



# Strategies for building effective virtual teams: Trust is key

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## KEYWORDS

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**Abstract** The impressive growth in web-mediated organizational relationships has created an escalating interest in how to manage virtual teams successfully. As organizations increasingly expect their managers to lead employees in these online groupings, it becomes imperative to identify and train them in the skills to do this effectively. The purpose of this article is to organize and present strategies that organizations have found successful in helping their managers lead virtual teams. While all successful managers must ensure that they have provided the basic organizational support for their employees, especially effective leaders also ensure they build trustworthy relationships. Thus, we emphasize how each strategy contributes to building and sustaining a climate of trust in virtual teams.

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## 1. Introduction

Fred has just been assigned to lead a team responsible for installing new credit card system software for a large bank in the Republic of Colombia. While this sounds like a normal leadership transition seen in any organization, this particular circumstance is

different. The team of programmers and installers does not reside in any single location, but consists of individuals located around the world. Instead of bringing team members together in a conference room to introduce their new manager, it is up to Fred to contact and build relationships with each member of his new team. Although management scholars have created a large body of knowledge on how to manage teams that are physically present in a single location, there is far less understanding of how leaders can manage teams effectively that work together virtually, using computer-based communication technology. It is a far different challenge to lead

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teams whose members are physically co-located than it is to lead a team comprised of people spread out all over the world—or even over the same building—who seldom, if ever, see each other.

Although virtual teams have existed since early history when empires sent their emissaries to rule distant lands, the impressive growth in web-mediated organizational relationships has created an added interest in how to manage virtual teams successfully. As organizations increasingly expect their managers to lead employees in these online groupings, it becomes imperative to identify and train employees in the skills to do this effectively. The purpose of this article is to organize and present strategies that have been found successful by organizations seeking to help their managers lead virtual teams. While all successful managers have to ensure that they have provided the basic organizational support for their employees, the especially effective leaders also ensure they build trustworthy relationships. Thus, we emphasize how each of the strategies contributes to building and sustaining a climate of trust in the team.

We organize the strategies into three inter-related categories: organization, leader, and team. While these are obviously interrelated and difficult to separate, there are specific cues in each category that, if properly presented, contribute to the success of an organization's virtual teams. Cues in each of these categories can aid in the development of trust at two levels (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013; Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998): initial team creation (swift trust) and continuing team performance (lasting trust).

## 2. Virtual teams

Virtual teams are groups of two or more geographically and/or organizationally dispersed people who are coordinated primarily through a combination of telecommunications and communication technologies to accomplish a common and valued goal (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). While initial discussions of how to manage virtual teams focused on the differences between face-to-face and virtual teams, current writers place teams along a continuum from completely virtual to completely face-to-face (e.g., Fiol & O'Connor, 2005).

Virtual teams have grown in use as organizations have employed increasingly sophisticated technology to solve two key problems: (1) how to assemble an optimal array of human resources to solve problems that cross traditional organizational design clusters, and (2) how to assemble teams that can address location-specific needs. In the first instance,

organizations find that while they may have the human capabilities to address problems or take on tasks, these people are not co-located in one place, one building, or even in one organizational unit; they are found across the globe in a variety of organizational as well as physical locations (Kirkman, Gibson, & Kim, 2012). Thus, the only way to benefit from collective capabilities is to form a virtual team that can integrate and coordinate knowledge, skills, and abilities to accomplish a task, often a time-limited project. An example of a virtual, cross-functional team would be a localized project group responsible for drilling for oil in the North Sea that needs technical assistance from teams drilling in other distant locations, as well as knowledge available from engineering experts located at the organization's home base.

The second instance is when organizations find it desirable to have employees physically located where they have no permanent presence. To address local market concerns while utilizing organization-wide resources and expertise, organizations might combine teams physically located at a remote or distant location with temporary local hires and/or organizational members scattered across the globe (Verburg, Bosch-Sijtsema, & Vartiainen, 2013). This type of virtual team allows organizations to minimize home country employee travel costs, access expertise across the world, and maximize input from local employees on key project factors such as labor for routine tasks or local customs and practices that can influence the success of a project.

