

Legends, Lessons & Relity in the Virtual World - by Anne Howard

The people on our team were selected because of the knowledge and skills we had. The idea was that we would complement one another and therefore should be more creative and productive. For the first while it seemed nothing could be further from the truth. We seemed to spend a lot of time spinning our wheels but not really getting any work done. Then one day when we were trying to solve problem and hadn't really got anywhere, someone made a joke about how uncreative we were for a bunch of brilliant and talented people. We were all laughing and then people started tossing out really wild ideas about how to solve the problem. What happened after that gave me goose bumps. We went very quickly to a truly brilliant and utterly simple solution to our problem. Since that day we have been consistently productive, highly energetic, and our meetings are fun.

Now and then there we hear about a team that became a high achieving team for a period of time. Those stories are the stuff of legend. Legend - because of the rarity of the experience and because it evokes a desire to share it.

We all know that truly successful teams require a great deal of work on the team itself for it to be productive, let alone high achieving. More often than not teams still fall short of their potential and the team members' experience with it less than great.

Even knowing how hard it is to build a great team with the advantage of physical presence, the use of virtual teams has and continues to grow. People now work on teams are diverse, multidisciplinary, geographically separate, and may have different employers and different jobs. The only common ground is the project objective. People don't see one another, don't hear one another and don't know anything about one another. These teams have even greater potential than the actual teams of the past - greater potential for achievement and greater potential for dysfunction and damage to the team members.

How can virtual team project leaders ensure that team experiences do not resemble the experience described by one virtual team member?

I was looking forward to the experience. I had never participated in an assignment or a team like this one before. Each of us needed the work experience we would be getting, had the necessary background and chose to be on the team. One person took charge, and assigned tasks. The team started out all right getting the tasks done, though looking back at it, I can see now that we were struggling from the beginning. Our self-appointed team leader was highly critical of everyone's work, and at the same time didn't ever offer any ideas or suggestions for improvement. None of us did anything about how we interacted with one another. By the time we were halfway through the project most of the team was barely communicating in the group sessions. People were contacting one another outside the group sessions, and completing their assigned tasks separately, sharing only the finished work with the group. No one took any risks, offered ideas or suggestions, and the finished product was just a bunch of completed tasks. No one learned anything and I know I wasn't the only one who dreaded our work sessions. Worst of all, at the end of the project I felt as if I had been mentally beaten up and had developed a real dislike for a few of the people on the team. My life and work outside the team project suffered along with the project work. It was the team experience from hell. I'll be really careful about getting involved with team projects from now on.

What does it take to create a productive, creative high performance virtual team? Virtual teams are no different than teams located in one physical space. The question is really just what does it take to create a productive creative high performing team.

As Patrick Lencioni points out in his *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team* what is necessary to high performing teams is: trust, the ability to deal with conflict, commitment, accountability and a results focus.

In becoming a team the people go through a series of stages: forming, storming, norming, performing and adjourning. It is in these developmental stages that the elements of successful teams are established.





None of that happens by chance. The process for team development has to take place. The basics of that process include:

- Meet regularly as a team in a shared communication medium (abiding by the procedures for good meetings)
- Clearly articulate the shared purpose (the goal of the team)
- Establish expectations and responsibilities (methods and types of communication, standards of performance, project process, conflict resolution, problem solving approaches, outcomes)
- Commitment by all team members to the team and the team process (conduct, accountability).

Developing and sustaining an effective team is hard work. Developing and sustaining an effective virtual team is REALLY hard work because the communication is more complex.

Recently while working on the introduction of a new process I was reminded again of the complexities of teamwork. The introduction team consisted of a technology whiz, a subject matter expert, the logistics guru, me, in my capacity as the change implementation facilitator and the project leader. A couple of the team members were on-site and the rest of us working remotely.

As we introduced the new process it became apparent that a number of details had not been considered and some follow up work was going to have to be done. We all felt foolish. In assessing the situation it became obvious that we had not been working as a team.

Had we all been located in one we likely would have got together in a meeting room, talked about the work, what each of us was going to be doing, set timelines and deadlines and ask the questions that arise out of those types of planning meetings. Instead because we were not, we didn't do what was necessary to create success. We didn't see ourselves as a team. Each of us worked independently on our little piece of the project.

This was a small part of a much bigger and longer-term project. While the missing details were simple enough to fix this little project was part of a long-term term change initiative. The significant impact was that we created frustration and additional discomfort with the overall change we were undertaking.

Lesson re-learned!