

The Virtual Project Manager

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Keywords: Virtual Organization, Leadership, Team Development

Increasingly, corporations are becoming virtual in nature; customers, suppliers and employees are no longer in the same city but in different time-zones and continents. "The virtual corporation is a temporary network of independent companies..."¹ Hand-in-hand with the Virtual corporation is the Virtual Project Manager, and her enablers are leadership and technology. With communication tools exploding and maturing exponentially, the project manager of these virtual corporations must learn to not only embrace but fully utilize emerging technologies and adjust her management style.

This paper will explore the project manager's role in a virtual corporation and how technology will support the activities of project management in this new paradigm. It will also discuss how culture can hamper or support the use of new technologies in project management.

The Virtual Project Manager

The Virtual Project Manager (VPM) will need to be more of a leader and technologist in order to successfully manage her projects. In the virtual corporation, gone are the days when a project manager's power/authority was defined absolutely and succinctly. Leadership, not management, is the style of a successful VPM and technology will be her supporting conduit.

Managing the Virtual Project

The virtual project poses a unique management situation to the VPM. The VPM must be more of a leader in her management style rather than the controller or supervisor not only with the team members but also the project's sponsor. Obviously, in the more traditional project, where all the team members are under one roof or in the same metropolitan area, a project manager exercises, in some cases daily, control and direction of the team's activities. This is a luxury the VPM does not have and she must alter her style to lead rather than control.

In order to effectively lead the virtual team, the team members must have the same vision, trust for each other and the VPM, and decision tools to guide them through

daily decisions. These issues play a significant part in the VPM's ability to lead and guide the team's activities.

Decision tools provide a mechanism by which remote team members can make the right choices on daily basis. The type of decision tool suggested here can be a group of questions which focus around the projects objectives and goals. They can be very simple such as:

- Which objective does this activity support?
- Is this activity necessary to achieve the projects goal?

However, these questions set down by the VPM must be clear and concise, misinterpretation will lead to misguided effort, financial waste and ambiguity in the projects results.

Trust is the second part of the virtual leadership equation. Trust does not come quickly and in many cultures must be earned over a long period of time. The technology section below discusses some simple techniques which can help develop relationships and trust between team member, however, the trust must start at the top with the VPM. The VPM must do two things to start the trust; bring everyone together at least once and be an idea champion.

As every project manager would agree, a critical success factor to every project is the kick-off meeting, even more so with the virtual project. Albeit expensive, this is the perfect time to bring all the team members together, preferably in a neutral and convenient location for all members. Members need to recognize from the start that there is a real person behind the e-mail and voice on the telephone. The perfect venue to establish this is the kick-off meeting. Here people will put name-to-face and begin to build relationships and trust. This is nothing new to standard project management practices but exponentially important to the success of the virtual project when this may be the only time the virtual team members have face-to-face interaction.

Being an idea champion supports the success of the project and minimizes the "trust trap." If members believe that they can freely discuss their ideas with the VPM without being shut down or ignored, they are more apt to do so not only with the VPM but also with each other. The trust trap is an occurrence of locale. We fall into this trap

when we put more emphasis on those close to us, those team members we see most often. Hence those members more remote, more out of sight - out of mind, tend to contribute less to the project and will become more of an entity than a team member. Each team member regardless of locale must believe that his or her idea will be heard with open ears and developed to the benefit of the project.

Technology

The VPM must be technologist in that technology, especially communication tools, will provide a supporting pillar to the successful completion of the project. For example the VPM must go beyond merely attaching files to an e-mail. Capturing and embedding objects such as voice comments or full motion video into documents such as mail memos, Gantt and Monte Carlo charts will be an everyday occurrence. The benefits of this capability are discussed below. Conversely, the VPM must be able to "play back" such objects. It goes without saying that the VPM will have technologist (a.k.a. nerds) on the team which will embrace new technology, and others which will resist for a variety of reasons.

Virtual Project Management Tools

Tools such as Lotus Notes, Netscape and Java provide a vehicle for individuals to better communicate and integrate, regardless of geographic location or hardware platform. They provide the seamless transparent integration that the computer industry has been promising us for the last 20 years!!!