An example of this type of team would be a group—like the one Fred manages, as previously described—that is sent to a distant location to physically install software in a customer's operating system and debug any problems. These teams consist of home-based employees on short-term assignments (even though they could last for a year or more) that are supplemented by local employees and perhaps access to part-time programming experts located in another country or company. These teams operate virtually in the sense that they are not able to benefit from face-to-face communication with their parent company or even other distantly located partners. Complicating the management and effectiveness of these teams is the common situation that some or even all of the team members are not assigned full-time to a particular project team, but instead have multiple projects reporting to several different managers (Cummings & Haas, 2012; Verburg et al., 2013).

Virtual teams depend on having appropriate communication technology to connect and support the members in ways that develop trust. Organizations show that they support the team and its mission

by providing this technology. Even more, they consistently provide cues to the team, proving the organization is trustworthy in all that it says, writes, and does. Specifically, the organization makes sure it assembles and sustains the best array of team members for the task, ensures that the team's leader is competent and capable of managing virtual teams, provides training and technology to support the team, and carefully monitors the professional and emotional needs of its remotely located employees. In viewing these cues, virtual team members make determinations—individually and collectively—about whether the organization can be trusted. If trust is the glue that holds virtual teams together and ties them and their members to the organization's mission, then developing strategies that focus on these trust-building cues is a crucial component of managing virtual teams.

### 3. Trust

Many factors enhance the effectiveness of teams, but one that gets a great deal of attention is trust (Lencioni, 2002; Salas, Sims, & Burke, 2005). Research shows that teams with high degrees of trust are more proactive, more focused on task output, more optimistic, more frequently initiate interactions, and provide more substantive, productive feedback (Clark, Clark, & Crossley, 2010). While trust has been defined in many ways, we—following Mayer, Davis, and Schoorman (1995) and Schoorman, Mayer, and Davis (2007)—define it as the willingness of one to be vulnerable to another based on the expectation by a trusting party that the party being trusted will perform a particular action important to the trusting party, regardless of the ability to monitor or control the other party.

Team members have to trust their leaders, each other, and the organization to be effective, and this is especially true for virtual teams (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Gilson, Maynard, Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015; Mitchell & Zigers, 2009). Studies have shown that workers' trust in others is impacted by their ability to observe directly what others are doing (Aubert & Kelsey, 2003; Mayer et al., 1995). Virtual environments make it difficult, if not impossible, for team members to observe each other as the subtle nuances of day-to-day informal interactions and nonverbal communications are lost in web-based communications (Kasper-Fuehrer & Ashkanasy, 2001). Thus, the organization, the leader, and individual team members must invent ways to be transparent with each other to build and sustain trust. While the technology is the hardware of creating virtual trust, the actions (or lack of

actions) of the parties in virtual teams are the software that builds and sustains the needed trust.

As noted earlier, trust may be established swiftly based on initial team member interactions and reinforced or adjusted given enduring, on-going interpersonal relationship experiences (Robert, Denis, & Hung, 2009). Swift trust is established at the formation of the team based on team members' personality types, stereotyping, and initial interactions (Clark et al., 2010). Some people are predisposed to trust because of their personalities. Others use stereotypes to make initial judgments of trustworthiness, and still others closely watch how team members behave to decide on their trustworthiness. There is some merit in the old truth that members get only one chance to make a first impression. Because information flow can be limited in virtual teams, especially in the formation stage team members look for 'tells,' just like gamblers playing high stakes poker. Little cues can mean a lot. For example, when people are slow to respond to emails or requests for information in the team formation stage, those people may be considered less reliable or trustworthy.

### 4. Organizational strategies for successful virtual teams

If trust is built on the basis of members' perceptions of ability, benevolence, and integrity, then organizations should strategically manage these perceptions to build trust levels by what they do and how they do it. This institutional trust (McKnight, Cummings, & Chervany, 1998) is created through such strategic actions as attending to supportive policies and procedures, providing appropriate technology, carefully selecting and training team leaders and members, and clearly defining tasks, roles, and accountabilities. An organization's trustworthiness is compromised when leaders fail to recognize the time and cultural differences across team members, when reward systems focus on individual rather than collective achievement, or when team members are not trained to understand each other or the specific demands of their project. These are also concerns for traditional, face-to-face teams, but the importance of these common team management tactics is amplified in virtual teams. It is too easy for members of virtual teams to believe that 'out of sight' leads to 'out of mind' when it comes to organizational leadership and increases the need for organizations to communicate to remote team members that their work is recognized and valued and that their careers are being protected (Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002).

