



The Handbook for Working with Difficult Groups

How They Are Difficult,
Why They Are Difficult and
What You Can Do About It

edited by Sandy Schuman

Deborah Ancona
Anna C. Boulton
Fusun Bulutlar
David F. Caldwell
Michael Cassidy
Ingrid C. Chadwick
Mark A. Clark
Taya R. Cohen
Philip Gamaghelyan
Dennis S. Gouran
Verlin B. Hinsz
Astrid C. Homan
Chester A. Insko
Sandra Janoff
Karen A. Jehn
Simone Kauffeld
Celia Kirwan
Theresa J. B. Kline
Dagmar Kusa
Mary Laeger-
Hagemeister
John Landesman
Nale Lehmann-
Willenbrock
Ann Lukens
Brian P. Meier
Steven Ober
Thomas A. O'Neill
Jana L. Raver
John Rohrbaugh
Adam Saltsman
Donna Rae Scheffert
Carol Sherriff
Wes Siegal
Stanford Siver
Richard W. Slone
Glyn Thomas
Marvin Weisbord
Simon Wilson

More information: www.exedes.com/handbooks



sponsored by the International Association of Facilitators



Virtual Teams: Difficult in All Dimensions

Thomas A. O'Neill
and Theresa J. B. Kline

Team D was characterized from the beginning by little communication, few goals for the project, and very little feedback. In what could be interpreted as a sarcastic reply, one member wrote “reply reply reply reply reply” in response to another member’s request for a reply if his message was received. The first of several messages indicated a lack of understanding of the project and the lack of task goals. In an early message, one member asks “what the heck” they are supposed to do. The same individual repeated the question one week later. The members of the team showed great reluctance to take on individual responsibility and be proactive. There was only one instance of positive feedback where a member thanked another for providing leadership. The leader completed the final assignment alone and submitted it from “Team D” without mentioning inactive members. (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998, pp. 49, 50)

