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Self-Organising and Virtual Teams: Culture, Emotional Intelligence, Trust and Communication

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Learning outcomes

Upon the completion of this chapter, the reader will be able to:

- Compare the different types of project teams.
- Discuss how self-organising teams operate within agile projects management methodologies.
- Discuss the factors that impact virtual teams in project context.
- Understand the relationship between culture, emotion intelligence and virtual teams' performance.
- Evaluate the impact of trust and communication on a virtual team's success.

Introduction

Amid the shift towards digital economies in the context of globalisation, project team members are required to work together remotely, utilising the current highly accessible technology (Han and Beyerlein, 2016). Virtual teams are growing rapidly in today's world as companies are being involved in a constant fight for existence, due to the very vibrant and continuous competition which makes organizations emerge in different countries. Being a global organisation involves synchronization among people situated in diverse geographical areas, thus there arises the necessity for managing global virtual teams, assigned to resolve issues at a global level (Paul et al., 2016).

The existence of a variety of technologies allows companies to have access to a large pool of talented people located all over the world, as it reduces costs and

facilitates cooperation among different locations and time zones (Paul et al., 2016). According to Hertel et al. (2005), the allocation of work among employees has become more efficient due to the evolvement of technology.

Consequently, for international companies to collaborate with each other and to have high performing virtual teams, there has been a need to consider the impact of cultural diversity on virtual teams' practices and performance (Han and Beyerlein, 2016). This discussion should also include self-organising teams in the context of agile methodologies and beyond. In addition, studies have been focusing on how emotional intelligence impacts teams and groups (Wolff et al., 2001). However, limited research has been conducted on how culture and emotional intelligence impact virtual team performance in the context of project management.

This chapter aims to discuss the critical area of managing project teams with emphasis on the relationship between culture, communication, emotional intelligence and trust in self-organising and virtual teams, and how the interaction between these factors impact team performance. This attempts to answer the call by the sixth edition of the *PMI PMBOK* that emphasised the importance of developing the soft skills of project managers in the pursuit of enhancing project management practice amid the growing interest in sustainability in general. In addition, this endorses and further justifies the suggested paradigm shift that the authors advocate, in pursuit of sustainable project management.

Definition of a team

A 'team' can be defined as a group of people highly task oriented compared to other groups, which follow certain rules and rewards set at the very beginning. Over the years, both the terms 'group' and 'team' have been utilized to depict little collections of individuals working together. Even though these terms have been regularly utilized in traditional and virtual teams, recently there has been questioning whether it makes sense to interchange the terms (Powell et. al., 2004). Many authors recommend that the usage of the term 'team' be saved for those gatherings that show abnormal amounts of interdependency and coordination among individuals.

A generally acknowledged definition of a team is: "A team is a gathering of people who are associated in their undertakings, who share obligation regarding results, who see themselves and who are seen by others as a complete social substance installed in at least one bigger social frameworks, and who deal with their relationship crosswise over hierarchical limits" (Bailey and Cohen, 1997, p. 241, cited in Tirmizi, 2008).

This definition is sufficiently general to be applicable to both traditional and virtual teams while explicitly recognizing the characterizing components of a team: its solidarity of reason, its way of life as a social structure, and its individuals' shared duty regarding results.

Katzenbach and Smith (1993) make a distinction between teams and groups as shown in Table 2.1; looking at leadership, reliability, meeting procedures and productivity. Nonetheless, by observing these distinctions – for instance, the third point on ‘a specific purpose’ – it can easily be argued that any collective of people is considerate about the organization’s goals and purpose. Having said that, since groups and team members are part of an organization they can’t be isolated from the organizations’ mission, hence why this point is applicable to both parties.

Table 2.1: Differences between teams and groups (Source: Katzenbach and Smith, 1993; adapted from Mataj, 2017)

Teams	Groups
Shared leadership	Strong, clearly focused leader
Individual and mutual accountability	Individual accountability
A specific purpose that the team itself delivers	Purpose is the same as the larger organizational mission
Collective work products	Individual work products
Open-ended discussion and active problem solving in meetings	Focus on efficiency in meetings

Types of teams

Teams can be categorized in six different types: formal teams, informal teams, task forces, committees, self-managed teams and virtual teams (Tirmizi, 2008). These types, despite their unique characteristics, share a few common attributes.

- **Formal teams** are seen as the fundamental blocks of an organization. Their organizational structure is very firm as team members are assigned distinct roles which contribute to the fair allocation of workload amongst them. These kinds of teams might be set up to facilitate the completion of tasks that the company intends to accomplish within a particular timeframe. There is high dependency amongst the team members and it is their performance that determines the success of the team.
- **Informal teams** are formed to resolve issues that the company is facing. Their roles are usually flexible and can change, based on the different tasks that are being presented to them. Informal team members, unlike formal teams, have a low dependency amongst them and the organizational structure is not as firm.
- **Task forces** are usually created when there is a need for particular projects and the company itself tends to manage them. Team members have high dependency on each other, as there is pressure on their performance and sticking to the timelines set by the organization.
- **A committee** is made of a group of people that are asked to execute a task that could be a strategy, finalizing a decision etc. This sort of team has resemblances with the task forces team as it focuses on project delivery within a definite timeframe. Committees’ members can have a mixture of dependency degrees amongst themselves and also different levels of independency towards the organization’s members.