#### 4.1. Technological cues

Organizations send cues to teams through the quality of the technology provided. The technology that connects the team members to each other, the team leader, other resource providers, and the home company headquarters should not only be the best fit for the task (Maruping & Agarwal, 2004), but also be as reliable, rich, and fast as necessary to properly perform the communication functions required by the team. We have all sent emails that never got to the intended recipient, tried to call someone when the connection was not clear, or executed a search for information that yielded too much to absorb. These common situations reflect issues with technology that may slow down progress in face-to-face teams, but could bring virtual teams to a full stop. The team cannot be effective if it cannot get the information it needs from the corporate expertise base, has to wait until a team member logs in for a new day, cannot access or share input or output with one another, or has a faulty phone system.

The need for data security and protection of the company or customer's intellectual property adds to the potential for communication breakdowns as these require access to secured phone lines or encoded electronic communications. If communication technology is compromised for a co-located team, a walk down the hall can provide a partial substitute to keep projects moving. For virtual teams, there is no easy substitute when their technology fails. Thus, we offer the following strategies for building trust through technological cues:

- Buy, maintain, and update the best available technology as it is the crucial connection and support for virtual team members;
- Ensure that the technology used by all of the team members is fully compatible among users and with the home organization;
- Have a backup plan for sustaining communications when inevitable communication breakdowns occur;
- Provide access to supporting information systems to ensure team members can find needed work and personnel information;
- Establish and enforce norms for communications (e.g., maximum response time);
- Ensure routine home company communications get routed to virtual team members;

- Make organizational information transparent and available asynchronously to virtual team members by providing accessible storage (e.g., SharePoint) of team documents, data, and decisions; and
- Invest in conferencing capabilities so team members can meet and see one another.

In addition to providing the appropriate technological resources, which is a fundamental cue of an organization's trustworthiness in the eyes of its virtual teams, there are other cues that can be used to establish trust. These include the design of the human resource policies and procedures that create trust in virtual team members, the selection and preparation of team leaders by the organization, the care it uses in structuring the team and its mission, the support it gives to the team's tasks and socio-emotional needs, the effort it expends in creating substitutes for direct leadership, and the attention it gives to accommodating the cultural, working style, personality, linguistic, and temporal differences that occur when members of teams are geographically dispersed. We detail these next.

#### 4.2. Human resource policies and procedures

There are several important organizational policies and procedures that enhance a sense of trust among virtual team members. The key ones formally and directly include remote team members in the life and processes of the organization, such as training and on-boarding. Designing and delivering a systematic introduction to the team is as important for a member joining a virtual team as it is for newly hired employees joining any organization. There is much literature on on-boarding strategies, but a key ingredient for virtual teams is to ensure the inclusion of extra information about team members and their personal idiosyncrasies, backgrounds and experiences, working styles, qualifications, and task roles that face-to-face team members typically acquire informally and that create a sense of familiarity with other members. On-boarding should also, if possible, include an opportunity for personal contact with the team leader and preferably each team member. Students of management are well aware of the value of informal organizations and creating face-to-face contact to enhance job satisfaction (Siebdrat, Hoegl, & Ernst, 2009). Other strategies can also communicate trust, such as ensuring virtual team members are included on distributions of routine communications like announcements of organizational events and activities.

### 4.3. Selecting and preparing team leaders

Another important cue that organizations can send to their virtual team members to build trust results from the selection and preparation of team leaders (Rosen, Furst, & Blackburn, 2006). While team leadership will be discussed later, here we focus on the perceived effort an organization gives to the assignment of experienced, strong team leaders to its virtual teams. The advantage gained from dispersed members is a disadvantage for a leader. Without frequent face-to-face contact and the informal two-way communication such contact enables, the leader chosen for a virtual team needs special skills to compensate. While all team members have both task-related and social emotional needs that a leader must meet, the distance and cultural, linguistic, work style, experiential, and time zone differences of virtual teams exacerbate these leadership challenges. The extra training an organization requires to ensure an otherwise qualified manager can meet these needs sends an important cue to team members that the organization cares enough to recognize these special challenges. Selecting a manager who has experience in managing virtual teams and has demonstrated success in leading such groups to successful project completion is also important. Training in delegation, goal setting, role clarification, conflict resolution, and self-management are also valuable skills for managers who are unable to have the same personal face time with team members. Finally, selecting managers who are proven winners is important in building the trust of team members as it demonstrates how much the organization recognizes that what they are doing is important as it merits the best managers available.