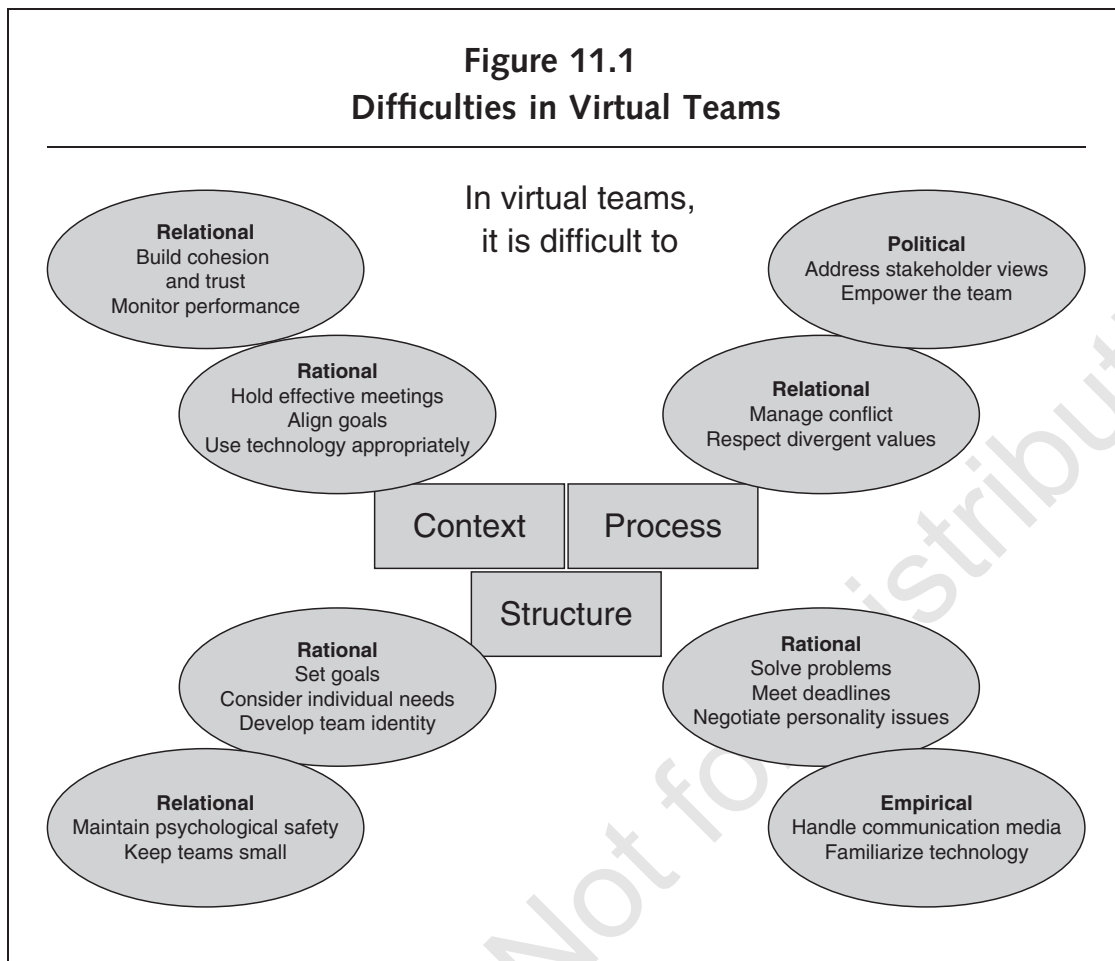
INTRODUCTION

Many organizations have responded to the increased pace of change and globalization by assuming dynamic and distributed structures described in the literature as virtual, network, or cluster organizations (DeSanctis & Poole, 1997; DeSanctis & Jackson, 1994). Smaller forms within these organizations are virtual teams (VTs). VTs can potentially give organizations increased flexibility and responsiveness, permitting geographically dispersed experts to rapidly form cohesive units to work on urgent projects. This is the most positive outcome of such an arrangement. However, for a number of reasons, VTs do not always live up to their potential of effectiveness (see a review by Kline & McGrath, 1999).

Following Hackman (1990), we define effective VTs as those whose (1) productive output meets the standards of relevant stakeholders; (2) work processes enhance the team's viability; and (3) ongoing experience contributes to group members' personal well-being. We also follow Kline and McGrath's typology (1998), which considers team performance as a function of problem solving, quality of work, workload allocation, meeting objectives, and displaying a team attitude. In this chapter, we will discuss why VTs experience difficulties in meeting these criteria for effectiveness, and provide some avenues for coping with VTs and their unique issues. The difficulties we discuss have been documented in research that has compared face-to-face (FTF) and VTs and has found them to be particularly salient in VTs, as are the remedies we recommend for overcoming them.

The most important difference between VTs and traditional FTF teams is that phenomena that are often implicit in FTF teams *must* be made explicit in VTs. This fundamental difference gives rise to a host of issues that make VTs particularly problematic (Hackman, 2002). Each of them can be described in terms of the matrix of factors (context, structure, and process) outlined in the Introduction to this volume. Refer to Figure 11.1 for a road map of what our chapter covers with respect to each factor. With regard to all three factors, we find the relational and rational perspectives on group effectiveness to present specific difficulties for VTs. In addition, for the process factor, difficulties are found also in the political and empirical perspectives. The specific difficulties VTs face, organized in terms of the model, are presented in Table 11.1.

Figure 11.1
Difficulties in Virtual Teams



CONTEXT

The context of any team is the overall environment in which it finds itself. Most FTF teams are embedded in a single organizational, societal, and cultural environment. This is not the case for most VTs. Because VTs by definition are composed of members scattered across geographical areas, they may exist in multiple organizational, societal, and cultural environments—not to mention different time zones. This creates the potential for problems in developing effective relationships between members and conducting the rational work of the team.

