



A Successful Virtual Team Adventure: IBAM Sparks Collegial Research *

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ABSTRACT

In November 1999 five IBAM members sat over dinner at the Annual Meeting discussing what it takes to be a good team member. Through the laughter and camaraderie of new-found friends, a research project was born. This article summarizes the process that led our team through the design and implementation of a research project and the writing of a manuscript. The theoretical context for our team's experience is blended into the discussion of our experience and the benefits of virtual teams for conducting research.

The Development and Implementation of a Research Project

Karen Dill Bowerman (California State University – Fresno), Terry Curran (Siena College), Jim Freiburger (Southern New Hampshire University), Linda Hartenian (University of Wisconsin Oshkosh), and Ray Maghroori (Riverside Community College District) first became acquainted on Friday evening of the 1999 IBAM Annual Meeting. Casual conversation about the Annual Meeting and each of our specific research interests gradually led to a discussion of teams in organizations. Eventually one of us posed the question as to whether those who had sports experience were more likely to be better team players than those who had not played team sports. Of specific interest to our team were potential gender differences in team sports experience. Someone suggested we explore whether research had been done on these ideas, and the “seed” for a research project had been planted.

Ray volunteered to send an e-mail to encourage us to keep in touch upon the return to our respective colleges and universities. He identified roles for each team member based on his



observation about our individual skills, and we began to complete this research project as a virtual team. Karen, Terry, and Ray conducted a brief literature review and concluded that little or no research had been conducted on the role of team sports in developing team player characteristics. They continued exploring the literature, leading to the theoretical development of our research project. Linda and Jim explored the literature for theory on team player characteristics, eventually developing the questionnaire used to collect data. Jim took responsibility for creating the data base. Linda analyzed the data and wrote preliminary drafts of the results and discussion. Karen put finishing touches on the final manuscript. Ray has taken responsibility for submitting the manuscript to journals for publication.

Why This Project Was a Success

Our team experience was successful for several reasons. First, we had a champion for our research idea—someone in our team who took it upon himself to be sure that we kept in touch with one another and proceeded according to our timeline. Roles were delineated and multiple opportunities for leadership and followership were present. However, the team environment might have led some to conform to the other team members' wishes. Second, the voluntary aspect of this project kept us motivated. Motivation was both intrinsic and extrinsic. Commitment to the project and cohesiveness were important. Third, we varied our decision-making models as the project took shape. Fourth, we took advantage of information technology to maintain communication, recognizing the drawbacks of a “less rich” medium, particularly the inclination to withhold information. Each is discussed below.

Idea Champion to Promote Creativity and Innovation

Our research team unanimously concluded that Ray has been our idea champion. We know from research that a leader, especially one in a cross-functional team, must be able to rise above his or her functional level to take an overall view. While idea champions are often those in leadership who have control over resources (Clark & Wheelwright, 1993), product champions can be those “...who take ‘ownership’ of a project, solve problems as they occur, smooth over disputes between team members, and provide leadership to the team” (Jones, 1993). Idea champions help to fight the natural resistance to change in organizations (Howell & Higgins, 1990)—in fact, failures are often attributed to lack of a volunteer champion. Someone who is a management champion is one who supports the idea by sponsoring and shielding the idea while it is being pursued (Maidique & Zirger, 1984). The management champion recognizes the potential of an idea and possesses enough prestige and authority for the idea to receive a fair hearing and obtain the necessary resources to promote the idea.

In early stages of development of the research project, evaluation of ideas was avoided. Knowing that creativity and motivation can be undermined with performance evaluation (Amabile, 1979), team members were encouraged to share ideas with one another. The final product of each stage (e.g., literature, questionnaire design, results/discussion) was the initial responsibility of the person(s) taking the lead in each stage. Much individual flexibility and choice in how to do a task were maintained in our individual team roles, enhancing creativity (Amabile, 1983).



