



# Thriving on Virtual Teams

A white paper, in collaboration with Vlerick Business School, detailing key information presented at Unify's amplifyTEAMS: experience! seminar in Brussels' Cercle de Lorraine - 21/03/2013

# Contents

Introduction	3
Today's challenges	4
1. Why use virtual teams and what are the challenges?	4
2. The secret of virtual teams: team shared mental model & team identity	5
3. How do we set the scene to make a virtual team work?	6
4. Prominently post your shared team goals	6
5. Reward good teamwork to inspire future use	7
6. Conclusion: sharing the same identity	7
Prof. Dr. Smaranda Boros: "Virtual teams can do exceptional jobs"	8
Customer perspectives	9
Literature perspectives	11

# Introduction

A quarter of a century ago, US management guru Tom Peters wrote his then-radical new handbook for a management revolution called "Thriving on Chaos". It offered a trenchant analysis and a bold program for action: forty-five prescriptions specifying what managers at every level had to do (preferably fast) if their organizations were to survive, "let alone be superlative in today's (and tomorrow's) chaotic environment." It was a wake-up call for many large enterprises that had, as Barbara Tuchman described so eloquently in "The March of Folly", shown three prevalent attitudes: obliviousness to the growing disaffection of constituents; primacy of self-aggrandizement, and; the illusion of invulnerable status.

Today, 25 years later, we don't need gurus to understand that even if the world has become a global village, it has also become a very crowded one requiring new, smart ways to make it work. Our success depends on how successfully we build trust in each other from a distance.

Our brains still are wired as they were millennia ago, and building trust in each other is still mostly determined by non-verbal cues dependent on physical closeness. But the most recent social revolutions may change this. Teenagers now spend more time online than face-to-face when building relationships. Five years ago in the US, one in five marriages was the result of online dating; now it's two in every five. Stop saying that technology is a cold thing. Today, many find their life's partner online.

Prof. Dr. Smaranda Boros of the Vlerick Business School has spent the bigger part of her professional life studying virtual teams. In spite of the many gurus proclaiming the next management revolution theory, she sees corporate organizations lagging behind in this new IT- and social media-based world. When it comes to teamwork, she feels we haven't developed a passion for its virtual counterpart: we still prefer a face-to-face meeting, if at all possible.

Nevertheless, every revolution - e.g., the industrial revolution or the current digital one - creates a new order with its own pecking sequence. Every time, organizations need to try and understand the revolution's consequences, change and adapt to it. If you want to be on top, you need to find out how to thrive on virtual teams; how to make these processes work.

This white paper explains how the basics of a shared mental model and shared identity allow virtual teams to thrive.

# Today's challenges

## 1. Why use virtual teams and what are the challenges?

A 2012 survey by the British Society for Human Resource Management examined what corporate virtual teams are used for most, and where they were considered better or worse than real, traditional teams. The research shows that virtual teams are preferred for a project or assignment's creative, coordinative and strategic part (Figure 1).

Figure 1 - Why virtual teams (green) vs. traditional teams?

