Distributed Teams—Challenges and Opportunities

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As companies get larger, team sizes, and the geographic and social distance separating team members, expand. While it's difficult to measure team effectiveness, it's easy to measure growth, revenue, and profitability. And virtually all companies experience at some point a dramatic breakpoint shift in growth rate that signals the end of innovation momentum, a clear harbinger of team dysfunction. Why do these companies get stuck? Because their teams aren't working. Collaboration attitudes and practices—within departmental teams and between departments—are critical bellwethers.

For too long attention to business communication needs has focused on the tools. Broadband communication networks have allowed global companies to distribute their workforces more widely than is commonly perceived, taking advantage of talent wherever it may be, diversified supplier networks, and wage differentials. Online collaboration tools support creation of dispersed "virtual teams."

But that attention to tools has not been matched by attention to the underlying culture and dynamics that support—or undermine—collaboration. Virtual work teams raise the ante on interdepartmental discussions, as well as intercompany interactions. Tools facilitating such required dialogue are ripe for discovery. To reap the rewards of the revolution in communication and sharing technologies, companies must nurture a culture that supports collaboration.

A Collaboration Case Study

Several years ago I conducted an in-depth two-year study of a distributed senior management team at a NASDAQ 100 company building collaboration and networking tools, as part of an effort to assess the efficacy of the tools the company was using.[1] The company had grown quickly by acquisition and was facing two management problems. First, key division managers and technologists were located where they had started their companies, not at the parent company's headquarters. Relocating to a mid-Atlantic state from the Bay Area, Boston, Santa Barbara, or Israel wasn't attractive for them. Secondly, the rationale to buy the companies was to create an integrated system rather than a series of stand-alone products. Unfortunately, no one knew how to do that—or whether it could even be done.

The headquarters operational leadership was mostly homegrown, but the CEO had recently upgraded his staff, hiring a key legal expert from AT&T, a seasoned corporate IT director, and key engineering executives from IBM. The division leaders, by and large, were seasoned veterans of larger corporations—HP, DEC, and Motorola—well able to manage in complex organizations. They just didn't know each other or the company's specific products. The engineering leaders, on the other hand, had largely learned their skills in small startup companies. They were nearly totally unaccustomed to collaboration and interaction to build common value.

To help bring the leadership teams together, the CEO hosted a four-day face-to-face meeting at the end of every quarter. It was a perfect opportunity to connect a voice or email colleague with a face and build some collegiality.

The real work of the company, though, happened at weekly Monday morning staff meetings for extended staff. Those meetings usually included nine people in the company boardroom and another seven on the conference bridge. The meeting was mandatory; a substitute was expected if the division leader couldn't attend. The meetings typically addressed classical operational issues, such as shipments, change orders, quality problems, customer complaints, personnel matters, budget reviews, expense questioning. Strategic topics were covered separately, usually only at quarterly reviews.

All attendees were expected to give a formal presentation at every staff meeting, and each attendee was expected to comment on other presentations. The insightful question or clarifying statement may be the most meaningful contribution

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[1] I was a senior executive who attended all staff meetings, tasked with assessing tool efficacy for the CEO. The study was first reported at HICSS 38 in January 2005, with Mei Lu, Mary Beth Watson-Mannheim, and Tamar Matzkevich Garrett. The paper, "Does Distance Matter? Bridging the Discontinuities in Distributed Organizations," which appeared in the conference proceedings, is available at https://www.academia.edu/3054112/Does_Distance_Matter_-Bridging_the_Discontinuities_in_Distributed_Organizations

Chuck House believes that to make virtual teams successful, companies must focus on social, psychological, and interpersonal tools to support collaboration.

tended to dissent far less, a staggering 85–90 percent less, than home attendees. This finding was the most distressing for the company. Remote participants were most likely to have different experiences from the home staff, and they could provide invaluable perspective. But they couldn't offer that perspective.

This study points to the need for action to make sure remote participants can be truly empowered and heard in companies that are increasingly dispersed across the globe. In an age of distributed companies, this is an imperative requirement. While tools can be helpful in reaching this goal, more effective cultural practices and management techniques have much more potential benefit.

Some tool improvements developed results at the company we studied. Primarily, the management team added an audio bridge with conferencing telephones. A bridge can be leased from many services today. Most have security checking, to ensure that only proper attendees can dial in; many offer a variety of active, online audit capabilities. Directional, full-duplex microphone desk-sets provided an incredible improvement in audibility. Multiple participants at each end could sit naturally quite a distance from the unit and be heard clearly and distinctly, with background noise muted. The improved audio technology meant that both sides of the link could hear audio cues for interruption.

But the real change engine was a set of management changes aimed at building real connection. To create more collegial empathy, every member of the home company leadership team had to travel to a remote site twice each quarter, and while there, give a presentation at the main meeting. This experience gave home meeting attendees greater perspective on the issues associated with remote presentation; it also allowed them to experience firsthand the broader range of remote attendee issues.