Leadership and Followership

While our virtual team exhibited several aspects of self-directed work teams, leadership opportunities also existed. Characteristics of a self-directed work team included sharing tasks (e.g., completing the literature review, developing the research questionnaire), taking collective responsibility for team outcomes (e.g., encouraging one another to achieve goals), possessing the skills necessary to perform tasks (e.g., technology capabilities, research skills) (Wall, Kemp, Jackson, & Clegg, 1986) and a high degree of self-determination in managing work (e.g., a strong desire to bring the project to fruition) (Cummings, 1978). Leadership opportunities included guiding our team toward our outcome (e.g., we all provided encouragement to one another, Ray sent frequent process-oriented e-mails to ensure we were on task) (Robbins, 2000). Though leadership is not necessary when professionalism exists, when the team is cohesive, and when people are highly experienced/trained and have intrinsic motivation (Kerr & Jermier, 1978), the virtual nature of our project required someone to facilitate and manage the project (Wellins, Byham, & Dixon, 1994; Steckler & Fondas, 1995). Our project had all of these characteristics. The success of our team was a function of knowing from the printed words before us when a leadership role needed to be taken on, and when team members needed to follow.

De Pree (1989) suggests that good leaders actually develop a servant mentality, someone indebted to those he or she leads. When a leader embraces the servant role, he or she focuses on removing obstacles that limit followers in achieving their own excellence. And, leaders can't be good leaders without good followers. In our team project, opportunities existed for the exchange of roles. Each of us had to be a good leader as well as a good follower.

Conformity

In some groups or teams, the pressure to conform can counterbalance the benefits of multiple perspectives. Research by Janus (1972) suggests that groupthink exists when "...people ... are deeply involved in a cohesive in-group, [and] when the members' strivings for unanimity override their motivation to realistically appraise alternative courses of action" (p. 8). Janis goes on to suggest that groupthink is a concurrence-seeking activity. On the one hand, our virtual team ran the risk that by seeking concurrence at different stages of our research project (i.e., putting pressure on team members to proceed in a certain direction), defective decision-making would occur. While Choi and Kim (1999) found that concurrence seeking doesn't necessarily result in poor team performance, lack of group identity might. From our team's perspective, maintaining the sense that we were working toward a common goal was important, if for no other reason that this project was fun!

Voluntary vs. Involuntary Assignments

Though each of us has research requirements associated with our roles as college and university professors, this project was undertaken voluntarily. The voluntary aspect of this project had a positive impact on our continued motivation to complete the project and write a manuscript. Several motivation theories can be used to explain why we voluntarily entered into this project. Expectancy theory would predict that persons participate in volunteer activities



because they will lead to outcomes that are valued (Pinder, 1985). Equity theory suggests that rewards must parallel inputs so that input/output ratios are equal (Gidron, 1978). Needs theories would suggest that people seek out volunteer activities to satisfy needs that are not met by other activities (Maslow, 1970). Others have found that people volunteer more frequently based on individual motives, such as feeling useful, productive, fulfilling moral obligation (Okun, 1994) and other intrinsic reasons ((Sherman & Smith, 1984). When people are viewed as intrinsically motivated volunteers, they are more likely to be characterized as exhibiting greater involvement, enthusiasm, and innovation relative to those who got paid (Wild, Cameron, Enzle, & Hawkins, 1992

In a broader organizational context, volunteer activity in organizational settings is known as “organizational citizenship behavior (OCB).” Organ and colleagues (Organ, 1988; Organ & Ryan, 1995) suggest that OCB is discretionary in nature, not part of employees’ formal role requirements, and go beyond that which is expected and contracted for. OCB’s however are not considered superfluous, however, but they actually promote effective organizational functioning. OCB’s result in an increase in the coworker’s performance (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Fetter, 1991; Podsakoff & MacKenzie, 1994). For sure, each member of our research team benefits from a published manuscript or presented paper. Also, our link to IBAM supports IBAM’s objectives.

Intrinsic / Extrinsic Motivation

In order for our project to move forward toward closure, the presence of factors that would bring satisfaction was needed. Herzberg’s (1959) motivator-hygiene theory of motivation has led us to conclude that motivating factors and hygiene factors are on separate dimensions, with motivators bringing/avoiding satisfaction, and hygiene factors bringing/avoiding dissatisfaction. Indeed, if our team only avoided dissatisfaction, project completion would become as dispersed as our geographical locations.

