Childs, E., Dewar, T., & Whittington, D. (2005). Virtual Teaming: It's not just for Distance Educators Anymore. *ADETA's The Distance, 14*(1).

Virtual teams and working in the virtual environment are increasingly becoming the way in which work is done both within and between organizations. Virtual teaming offers increased flexibility in the way in which work is conducted and has several potential benefits; flexibility of time and place being two of the most frequently cited (Bock, 2003; Jude-York, Davis & Wise, 2000). Almost ten years ago Lipnack and Stamps (1997) made the following observation, "in the coming decades, most people will work in virtual teams for at least some part of their jobs" (p. 5). Parker (2003) observes that most teams in the workplace are now diverse and virtual requiring members and leaders alike to develop a new set of skills in order to work effectively in these "leading teams of strangers" (p. 1).

There are a variety of different types of virtual teams that have been identified in the literature (Jude-York et al., 2000). Given the changing nature of the workplace, people participate in a number of these teams simultaneously and the types are not exclusive. In cross-functional virtual teams, people from different functional areas are brought together to achieve a common purpose that may or may not be time-limited. Horizontal virtual teams generally are constructed so that all members of the team share an equivalent position in the hierarchy, and are brought together to achieve a common purpose. Self-directed virtual teams are teams without formal leaders. The roles and responsibilities are determined by the team, and not dictated from the outside

It is now well documented in the literature (Henry & Hartzler, 1998; Jude-York et al., 2000; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997) that working in virtual teams is more difficult than in face-to-face teams. People operating in virtual teams need to address several unique challenges some of which include (1) managing across distances and time zones, (2) shifting team membership or membership on multiple teams, (3) defining norms for the team that are appropriate to its mission, (4) "boundarylessness" or ambiguity in what used to be well-defined and predictable work practices, and (5) culture and regional differences.

The VASE framework has been developed to help individuals, teams and organizations to understand and address some of the challenges of working with virtual teams. It is based on over 40 years collective virtual teaming experience and some recent research and development work based at Royal Roads University in partnership with Calliope Learning. The framework has four components: (1) build and maintain a **V**ision, (2), check **A**ssumptions, (3), take a **S**ystems approach, and (4) **E**xpect white water. Each component has an associated set of competencies and development tools.

Build and Maintain a Vision:
Building and maintaining a vision is a critical component of virtual teams. "A vision is a picture of the future you seek to create, described in the present tense, as if it were happening now" (Senge et al, 1994, p 302). The literature on virtual and face-to-face teamwork (Henry & Hartzler, 1998; Jude-York et al., 2000) emphasizes the need for a team's goal and purpose to be well understood, shared among all team members and revisited at regular intervals. This may seem like common sense but Murphy's Law tells us that wherever there are opportunities for miscommunication then we need to pay careful attention. If team members are heading in different directions then a team doesn't really exist.

Checking Assumptions:
While checking assumptions is a key skill for any teamwork, it becomes imperative in virtual and horizontal teamwork because so many taken for granted conditions are challenged. On virtual teams when things are not said, they do not exist. People working on virtual teams need to continually check their assumptions about the three Cs of working in virtual teams – communication, coordination and collaboration. Jude-York et al., (2000) refer to the three Cs as

"the primary tasks of virtual teamwork" (p. 10). While the three Cs are not the goal of the team, they are the factors that will enable the team to reach its goal.

Taking a Systems View

"Everything affects everything else in one way or another. Whether you are aware of that or not does not change the fact that this is what is happening. This systems perspective reminds us that this is what is going on. And when you see it this way, you can manage your business better" (Woods, 2002). Within virtual teams, there are intra-team and inter-team systems which need to be identified and dealt with on an ongoing basis. The flexibility of time and space inherent in virtual teams can make it difficult at times to see connections to the larger intra/inter team systems. Without regular attention to the intra/inter-team system dynamics, the ability of the team to effectively and efficiently reach its goal is compromised.

Expect White Water

Permanent white water is a term used by Vaill (1996) to describe the complex, churning and ever-changing environment in which most of us find ourselves in our personal and professional lives. Vaill (1996) suggests, "these conditions are taking us all out of our comfort zones and asking things of us that we never imagined would be required. "Permanent white water means permanent life outside one's comfort zone" (p. 14).

