



Published in DM Review Online in October 2002.
Printed from DMReview.com

Toward Pervasive Computing: Toward Pervasive Virtual Collaboration

By Lee T. Capps

Lee Capps would like to thank Maura Eggert, principal in the Leadership Advisory Services practice at The Revere Group, for contributing this month's column.

9/11. Downsizings. Potential war. Corporate leaders in disgrace. Fear, uncertainty and mistrust are rampant in the workplace. Overworked, stressed survivors fearing for their jobs either don't have the time or energy to share information or they hoard information in a misguided effort to safeguard their employment. In addition, with reduced travel budgets and a reluctance to plan "non-business-critical" meetings following 9/11, there are far fewer face-to-face meetings, so it is increasingly difficult to establish and manage the relationships that are so critical to collaboration. There is increasing reliance on virtual communications – Web conferencing and text messaging, for example, are gaining popularity. Given these factors, how can we build collaboration in an increasingly global, diverse and virtual world?

Process is Critical in a Virtual World

Managing in the knowledge economy requires increased attention to the processes behind decision making. It is critical to identify group ground rules, norms, and roles and responsibilities for a virtual team just as you would for any other team. For example, newly formed groups must identify and document how they will work together – accountabilities, turnaround time frames, escalation of issues, etc. This should be documented, available to all team members and referred to frequently. Another challenge is that virtual workers can't rely on body language when they are assessing how the virtual communication process is working. Consider the following to counteract these virtual group process challenges:

- Is everyone participating? If not, it is important to follow up to find out why and help them become engaged.
- Are the ground rules being followed? If not, what is the process for addressing non-compliance?
- Does every member understand the process? Regular reminders (virtual flip charts) are helpful, particularly in the early stages.

Easy Tools and Technology that Makes Sense

In our busy world, knowledge workers don't have a lot of time to learn new technology, and training budgets are especially vulnerable in tough times. Technology that is truly intuitive or easy to use is a collaboration enabler. Knowledge management systems that are designed under this premise are much more likely to be used. But if intellectual capital is still not being shared, it may not be just a technology problem – it may also be related to culture or the lack of a trust foundation.

Culture Doesn't Just Apply to Yogurt

It is important to consider how an organization's culture impacts how people share information to ensure that the tools and technology work well. There are overall organizational cultures,

subcultures and individual preferences. Some organizations have clear preferred modes of communication – you may see an organization that e-mails everything, even to the person sitting in the next cubicle. Others are very meeting-intensive. Some cultures are bureaucratic and rules-based, others loose and free flowing. The level of diversity also plays a key role in a culture, for example, there are often generational differences in technology adaptation. The generation raised on the Internet will often be far more comfortable with virtual communications, including devices like emoticons (smiley faces, winks, etc.), which are the online version of body language.

Understanding cultures and subcultures in an organization is important to unlocking the sharing of tacit knowledge. How does the grapevine work in your organization? Via the phone or forwarded e-mails? A virtual collaboration strategy needs to leverage what works today in an organization. If people are comfortable with e-mail, use of asynchronous technology that allows for discussion threads may be effective. But if you have people that prefer to talk on the phone such as salespeople, then synchronous communications such as Web conferencing allows for live exchange of information, and presentations and often the dialogue can be archived for reuse or review at a later date. The best strategy for encouraging collaboration is to provide mixed media to allow for different preferences. But one needs to go beyond tying processes and technology to the culture – collaboration is dependent upon relationships and a sense of community. That leads us to the "Cheers" model.

The "Cheers" Model – Where Everyone Knows Your Name

Developing, building and maintaining relationships is key to successful collaboration. This is challenging enough working in a face-to-face environment. But how can you foster a sense of community in a virtual world? One way is by ensuring there is some type of virtual "water cooler" that allows people to check in, provide support and find communities of common interest, often referred to as communities of practice. In our busy world where more and more people are eating at least one to two meals per day at their desks, there is less opportunity for workers to take a minute to step back, relax and build relationships. Building relationships is critical to collaboration – we look for a place where we can log in or call and everyone would call out "Norm!" (substitute your name here). However, building relationships is dependent upon a foundation of mutual trust.

Trust Me

If workers cannot trust each other or their management, this can lead to the withholding of information. Building (or rebuilding) trust improves collaboration. Robert Bruce Shaw ¹ has identified three key trust imperatives, which are:

- Achieving results by following through on commitments,
- Demonstrating concern while respecting the well-being of others, and
- Acting with integrity by behaving in a consistent manner

What's in it for Me?

Collaboration often requires extra effort and awareness, so rewards and recognition need to be tied to collaboration goals. There needs to be role modeling of collaboration from the top and clarification and consistent communication regarding collaboration goals and expectations. Workers need a chance to learn and grow virtual collaboration skills in an increasingly challenging workplace.

Mastering virtual collaboration takes careful consideration of processes, technology and people as well as a foundation of trust. But as companies face a future that seems headed toward even greater reliance on virtual collaboration, it is indeed worthwhile to devote the time and effort needed to gain

competence in this area.

References:

1. Shaw, R.B. *Trust in the Balance: Building Successful Organizations on Results, Integrity, and Concern*. San Francisco. Jossey-Bass Publishers. 1997.

Lee T. Capps is vice president of IT Strategy for The Revere Group. Capps has more than twenty-five years of information technology (IT) industry experience, including more than twelve years in IT consulting. Capps joined The Revere Group in February 2000 and currently leads the Leadership Advisory Services Group, specializing in technology strategy and organizational change leadership. Prior to The Revere Group, he was employed with Acxiom Corporation, a major provider of customer relationship management (CRM) solutions. In his role, Capps led a sales and delivery team that developed a pharmaceutical and healthcare-focused business unit for Acxiom. Capps can be reached at lcapps@reveregroup.com or (847) 790-2318.

© Copyright 2002, Thomson Media