Relational: Build Cohesion and Trust, and Monitor Performance

Cohesion and trust between members are typically developed by FTF interactions between members. There is a free flow of information between members, which includes dialogue about not only work tasks but also the team members themselves. They have ample opportunity to describe or

Table 11.1
The Special Difficulties Presented by Virtual Teams

	Relational	Political	Rational	Empirical
Context	Build cohesion and trust Monitor performance		Hold effective meetings Align goals Use technology appropriately	
Structure	Maintain psychological safety Keep teams small		Set goals Consider individual member needs Develop team identity	
Process	Manage conflict Respect divergent values	Address stakeholder views Empower the team	Solve problems Meet deadlines Negotiate personality issues	Handle communication media Familiarize technology

demonstrate their skill sets to each other, to give and take ideas while respecting members' rights to speak and be heard, and get to know one another at a personal level. This occurs naturally when members do a variety of things, such as ask each other about their weekend activities, discuss each other's children, and talk about the latest gossip. In short, they develop a sense of being a collective just by interacting with each other on a regular basis and getting to know one another at both professional and personal levels.

This does not typically happen spontaneously with VTs. For VT members to develop mutual trust, they must complete their team-related work on time and with the expected level of quality (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). That is, trust is not between the members as individuals, per se, but between members as part of a working unit. Members learn they can rely on each other because they consistently fulfill their duties.

Cohesion (working together to form a unified whole) in VTs is characterized by formality, politeness, and professionalism directed at task performance.

Rarely does it take on the more informal cohesion of FTF teams. For example, our own research conducted in collaboration with other colleagues has found that short-term FTF teams are more cohesive than short-term VTs (MacDonnell, O'Neill, Klien, & Hambley, 2009). This is likely due to the limitations inherent in the capability of computer-based communication technologies to transmit emotional and humorous information. However, it is likely also due to people's relative inexperience with interpersonal work arrangements that do not include FTF contact. Indeed, several researchers have suggested evolutionary-based models, where team members get better at using non-FTF communication methods for person-focused discussions over time (for example, Kock, 2004; Walther, 1992). Keep in mind that VTs can and do develop trust and cohesion—it just takes longer than in FTF teams.

On the organization's side, one related issue is the use of electronic performance monitoring (for example, monitoring e-mail content, keypresses) to supervise employee productivity. This controversial practice has been linked to stress, decreased physical health, and the avoidance of using monitored tools (for example, Aiello & Kolb, 1995; Markus, 1983). In addition, if trust is damaged, citizenship behaviors, job satisfaction, and in-role performance will decrease, whereas counterproductive behaviors will increase. Not surprisingly, leaders may be more likely to monitor performance when they expect a particular VT member's productivity to be lacking (Alge, Ballinger, & Green, 2004). We suggest avoiding electronic performance monitoring in general, however, because of the negative consequences of this practice. If it is needed, allowing member input to the program and how it is used (for example, for feedback purposes), and using openness and sensitivity in its application will help increase acceptance.

What you can do. How does one build trust and cohesion in VTs? It starts with everyone on the team being clear on the task. This includes the expectations for the quality of the work, the timelines and budget for the work, each person's role in the work, and putting into place a way to monitor team members and team progress on a regular basis. Particularly at the beginning of the task, team members' making and keeping milestones will ensure that they develop trust and cohesion. Regular conference calls, videoconferences, and e-mail exchanges can facilitate the process. If at all possible, the team should get together FTF for a "kick-off" meeting so that members can put faces with names, e-mail messages, and voices on the phone. This helps personalize the team members to each other (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2002; Hambley, O'Neill, & Kline, 2007b).

Rational: Hold Effective Meetings, Align Goals, and Use Technology Appropriately

It was noted earlier that meetings are an important part of developing team trust and cohesion. However, holding effective meetings for VTs is difficult due to many factors. First, there is a lack of socioemotional cues between members. For example, the impoverished environment of e-mail makes it difficult for the proper “tone” to come across to other team members. One member may be making a joke, but another might interpret the joke as a serious remark and possibly react in a counterproductive way. This is particularly problematic when VT members are from different cultures; language barriers and local communication norms can impose an added layer that may contribute to misunderstandings.