### 4.4. Structuring the team and its mission

Some people are better able to work in virtual teams than others. Besides the obvious inclusion of required expertise to achieve the team's mission, there are fundamental personality characteristics and personal values that will influence team success. A willingness to trust, a positive view of the organization and its mission, the skill of self-management, and an ability to communicate and cooperate with others in a virtual work environment all are valuable assets for members of virtual teams (Clark et al., 2010). Organizations that properly select and prepare team members for virtual team assignments send a clear message that these organizations are aware of the importance of team composition and preparation.

Likewise, organizations that recognize their responsibility in providing clearly defined tasks

linked to a defined team mission gain team member trust. Some tasks lend themselves more to performance by virtual teams than others. Tasks that are highly interdependent with other parts of the organization are more difficult to assign to virtual teams than those that are self-contained. Thus, we tend to see virtual teams more frequently used for projects that have a beginning, an end, and a defined set of steps in between. Ongoing, ambiguous, or innovative tasks are more difficult to assign to virtual teams as the intensity of intermember communication, as well as extramember communication, makes reliance on electronic communication challenging even when supplemented with visual connections. In general, assigning ambiguous tasks to virtual teams is more problematic than tasks that have defined parameters and outcomes. In situations where we can use traditional goal setting, virtual teams have a solid record of success. Virtual teams must trust that the organization is setting obtainable, fair goals that are linked to the organization's mission and not wasting the team's time and capabilities on poorly defined or inappropriate tasks.

### 4.5. Supporting team tasks and socio-emotional needs

Supporting team tasks and its members' social-emotional needs is another area where organizations can develop strategies to build trust. Virtual teams not only represent the many diversities found in face-to-face work teams, but add other dimensions that complicate communications and teamwork (Zander, Zettinig, & Mäkelä, 2013). Different time zones, nationalities and cultures, working styles, and languages make it challenging for virtual teams to work together effectively. Here again, the organization can take the initiative to recognize these differences by offering programs and processes that accommodate them. Some organizations offer language lessons to those not speaking the predominant language in team usage or provide translators when having team discussions. Even sending simple reminders to team members about the potential communication pitfalls in using slang or regionalized terms is a sign of commitment to team support. Likewise, reminding team leaders of the need to vary team virtual meeting times and to adjust deadline and turnaround times to accommodate the variation in work times for team members spread across the globe are also signs of a caring organization. Finally, even simple things like showing awareness of national celebrations or holidays at virtual team member locations can send a powerful reminder that each team member is important regardless of where that member lives.

To demonstrate understanding of the special challenges of virtual teams, organizations can offer substitutes for social and emotional supports that are available in traditional, face-to-face groups. For example, one company has invented a virtual break room as a place for casual, informal interaction for virtual team members. The technology shows when someone enters so others can see and greet a member and have a casual conversation. While it is not a perfect substitute for a face-to-face meeting, such an option shows consideration for those in virtual locations and cues a feeling that the organization cares. Another common example is using visual conferencing technology to hold virtual meetings where all team members gather to replicate as much of the sense of face-to-face meeting as possible. There are many programs now readily available to use (e.g., Skype, Watchitoo, Infinite, GoToWebinar, Zoho Meeting, WebEx, Elluminate, Adobe Connect). Even a simple strategy of requiring the use of computers for team communications not only saves money, but also allows members to see each other via webcam while talking. An additional benefit of this is to increase member involvement in the meeting, as everyone can see if others are trying to multitask instead of paying attention to the discussion. While no one believes that any of these are perfect substitutes for the interactions of a face-to-face meeting, the fact that the organization is seen as trying to do what it can is a trust-building strategy.

#### 4.6. Substitutes for direct leadership

It is a challenge for organizations to find effective leaders when physical team presence is dispersed. Thus, the team has to be empowered to fill in any gaps (Hill & Bartol, 2015; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). While a detailed review of the tasks necessary to lead groups and teams is beyond the scope of this article, there are activities and things that an organization can use to substitute for direct oversight (Kerr & Jermier, 1978). Characteristics of the person being led, the task which that person performs, and the organization's structure can substitute for a leader's direct involvement. For example, team members' professional identities can strongly structure how they perform their work. College professors often feel strongly that their commitment to the values and norms of academic professionalism replaces, if not supersedes, any effort on the part of a university administrator to lead them.

