Designing, Managing, and Working in Virtual Teams

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Agenda

1. What is a team? What makes a team effective?
2. Adding virtualness to a team: what & why?
3. Challenges virtualness introduces
4. Practices to address challenges

- How – interactive session with you! Please ask questions, offer comments and experiences. Possibly many of you have worked in virtual team?

Our virtual team background

- **Research:**
  - Case studies in organizations
  - Large-scale surveys with employees
  - Controlled experiments with students
  - Reviews of the literature

- **Experiences:**
  - Work experience
  - Collaborative writing
  - Volunteer work for professional associations

What is a team?

- Interdependence is key
- Shared goals/purpose and outcomes
- Life of the team?
  - Can vary – short term, project, on-going
  - A work group is not necessarily a team

- Huge body of research and advice on how to make a traditional (co-located) team effective
- Typically structured in an input-process-output model

Inputs

Process

Outputs

Group Characteristics
* Type of Team and Members (e.g.
team size, individual characteristics,
group efficacy, group beliefs*)
* Team Development Stage

Nature of Task
Task design (e.g. significance, skill
variety), task demands (e.g.
conceptual versus behavioral), task
duration, team autonomy,
interdependence

Organizational Context
e.g., organization culture, rewards,
information, training

Supervisory Behaviors
e.g., transactional versus
transformational, degree of
supervision, expectations

**Expressive and
Instrumental
Interactions**
e.g., cohesion,
communication,
coordination, effort,
sharing of expertise,
work procedures
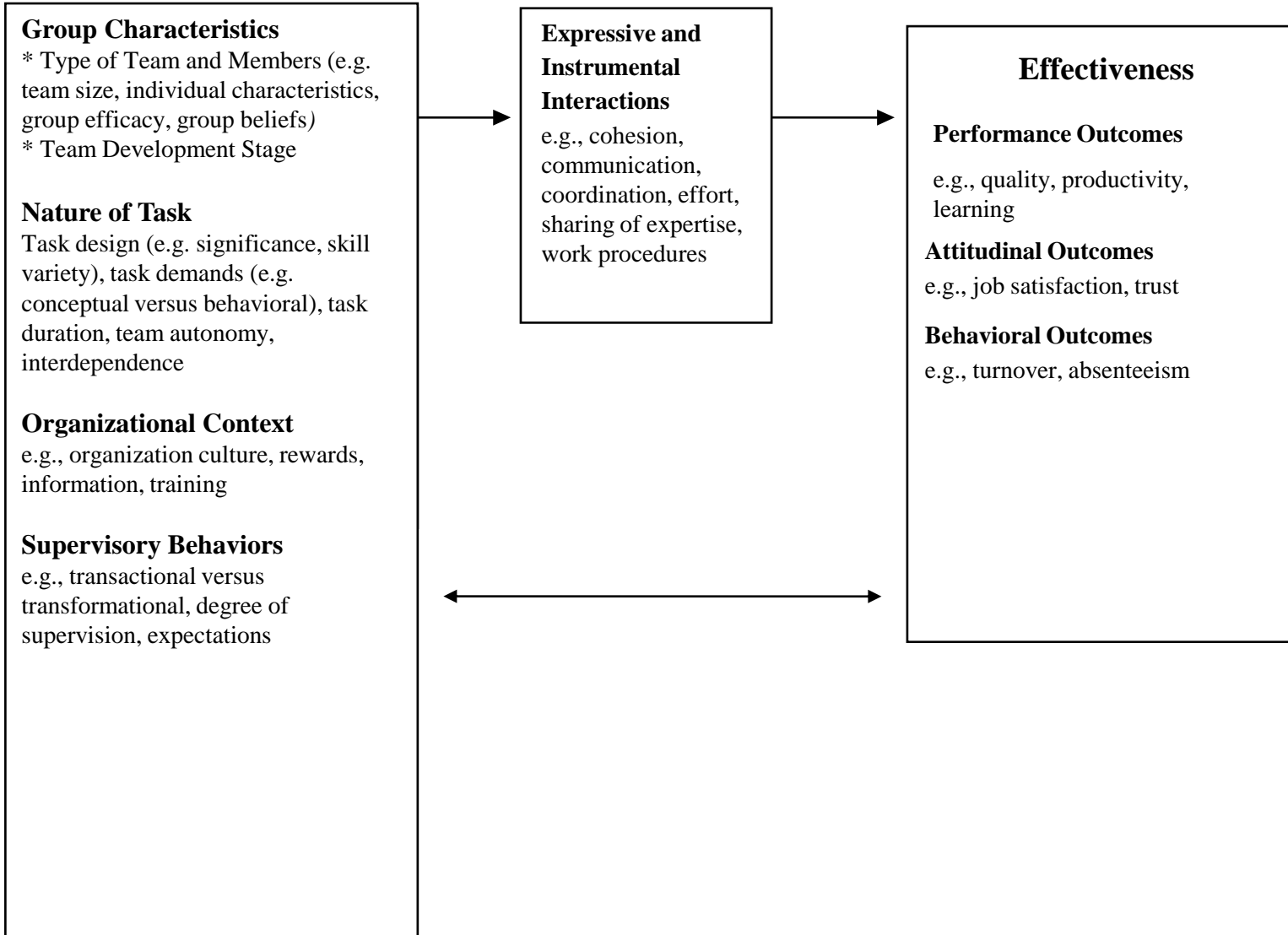
Effectiveness

