or team meetings of individual and team accomplishments establishes the framework that creates clear expectations and allows celebration of team success. Team integration also means overcoming the barriers associated with working remotely. For example, some members of the team may be more comfortable with technology-based tools than others. One way to overcome this barrier is by ensuring all members have been properly trained on the tools and then supporting that knowledge by creating an online repository of information necessary to the application of the virtual collaboration tools. This repository would be comprised of information including the application of the online collaboration tool, individuals' roles, and team processes. When a team member knows how he/she fits into a larger framework and is equipped with the means to navigate the framework, he or she is able to excel and integrate his or her individual success into the success of the team. Creating the structure that is needed to run a virtual team leads to the empowerment that is needed for true team integration.

Developing Team Intent is the most important step to ensure a virtual team's success. Team intent is the way a team implicitly operates. This includes the ways the team works together, bonds, and builds each other up to support one another in the overall team objectives. In order to establish positive team intent, leaders of virtual teams must establish and implement a "community" based on mutual trust among all team members. Establishing consistent communication regarding team ground rules, developing and implementing virtual team etiquette, and ensuring clarity of roles and responsibilities all determine how well a leader can form a community within the virtual team that leads to the ability to work together effectively. Establishing consistent communication related to team intent means finding time to meet on a regular basis and discussing things directly related to the team members' responsibilities, what they are effectively getting done, how they are developing as individuals, and what they can do differently to become more united as a team. The time spent doing this will ensure more effective results and build the collaboration needed for positive team intent.

Conclusion

Today's workplace is a virtual environment where collaboration must flourish without the benefit of face-to-face interaction. Technology plays a major role in this effort as collaboration is driven by the technology that is put into place to support the virtual team. Leaders of these teams have a responsibility to ensure both the proper tools are in place to facilitate the team's efforts, and they must embrace this new structure by effectively managing individuals and groups without seeing them regularly. Through maintaining team identity, integration, and intent, virtual teams can and will drive positive business results for organizations world-wide.

What Can Adayana Do for You?

Adayana understands the changes of global business operations and is ready to help organizations implement the solutions that will fit specific business needs. As a global human capital development company, Adayana is keenly aware of the importance of virtual team management, and works to implement effective e-Learning programs for its clients around the globe. These programs allow their teams to learn in a consistent and timely manner despite the distance, or time zones, between them. Adayana also supports the integration of learning portals, which function as a workspace for virtual teams and allow for easy collaboration and integration of group processes. Adayana's business strategy focus of customer innovation and intimacy allows it to truly partner with clients to collaborate on how to define success. It is Adayana's mission to understand client needs and develop solutions that positively impact business results.

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