Virtual team members who view themselves as professional programmers also tend to view themselves as fully able to structure their work roles without assistance from direct leadership. Likewise,

there are factors associated with a person's task that are so clear, structured, and methodologically invariant that the work itself supervises the employee's behavior. One of the stronger recommendations for goal-setting is to make it clear to the employee what the results of that employee's efforts should look like in lucid and specific terms. Project teams often have the same substitute for direct leadership in the clarity of a project outcome. If the task is to install software on a customer's financial processing system successfully, then the completion of the installation can structure the activities and actions of the employees involved without much need for direct oversight. Similarly, there are tasks that are so satisfying and rewarding to the people performing them that direct supervision is unnecessary. Finally, the organization itself can act to provide substitutes for direct leadership. Not only can it do this through training in shared leadership strategies but it can also develop explicit plans, policies, and procedures that define tasks, how tasks should be performed, and what successful completion looks like (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014).

The point here is that if the organization has correctly identified and hired the kind of people who fit the virtual team environment and have the right array of expertise to accomplish a virtual team task, then the proper design of substitutes for leadership can enhance the team's ability to perform. Clearly, an employee with strong professional values related to the role played in the team will not require much direct leadership. This individual must be tasked with performing a role that is methodologically invariant, be well trained in how to perform that role, derive satisfaction in performing it, have clearly defined goals with specific performance metrics, and work in an organization that has thoughtfully crafted policies and procedures to guide team behavior. Thus, we offer the following strategies to building trust through organizational cues:

- Create formal policies that include virtual team cooperation and productivity in career development, performance appraisal, and recognition programs;
- Publish formal policy requirement for virtual team members to be trained in team building, team collaboration, and team leadership;
- Define formal policy requiring training in managing virtual teams for team leaders;
- Establish formal policies to ensure team activities (deliberations, progress, and decisions) and communications are recorded and shared;

- Provide financial support for virtual team leaders to physically visit with each team member at entry and at least annually thereafter;
- Require team meetings for all virtual team members; and
- Base selection of leaders on past success with virtual teams.

## 5. Leadership actions to create trust

Much has been written on how to lead teams and groups of employees (Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010; Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). The emphasis of this literature is on both managerial and leadership skills. Strong team leaders make sure they attend to the mechanics of the team's work, but they do much more than this. They attend to the human needs of individual employees by encouraging motivated behavior and the self-efficacy needed to persist on challenging tasks. Moreover, leaders promote member identity, establish group goals, and attend to member needs for bonding and recognition. In general, effective group leaders integrate team members' efforts, promote friendships, mitigate conflicts, and enhance collaboration.

The added challenge for virtual leaders is that the subtly nuanced cues that can be picked up in often seen and familiar facial expressions, tone of voice, or interaction behaviors of face-to-face employees are unavailable to the virtual team leader (Gilson et al., 2015). Instead of having a quick sit-down meeting after observing some negative cues with parties in conflict or calling a brief conference with a team member who is being disruptive or exhibited a look of confusion in a team discussion, the virtual team leader has to invent substitutes for face-to-face interactions and interpret all the available cues team members send in their nonverbal communications.

There are many ways leaders send cues of their trustworthiness to team members. Most of these depend on the leader's recognition of the unique challenges of managing people not physically present but instead spread out across, in some cases, multiple nations, cultures, organizational units, and time zones (Kirkman et al., 2002). Thus, a virtual team leader needs to spend the time and energy to accommodate each member's individual circumstances and to ensure team members accommodate them as well. An employee in Singapore will be in bed when an employee in Florida is working and even employees on the same time zone will be influenced by unique geographical circumstances or cultural differences. Employees in different parts of the world have very different holiday traditions and celebrations.

Leaders of virtual teams need to be aware of and respectful of these differences. Rotating times for team meetings to accommodate different time zones and holiday traditions will cue members that the team leader cares about their circumstances.

One manager would take symbols of his home country holidays when visiting non-U.S. team members. He brought, for example, King Cakes during a Mardi Gras time visit to his Singapore team members as a basis for building a relationship with these mostly Indian members. The non-work related conversation explaining this unique holiday helped him build a more personal relationship with them by showing that he was interested in them as individuals through sharing unique cultural traditions. On another trip around St. Patrick's Day, he took these team members to an Irish pub. In recalling the impact these small gestures had on his working relationships, he was amazed at how impressed these employees were with his thoughtfulness. As he pointed out, a small gesture that recognizes local differences goes a long way in building relationships.