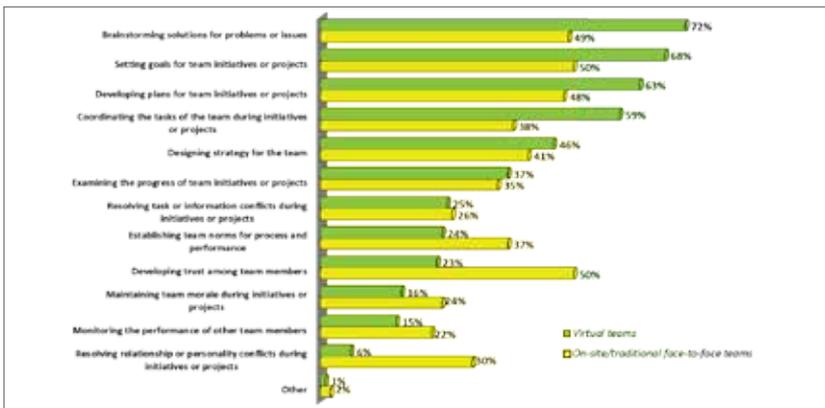
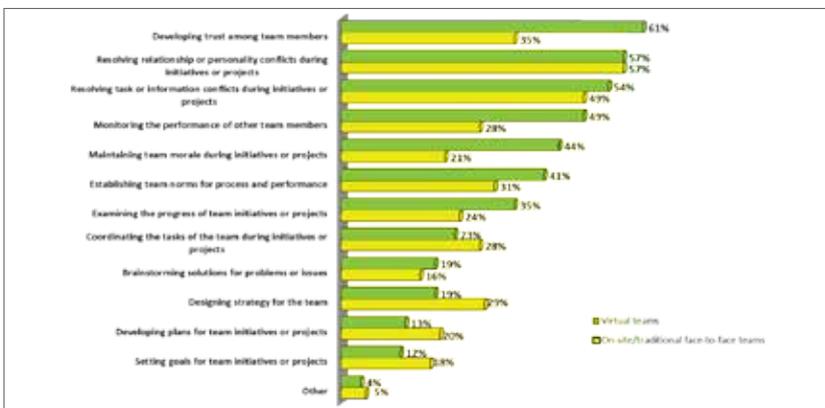


Figure 2 - The challenges of virtual teams (green) vs. traditional teams



The challenges with virtual teams (Figure 2) are all about human relations. "When it comes down to the nitty-gritty of life,

we mostly complain about virtual teams", Prof. Dr. Smaranda Boros concludes. "In

all fairness, we do not really believe in them."

Virtual teams are usually global, explains Prof. Boros. They are culturally and functionally diverse with members from different backgrounds. So it is not unusual for a virtual team to be confused, unclear, or perplexed. "Everything that a traditional team does is amplified in a virtual team, for better or worse. The good parts can be much better; the bad will be ten times worse."

As nearly every business journal states, each conversation we engage in centers on the recurring theme of **developing trust**. For centuries, our brains have been wired to look for subconscious clues, many of which are lacking in virtual space: smell, body language, facial contours, and similar non-verbal messaging. In close connection to the issue of building trust is maintaining and restoring it. Although **resolving conflicts** between members is indicated as a key challenge, it is staggering how little research there is about conflict resolution strategies in virtual teams, says Prof. Boros. "We still believe conflicts are handled the same way in a virtual team as in traditional ones when there is so much empirical evidence that virtual conflicts have a very particular way of unfolding and escalating."

Smaranda Boros: "How to build, maintain and restore trust are key questions organizations need to focus on in this social media revolution. If you invest in finding answers to these questions, you will find yourself at the top of the pecking order in the new society."

To start answering these questions, we need to know the deeper-level mechanisms at the basis of building trust in virtual teams.

## 2. The secret of virtual teams: team shared mental model & team identity

Having a team **shared mental model** means that all members have **the same representation** of what the task is, how they should go about it, and how they should work together. Prof. Boros points out that even if we understand the consequences of having a shared mental model in our everyday life, we often lack this insight when starting a virtual team. "A lack of a shared mental model leads to low effectiveness and even conflicts. For instance, if your wife has a different understanding of what a "French key" is, she will not be a big help when you repair the kitchen sink. Should she say she wants to buy a new pair of shoes, you need to understand she really means going shopping all afternoon - you can easily imagine the frustration when having a different assumption of how things will go!

On a professional level, a surgical team must share the same mental model because they cannot afford to waste time during a procedure. They need to know exactly what the surgeon wants and exactly when; therefore, their mental model is dictated by his way of operating. The consequences of not sharing the same model, even in apparently obvious matters (which team members sometimes feel redundant to specify) can lead to expensive disasters. A case-book example is NASA's Mars Climate Orbiter spacecraft, which crashed into the Red Planet because the US virtual team that developed the orbiter unknowingly worked in different measurement standards; one metric and the other, imperial."