What you can do. Even between members of FTF teams, meetings are often viewed as time wasting. In order to have effective VT meetings, agendas should be sent out in advance, with enough time for all members to review pertinent documents and information in order to be prepared to contribute to the meeting. A protocol for interacting in the meetings should be agreed on beforehand. This should include instructions that (1) each person is expected to put forth his or her views on the agenda items; (2) each person is allowed to complete his or her thoughts without being interrupted; (3) members should build on prior contributions, and not review or rehash old issues; (4) minutes of the meeting are sent out within twenty-four hours of completion of the meeting, with action items highlighted for each member to complete, providing documentation of the members’ expectations of each other; (5) the next meeting time is agreed on; and (6) follow-ups are conducted to ensure that action items were completed, and if not, the reasons why. Following this process helps align member expectations, which ultimately allows members to predict future team member actions and adapt behavior accordingly (that is, develop a “shared mental model”; see Fiore, Salas, & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). For other ideas on VT meeting effectiveness, see checklists provided by Bradley and Beyerlein (2005).

Another rational issue is that all teams perform better when their goals are aligned with those of the organizations involved (Kline, 1999a). Because VTs often represent geographical or functional differences in the organization, it is even more difficult for VTs to align themselves with large

organizational goals. There may even be cases where the goals of one part of the organization conflict with the goals of another part of the organization. If members of the VT come from these different units, superordinate goals have to be generated so that the VT members can work together and share a meaningful direction. For dealing with this issue (and many others), team leadership is crucial. The VT leader provides the link between the VT and the rest of the organization. An important role for the leader is to ensure that VT members are working on tasks relevant to the organization, that the primary team goal is authoritatively delivered to team members, and that the exact means of reaching that goal are left to the team to decide. If these conditions are met, then the VT will have a better chance of performing effectively for the organization (Hackman, 2002; Wageman, 2003). This should hold regardless of whether the leadership role is formally assigned or naturally emerges.

Finally, VT members will have different needs and familiarity with different technologies. It is important that all members are comfortable with the various technologies used for communicating (Kline, 1999a). Some collaboration tools to keep the team coordinated, organized, and on track toward its goals are instant messaging, e-rooms, collaborative space, data-sharing applications, electronic bulletin boards, collaborative authoring programs, and project forums, to name a few (for many others, see Bradley, 2008). Simply having workshops on technology use for all team members will go a long way toward solving technological issues that may seem simple but that get in the way of effective work. It should not be assumed, however, that team members have the needed technological skills simply because they are familiar with the communication software and hardware. At team start-up, norms around what collaboration tools will be used for what purposes must be made explicit, and revised accordingly thereafter. One suggestion is to stick to richer mediums early to help the team develop shared expectations, and gradually shift to leaner methods once everyone is on the same page (O'Neill, Lewis, & Hambley, 2008).

STRUCTURE

In the previous section of this chapter, we discussed how some of the environmental contextual factors may impact the effectiveness of VTs. In this section

we turn to the structure of the VTs themselves to understand how best to facilitate VTs from this perspective.

Relational: Maintain Psychological Safety and Keep Teams Small

Teams work well when their members feel they are working in a “psychologically safe” space (Edmondson, 1999). This means that team members feel free to provide honest opinions without fear of retribution by the other team members. Such an environment fosters creativity and openness in the members (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006). For VTs this can be particularly problematic, as nothing is “off the record.” In fact, almost everything discussed can be captured on some sort of recording device. Thus members should be cautioned to keep discussions focused on team tasks and not on office politics. Humor should be used, but with care that no individual or group is being singled out as the subject of that humor. Although this may seem stilted, it does ensure that the VT is perceived by its members and by others to be professional in its interactions.

Another structural issue that plagues many teams is size. Frequently members are added to teams for politically expeditious reasons—members are there to represent a constituency. This hinders FTF teams from working effectively and can be debilitating for VTs. It is difficult enough to find times for integral VT members to meet virtually, let alone try to accommodate members who may be tangential to the task at hand. Thus VTs should be used on short-term projects where the task is clear and the members of the team are all active contributors to the team’s work, either in terms of expertise they bring to bear or the skill sets they have to complete the work. As is the case with FTF teams, smaller is better in terms of team size for VTs (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005).