Besides recognizing the impact asynchronous work patterns have on virtual team member interactions, there are other actions leaders can take to influence trust in virtual teams. Because face-to-face time is limited, a virtual team leader has to be an effective communicator and pay attention to a remote worker's need for information. Even if they are not physically present at the main company offices, people want to feel engaged with and part of the larger organization. Besides the aforementioned formal organizational strategies to provide routine information to distant employees, team members depend on the leader to stay informed of the informal news and connected to activities in the organization. Virtual team members do not have easy access to informal communications shared at the proverbial water cooler, thus the leader must be mindful of the need to fill in this information gap (Mulki, Bardhi, Lassk, & Nanavaty-Dahl, 2009).

Likewise, the virtual team leader is a connection to other units in the organization where essential resources or information may reside. The team leader also is responsible for resolving both professional disputes and personal disagreements. Because many remote teams are involved in decision activities or professional tasks, the normal disputes and disagreements that people have trying to reach agreement in decisions or applying their best professional judgment to solve problems may require a leader to intervene. Doing this while everyone is present in a single location is difficult enough but to resolve conflicts in virtual teams requires special skill.

Additionally, virtual teams typically include members who are not only demographically and

professionally diverse, but also different in terms of their culture and language. In these cases, successful team leaders demonstrate an ability to obtain information from all parties, to act impartially, and to act with sensitivity to diverse cultural and personal differences.

Leaders serve as a communication hub for information in and out of the team to organizational leadership. As such, leaders should be connected externally to advocate for the team and its members. No one outside the virtual team will know as much about individual and team performance as the leader and it is that person's responsibility to communicate up to management, down to the team, and out to supporting organizational units. The team looks to its leader to be the visible and effective cheerleader for both team and team members. Making sure that virtual team member accomplishments and milestones are included in routine organizational announcements cue members of their leader's appreciation of members' needs to be regarded as part of the overall organization. Relatedly, the leader must be successful in accessing resources required by the team (Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005). The virtual team typically is located remotely and requires access to resources, both physical and informational, held in other parts of the organization. In an ideal world, these resources are freely available to any organizational member. The reality of most organizations, however, is that someone has to intervene to get those resources. The virtual team depends on its leader to perform this important, often political, function (Malhatra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007; Mulki et al., 2009).

The leader is also the task manager (Ammeter & Dukerich, 2002), the person who articulates the mission of the group and its connection to the organization's mission. Besides giving team members an understanding of the value of their work to the organization, the leader defines task goals and role requirements that allocate responsibility for mission accomplishment to individual members (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008). The leader removes any uncertainty about the task by providing specific performance feedback to the team on progress, sets and monitors deadlines, and holds members—individually and collectively—accountable for performance (Kirkman et al., 2002). Goal setting is an important managerial task (Locke & Latham, 2006) and the leader is not only responsible for setting high but achievable goals that direct individual performance, but for disciplining or removing from the team those that do not perform. If a team member is loafing, incompetent, or undependable, then the leader has to discipline or eliminate that team member. Since the team overall relies on all its members performing, it is

an important leadership skill to maintain the integrity of the group by easing out and not bringing in those 'social loafers' who do not perform (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998). This requires considerable emotional intelligence as computer-mediated communications will amplify the impact of leadership actions.

Because the role of serving as the communication hub is so important, the leader should communicate often to all members of the team individually and collectively about the task, what the contribution each member is expected to play to accomplish the team's mission, how the goals of team are the means to the organization mission, and what progress is being made (Kayworth & Leidner, 2000, 2001-2002). The more specific the leader can make every team members' tasks, roles, and responsibilities, the easier it will be to communicate through a common performance metric that keeps everyone focused on where the team is and how it is doing on reaching its goal. Some leaders use celebrations and recognition programs to reproduce the excitement and feeling of unity that face-to-face teams have when recognizing both individual and team achievements. While a virtual party may not have the same feeling of camaraderie and interaction that the face-to-face team would get, it is still a strong signal of the importance of the accomplishment when each team member gets sent a virtual party horn to blow, or a cake piece to share, or a plaque via FedEx during a virtual team meeting.

