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# The Virtual Team Challenge

Steven R. Rayner

Some have come to call the decade of the 90s the "Age of Teaming" due to the vast number of corporations, government agencies and nonprofit institutions that have either adopted or are aggressively trying to implement high performance, team-based management. The reason is simple: organizations utilizing high performing practices consistently outperform traditionally designed counterparts. In fact, when properly implemented, a team-based approach produces superior results in virtually every measure—from productivity to morale; from quality to shareholder return.

As teams have increasingly become a key management tool for improving organization performance, we have learned a great deal about what must be in place for teams to be successful and what potential trip wires can lead to team disaster. What we've learned to date applies directly to "neighborhood teams," where members are physically close and have regular face-to-face interactions. But what of virtual teams whose members may be separated by such factors as geography and time?

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## Definitions

### **Neighborhood team:**

Members are all in the same immediate area (typically within the same building/site). Interactions among members are frequent and typically occur face-to-face.

### **Virtual team:**

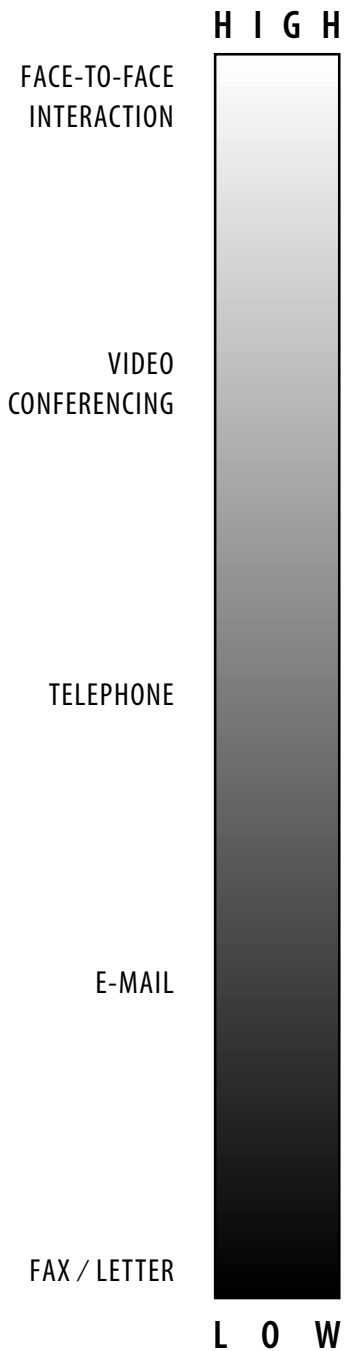
Members are geographically separated and may reside in different time zones in various parts of the world. Interactions among members are frequent but are primarily conducted through an electronic linkage (e.g. telephone, fax, e-mail, video conferencing). Members may occasionally meet face-to-face, but this is clearly the exception due to the physical separation of their "home" location.

The disciplines required of a virtual team are nearly identical to those of a neighborhood team—both need a clear charter; decision making protocol; well planned meetings; problem solving skills; role and responsibility definition; giving and receiving feedback capability. The difference is in the increased complexity of instilling these disciplines when face-to-face interaction can only happen occasionally or possibly not at all.

## The Virtual Difference

A virtual team is inherently more difficult to form and requires more energy to sustain than a neighborhood team. The following are some examples of why creating and sustaining a virtual team is so difficult.

### Likelihood message gets interpreted correctly



### *Incomplete communication*

It is often noted that 80% of all human communication is conveyed through factors other than the meaning of the words that are spoken. The tone of voice, facial expressions, speed, cadence, body language all help us determine whether a comment is flippant or serious; whether an apology is cynical or sincere. Over electronic mail, we are more susceptible to misinterpretation. While a phone conversation gives us a fuller picture (after all, we can pick up on tone, cadence and speed as well as meaning) we still miss vital nonverbal clues. Was there a frown while he was reporting the sales forecast? Did she roll her eyes when asked to take on an action item?

### *Limited relationship building opportunities*

In the early 1980s, Hewlett-Packard popularized the importance of regular, informal contact between managers and employees. It was known as MBWA (management by wandering around). By “wandering around” managers would have non-threatening, informal encounters with members of their “team.” The casual interaction often surfaced issues and solutions that were never brought up during formal meetings. Further, it gave managers the direct opportunity to address concerns, dispel rumors and forward company strategy.