What you can do. Recently, Walther and Bunz (2005) identified six rules for virtual groups that facilitate the development of trust, cohesion, and performance. First, the group should start on task work immediately, as virtual work tends to take longer than work done FTF, and VTs tend to put off task work longer. Further, research has clearly documented a procrastination effect in teams; that is, teams tend to delay substantive work until about the midpoint of the team’s life cycle. Whereas that strategy may work in FTF teams, VTs who follow suit will probably fail to reach their objectives on time. For the second rule, Wather and Bunz stipulate that communication must be

very frequent, as some team members may need information before continuing their tasks or may need to be made aware of something and adapt their work accordingly. Third, the team should multitask, getting organized and working on action steps simultaneously. Planning and strategy formation can take a significant amount of a team's time—even more so in virtual space. This means less time for task work. Tasks must be assigned, and may later be modified at the same time as strategy is developed. The last three rules are fairly self-explanatory but nonetheless deserve mention: members should overtly acknowledge that they have read one another's messages; members need to be explicit about what they are thinking and doing; and they must set deadlines and stick to them. These six rules represent norms or standard operating procedures that should be made explicit if virtual teamwork is going to be effective and the virtual climate is going to be trusting and cohesive. Keeping teams small will facilitate the development of a psychologically safe structure.

Rational: Set Goals, Consider Individual Member Needs, and Develop Team Identity

The fulfillment of leader roles is probably the most important structural issue to impact the day-to-day operation of the VT. One of the most salient roles for the leader is the establishment of goals for the team. Because VT members do not have the luxury of FTF discussions about their goals, and because VTs need to move forward as quickly as possible with substantive task work, it is often best to have goals assigned. Goal-setting theory, one of the most widely accepted theories in organizational research, suggests that as long as the assigned goals are accepted and committed to, a participatory discussion about the goals is not needed (Latham & Marshall, 1982). Accordingly, goals should be set such that tasks are concretely understood and the project is of such duration that members can see it through to completion.

What you can do. Although the purpose and direction of the team should not be up for debate, we recommend a participatory approach to setting the smaller goals that will lead to attaining the overarching missions of the team. A participatory approach might involve the leader suggesting a short-term goal and allowing the VT members to provide feedback. In this way, the goal can be revised and negotiated to ensure feasibility, acceptance, and commitment. Throughout the goal-setting process, it is critical to demonstrate confidence in

team members' abilities, as this should increase the difficulty of goals selected and the quality of the resulting performance. Ultimately, it will be helpful to outline what goals are expected to be completed by certain times so that the team stays on track with regard to its expected work (in other words, set deadlines and stick to them).

Although individual goals are needed, it should be clear that team-level goals are important too. Again, the superordinate mission should be set by the team leader or project manager. To get VT members on board with the team's purpose, a team identity should be established. When team identification is high, team members internalize the values, needs, and beliefs of the group (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004). Essentially, the team's values and purpose become, at some level, those of the individual members. When team identification is high, and the team looks as though it is set on a trajectory for success, motivation to contribute toward the team effort (that is, the superordinate goal) will be highest.

The best ways to get team members to identify with the team are to (1) show confidence that the team can accomplish its task, (2) provide the resources needed, (3) demonstrate how the superordinate goal or purpose is an important one, and (4) link the superordinate goal to smaller, short-term team and personal goals that are doable (O'Neill, Lewis, & Hambley, 2008). Another role for the leader is to ensure that each member feels that he or she is contributing to the task. This means assigning tasks to members that they can complete, providing them with the resources needed to complete their work, and ensuring that everyone is rewarded and recognized for his or her contributions. This is not an easy job for leaders of VTs. It takes time and energy to check in with each member on a regular basis to determine if there are problems with which the member needs assistance in order to complete his or her section of the task. Nevertheless, this is time well spent by VT leaders, as it ensures that the team members are all working together effectively toward a common end, and it shows that the leader is considerate of each individual's unique challenges and constraints. VTs should be recognized not only for their task accomplishments but also for their capability of working across distances and time zones. This balanced approach to the assessment of VT member performance is exhibited by the best VT leaders (Hambley et al., 2007b).

