An Invitation to Participate in a Study Virtual Team Learning

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Why study learning in virtual teams?
Let's face it: Most of us find it much easier to collaborate with others when we're in the same room. Likewise, most managers admit they struggle when it comes to engaging team members who work from a distance. Although virtual work is fast becoming the norm for many organizations, most know their teams are not delivering the results they're really capable of, given the right structure and tools.

If you are interested in the answers to any of the three question below, I encourage you to contact me at nancydixon@commonknowledge.org so we can discuss the virtual team issues your organization is facing and see how a study might provide new insight on the issue.

The study of virtual team learning is research for the purpose of exploring:

1) **The extent to which virtual teams are able to learn.** Learning, in this sense, means:
   a) learning from each other as team members, so that all the knowledge held by individual team members is made available to all members (e.g. ideas based on his/her past experience; admission of mistakes, own and others; limitation of own experience; knowledge of strengths and weaknesses of the team as a whole; knowledge gained from interacting with clients, etc.). For this level of exchange to occur, I hypothesize that psychological safety must exist within the team, (e.g. "a shared belief that the team is safe for interpersonal risk taking … [they have] a sense of confidence that others will not embarrass, reject or punish someone for speaking up.") (Edmonson)
   b) learning from interacting with clients, suppliers, and other stakeholders, that allows the team to modify their actions.
   c) learning from other teams within the organization and from members of other teams with whom an individual member may be co-located.
2) **The practices (routines) teams engage in** to support that learning (what software they employ and for what purposes; meetings they hold, in what format, with what frequency; how they collaborate related to what issues; how they build social relationships within the team; how team decisions are made, etc.).
3) **Factors that influence team learning effectiveness**
   a) the level of verticality of the team, (e.g. holding an initial meeting to form the team; some members co-located some not; some members meeting face-to-face periodically; all members meeting face-to-face periodically, etc.).
   b) the number of members and the structure of the team (e.g. role of team leader, role of experts, the extent to which leadership is distributed).
   c) the level of interdependence of the task the team is working on (e.g. sequential, pooled, reciprocal).

How I Conduct a Study

1) Hold an initial meeting with a manager or management team to:
   a) explain the study and how I would like to conduct it.
   b) solicit any additional questions that are of interest to the cooperating organization, that I might include in the study.
   c) identify the team or teams that will be the subject of the study; a minimum of one and a maximum of four. I am primarily focused on understanding the learning routines of **successful** virtual teams, although I am open to comparing teams that are considered the most and least successful, if that is of greater interest to the organization.
   d) determine the number of team members to be interviewed.
2) The main source of data for this study is narrative interviews with working members of the team(s). I conduct hour long Skype interviews with selected individual team members. All the interviews will follow an open interview guideline with narrative elements. The interviewer will take care to cover the intended topics, but encourage interviewees to add other issues they considered relevant.
3) If pertinent and acceptable to the organization, I review relevant team communication found in email, chat, or team software like Slack or Jabber.
4) Hold a final meeting with organizational members to present the findings of the study

Courtesy and Protections for the Cooperating Organization

- I sign a non-disclosure agreement to protect any sensitive information.
- I make the initial interview guide available to the organization, with the understanding that questions are often added to the guide as the interviews reveal new areas to explore.
- In the report I quote interviewees rather than paraphrase their ideas. When the case study is complete, I offer anyone that I have quoted the opportunity to review the report and to correct quotations attributed to them. The quotations in the report can bear the interviewee's name or be anonymous.
- I offer the organization I am studying, the opportunity to review the completed report before publication and to change any information in it that is factual incorrect.
- The research findings in the study are a product of my interpretation based on the data collected and the study of the literature. Therefore, the findings should not be altered by the organization, although I am always interested and open to different interpretations. If the organization chooses, it can remain anonymous rather than be named in the study.

Benefits for the Cooperating Organization

- I present the findings of the study to a management team and look forward to engaging in a discussion of the implications of the findings for the organization.
- In the studies I have conducted in the past, I have consistently heard from the team studied and from the management team, that they have benefited from having an external view on their virtual teams.

- The completed study contains a review of the literature on virtual team learning which can inform the thinking of both the team studied and management.

Costs Involved in the Study

- I anticipate that interviews will be conducted by Skype video and that the document review can be conducted remotely. There is **no cost to the organization**, for participating in the study other than the time of team members to be interviewed and to review the completed study.
- I anticipate traveling two times to the organization location, 1) an initial meeting to plan the study with organizational members and 2) a final meeting to present the findings. Typically, the cooperating organization covers the travel cost for these two trips, although this is not a requirement for participating in the study.

Attachments:
- Learning together and Working Apart, Case Study of ProQuest virtual team
- Dr. Dixon's CV
- Dr. Dixon's resume