Performance Outcomes

e.g., quality, productivity,
learning

Attitudinal Outcomes
e.g., job satisfaction, trust

Behavioral Outcomes
e.g., turnover, absenteeism

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Virtual Teams

- What does virtual refer to?
- Dictionary definition[1]:
  - "being such in power, force, or effect, though not actually or expressly such"
- These are real teams – interdependent, shared task
- What isn't real/actual?
  - Not working together around a table or in the same location
- Geographically-dispersed teams
  - Working (to varying extents) at a distance

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1. virtual. Dictionary.com. *Dictionary.com Unabridged (v 1.0.1)*, Based on the Random House Unabridged Dictionary, © Random House, Inc. 2006. http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/virtual (accessed: November 23, 2006).

- The term "virtual" is sometimes used to refer to very temporary teams (timing) or to teams where members come from different organizations (corporate loyalty/membership)

- More common to refer to geographically-dispersed teams
    - Life of the team can vary
    - Company membership can vary

- Our focus is on geographically-dispersed teams!

- Virtual / Geographically-dispersed teams are becoming more common all the time in companies? Why?

Advantages of Using a Virtual Team

- For the Organization

- For the Team Leader/Manager of the task/ success of the task

- For the Team Members

Challenges of Virtual Teams

- Let's brainstorm for 5 minutes to create a list
  - Then we will discuss what can be done about the disadvantages and the underlying causes
  - Let's make a list on the whiteboards…

Challenge 1: Diversity

- **Types:**
  - **National Culture**
  - **Organizational/Professional Culture**
  - **Individual Characteristics**

In emails, Americans tend to start immediately with the task – which is often experienced by people from other cultures as rudeness.

- **Jim comes from a highly bureaucratic company where it is common to copy multiple people on correspondence, keep copies of everything, and ask for permission for most things. Joan, Jim's new teammate, comes from a fast growth, entrepreneurial company where people acted fast.**
- **Jim is a highly dedicated, competent and creative person. So is Joan.**
- **They are both assigned to work on a virtual team together. How would you see them behaving and interacting?**

Diversity results in different

- **Expectations**
- **Interaction preferences**
- **Power structures**
- **Observable differences**

Solutions?