PROCESS

The final factor to be examined regarding VTs is that of the internal processes of the team in conducting its work. Process issues have an impact on all the aspects of team performance outlined in the Introduction. This is not surprising, as process issues are really how the team accomplishes its work, and such variables set the stage for future team functioning and performance (Ilgen, Hollenbeck, Johnson, & Jundt, 2005).

Relational: Manage Team Conflict and Respect Divergent Values

One thing that is impossible to avoid in teamwork is conflicts of opinion. Dealing effectively with group conflict is especially difficult in VTs because of (1) the limited time members can spend interacting to resolve conflicts, (2) the increased time needed to manage such conflicts using virtual means, and (3) the fact that conflict is likely to be perceived as negative and aggressive in VTs. Meta-analyses show that group conflict is almost certainly detrimental to group performance (De Dreu, 2008). It is important to determine how conflicts will be resolved in the team *before* they happen.

What you can do. If a set of principles for making decisions when members have different perspectives on an issue is established ahead of time, then this protocol can be observed when the conflict occurs. Perhaps the team agrees that they must meet FTF when conflicts arise. Perhaps a set of alternatives is suggested with pros and cons of each, circulated to members, and a virtual meeting devoted to the resolution of the issue is scheduled. Whatever the approach, it should be viewed as fair by all team members. This will ensure their continued support for the team and its tasks.

Even with conflict management norms in place, conflict may still occur. This is bound to happen in teamwork, as people just don't always agree with each other, no matter what the ground rules are. But in VTs, the impact of the technology might make conflict more likely. To address interpersonal conflicts, we suggest employing the tried-and-true methods based on the organization development literature. One approach, called role negotiation (Harrison, 1972), asks each VT member to list what he or she expects of the other members. The group can then meet with a facilitator or coach to review this information and jointly clarify and negotiate each member's role. A second method involves bringing in an independent third party to

help the group move through the real issues that underlie the conflict. The intervention should aim to (1) prevent ignition of further conflicts, (2) constrain the current form of conflict, (3) help the team cope differently with sources of conflict, and (4) resolve the issues on which the conflict is based (for more, see Walton, 1969).

One final suggestion for mitigating conflict is to take the time to develop formalized channels for dealing with problems. This is particularly important for VTs, as the team leader may not be the members' direct supervisor, meaning it may become unclear who should manage complaints. A good starting point would be to have the VT members consult the team leader. If the VT leader fails to effectively manage the problem, however, members should know where the problem can be reported. Whatever the appropriate channel is, making a plan in advance and communicating it to the team provide members with appropriate avenues for dealing with conflict and ways to go around the leader, should the case warrant such an approach.

Whereas many teams may have conflicting views about how to carry out their work, VTs are more likely to suffer from value incongruence between members because they are more likely than FTF teams to be made up of members from different countries. Drawing on the work of Hofstede (1980) and results from project GLOBE (for example, Javidan, Dorfman, de Luque, & House, 2006), we know that different cultures have different views about power distance, individualism, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientations, to name a few. These can sometimes get in the way of the VT accomplishing its tasks. For example, in India, paternalistic and authoritative leadership is often preferred. However, for people in the United States, participative leadership is typically most important for performance (Dorfman & House, 2004). The best way to deal effectively with these and other value differences is to identify them in advance and make a determination of whether or not they will be a hindrance to the VT's work. At these junctures, plan on having several virtual meetings, and anticipate a slowdown in the team's work until the issue is resolved.

Political: Address Stakeholder Views and Empower the Virtual Team

Obtaining adequate representation from all the relevant stakeholder groups is problematic for VTs. VTs must be small to work effectively, but may miss out on some major perspectives in completing their work if a particular

stakeholder group is left out. Furthermore, FTF teams may get accolades from their organization for a “job well done” and accrue scarce resources for the team as part of their reward. For VTs, however, team rewards are not easily obtained, and members do not easily build a sense of being an empowered team. These challenges have negative consequences for working together in the future and for the work satisfaction of team members (Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002).