The motivator factors are intrinsic factors, or internal factors directly related to the job, whereas hygiene factors are extrinsic factors, or factors external to the job. Herzberg’s theory told us that the motivator factors include the work itself, as well as recognition and responsibility—the very factors that we rated high among our members. In contrast, hygiene factors are related to the context in which a job is performed, such as supervision, salary, working conditions, or interpersonal relations—factors that we rated as unimportant in the context of our “virtual” relationship to the team.

Intrinsic outcomes, such as a feeling of accomplishment after publication, were shared among team members. A virtual team may even have a distinct advantage over traditional teams when intrinsic factors are clearly present. Not only is the team motivated, but it does not face the specter of dissatisfaction because extrinsic factors that are normally determined by the organization are not shared.

Team Commitment



Organizational commitment has been linked to job performance (Brett, Cron, & Slocum, 1995) and organizational turnover (Bishop, Scott, & Casino, 1997). Commitment to the team is related to team performance (Scott & Townsend, 1994). The extent to which the employee feels attached to the organization and to the team was recently studied by Bishop and Scott (2000) in the context of self-directed work teams. Predictors of team commitment included level of inter-sender conflict, perceived task interdependence, and satisfaction with coworkers.

In application, we conclude that our sense of attachment to the team is strong because there is no inter-sender conflict (in fact, team members willingly took on designated tasks without challenging how others chose to carry out their roles, and without identifying email discussions about research content as team conflict), there is high perceived task interdependence, and team members were satisfied with each other.

If the team had been appointed in virtual space, without the opportunity to meet initially in person, it is doubtful that team commitment would have been so strong, even with the above attributes in place. In a survey of how the medium influenced team relations and the team project, one member commented, “The instant bonding that our team experienced has helped this team project survive. We have continued to approach all of our interactions with a positive excitement. This seems to have come naturally.” Another member commented on how the team “clicked” when members first met at IBAM 1999. When the team reunited at IBAM 2000, team members separately commented on how they looked forward to opening email, in hopes that there would be a message from a team member, and on how effectively our contributions interrelated to produce a whole.

Cohesiveness

The strength of members’ desire to remain part of the team and contribute to team goals is commonly known as cohesiveness. When cohesiveness is high, the team can experience higher efficiency and effectiveness. There is a sense of a vicious circle in that a team achieving its goals is more likely to be cohesive than a team that is not achieving its goals, and at the same time, a team that is cohesive is more likely to achieve its goals. As soon as commitment to the team decreases, team members are less likely to communicate and cooperate to the extent needed to obtain goals (Hellriegel et al, 1992). Had it not been for the medium of email, this team concluded that there was a strong likelihood that the good idea discussed informally at IBAM 1999 would never have materialized into an actual research project. Why? Given the team’s geographical dispersion, it would have been absent a medium for maintaining the sense of cohesiveness and commitment to the team. Furthermore, congruence of team and individual goals positively influenced cohesiveness. In this particular case, the team goal quickly became “to publish” and “to present” findings of joint research – goals that appealed to each member individually. Cohesiveness with the team as a whole was so strong that when two members saw each other at conferences without the presence of the others, they steered away from team-owned topics so that there was no effect on the team project.

There is danger when cohesiveness is high and conformity—the extent to which differences are tolerated—is also high. The danger is the phenomenon, known as groupthink. When conformity is high, in order to free the team from pressures to adhere to group norms, the



team needs the insertion of different opinions that are then legitimately considered (Spich and Keleman, 1985). In this particular team effort, two of the five members conceded that they knowingly withheld communication that might have been shared in a different medium. Withholding communication, a type of conformity, can result from the otherwise-noble personal support of the group's norms. One reason for withholding was said to be because the act of inserting diverse opinions seemed particularly cumbersome on email—cumbersome both to write out, and to “discuss” for lack of opportunity to snap views quickly back and forth, bouncing ideas, spring boarding to a higher perspective. By challenging an item or a word, would not one slow down the team objective? Emailing back and forth on even a small point may, after all, take several days to reach a conclusion if a member is out of town or swamped with too large an inbox. Overall, the medium of email brought limited expression of divergent views, and also led to members withholding some potentially-significant thoughts because of anticipated inefficiency in communication. A medium superior to email for accomplishing “electronic brainstorming” is recommended by the team for discussing ideas in real time, at least occasionally throughout the creative process. Special software has been developed for that purpose, or methods as simple as instant messaging [now available through the Internet (e.g., Yahoo Messenger/AOL instant Messenger)] could be used. These software include both verbal and typing simultaneous exchanges of information.