Diversity – Solutions

- **Create a team identity:**
  - **develop common ground**
  - **set team norms and expectations**

- **How?**

Develop common ground

- shared purpose and responsibilities, rituals, habits, and history
- a basis for mutual interest or agreement that deepens commitment

- **Organizational**
  - provide resources, time, tools
- **Leader/Manager**
  - develop shared experiences:
    - encourage sharing of personal and virtual office photos, individual web pages, personal & professional victories, celebrations
    - facilitate conversations that are not task-related
      - training, guest lecturers, discussion topics
- **Team**
  - be motivated to participate and have the time

Set & maintain team norms and expectations

- **Organizational:**
  - standardized processes and protocols for establishing & managing virtual teams
- **Manager/leader:**
  - Develop a team charter, vision & values
  - Make sure everyone knows their part in the team
  - Plan tasks, roles, & operating norms
  - Develop process plans for communication, dealing with conflict, etc.
- **Team members:**
  - Be proactive in communicating their availability, expectations, needs, etc.

Challenge 2: Location of Team Members

- **Characteristics:**
  - All distributed versus hybrid
  - Frequency of face-face meetings
  - Time zones & distance
  - Home/office/on the road
  - # organizations

In-group /
Out-group
Issues

In this project the six of us are a small sub-team of a large project. We work in a conference room.

I find that the other members of the sub-team are extremely critical and judgmental about just about everyone outside the immediate team and especially about the members of the other sub-teams who can impact our part of the project by making certain decisions.

Two weeks ago, Pat was assigned to a work with a new product development team. Team members were in North America, Australia, India and the UK. One team member in Australia, Kent, had not responded to the 5 emails sent to the team's distribution list and had not participated in the two online chat sessions the team had held.

Pat was getting very frustrated with Kent's lack of commitment to this project and his unprofessional conduct.

Locations – Solutions

- **Build a strong team identity**
- **Team design**
- **Manage communication**

- **How?**

- **Organizational**
  - **avoid hybrid teams when possible**
- **Leader/manager**
  - **break up in-groups (e.g., physically)**
  - **communicate with/treat members equally**
  - **rotate meeting sites/times/work hours**
  - **Establish communication protocols**
- **Team members**
  - **share information**
  - **avoid attribution errors**