What you can do. One way to manage stakeholder views is to include all relevant stakeholders when setting up the VT’s primary goals and work plan. This way their perspectives can be conveyed to the VT members before work commences. However, the various stakeholders do not have to actually conduct or oversee the VT’s day-to-day work. Interim reports to stakeholders on the team’s accomplishments, and meetings of the stakeholders with the team leader are efficient ways to keep stakeholders “in the loop” as well as to take advantage of their perspectives.

Encouraging and supporting VTs and their members may be accomplished by using participative leadership principles (for example, allowing members some discretion in their work) and showing individualized consideration (for example, paying attention to each member’s special circumstances). Moreover, such relationship-oriented leadership behaviors may increase motivation and feelings of empowerment (see Avolio & Kahai, 2002). Empowerment is generally thought to hinge on intrinsic motivation, and is characterized by a sense of personal competence and the feeling that one’s work has an impact, is meaningful, and involves choice (Pinder, 1998). Some of our previous suggestions are consistent with those that lead to empowerment: leaders should specify goals, but not the means for accomplishing those goals; instill confidence in the team; build a team identity; show individualized consideration; and communicate frequently. Putting these conditions into place should help the VT feel more empowered and intrinsically motivated, enabling it to perform excellent work.

Rational: Solve Problems, Meet Deadlines, and Negotiate Personality Issues

By setting up an agreed-on problem-solving process and setting problem-solving norms across geographical locations and time zones, teams will be better able to anticipate conflict and confront it before it happens. VT leaders

need to ensure that team members do not avoid important task-related conflict when it arises, or use strategies that result in a compromise when that is not the optimal solution to the problem (see results from Montoya-Weiss, Massey, & Song, 2001). Indeed, those authors found that the lack of FTF contact necessitated either a more competitive approach to dealing with conflict, or a more collaborative approach where the most important points of each party are incorporated into the final solution (see also Kline & Sell, 1996). Other methods that did not work included avoiding, compromising, and accommodating. Thus, the VT leader must oversee the use of one conflict management strategy over another and step in when needed to determine whether one particular group member's suggestion is best (competitive), or an additive sum of several members' ideas should be formed (collaborative).

Regardless of the approach used, ensuring the most effective problem-solving and conflict-resolution processes may not always leave members feeling equally satisfied. When this happens, team members need to know whom they can go to for support. Developing appropriate, formalized channels for dealing with conflict, usually beginning with the team leader, then including other parties from there, will help mitigate this problem. People often feel better if they at least know someone cares if they feel slighted and if they know they have an opportunity to complain if necessary.

One proposed problem-solving decision-making method that we think would be useful in VTs comes from Witte (2007). The author proposes the following problem-solving steps. First, an individual-oriented, structured technique aims to capture each team member's arguments around possible decisions. This circumvents well-known motivational losses usually called loafing and free riding, as well as biases such as group conformity and the sharing of information that is common (instead of unique) to each team member. These arguments are supported by the individual's own logical presumptions. All individual information is then shared anonymously—usually a facilitator or group leader will be needed. The anonymous sharing of information will preclude many subjective (and potentially biased) judgments that hinder problem solving. Finally, the group works to integrate the individual ideas to come up with the best approach possible. Witte's approach should be particularly effective in VT environments, where motivation losses and personal biases may operate at their strongest. On the upside, problem solving is generally more effective in VTs as personal issues

can be set aside, and optimal task completion is of primary importance. For example, Jonassen and Kwon (2001) found that problem-solving VTs were more satisfied with the process and saw their solution quality as superior compared to FTF teams. The trick is to follow effective conflict management strategies outlined in this chapter and to keep the group focused on the task-related issues and not interpersonal ones.

Another work process issue that can plague VTs is that work may not be completed on schedule. It is easy to let work associated with VTs “slide” in the face of other tasks that are more salient to the members. To keep the VT’s work at the attention of team members, a reminder schedule should be set up that automatically alerts members that work deadlines are approaching. These reminders can be sent through e-mail, collaborative workspaces, or desktop widgets, among other means. In addition, sanctions for members who do not complete their work and rewards for members who do complete their work should be set up to establish a culture of meeting deadlines. These consequences must be made clear to all team members, however, and they must be enforced, or else trust and cohesion may be threatened.