Decision-making

The development of the team's research idea involved group decision-making. Group decision-making has strengths and weaknesses (Maier, 1967; Schwartz & Levin, 1990). Strengths include generating more complete information, improved accuracy, increased diversity of opinions, high quality decision, and increased acceptance of solutions. Weaknesses include less efficiency, time consuming, conformity pressures, domination by one/some members, and ambiguous responsibility.

Our team's approach involved consensus as well as authoritarian decision making. The need to maintain a tension between dissent and consensus building is critical (Rumelt, Schendel, & Teece, 1994). Dissent is necessary to ensure that diverse opinions have been considered concerning the implications of facts and information (Miller, Burke, & Glick, 1998) and to neutralize groupthink (Janis & Mann, 1977). Consensus is necessary to ensure commitment (Wooldridge & Floyd, 1990). Consistent with Dooley and Fryxell's (1999) findings, our virtual team members viewed each other as “loyal,” which encouraged constructive processing of dissenting views. Further, team members' competence was never questioned. Dissenting opinions were resolved. For example, in the initial stages of our research project, a team member suggested gathering supervisor perceptions via our questionnaire. At another stage, a team member wanted to identify the organizations that had participated in our research project. Dissenting opinions on both issues were received, processed, and a final decision made after considering supporting and dissenting opinions.

As noted above, individual team members took responsibility for different stages in the project. Each person tended to be the final “authority” for their stage, after gathering opinions from other team members. For example, Jim and Linda developed the research questionnaire



using the definition created [primarily] by Karen, Ray, and Terry. The theoretical basis for the questionnaire items on the variable “team style” was ultimately Jim and Linda’s decision.

Communication

Benefits of email communication are many. The researcher can respond when he or she has time to respond, any time of day or night. Time wasting from trying to reach other parties by telephone is eliminated. Barriers of distance are overcome by email. The medium is free to use, and easy to use, barring hard-drive rebuilds during a long-term project. Users can file correspondence for later reference without printing it out.

Disadvantages of our team’s email approach included that by its nature it was sequential, which was not the best approach given the nature of the team’s interdependence. Team interdependence was reciprocal (Thompson, 1967), meaning that researchers needed to exchange information simultaneously with every other member of the team. Reciprocal interdependence normally requires spontaneous rich (usually face-to-face) communication, rather than sequential communication. There is a match when sequential communication is used with sequential interdependence, and one person’s output properly becomes the input for the next team member in line.

Another disadvantage was that the email medium was low in richness, meaning that email’s capacity for carrying multiple cues and providing two-way feedback is limited. Email is ranked above impersonally addressed written communication in richness, but below personally-addressed letters and memos, telephone conversations, and of course face-to-face conversations (Russ, Daft, and Lengel, 1990). The more cues that can be observed by the receiver, the richer the medium. If the message is routine, email as a medium can be satisfactory. But the more uncertain the message, or the more it is in need of back-and-forth discussion to deal with ambiguity, the more a richer medium is needed. Although the team was unaware of disadvantages associated with low richness, if there were a need for achieving ambiguous improvements in the research, either awareness of the disadvantage would arise to consciousness, or the project would tend receive less and less emphasis by team members.

Conclusion

The opportunity to meet new people and develop collegial bonds is a hallmark of the annual meetings of the Institute for Behavioral and Applied Management. Each of us was fortunate to be in the right place at the right time! We have continued to keep in touch as we prepared this paper as well as plan the future for our research project. Previous articles in the Journal of Applied and Behavioral Management have emphasized the history of IBAM and its goals; we encourage you to read about IBAM, JBAM, and to attend a future annual meeting. Keep in mind that attending IBAM is more than an opportunity to exchange research already completed or already in progress. The conference’s informal and supportive nature also presents opportunities for discussion that sparks new “virtual” research horizons. And as the technology improves, based on our team experience, we recommend the Institute for Behavioral and applied Management create a category for collegial research patterned on our project.



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