CREATING SUCCESSFUL ONLINE TEAM COMMUNICATION

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Abstract

A review of the literature on successful virtual teams is presented, along with a discussion of the elements required for effective online communication. A strategy for developing successful online team communication is presented along with applications for use with each element of communication.

Creating Successful Online Team Communication

The Elements of Communication

Successful and personally satisfying online team experiences have certain characteristics in common. For the purposes of this discussion, these characteristics or traits are labeled "elements linked to successful online teams and satisfying online team experiences." These elements include getting organizational or instructor support, getting acquainted with team members, building effective communication, building trust, and using effective online strategies for getting organized (DeNigris & Witchel, 2000; Duarte & Snyder, 1999).

Getting Support. The literature often cites organizational and management support as the major factor in team success (Berry, Avergun, & Russ-Eft, 1993; Haywood, 1998). In educational teams, a lack of support from the instructor causes anxiety and frustration among students and adversely affects team effectiveness (Hara & Kling, 2000). Oliver, Omari, and Herrington (1998) recommend that online instructors should "scaffold" their support to students. They describe scaffolding as providing increased support at critical times, such as at the beginning of instruction when students must learn new information or skills, and tapering off as students become more experienced. In knowing what constitutes getting support, team members can play a more active role in obtaining it.

The element "getting support" encompasses providing encouragement, information, and resources to the team. In addition, it includes responding promptly to team requests, providing direction to the team, acting as an arbitrator, and backing the decisions of teams (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Haywood, 1998; Eales-White, 1997).

Getting Acquainted. Berliner (1991) writes, "education -- even when carried out with personal computers -- is an inherently social process" (p. 50). Although building relationships in online environments can be difficult, it is essential to team effectiveness (DeNigris & Witchel, 2000; Haywood, 1998). Research has indicated a positive link between team member relations and

team performance in both short-term teams (Druskat & Kayes, 2000) and in long-term teams (Druskat, 1996; Goodman & Leyden, 1991). The familiarity that individual members develop within their teams helps them to predict each other's behaviors and match their strengths and interests to tasks and responsibilities (Cannon-Bowers, Salas, & Volpe, 1995).

The element "getting acquainted" encompasses sharing cultural information. This element includes exchanging information on shared beliefs, values, assumptions, and opinions. Additionally, the sharing of personal information such as interests, hobbies, work life, family life, personal Web site, hours of availability, personal expectations of the team, types of computer connections, equipment, and skills is subsumed under this element (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Haywood, 1998).

Building Communication. Much of human communication is inherently ambiguous. In face-to-face situations, however, people are more apt to resolve these ambiguities. As Hara and Kling (2000) found in a study of graduate students who were taking an online course, resolving communication ambiguities can be much more difficult in synchronous and asynchronous online situations where the primary means of communication is written text. In a separate study of graduate students enrolled in an online educational technology course, Talley (1997) found two underlying problems specific to online communication and distance education: (1) students who easily communicate face-to-face found online contact more difficult due to limited typing skills and (2) synchronous discussions require a speed of response and attentiveness that is demanding, while students generally prefer time to reflect on ideas before responding to them.

Establishing clear communication is fundamental to all aspects of online teams. For example, teams must communicate effectively in order to establish clear and specific goals and objectives so that they may function effectively as a team (Larson & LaFasto, 1989). Yukl (1994) maintains that team members who do not clearly communicate their goals will be fraught with disagreement about priorities and processes for accomplishing objectives.

Building Trust. Building trust also fosters effective online communication. Geber (1995) determined that face-to-face contact is necessary to establish trust within teams. In a study of virtual organizations, Handy (1995) corroborated Geber's conclusion when he proposed that trust may not be possible in virtual teams because it requires "touch," referring to direct face-to-face exchanges. Conversely, Jarvenpaa, et. al. (1998) found a positive relationship between the levels of trust and the amount of cohesiveness, satisfaction, and perceived effectiveness among online team members. According to Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1998) although the usual cues used to convey a sense of trust, such as warmth, attentiveness, and other expressive behaviors are somewhat lacking in the virtual realm, experienced online team members display trust behaviors in other ways. While developing trust in a virtual environment requires a more conscious and planned effort (Duarte & Snyder, 1999), once it is developed, trust enhances group learning and development (Braaten, 1974; Mann, 1975), and it allows teams to manage conflict more effectively and to emerge as more productive and creative (Dee, 1995).

In online teams, the element, "building trust" encompasses acting with integrity toward teammates, respecting others, committing to the team effort, resolving conflict constructively, being reliable, and being honest (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Haywood, 1998; Iacono & Weisband, 1997).

Getting Organized. The research of Druskat and Kayes (2000) and Langer (1997) revealed an inverse relationship between clearly defined project goals and learning. Specifically, a decrease in structure and specifics of a project results in an increase in learning and vice versa. Langer (1997) describes this phenomenon as the need for "mindfulness" or thought and attention to changing ideas and circumstances which, she argues, increases learning. Conversely, other studies involving project teams reveal that developing clear plans, goals, and priorities is positively associated with team efficiency (Ancona & Caldwell, 1992; Ko & Rossen, 2001) and performance (Porter & Lilly, 1996).

Duarte and Snyder (1999) describe a virtual environment as inherently chaotic. They advocate the use of clear procedures and guidelines for organization within online teams. They outline several strategies, tools, and techniques to help online teams be more organized, satisfied and successful. For example, they use checklists and worksheets to highlight critical success factors found in effective teams; they provide sample agendas to help confirm team missions; and they use scenarios and exercises to encourage spontaneous and reflective thinking to develop problem-solving skills.