Finally, when it comes to the selection of VT members, the personality factor of conscientiousness is likely to be helpful, particularly in the area of following through on commitments (English, Griffith, & Steelman, 2004). People who are conscientious do their work well and get it done on time. Regarding other traits, Hertel, Konradt, and Voss (2006) found that performance ratings from VT leaders were higher for those members high in cooperativeness. This makes sense, as uncooperative team members are unlikely to contribute to the VT’s mission. Elsewhere, Kline (1999b) refers to a trait known as *predisposition to be a team player*. Essentially, people high on that trait tend to enjoy working in teams, which was found to be predictive of team performance in a recent empirical study (MacDonnell et al., 2009). Finally, extroversion is likely to be important for VT members, as those who are more sociable, friendly, and talkative are likely to keep in better touch with other VT members and be more satisfied with working virtually (O’Neill, Hambley, Greidanus, MacDonnell, & Kline, 2009). When it comes to leaders, however, there may be a more important aspect of extroversion needed. The dominance-assertiveness facet of extroversion may be particularly important, as individuals high on this trait will probably be more explicit in directing VT members and making sure everyone on the VT is clear about his or her roles and responsibilities.

Empirical: Handle Communication Media and Familiarize Technology

It has long been known that the communication media used have an effect on VT effectiveness. They can hinder effective group interaction because they do not capture and replicate the entirety of a FTF exchange. In videoconference, for example, there is typically a time lag between the movement seen on the screen and the voiceover that accompanies it, making communication more challenging (Hambley, O'Neill, & Kline, 2007a). In e-mail, the environment is completely impoverished, with little to no allowance for emotion, tone, or nonverbal body language to assist in interpreting the meaning of a team member's statements.

What you can do. To combat these problems, team members need to become familiar with using the technology. They should have time to be trained in how to use it and also how to repair it should the need arise. That way, the members are not dependent on technology staff to assist them with their VT interactions. In addition, simply having experience with these newer technologies is a great asset for VT members. Making time for trial runs and training sessions can assist in making VTs interact more effectively. But recall also that norms around communication must be set up so that team members are on the same page in terms of how best to communicate different types of messages: richer methods earlier on, followed by leaner, more efficient ones later. The choice of medium also depends on the purpose of the message. If the message is a motivational one from the leader, then a rich method is needed; if the message is solely task related and relatively simple, and familiarity is high, then a leaner method such as instant messaging should work.

Meetings have to be held at unusual hours for some team members if they are geographically dispersed. The meetings should be held so that each member of the team is inconvenienced equitably by time zone differences (Hambley et al., 2007b). In the study cited, one leader referred to this practice as a "share the pain" mentality, whereby everyone takes a turn meeting at an inconvenient time. Finally, people must agree to be available during a certain set of core hours so that communication is not delayed more than it needs to be.

CONCLUSION

It is certain that VTs pose greater challenges to organizations than those faced by traditional, FTF teams. The plethora of academic and practitioner readings

on the topic demonstrates both a fascination with VTs and the difficulties in making them effective. In this chapter, we provided some guidance to VT leaders about how they can improve team functioning. The suggestions were based on the research literature and, where that was sparse, on our own experiences.

Referring back to Figure 11.1, there appear to be two issues that underlie the challenges to VT effectiveness. Simply put, most of the difficulties can be described as hindering communication or motivation. For instance, holding effective meetings relates to communication, and building a team identity is a motivational concern. Furthermore, these overriding issues are deeply intertwined, as most attempts to enhance motivation include communication, and communication is often driven by motivational concerns. Thus, for VTs, keeping communication and motivational issues at the forefront can serve as a quick and easy heuristic for noticing potential problems before they arise. After identifying a threat to the team's performance or functioning, you can refer back to the specific strategies that were mentioned in this chapter. We trust that the topics covered will be helpful to current and future VT leaders and members. After all, virtual teamwork is an organizational issue that can only become more important in the years to come.