

Creating Teams for Maximum Learning: Virtual and Face-to-Face

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Abstract

The goal of this special session is the creation of effective teams that will function as a collaborative learning community producing quality output. This strategy is successful for both online and face-to-face classes.

Historically, businesses formed strategic alliances with other corporations as a way to broaden their opportunities, impact or power. The benefits organizations derived through the collective power of industry collaboration has been incorporated in techniques targeting their own employees. Company leaders who recognized the value of partnership and teamwork with external environments have brought the concept to their internal operation. Organizations are structured to use a team or group approach to everyday business opportunities and challenges. This collaboration has benefited employees through improved productivity, flexibility and engagement (Schrage 1990; Siha & Campbell 2014).

Theodore Lewis noted that “teamwork constitutes a new point of tension in the labor process, because, by nature, it requires workers to forego autonomy and craft-consciousness, and to accept flexibility-enhancing regimes. Team-based mechanisms such as cross-functional training and job rotation make workers interchangeable, thus normalizing their identities.” (Lewis, 2011) He went on to define “several variables have emerged from the research literature on team work as significant moderators of the relationship between team status and dependent variables. Some of the more promising of these are set forth here and suggested as the basis for further work. Included are performance feedback, team learning behavior, team need for cognition, task structure, team creativity, team diversity, and job satisfaction.” (Lewis, 2011) Many of these are within our control as facilitators and instructors.

According to a survey released by the Society for Human Resources Management in July 2012, “nearly a half, or 46 percent, of organizations polled use virtual teams” with “publicly owned for-profit companies are the most likely (50 percent), closely followed by privately owned for-profit organizations (46 percent).” (Minton-Eversole, 2012) Virtual teams were defined as “groups of individuals who work across time, space and organizational boundaries and who interact primarily through electronic communications.” (Minton-Eversole, 2012). Additionally, according to the Help Scout Blog, “a 2009 study from MIT’s Sloan School of Management found that virtual teams working for software companies were regularly outperforming on-location teams, as long as they had the proper systems in place.” (Ciotti, 2013) An article in the Harvard Business Review added that remote workers “more engaged and more committed to their work” for a number of reasons. These include the observation that distance and absence make individuals reach out to others on their team more frequently and manage their time better. (Edinger, 2012) This was validated by a study done by Cisco in 2009 where they found that “approximately 69 percent of the employee’s surveyed cited higher productivity when working remote, and 75 percent of those surveyed said the timeliness of their work improved.” (Cisco Systems, 2009).

An article by John Forward in the Journal of Personality “presents information on a study regarding group achievement motivation and individual motives to achieve success and to avoid failure. Several studies in group achievement motivation have demonstrated that tendencies toward group achievement can be aroused by certain group conditions. A major assumption is that certain group conditions may have the effect of inducing temporary dispositions among members either to achieve group success or to avoid group failure.” (Abstract) (Forward, 1969)

On the other hand, failure may also be driven by a group, a situation most educators have experienced with group or team assignments. One of the primary reasons for failure is social loafing, defined by Ying Xiangyu “as a phenomenon in which people exhibit a sizable decrease in individual effort when performing in groups as compared to when they perform alone” (Abstract from Author) (Xiangyu, 2014).

The continued use of work teams and/or a group task approach by the business community has manifested the necessity of higher education to respond by developing learning strategies that would produce a more competent graduate who possessed these skills (Imazeki, 2015). The inclusion of group/team activities and assignments has become an essential component in academic business curriculums.

Over 80% of university business faculty report using team activities in their courses (Siha & Campbell 2014).

Hackman delineated the definition of teams from groups by determining that teams possess more identity and common objectives. The team is also more likely to have varying dimensions and contingent individual assignment responsibility (Hackman, 1990).

Key benefits of team activities:

- Advance problem-solving, social, and communication skills (Hackman, 1990)
- Collaborative learning (Schrage, 1990)
- Critical thinking (Tseng & Yeh, 2013)
- Teams outperform individual (Neufeld & Haggerty, 2001)
- Improved learning and engagement (Haidet & McCormick, 2014)

Key issues of team activities:

- Student anxiety (Skelly, Firth, & Kendrach, 2015)
- Low accountability and slackers (Tseng & Yeh, 2013; Siha & Campbell 2014)
- Team formation: random; self-selection; public selection (Skelly, Firth, & Kendrach, 2015; Barney, Prusak, Beddoes & Eggett, 2016)
- Trust (Tseng & Yeh, 2013)
- Lack of engagement (Imazeki, 2015)

The primary problems associated with team activities could be solved through team creation and development (Tseng & Yeh, 2013; De Cooman, Vantilborgh, Bal & Lub, 2016). The negative factors of teamwork are concerns of both faculty and students and can limit or negate all of the positives. The perfect method of team determination is challenging, but possible. Attention to specific fundamentals such as, personality, GPA, and career goals is essential (Skelly, Firth, & Kendrach, 2015). Team-building and trust provide the foundations of cohesion within the group, ultimately leading to successful teamwork (Staggers, Garcia & Nagelhout, 2008; Tseng & Yeh, 2013).

An additional obstacle to team projects is the tremendous demand for online courses. Student and administrators are mandating virtual education (O'Conner, 2015). "Higher education institutions are no longer defined by the physical boundaries of their traditional campus but the entire student experience, whether that be negotiating the physical corridors of the campus or connecting to virtual environments" (Riddle, Souter, & Keppell, xvi, 2012). Team activities have multiple obstacles in the virtual world. Two primary issues are communication and social

loafing. Techniques to resolve these potential problems can be assuaged by improved team formation.

As business education evolves and becomes more responsive to its numerous communities, educators acclimate and produce better prepared graduates ready to begin their career. This special session will explore various theories and proven techniques for Creating Teams for Maximum Learning relevant for both the Virtual and Face-to-Face environments.

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Relevance to Marketing Educators, Researchers and Practitioners:

With 80% of University Professors requiring teamwork activities in the business curriculum, it is very important to form the best possible working groups. The creation of effective teams that are capable of functioning as a collaborative learning community and producing quality output is very difficult. This special session presents a proven strategy for team construction and discusses way to implement the process in Online and Face-to-Face courses.

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