In online teams, the element "getting organized" encompasses selecting a team leader, recognizing and rewarding team accomplishments, facilitating team meetings, developing team norms, instituting workflow procedures, creating time lines, and selecting the appropriate technology and method for team interactions (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Haywood, 1998).

Research suggests three additional ways to foster effective online communication. First, limit interference. This entails being prepared for online team meetings, being timely, using technology effectively, and asking questions when messages are unclear (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Haywood, 1998). Second, encourage open communication. Open communication involves being informal, incorporating humor, being honest and thoughtful, and providing motivational and positive messages to teammates (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Hara & Kling, 2000). Third, build rapport among teammates. This entails occasionally engaging in team activities or discussions that are not work-related (Barker & Franzak, 1997, Oliver, et. al., 1998).

Conflict Resolution. Conflict is a reality of any team experience, and the willingness and ability to resolve personal conflict is crucial to team success (Hequet, 1994; McClure & Werther, 1993). Although several researchers recommend the golden rule for resolving conflict and building trust (Dee, 1995; DuBrin, 1995; Gardenswartz & Rowe, 1994) Kezar (1998) and Manz, et. al. (1997) suggest a somewhat modified golden rule that embraces the diversity found in online teams. They urge team members to discover how other people on their team want to be treated and then act accordingly.

Synthesis and Application

The body of research for the above elements suggests that an effective strategy for developing good online team communication is achievable. This strategy would address the anxieties that online learners feel toward online collaboration, and would incorporate all of the elements linked to successful online teams and personally satisfying online team experiences: getting support, getting acquainted, building communication, building trust, and getting organized. It would begin with providing information and activities in a way to help learners synthesize learning with application of knowledge.

This strategy also suggests that assignments given early on can improve online learner attitudes. I frequently require that team members engage in reflective thinking, discussion, team decision-making and team planning. For example, a scenario involving conflict can be introduced to teams and they would be asked to draw upon their own experiences and the experiences of others on the team to seek consensus on how to resolve the conflict. This approach helps online learners build trust, improve communication, and develop methods of organization so they can realize their team goals. The ultimate aim of this strategy is to help teams practice skills to make their online team experiences more successful and personally satisfying.

Getting Support. My course syllabus is designed to provide support for students when they first begin the online class. The syllabus provides information on how to contact me by e-mail, phone and fax; my schedule for online assistance, where to go for technical problems, how to obtain the required text; a general description of the course; general and specific goals to be achieved during the course; advanced competencies to be achieved such as critical thinking, problem solving, analyzing and synthesizing information, gaining a global perspective and integrity/honesty. Specific details are provide about exams (how to take them, the schedule for each test, what materials will be covered); how to locate a test proctor if necessary and who qualifies as a proctor; make-up exams, information on assignments including expectations of quality, an assignment schedule, how assignments should be submitted, and so forth. I also provide a section detailing team member responsibilities, how I grade student work, and a weekly outline of readings, written work, and associated due dates. The last section of my syllabus addresses course policies and procedures such as quality of work and academic honesty; and provides information on campus resources (library, online databases, Learning and Testing Center, special provisions for disabled students, etc.). My BlackBoard site houses supplemental materials such as chapter lists of key terms, theories, and concepts to be learned; career information and links; information on how to do research; and a list of relevant scholarly journals. In addition, I answer numerous questions and concerns by e-mail.

Getting Acquainted and Building Trust. On the first day of class, I ask my online students to write an obituary (or I may ask them to write a brief bio) for another member of the team. The obituary summarizes each person's values, organizational and club affiliations; major accomplishments; the impact this person had on family, friends and community; and any other information deemed relevant. Students share the obituaries with each other by posting them to a discussion board or file exchange where team members, as well as the entire class, can review them.

Building Communications and Trust. Explicit directions for word processing, e-mailing (e.g., what goes in the subject line, using names, creating a signature block), the use of attachments in e-mail, workflow protocol, and familiarization with the BlackBoard discussion board and file exchange are provided to the students in supplementary documents. Students are given numerous small tasks at the beginning of the term. These tasks require regular team communications, meeting online and using techniques such as brainstorming to foster communication and build trust among the members. Peer evaluations are conducted which help students to provide constructive criticism to colleagues. Students are encouraged to engage in open dialog within teams which results in a sharing of experiences that usually cover class-related and non-class related discussions.

<u>Getting Organized/Conflict Management.</u> During the first week of class, I assign the task of creating Learning Team Charters. The students are given one to two weeks to finalize their charter during which time I work closely with each team providing support, comments, suggestions, and so forth. The charter includes the following information:

• Team member's contact information: phone, fax, e-mail addresses

• Team member skills inventory: strengths, contributions they feel they can make to the team, identification of areas for improvement

• Learning team goals: goals for quality, group processes, project work, timelines for completion of team work

• Potential barriers to the achievement of these goals

• Conflict management: what potential conflicts might arise and how to team members plan to resolve these conflicts

• Preliminary project plan: identification of the tasks involved in the team project, who will be responsible for each task, completion date for each task, whether the team will assign a leader

• Communication Protocol: a set of guidelines for behavior including such issues as when/how to notify the team if the student has to miss a meeting, turn-around time for responding to e-mails/phone calls/faxes, teams norms, procedures for reviewing and editing documents, generating ideas for team building

The charter assists students in getting organized, getting acquainted, establishing communication goals, and taking the first step toward creating team cohesion.

The above suggestions are simple approaches that can be highly effective in establishing the elements of successful online teams. There are numerous sites on the WWW that provide additional ideas for enhancing virtual teams. Course assignments, exercises, case studies, and so forth are also available on the Internet and through library resources. Linking these course materials with each of the above elements will greatly enhance the likelihood that your online teams will be successful ones, and that team members will come away with a personally satisfying virtual classroom experience.

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