Challenge 3:
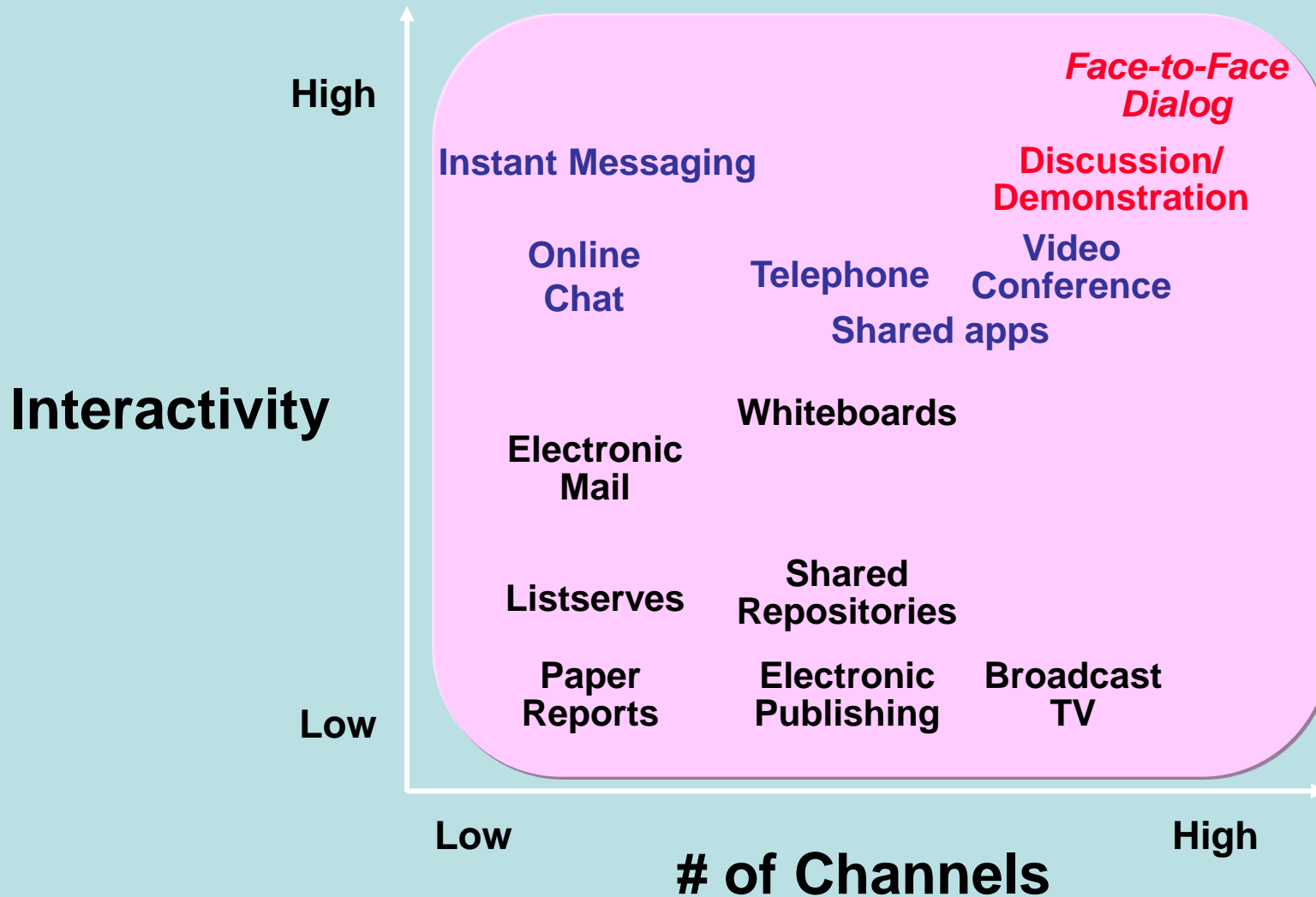# Effective Communication

- **Issues:**
  - Availability
  - Informal/formal
  - Social/task
  - Responding
  - Misunderstandings
  - Face-face versus electronic

With so much information going back and forth, it was difficult for my teammates to absorb every detail … and because I couldn't "see" if the receiver was paying attention, I didn't know if my message had to be repeated.

Solutions?

Communication Technologies

Interactivity

High

Low

Instant Messaging

Face-to-Face Dialog

Discussion/ Demonstration

Online Chat

Telephone

Video Conference

Shared apps

Whiteboards

Electronic Mail

Listserves

Shared Repositories

Paper Reports

Electronic Publishing

Broadcast TV

Low

High

of Channels

Communications – Solutions

- **Organization:**
  - **provide resources for virtual & face-face team meetings**
    - **a mix of tools: both communication & coordination/project management**
  - **provide communication training and technology support**

- **Leaders/managers:**
  - **develop protocols for communication**
  - **model appropriate communication behaviors and tool choices**
  - **encourage both social and task communication:**
    - **virtual water coolers/break rooms, open chat rooms, instant messaging, electronic bulletin boards**

- **Team members:**
  - **demonstrate appropriate communication behaviors and tool choices:**
    - **acknowledge communications**
    - **share availability & other commitments**
    - **silence ≠ consent *or* understanding *or* that you are being ignored**

Challenge 4: Leadership

How can I create, support, and sustain a virtual community so that everyone feels included, involved and responsible for the collective?

Managers have always talked about managing people, when in reality they've usually ended up managing the budget.

In the technology age, paradoxically, you have to spend more time managing people than in the past.

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                    │       Leadership            │
                    └─────────────────────────────┘
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        ┌──────────────────┐         ┌──────────────────────┐
        │  Transactional   │         │  Transformational    │
        └──────────────────┘         └──────────────────────┘
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Solutions?