The most valuable learning, though, for those traveling to remote sites was realizing the R&D issues the company faced. Two years after significant acquisitions, it was clear that the intended joint product strategy wasn't happening. As headquarters visitors began talking to remote teams, another set of collaboration issues emerged—issues that affected the company at a fundamental, strategic level.

Synchronizing Relationships

What the company discovered, as a result of its efforts to address leadership team collaboration issues, was a deeper collaboration issue—the company's various R&D teams didn't understand their relationships to the other teams.

Two lab teams might have any of four different kinds of relationships: linkage, coordination, separate and equal, or directed (Figure 1). If one lab or team thinks its purpose is to "direct" the other lab, while the other lab thinks the relationship is "separate and equal," it is unlikely that a truly effective joint program will be realized, no matter what collaboration tools are available.

The problem of misunderstood relationships appears to be pervasive. Across several multinational corporations, surveying multiple teams in many environments, we've found some patterns. If Team A thinks its relationship with Team B is Linkage, Team B will agree about half the time. If Team A
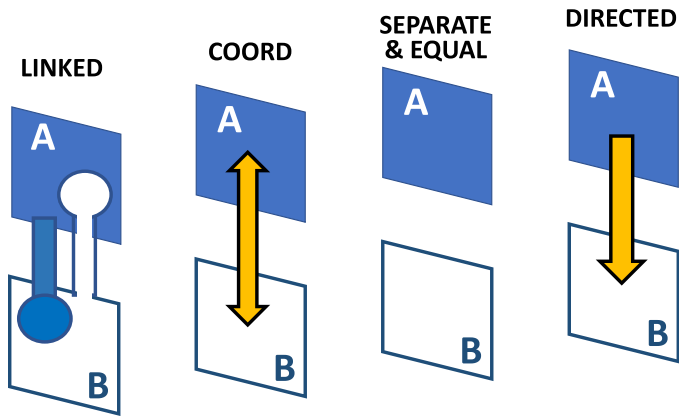
a meeting attendee can make, for other attendees and for the commenter's own understanding. Such insertions could occur during any presentation at the weekly staff meeting. But remote attendees only offered one or two comments per meeting, while those at the main meeting ventured six or seven. Remote participants questioned presenters at one-third the rate of those present at the face-to-face meeting.

Worse, when headquarters folk traveled to remote locales—and thus had to attend the meeting by phone—only one in five would present; others had various excuses. Interviewed about this, almost all said, "It's really hard to do an effective presentation on the phone." Yet they had never considered that 40 percent of their colleagues had to present on the phone routinely.

Some more complicated kinds of communication weren't tried via the phone connection. No funding proposals were broached from a remote site over the first year. Every remote participant waited for trips to headquarters to present proposals. Tutorials were taught three times as often at headquarters rather than remotely, whether the teacher was headquarters-based or remote.

Remote attendees were also more reluctant to vote—the most declarative position any meeting attendee can take. Many staff members were intimidated by this part of the meeting process; remote attendees felt particularly anxious because they couldn't glean the sense of the crowd. As a result, remote attendees

LINKED **COORD** **SEPARATE & EQUAL** **DIRECTED**

FIGURE 1. Types of lab relationships

thinks its role is coordination, Team B agrees about 60 percent of the time. If Team A reports that Team B is independent, Team B nearly always agrees, but if Team A thinks its role is to direct Team B, Team B disagrees at least 80 percent of the time. Does anyone doubt that if headquarters thinks Team A is in charge and Team B mostly disagrees, most likely nothing will happen—no progress will be made in important initiatives? Finding, assessing, and realigning these mismatches in role perception is imperative for success.

One factor in this misunderstanding is a misperception of how teams are usually organized. One common assumption posits two roughly equal-sized groups, separated by distance, working on one project. Across hundreds of teams, just 22 percent had this model. Another 13 percent had one central location, with multiple individuals calling in from independent sites. A full 20 percent were virtual teams with all members working on one project and no central locale. Nearly half of all professional staff members were multitaskers, working on many projects in parallel, each organized

differently. Such disparate team structures clearly affect team role perceptions, highlighting the need for role clarity.

So What Needs to Be Done?

Facilitating cross-cultural, interdisciplinary discussion is more a function of psychology, sociology, and interpersonal skill sets than one of technology tools and network structures. The most compelling determinant of successful collaboration is aligned culture, values, and attitudes. Achieving that alignment requires concerted effort to facilitate group cohesion, facilitate creative collaborative design, and define relationships among development teams.

The final factor: practice. One consultant sums it this way: "Teams that don't just talk about collaboration but actually do it usually realize strong results. These groups share a common purpose, see value in the contributions and abilities of each member of the team, speak frankly, seek out and address conflict, and look for ways to improve the status quo" (Business Training Works 2019).

What matters most? Building a trusting, respectful corporate culture, with clear role definitions, consistent frank communication, and appropriate rewards for team play.

References

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