What are the **dimensions** of the team shared mental model? The first is task-related, says Prof. Boros. Team members need to know what your goal is, share the goal's purpose, share a lot of information even if you find it redundant, and share

experiences. Second, define **the way the team will work** (e.g., what is in-time communication? How should the communication flow go? How will it cope with cultures that respect hierarchy; that believe conflict avoidance is essential?)

The other key aspect that ensures the success of a virtual team is a strong team identity. To achieve this, a strong starting point is getting to know each other so that this **team-identity** can build naturally on existing similarities between members. Teams need to know each other, even if they do not physically meet. Look at traditional teams, Smaranda Boros says. "Real teams spend huge amounts of time getting to know each other, up to 60% when you do content analysis of the conversations. People understand that you need to build team identity before you can create trust."

The other key trigger of team identity is an awareness that all members are fighting for the same goal; are in the same boat. Therefore, Prof. Boros asks, how do you expect people to put aside their personal goals and ambitions to participate in a virtual team without an informal organizational benefit for good teaming without being rewarded for it? She says this question is a challenge to most of today's HR departments.

Figure 3 - Frustrated virtual teams



<sup>1</sup>Siemens Enterprise Communications, now unify, global research conducted September/October 2012. Sample size n=320, 95% confidence level within +/- 5.44% margin of error

### 3. How do we set the scene to make a virtual team work?

A recent Unify global research study<sup>1</sup> shows that while the vast majority of today's organizations rely on remote, distributed and mobile team members, a smaller minority report having sufficient tools to enable effective team collaboration and coherent information sharing. And even fewer have formal training to ensure productivity with the tools they do have, or a means to measure and manage teamwork in the enterprise.

As Prof. Boros underscored, the same research (Figure 3) shows that more than four in 10 users 'always or frequently' feel frustrated or overwhelmed by the complexity of dispersed communications technologies, and only about half of respondents experience success in establishing trust and maintaining fluid dialog among team members within today's new 'virtualized' landscape.

At the same time, most enterprises are surprisingly heavily dependent on last century's tools - phone calls, conference calls and email - to drive team collaboration among those who cannot communicate face-to-face. A huge untapped potential for richer conversations, productive dialog and information sharing clearly exists.

To make virtual teamwork succeed, four pillars of creating a virtual team must be aligned: structure; task; people; technology.

First: we can introduce tasks that are



feasible in a virtual team within the organizational structure, in the way that work is designed. The tasks must be 'cool', and intrinsically motivating: people need to be motivated without you being there to pump up the energy, and they must be interesting and rewarding. The tasks must also be divisible as serial subtasks that members can work on in parallel between virtual meetings.

Second: about people; who to select? Team members must be good at self-management, proactive and high on self-regulation. In other words, they must scan the environment for opportunities, foresee problems and solutions to them, and be able to work alone and without immediate feedback for given periods. Otherwise, says Smaranda Boros, as a team-leader, you will be a dictator in a virtual world and end up doing all the work. Furthermore, team members must have great cultural awareness. If they don't have it, train them, she insists. When choosing the composition of a team, build on existing informal networks in organizations (to tap on existing trust) and have at least 15% of the team made of volunteers for the task (to have a motivation boost built into the team).

Last but not least, virtual team members must be comfortable with technology. They need to trust and be able to use it. "Team members need to spell out what they need from technology. They shouldn't ask what technology can do for them, but what they need from technology" says Prof. Boros. .

### 4. Prominently post your shared team goals

Once the right people are selected and ready to use the technology in place, you're ready to go. What do you pay attention to?

You need a shared understanding about the team goals. Post the mission in an easily accessible online wall and ask

members to convey what they understand by it. Make sure they discuss it until their understanding converges.

Provide clarity in roles and procedures: who does what? Define communication norms; e.g., what do we share during team meetings? Can we share drafts, and how do we organize file naming? How do we handle conflicts? What rules should govern off-line communication between team members? How do we document spontaneous contacts?