Due to the dynamic nature of the of the virtual corporation, more emphasis is placed on real-time communication. The amount of real-time communication possible is limited by time zone differences and geographic distance. Groupware and Internet applications support a group of people working on the same project and can enable them to communicate more effectively.

Virtual Cost

There is no virtual question about it, there is a financial and schedule price to pay for the benefit of virtual communication and it is in hardware and training. The team member's hardware may have to be upgraded to take full advantage of new communication and application software, but it doesn't stop there. Without proper and sufficient training, team members will not use the new tool efficiently if at all.

Embedding pictures, sound or full motion video requires a very sophisticated PC, most 486 and 68000 based

PCs are not equipped to do this effectively. Without the proper video environment pictures are fuzzy and video is choppy and distorted. Groupware applications are very resource intensive and without enough memory or processing power these types of applications may not run at all or so slowly that they are useless to the user.

Training the virtual team on new applications or hardware has additional challenges. In addition to standard training issues such as time and quality, it is practically impossible to bring all members together to be trained on the product at the same time. To this point, training will have to be modified and out-sourced to multiple vendors to ensure that all team members are educated in a timely fashion. Some team members such as senior executives or isolated individuals may need one-on-one, while others may have specific language requirements. Training can cost as much as ten times the initial hardware/software investment but is essential to the team's and project's success.

Culture Vs. Technology

Training is only the start at fully embracing new technologies such as groupware. The virtual team's computing paradigm must also mature in order to fully utilize applications such as Lotus's Notes. "...The implementation of such technologies [groupware] is more difficult and yields more unintended consequences than is typically acknowledged." ² The Virtual Project Manager needs to understand the issues surrounding the use of new technologies and its ramifications on corporate culture, work practices and social interaction.

People are comfortable using "me" applications such as a wordprocessor or spreadsheet for work they need to accomplish for their specific job. Alien is the thought process of using an application for work that the *team* needs to accomplish. Training can help them use the tool but the culture of how we use computers must to shift from a "me" focus to an "us" model. Corporation policy can support and encourage this shift but total envelopment of the team-application concept is slow. Some corporations have experienced a two year maturation process and this is about the shortest cycle-time experienced! The VPM needs to understand that this paradigm shift does not happen overnight and must be supportive through her own actions and evangelism.

Virtual Project Team (VPT)

The PM of tomorrow will no longer call weekly status meetings where all of the team members meet in the same room but rather the same forum. The Virtual Team will be more geographically dispersed, diverse in culture, and var-

ied in disciplines. With this in mind the Virtual Project Manager will need to understand this diversity and be able to use it to the advantage of the project.

Communications on the team

As every project manager would agree, concise, continuous and timely communication is a critical success factor for every project regardless of its geographic make-up. "Communication of key project information to involved parties is a critical element of successful project management."³ In this case, communication will come in one of three forms; e-mail, face-to-face, and voice mail. How these conduits are used can be a key performance indicator as to the success of your team but they will need guidance.

Policy one, with respect to e-mail, definitions and expectations need to be defined by the project manager on day one. Specifically, what is acceptable response time to information or requests sent by e-mail. However, the projects team will undoubtedly receive numerous electronic memos everyday and without a quick visual key some memos are read too late if at all! Team members need to see a key or symbol, which is used with consistency, and suggests the level of urgency. For example by prefacing the subject header with codes such as A1, A2, or A3, will quickly identify to the recipient expected response time and urgency. In this case, A1 indicates an action item or request for information on the same day. Whereas A2 tells the reader this memo requires a three day turn around, while A3 indicates that the memo is merely FYI and is to be read sometime in the next five business days.

Using a system similar to one described above provides two benefits to the virtual team members. First, it sets clear and concise expectations, A memo marked A1 has an expectation of same day responses and tells the receiver read me before that next meeting. Second, It helps the team members orchestrate their day more effectively. Knowing that a memo is only FYI with just a glance allows the reader to focus on more time sensitive matters.