Most people are comfortable with some changes (i.e. in their field of expertise, with technology) but not others (i.e. organizational structural changes). However, what is needed is the development of skills to become comfortable around all sorts of changes. By not looking for stability but rather embracing and even expecting white water conditions, we need to become good learners, and, in particular, really good at being beginners.

Virtual Team Skills Inventory (VTSI)

The Virtual Team Skills Inventory (VTSI) is a multi-rater, inside/outside, team skills inventory for virtual and other types of traditional and modern teams. It is similar to 360-degree assessments in that the VTSI draws on multiple perspectives from the individual, team members and external reviewers to get a clear picture of a team's skills. To do so, the VTSI identifies the strengths and areas for improvement based on a set of competencies and related indicators derived from the VASE framework and supporting literature on team and online competencies (Goodyear et al., 2001; Salmon, 2000).

The VTSI looks at a team from both an internal and external perspective to reduce the risk of skill blind spots. It also recognizes opportunities for team learning by identifying potential coaching partners within the team. The inventory provides qualitative reports that identify the areas for growth according to the virtual team skill competencies. Although the inventory has been created with virtual teams in mind, it is just as applicable to all types of traditional and modern teams.

Traditional 360-degree assessments suffer from two particular drawbacks that the VTSI addresses.

- In the VTSI raters are only asked to give feedback in areas that they know about. Traditional 360s ask for all raters to answer the same multi-choice questions.
- In the VTSI feedback is provided in a qualitative form that lists a ratee's specific strengths and areas for improvement based on the competencies selected. Traditional 360s provide quantitative feedback that is out of context, difficult to make meaning from and not always geared towards the development of action strategies (Johnson, 2004).

Conclusion

Working in virtual teams is an iterative job and one that requires the participation of each virtual team member. Team process needs to be attended to on a regular basis in order for progress on the team task to benefit from virtual teaming. The VASE framework and the VTSI tool introduced

in this article are two ways in which virtual teams can identify, develop and hone their virtual team skills on an ongoing basis in a sustainable manner.

References

Bock, W. (2003). Some rules for Virtual Teams. *Journal for Quality & Participation, 26*(3), 43.

Goodyear, P., Salmon, G., Spector, J. M., Steeples, C., & Tickner, S. (2001). Competencies for Online Teaching: A Special Report. *Educational Technology Research and Development, 49*(1), 65-72.

Henry, J. E., Hartzler, M. (1998). *Tools for Virtual Teams*. Milwaukee, WI: ASQ Press.

Lipnack, Jessica & Stamps, Jeffrey (1997) *Virtual Teams: Reaching Across Space, Time, and Organizations with Technolog*y. New York: John Wiley & Sons

Johnson, L. (2004). Retooling 360s for better performance. http://hbswk.hbs.edu

Jude-York, D., Davis, L., & Wise, S. (2000). *Virtual Teaming: Breaking the Boundaries of Time and Place*. Menlo Park: Crisp Publications Inc.

Parker, G. (2003). Leading a Team of Strangers. *Training and Development, 2*, p. 21-23.

Salmon, G. (2000). *E-Moderating. The Key to Teaching and Learning Online*. London: Kogan Page

Senge, P., Kleiner, A., Roberts, D., Ross, R., and Smith, B. (1999). *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook*. London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing.

Vaill, P. (1996). *Learning as a Way of Being*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Wood, J. (2002). Work in Progress.

Biographies:

Elizabeth Childs uses her PhD in Educational Technology and her experience in education and training to inform her consulting practice. She has worked in a variety of sectors to analyze, implement and evaluate training and human performance interventions. The majority of her work is done at a distance and virtual project teams make up most of the way in which Elizabeth collaborates with others to complete projects and manage programs.

Tammy Dewar combines an academic background in learning (Ph.D. in Adult Learning) with practical leadership and team expertise in a variety of sectors. Her independent consulting practice includes over fifteen years of experience in leading virtual project teams to design, deliver and evaluate face-to-face and virtual learning experiences in both the public and private sectors.

Dave Whittington has been carrying out research into the uses of educational technology for more than 20 years and holds a PhD in computer science. His experience of e-learning and virtual teams ranges from being a student of the UK's Open University to being the technical director of one of Europe's first virtual university.

Contact Information:

Calliope Learning
info@calliopelearning.com
(250) 213-6239