Conflict management requires clear communication norms. For example, disagreement is good for the team and should be tolerated. It's a way to build trust, Prof. Boros holds. "There are very small things that we cling to as humans to build relations. Those things must be translated in the virtual world. We need to be more informal, and at ease. Trust in a virtual environment takes more time to establish, and is action-based. People are judged on their actions rather than the impression they make. Above all, trust is built when people deliver on their promises. "

So the question arises how organizations can promote trust in the relationship to build confidence sooner. The answer lies in the social communication and "quality time" people spend with each other. Some teams do online teambuilding, such as playing World of Warcraft together, while others publish a joint play list with 'the song of the morning' for all team members.

## 5. Reward good teamwork to inspire future use

What do you have at the end of virtual teamwork? A result and (hopefully) a team. It's not just about performance, explains Prof. Boros, referring to the time virtual teams take to build. "Although they save on travel, meal and hotel costs, they can be very costly because you're building expertise across the globe with really good people. As such, you want them to

collaborate again in the future, and want them to have satisfaction about having worked together." The final aspect that will define your colleagues' eagerness to join a virtual team is recognition of their working together. Do you have a joint reward for them? Do you even recognize the effort? Is their direct supervisor informed about their good work on the project, or is this time left unaccounted for in their eyes? "Make sure there are at least informal reward ceremonies and that you capitalize on the human relations aspects because satisfaction is just as important as the performance they delivered on that single project." Boros concludes: "Will your team members in the end drink champagne together in mutual celebration over their achievement, or privately down vodka to soothe their frustrations?"

## 6. Conclusion: sharing the same identity

In Prof. Boros' opinion, a virtual team's success boils down to sharing the same understanding and identity. You build these attributes from the way you set the scene, the people you chose, the way they're trained, the technology you select based on the tasks to be performed, and on the particular structure of your organization. You then need to place much heavier emphasis on the social/emotional processes and to carefully set out and monitor the entire work process.

It's a mindset, Prof. Boros concludes. "Take the Swiss banker I recently met, complaining about his contacts with South-American colleagues: 'Every time, I have to spend fifteen minutes discussing their families before going into business issues...' I suggested he allot not fifteen minutes, but half an hour to touch base with his Latin colleagues. He should learn to travel in virtual space, touch base with the people, try to create team identity, and try to actively build trust. The more time and effort invested, the higher the reward."



## Leadership perspective

Smaranda Boros is Associate Professor of Organizational Behavior at the Belgian Vlerick Business School. Before joining Vlerick, she taught at the University of Tilburg in The Netherlands and Babes-Bolyai University in Romania. As a social psychologist, Smaranda Boros specializes in working with group dynamics, especially concerning issues of diversity, and relative to this, gender stereotypes in management and group/organizational identities.

“Virtual teams can do exceptional job.”

Prof. Dr. Smaranda Boros

What is the key message for CIO's or IT Managers as far as the success of virtual teams is concerned?

“I think it's hugely important that managers believe virtual teams can do exceptional, outstanding jobs - not just get the job done. We've been talking about the social media revolution and how it's changing societal hierarchy. This is where an organization can change its rank over others by adapting faster and capitalizing on the expertise it has inside but is not always aware of. The reward for those willing to do that is to move ahead of others who won't.”

What is the role of communication technology in a virtual team?

“Technology shapes both social relations and the way we work in virtual teams. And it needs a two-way street adaptation process: not just the user to adjust to existing communication technology, but also technology to adapt to user needs. Therefore, the functionality aspect of technology design is capital. Because of work specialization - the specialization of people who design technology - and the difference between user and producer,

users must be very, very clear about what they want and need. Not just what they want technology do, but what they want to achieve with it. And then give this explicit information to the technology designer so he can provide its proper evolution to support it. So this is a system that must co-evolve more explicitly from now on if it is to succeed.”

What is the biggest challenge of communication technology to the success of virtual teams?

