

Virtual Teams – Problems of Trust?

The organisation and the team

A major international bank has used the new International Team Trust Indicator (ITTI) a number of times across its senior and middle management teams.

This case focuses on one of the senior management teams which has its members spread worldwide, meeting at least 3 times a year (face to face and virtually) in order to establish high level objectives, discuss strategy, align targets across countries and share challenges. The issue the team thought would be useful to focus on was their level of effectiveness. Were they working effectively enough as a team or were there barriers in the way they operated which hindered their ultimate success?

Team difficulties

This high level team's success depended on setting the right objectives and fulfilling the agreed strategy in a consistent and uncompromising way worldwide.

As a team it had experienced the following problems:

- Their vision was unclear, and as a result so were their targets and their individual responsibilities.
- They were inconsistent in their behaviour, they often agreed one course as a team and took another at a local level
- They were not open and honest enough with each other. This often resulted in hidden agendas, retention of information and decisions taken without transparency and consultation.
- The team members paid lip service to global strategy decisions but personal ambitions were held to be more important than group decisions.
- Distance led to a lack of communication and empathy and a tendency not to value each other.

What the ITTI revealed to the team

When each team member completed the online ITTI questionnaire, the individual results were combined together to create a detailed team Feedback Report. This report analysed the team results against 9 trust criteria and identified the trust GAPS created between what the team said they needed and what they received from other team members. Based on these trust gaps the diagnostic also offered a team coaching guide to clarify and resolve each gap and help plan relevant action.

While the team felt they had trust in each other's level of competence to fulfil their objectives and carry out the strategy, they identified 2 main trust GAPS that were holding them back from being effective and ultimately successful in their outcome.

1. A lack of Alignment within the team. Alignment is based on a clear understanding of each other's roles together with shared team objectives and a common vision of the future. This team needed to truly share a global plan, commit to it and to each other and share the challenges if they were to succeed.
2. Honesty among team members emerged as a serious issue. Honesty required openness and transparency between team members and for each team member to deliver on commitments they made. This team needed to put trust on the agenda, to support each other and to bring any conflicts out into the open.

Outcomes – what happened as a result?

The team was divided into 2 groups and each group took one of the above issues from the Feedback Report. Their role was to analyse and discuss it further as well as to pin down the causes for these results and recommend suitable action. This phase had its difficulties as a number of team members in both groups found it hard to take on board some of the results from the Feedback Report and found it easy to blame their fellow team members/the policies they worked within/the broader organisation instead.

Eventually in plenary session the benefits of concrete evidence and open discussion began to pay off and the team put together a detailed plan for change and assigned responsibilities for making things happen.

The power of trust and its effects were put under the microscope and the following changes were planned to happen:

1. Cross-country work groups to ensure common goals were adhered to and relevant information shared. They also had as their aim regular communication and an occasional opportunity to meet face to face.
2. Local teams to participate and contribute on strategic decisions especially time frames that will affect them down the line.
3. A charter on how to deal with each other, particularly in intercultural meetings included:
 - Listening to each others' needs
 - Banning inconsistent behaviour
 - Honesty even if it hurts
 - Discussion of mistakes and learning from them – definitely no blame culture
 - Giving each other honest feedback
 - Making conflicts explicit

The team agreed that while they had on paper a clear strategy for growth they had neglected the problems of execution and the need for openness and trust to quickly spot and correct things when they veered off course.

They felt that going through the ITTI had been a cathartic process and while challenging for some team members, it helped bring issues that were never otherwise discussed into the open and gave them a common language to talk about them.

For further information about trust within teams click [here](#)