Leadership - Solutions

- **Maintain the team**
  - **Keep energized – social communication, routines, celebrations & recognition**
  - **Have to deal with members joining and leaving**
    - **How to bring new members up to speed on task, accomplishments, and operating norms of the team. How to introduce them?**

- **Be willing to reevaluate the way work gets done (output-based versus behaviour-based)**
  - **Build commitment, not control**
  - **Focus, coordinate and communicate -- not authorize, command and plan**

- **Integrate the team with the larger organization**

Challenge 5: Group Processes

- **Communication**
- **Team spirit**
- **Sharing**
- **Conflict**

Solutions?

Solutions

- **Increase trust**
- **Decrease conflict**

Increasing Trust

- **How**
  - **demonstrate integrity (deliver on commitments and promises)**
    - **initial trust is based on reputation and situation – but it is fragile & team needs to maintain it**
  - **celebrate accomplishments & share excitement**
    - **e.g. have food delivered to everyone, show video clips of members receiving awards, post fun & exciting news to a team web page**
  - **support the team community**
  - **provide incentives and mechanisms for sharing**
  - **find time for social conversation**
  - **communicate frequently**
  - **avoid attribution errors via team protocols & norms**

Decreasing Conflict

- **Some degree of task conflict is beneficial:**
  - **different views stimulate innovation, creativity and discussion**

- **Minimize relational conflict, while allowing task conflict to occur**
  - **so different opinions relevant to the task are freely offered and considered**

- **Catch relational conflicts early and deal with them fairly:**
  - **if left unresolved, they will get worse and undermine team trust and functioning**

- **How?**
  - **trusting environment**
  - **"safe" method for highlighting issues in a timely manner**
    - **part of team protocols**

HR Implications

If I turn in excellent work on time and ahead of schedule but the project fails, will I get a bonus?

HR Implications, cont'd.

- **Develop compensation:**
  - **team-based rewards & recognition, as well as individual**

- **Develop operational procedures:**
  - **requirements for team charters, team development processes, etc.**

- **Build a collaborative culture via rewards, compensation, career paths, recruitment policies**

- **Make sure remote people are not overlooked for career planning & advancement**
  - **treat local and remote people equally**

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HR Implications, cont'd.

- **Team member selection & development**
  - **What is needed for someone to be a good VT member?**
    - **Communication skills, IT skills, self-reliant, time management and organizational skills, able to manage conflict (not avoid issues), knowledge of org. policies and cultural norms, independent, resourceful and innovative, assertive/proactive (need to avoid being "out of sight, out of mind"), adaptable, reliable/trustworthy, cooperative**

- **Resources**
  - **policies and forms available on intranet so remote people can access**

- **Training:**
  - **tools, cross-cultural issues, virtual work, conflict training**
  - **remote management**
  - **train as a team**
    - **builds shared experience and members can practice what they learn**

Many challenges remain

- For example:
  - Does HR know which teams exist?
  - Do managers know the teams on which their employees serve?
  - Is team leadership formal or informal?
  - How do team members balance demands from multiple teams?

Further Reading

- **Articles:**
  - Staples, D.S., Wong, I.K. and Cameron, A.F. (2005). Best Practices for Effective Virtual Teams **Encyclopedia of Information Science and Technology.** M. Khosrow-Pour (Ed.). Idea Group Publishing, Hershey PA, 260-265.
  - Cramton, C. D. (2002). Finding common ground in dispersed collaboration, *Organizational Dynamics*, 30(4): 356-367.
  - Ross, J. A. (2006). Trust makes the team go 'round, *Harvard Management Update*, June, No. U0606B.
  - Wardell, C. (1998). The art of managing virtual teams: Eight key lessons, *Harvard Management Update*, No. U9811B.

- **Practical books:**
  - Hoefling, T. (2003). Working Virtually: Managing People for Successful Virtual Teams and Organizations. Stylus Publishing, LLC: Virginia.
    - Handout of chapter 6 – Practical Guidelines for Virtual Communication
  - Duarte, D.L. and Snyder, N.T. (2001). Mastering Virtual Teams: Strategies, Tools, and Techniques that Succeed, 2nd edition. Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.