Even in organizations where MBWA is not part of the work culture, a significant percentage of organizational decisions will be either influenced or made outright based on casual interactions that happen outside the sphere of pre-planned events. By some estimates, as much as 30% of senior management time is spent in “chance” encounters (such as unplanned hallway, parking lot and lunch room conversations).

Informal “off the record” contact among peers is equally valuable. Often this interaction extends well beyond the confines of the workplace. Members might share a common hobby or merely enjoy one another’s company for a beer after work. Invariably, topics relating to work come up, and often the discourse leads to highly creative and innovative ideas. In a virtual team setting, these opportunities for relationship building and idea sharing are far more limited.

### *Added complexity of distant interaction*

A neighborhood team resides within close physical proximity and within the same time zone—a virtual team may not. Imagine the added complexity that is created in doing something as mundane as scheduling a meeting. If a team is comprised of members across a number of time zones—say Toronto, Seattle, London, Hong Kong and Tel Aviv—using a “real time” conference call as the primary method to communicate is impractical.

In such instances, electronic and voice mail may be the best available communication devices since neither requires the person receiving the information to be present at the time it is sent. However, the likelihood that we misinterpret or make an erroneous conclusion based on an e-mail or voice mail message is great—the result of the receiver’s inability to ask clarifying questions and receive feedback.

## The Virtual Advantage

Despite the additional complexity required in managing a virtual team, there are certain advantages that should not be overlooked. For example:

- *The process of writing—where the sender must carefully examine how to communicate his/her message—provides the sender with the opportunity to create a more refined response than an “off-the-cuff” verbal comment.*
- *Far more information can be examined in a far shorter period of time using e-mail than voice communication.* In an hour, the average person can scan over a hundred discrete e-mail messages and quickly determine which ones contain relevant information.
- *Political gameship is less likely to occur during a remote meeting than during a face-to-face interaction.* Participants might pick up on subtle clues such as facial expressions or body language and decide to “stick with the boss” rather than voice their true position on an issue.
- *Having members span many different time zones can literally keep a project moving around the clock.* As an example, imagine we have team members in London, England and Vancouver, British Columbia jointly developing a proposal for a major customer. About the time the London based team members are heading home from a full day of work, their Vancouver based teammates are just arriving. The Vancouver team can quickly key into the data base and continue to work on the proposal started eight hours earlier in London. Work doesn't stop—it merely shifts to a different time zone.
- *The cost of electronic communication is far cheaper than the cost of transportation.* This becomes an increasingly relevant issue as the physical location of team members spans a larger geographic area.
- *With effective communication linkages, organizations can operate with far flatter structures.* Management hierarchy is greatly reduced as vital business information becomes accessible to virtually everyone instantaneously.
- *Many find the ability to work from their home to be a significant life-style advantage.* For the individual, there is less transportation cost to/from the office; greater flexibility in where to live; and more productive surroundings than a traditional office environment. For the corporation, there can be significant cost savings or overhead since far less office space is required.
- *Perhaps the greatest advantage to a virtual team is that it allows far greater organizational flexibility.* The ability for an organization to bring people together from remote geography and quickly form a cohesive team that is capable of quickly solving complex problems and making effective decisions is an enormous competitive advantage.

To overcome the inherent shortcomings a virtual team possesses and to maximize the advantages that it can provide requires a well planned and executed implementation. Each phase of the team's development—start-up, development, performance and conclusion—requires a disciplined approach that enables the advantages of electronic communication to be exploited and its disadvantages minimized.

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### About the Author

Steven R. Rayner is the founder of the consulting and training firm Rayner & Associates, Inc., which specializes in helping organizations implement high performance work systems.

Rayner is the author of *Team Traps: Survival Stories and Lessons from Team Disasters, Near-Misses, Mishaps, and Other Near-Death Experiences* (John Wiley & Sons, 1996). He is also the author of *Recreating the Workplace: the Pathway to High Performance Work Systems* (Oliver-Wight Publications, 1993) and co-author of *Tips For Teams* (McGraw Hill, 1994).

This article was excerpted from the book *Virtual Team*. Rayner & Associates offers *Virtual Team* training to members of remote work teams. Train-the-Trainer certification is available for trainers within your organization.

If you would like to inquire further about *Virtual Team* or any of our training programs, please call Rayner & Associates at (360) 331-6773.