Finally, an important cue of trustworthiness is how sensitive a leader is to members' personal needs. A virtual team member may have family emergencies, need evacuation from a dangerous location, be unhappy over a pay or promotion action, require extra training, or any of the other things that face-to-face leaders can sense during informal interactions with team members. This awareness is far more difficult for virtual team leaders as they are unable to 'manage by walking around' and cannot see the body language, facial expressions, or other cues available to the face-to-face team leader. Avoiding awareness deficiencies by keeping a finger on the emotional and even physical well-being of team members is an important leadership role amplified in virtual teams (Hunsaker & Hunsaker, 2008). The ability to sense when something is wrong is augmented by the relationship created during face-to-face meetings that should occur during the on-boarding process and the weekly meetings successful virtual leaders have. Thus, we offer the following strategies for leaders to build trust:

- Enhance and reinforce leader skills in goal setting, rewarding individual and team performance, communication, team building, and conflict resolution;



- Train the leader in virtual skills such as recognition of technological aspects of communication, time zone and cultural variations across team members, unique events at team members' localities, and early warning signs of team conflict and team member isolation/withdrawal;
- Require leaders to initiate face-to-face contact with all team members annually at a minimum and electronic contact at least weekly;
- Train leaders in collaboration skills to ensure effective group progress and management;
- Encourage leaders to invent virtual celebrations to recognize team member's milestones and group accomplishments; and
- Ensure leaders find ways to include teams and members in organizational life to avoid feelings of isolation or that they are 'out of sight, out of mind.'

## 6. Team composition

In addition to both organizational and leadership strategies, team composition is the third aspect of building trust in a virtual team. Besides the obvious impacts of size, cultural values, and technology (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004), people selected to be members of virtual teams have to have a predisposition to trust each other to perform collaboratively (Clark et al., 2010). If there is suspicion that team members, the team's leader, or the organization does not support the team's activities, communication lapses that inevitably occur with a lack of trust will aggravate this doubt. For people to work effectively when the primary means of communication is computer-mediated, there must be a strong and enduring foundation of trust. Members must believe that the other team members are trustworthy, that they were selected with the appropriate composition of abilities to address the team task (Martins et al., 2004), that they will be benevolent in their dealings with one another, and that they are reliable and dependable. Because it can be more difficult to hide in a virtual team, members quickly identify free loaders, members lacking relevant skills or knowledge, and members who are unreliable in supporting team norms.

The good news is that there are characteristics of virtual team members that enhance the level of trust. From research in personality, we know that team members who are high in agreeableness and conscientiousness are perceived as more

trustworthy (Evans & Reville, 2008). Moreover, there are people who have a higher propensity to trust than others (Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004). In addition, most organizational members will have a history or reputation for trustworthiness gained from working in other organizational roles. While it may be surprising to some how easy it is to find out about others in the same line of work, the informal communication network typically works smoothly in sharing information about people and their work habits.

Finally, the most productive teams are composed of people who are eager to share in each other's development and success. This means that members are not allowed to hide or exclude themselves from team deliberations. The success of teams is dependent upon their ability to successfully communicate, and success is dependent on the members' willingness to share what they know. Team members must be aware of the potential for miscommunication that team diversity presents and be willing to double check that communications are clear and accurate. Thus, we offer the following strategies for building team trust:

- Select team members based not only on their knowledge, skills, and abilities relevant to the team's mission, but also on their personality types and propensity to trust;
- Select team members based on prior performance in virtual teams;
- Ensure team members are trained in group collaboration;
- Select team members who are self-starters; and
- If assigning organizational newcomers to a virtual team, make sure they are properly on-boarded by briefing them on the organization's culture, its policies and procedures, and the roles, responsibilities, idiosyncrasies, and expertise areas of their fellow team members.

## 7. Virtual teams: Here to stay

Virtual teams are here to stay. Although the degree of virtuality may vary across organizations, projects, or teams, these proposed organizational strategies for building and sustaining the trust that is key to virtual team success will only become more critical as technological capabilities increase the use of globally dispersed teams. While we have offered many guidelines to those seeking to enhance the effectiveness of their virtual teams, we advise that these suggestions work together and should be combined to enhance

trust among dispersed team members. If the bottom line is to develop cues to virtual team members that the organization, team members, and the team's leader are all trustworthy, then attending to all the cues that reinforce this perception is critical to virtual team success. Indeed, trust is the glue that holds virtual teams together.

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