

WHEN IS A (VIRTUAL) TEAM NOT A TEAM by Kevin McKee

Coming together is a beginning, staying together is progress, and working together is success.
Henry Ford

It seems these days that many people are, or at least suspect they might be, members of a “virtual team”. This is a term we hear a lot but like so many ideas in the woolly world of management and organisations we wonder what it really means. As you will see below there are ways to decide what sort of a “virtual team” you need (and have actually got). That decision made you can then decide what set-up, development, maintenance or repair work it might require.

Our colleague Derek Wood at the London Centre for Leadership uses an interesting continuum for assessing teams and groups. We have adapted it for our work with teams, actual and virtual:



REQUIREMENTS

Good communication
Meeting and Greeting
Names/Faces
Circulation Lists
Welcoming Skills

REQUIREMENTS (as before plus)

Roles and Resp
Goals/Objectives
Skill Sets
Leadership
Structure
Tools for the Job

REQUIREMENTS (as before plus)

Trust
Personal interest
Helping
each other
learn
Fun

As you can see each evolutionary stage for a group requires more effort so we always advise a “fit for purpose” approach.

Research indicates that the above requirements often surface in distinctive ways in virtual teams. Trust for example is both harder to build and easier to lose among virtual teams. Three good trust building tips are:

- make sure team members do some personal introduction before getting to the work in hand
- have clearly defined roles for each person in the team
- a positive, action orientated approach from all team members is essential. “One pessimist has the potential to undermine an entire virtual team” states one researcher.

Building effective groups or teams is not easy and the virtual element makes the process more complicated. However, this field of knowledge is expanding quickly. Appropriately enough a lot of good information is available on line. Some names you might look out for are: Prof. W. L. Jarvenpaa, Prof. D. E. Leidner and Lisa Kimball.

The last is a notable Canadian researcher who asks us to bear in mind the simple fact that “you can share your mind electronically but not your heart”.

“It is amazing what can be accomplished when nobody cares about who gets the credit.”
Robert Yates