The other one way conduit of communication most widely used is Voice mail (V-Mail). This tool supports the virtual team in a similar manner but is more timely than e-mail. Teams members can leave messages and action items for other members regardless of time-zone or country. Unfortunately, V-Mail is too often ignored or used to blast another member. The VPM has very difficult time developing trust as it is on a virtual team, using v-mail to rant and rave only diminishes that trust. Without the opportunity to defend or explain the situation in two-way conversation its usefulness is limited if any. This use of V-Mail chips away at the trust built up between team members and is destructive to the team. The bottom line is that

this type of negative communication must not be condoned on the virtual project. The second communication policy for every Virtual team must be: Don't use voice mail to blast or rant at another team member.

Virtual Project Management

Since the very nature of the virtual corporation is temporary, more emphasis is put on reducing cycle-time and shortening the time to market. These have significant ramifications on how the project is managed and how scope change is administered.

Scope change

We have all heard the statement, "If it isn't in writing - It didn't happen and won't happen" This is an excellent policy when time is not an issue. In the virtual project, time to market is a critical success factor and in order to meet this criteria documentation becomes less important. This concept may seem unthinkable to many project managers but the VPM must be more flexible to accommodate the dynamics of the virtual corporation and its projects.

Closing the Loop

Another term for closing the loop is prototype and it takes on more importance in virtual project management. With team members being diverse in culture and location, ambiguity can become a critical failure factor. By prototyping, this ambiguity can be minimized and ensure project objectives are met the first time. Don't simply describe the end results in a scope of work document but provide a vehicle by which team members can provide prototypes to ensure details were understood completely.

Virtual War Room

Almost every project has an area designated as its war room, obviously, this is not possible in the virtual corporation. The war room of the virtual project takes on a different environment. It will become an electronic room or forum rather than a physical space. The virtual war room can be a discussion applet in Notes or an interactive chat room on the net. It will continue to be dynamic, it must be, but will not be face-to-face but keyboard-to-keyboard. The virtual war room's foundation will be dependent on the technology used by the team and will remain an important venue for the project.

Critical Failure Factors (CFF's)

Where managing the virtual project breaks down is at the top and bottom of the resource chain. As with any other project, the sponsor and team members can make or break the success of a project.

With out a single vision or using the decision tool as needed, member's actions will become diluted and energy will be applied toward the wrong activities. Activities which do not support the projects objects or goals. In addition, the communication policies described above may be viewed as another passing fad and not adhered to. The VPM can not allow her communication policies to be ignored and must continuously monitor compliance.

Managing the virtual sponsor can be much more difficult and trying, especially if the sponsor doesn't have the same vision or understanding of virtual project management methodology. Often, for whatever reason, historically stakeholders want the project manager to be located near them (i.e. within strangling distance.) However, in this virtual paradigm the VPM's location is less relevant to a successful project. Using the technology tools highlighted above, the VPM is only a page or phone call away. Requiring the VPM to be in arms reach can negatively impact her ability to manage a virtual project.

This is not to say that the VPM is not as critical to the success (or failure) of the virtual project. If the basics described above are not executed from the beginning of the project, it probably will not be as successful, if at all, to which the VPM is accountable.

With all this said...

Virtual project management is still prepubescent. As technology develops so will our ability to more effectively manage geographically diverse projects. As technology advances so must our skills to manage team members, the concept of resource management will be replaced with guidance and leadership. Leadership, not control and embracing new technology not casual usage will be the successful attributes of the Virtual Project Manager.

Of course you realize that PMI will now have to offer a new certification , the Virtual Project Management Professional (VPMP), well maybe not....

Virtual Project Management Road Map

Technology

Get on the net!

Look into and get educated on tools such as CU/See Me or Lotus Notes

Add pictures to your existing e-mail

Develop a Virtual War room

Upgrade Hardware

Sound

Video

Connectivity

Memory

Processor

Training, Training, Training

CFF's

Casual usage of available technology

Not planning for culture change

The V-Teams

Single vision

Shared Responsibility

Kick-off Meeting

Personal commitment

Decision tools

Defined communication policy

Closed-loop quality program

CFF's

Not using the decision tool

Not authorized or empowered to get the job done

Voice mail ranting

The VPM

Spend time getting to know the team members

Spend more time in field

Build Trust

Less Documentation

Understand Culture Change

Evangelize Technology

Champion Ideas

CFF's

Micro-Management

Un-educated Sponsor

"Trust-trap"

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