



# Organizations in Action

Practical Information for Managers and Leaders An Occasional Publication from TRG, Inc.

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## LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS

Today's organizations have teams and offices around the world and rely heavily on technology to facilitate their communications and work. Organizations that previously had staff co-located in one office working effectively in project teams now have team members scattered in different offices, cities, states, and countries. While, they may come together for a period of time to work toward a common goal or produce a product, much of their work is now done virtually, spanning across boundaries or limits of time, geography, culture, and organizations.

At TRG we have studied literature and worked with clients to find the best practices for successful virtual teams. Here are some tips for how team leaders can improve the effectiveness of their virtual teams:

### 1. Be intentional about the formation of the team.

It is essential that the team leader be clear about the team's purpose, mission, and goals and authority. This clarity provides the glue that holds a team together when they are scattered around the world.

### 2. Have a team start-up meeting.

A face-to-face start-up meeting where all members get acquainted and jointly plan how they will do the work jump-starts a team's performance much more quickly. For virtual teams this meeting is a time for not only clarifying the team's purpose, roles, directions, and common strategies, but also building the social capital that will sustain the trust and teamwork over time and distance.

Leading virtual teams presents new challenges even for experienced managers. Team leaders can no longer walk down the hall to seek information, meet for lunch to talk about a problem, or call a quick meeting to address an opportunity. Instead the virtual team leader has to rely on electronically communication to send and receive information and key messages. S/he has to coach and manage performance without traditional forms of feedback; help select appropriate technology for the team to use to do its work; and facilitate work across different cultures, time zones, and language barriers.

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### **3. Choose the most appropriate technology for the team and its work.**

The technology should meet the business needs of the team; however, it need not be top-of-the-line or ultra complex. If the technology is too complex and the members have little experience in using it, it can actually get in the way of achieving results. The basics are audio conferencing equipment, voice mail, fax capability, and a common e-mail system. Other more sophisticated technology such as video conferencing, scheduling, real-time data conferencing, electronic meeting systems, and collaborative writing tools can be added as needed.

However, these more sophisticated technologies demand that the organization have the technical resources and electronic infrastructure available to make the technology work reliably. In addition to choosing appropriate technology, consensus needs to be reached about the use of this technology. Issues such as the application of email, appropriate time for return calls, and attendance at conferences should be clarified and agreed upon by all team members.

### **4. Build trust within the team.**

Trust in team settings usually means that members can rely on one another to perform competently, do what they say they will do, and to care about the well being of others. Trust is a very critical element that influences performance and collaboration. It is more difficult to build trust in virtual settings where face-to-face contact is limited. A few examples of what team leaders can do to build and maintain trust include:

- \* Arranging for face to face time
- \* Encouraging team members to talk openly
- \* Maintaining close contact with members to minimize feelings of isolation

### **5. Develop the skills to facilitate virtual meetings.**

Traditional meetings are often not facilitated or led well. They can last too long, some people dominate the discussion while others say nothing, discussion roams off topic, etc. These challenges are present and often can be harder to keep in check when you are having virtual meetings. Thus, the basics of facilitating good meetings are even more important in a virtual context.

- All meetings must have a purpose and expected outcomes, along with an agenda and time plan that are shared and agreed to by members participating in the meeting.
- Sufficient time must be devoted to preparation for virtual meetings so that materials are sent out ahead of time, agendas are developed, input from members is solicited, and a good plan for the meeting is developed and shared with members.
- The meeting leader should keep the team focused on working through the agenda in the time frame decided upon. Of course how this is done is different in audio or video conferencing than it might be for an e-mail meeting.
- It is important to devote some time toward the end of the meeting for observations from members about the process of the meeting. Members should reflect on the meeting to see if the team followed its guidelines or ground rules. Suggestions for improvement should be included in the meeting notes.
- Notes should be written for each meeting that describes the action the team decided to take, who is responsible, when the action will be completed, and any resources that would be required for the action to be implemented. These should be sent to members and posted for referral.

## 6. Secure resources for the team's professional development.

The challenges that virtual team members and leaders face can be daunting. Teams that are co-located often struggle with issues such as performance feedback, learning how to use new technology, and how to develop true mutual accountability. In fact, these issues are even more difficult with virtual teams. Team leaders need to encourage team members to create learning plans and access training programs to build new skills. In turn, the organization must support these new learning needs.

TRG has worked with many organizations to improve the performance of their virtual teams.

- \* A coalition of industry, academic, advocacy and other organizations that provide health care information on the Internet sought to develop a code of ethics that would be accepted worldwide. TRG was asked to support the work of a broad and diverse virtual team that worked over a period of time to develop and launch the code of ethics with a high level of participation and broad consensus. Tag's role included establishing norms for working virtually, creating an atmosphere of trust and transparency during the drafting of the code, facilitating telephone conferences and face-to-face meetings, and managing an enormous volume of email traffic which was generated during the process. The Internet Healthcare Code of Ethics was successfully launched in the U.S. Senate in the spring of 2000.

Virtual leadership requires fresh thinking, creativity, and a willingness to experiment and learn from mistakes. We have found that for virtual teams to be effective, it is not technology that makes the difference, but it is thoughtful, consistent, and creative team leadership.

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## TRG JOINS FORCES WITH RENOWNED IMPROV COMPANY

Who would have thought that world-class improvisational theater and international management consulting would be a perfect marriage?

TRG and Second City Communications (SCC) have formed a strategic alliance to expand and deepen the services they offer. SCC was founded in 1990 as the business theater division of The Second City, the theater training ground for comedic talent such as Bill Murray, Alan Arkin, John Belushi, Dan Aykroyd, Joan Rivers and Mike Myers. SCC creates professional workshops that enhance creativity, idea generation, and public speaking and communication skills. The firm also produces live, customized corporate comedy events, as well as videos, Web-based services and trade show support services.

Under the agreement, TRG and SCC will work together to create new products and services based on the cutting edge approach of utilizing improvisational theater techniques for business applications. The end result will include teambuilding and innovation workshops, programs to make creativity and fun part of organizational culture, and high-energy, high-impact corporate events that people actually want to attend.

“The use of improv is particularly appropriate in the information economy, and for information technology companies,” says TRG Board member and former CEO Ed Salt. “The success of many of these companies depends on their people’s ability to think fast, be extraordinarily creative, and to put ideas into action.”

The strategic alliance was finalized after SCC and TRG successfully partnered in Boston to facilitate an event for the governing body of InterGen, a global power generation company.

“The relevance, in addition to fun, of the Second City/TRG session seemed to be about the innovation part of our business,” said Carlos Riva, CEO of InterGen.

“Creating the conditions for innovation is something we can do as managers, and there were some good messages in there.”

The partnership’s initial offering will be corporate events and meetings in which TRG and SCC facilitators collaborate with clients to create high-energy, fun sessions which are targeted to the achievement of specific business objectives.

## **TRAINING RESOURCES GROUP, INC.**

is an employee-owned training and organizational development consulting firm that works with clients to improve organizational performance. TRG helps clients to develop strong leaders, create high performance work teams, manage growth and change, and establish positive, productive work environments. TRG has worked throughout the U.S. and in more than 116 countries around the world.