The other barrier is being stuck in the old ways of doing things. What we now push very hard is to make technology and virtual teams adapt to the way regular teams work, instead of believing it's a totally different story. Finally, we must adapt procedures, people selection, and the way we give rewards.”

How can we change our behavior?

“Begin by using young people and those comfortable with technology. For example, if I have those resources easily available, I will ask for advice. I will learn to use technology. I will see that it can do things for me. The minute I see it has a benefit, I will be more open. The second step is more strategic: learn to

use this technology in an informal way. Team building sessions are happening online throughout the world. People play videogames together. They all build a shared identity in the virtual world. So we need to be comfortable with by making it more personal. It needs to become more human. Now, it's just a work-specific tool. It must become a part of human relationships similar to those experienced by online 'gamers'".

### What are companies doing to adapt to this new order?

"Some companies cope with change very well and some don't. There are examples everywhere, like Google or most IT-oriented software businesses that use technology daily and have an entire organizational culture built

around virtuality. Others, however, use technology because they're forced to, and restrict it primarily to completing task work and discourage human interaction from popping up.

In general, companies definitely do not invest enough in training people to learn new technology skills. I feel it's like sending soldiers to war with a gun, when they have been taught to fight with the bayonet. They will keep using the gun as a bayonet. So companies definitely need to understand that virtual teamwork is different than traditional teamwork. It's much more specific. It requires certain skills and tools that people need to feel comfortable with before they get anything started. Training in this respect should be much more focused and salient."

## Customer perspective

"Fundamentally, in a virtual team, we have the potential to use the networks behind it. There are networks and subnetworks, and in reality, everyone is connected one way or another. The purpose is to have the right resources we want at a given time, thanks to that connection."

Yves vander Auwera,  
Director Staff Department ICT Shared  
Services, Fedict Shared Services

"With the new tools, we'll find new ways to understand people. But I think there are times when we'll need to meet face-to-face. Our virtual teams are built over several years. When it comes to building a new virtual team, Prof. Boros made an excellent point. We should first gather around the table face-to-face, share things, and then progressively shift to a virtual team."

Luc Moentack, Global Telecom &  
Collaboration Manager, Solvay

"The demonstration today makes it clear that UC technology is really up to standards. It has left the geeks and is now useable by everyone. I find the demonstration shows Unify's courage, and it was wonderful. If you can do a demonstration like this, it's ready to work."

Eddy Mus, Teamleader Voice & Media,  
BNP Paribas Fortis

## Customer perspective

“I have colleagues working from the Czech Republic and Russia. So you create virtual teams. And you indeed have to work on teambuilding, setting a goal – perhaps simple goals that everyone can achieve. It’s important to know each other so you can work towards a certain direction.”

Guy Vanderperren,  
IT Department Manager – Corporate  
Network, AGC Glass Europe

“At our hospital, there’s a breast clinic that involves hematologists, radiologists, and plastic surgeons, among others. So in that case you could have virtual teams working together on a project, separately from their own consultation. There, I could see it work, and it’s happening more and more often.”

Stef Colson, Responsible for Reception  
and Telephony, Clinique Saint-Jean

“You have to face reality. If you’re at home and you have kids, you’ll see that they use UC constantly. They’re on Skype, Facebook, and they communicate with each other in different ways than we did. This is the story we face: It’s going to be integrated in our business, because the people who are now leaving school will also want to use it.”

Guy Vermeulen, Voice Coordinator –  
IT&S, Borealis Polymers

# Literature perspective

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## About Unify

Unify—formerly known as Siemens Enterprise Communications—is one of the world’s largest communications software and services firms. Our solutions unify multiple networks, devices and applications into one easy-to-use platform that allows teams to engage in rich and meaningful conversations. The result is a transformation of how the enterprise communicates and collaborates that amplifies collective effort, energizes the business, and dramatically improves business performance. Born out of the engineering DNA of Siemens, Unify builds on this heritage of product reliability, innovation, open standards and security to provide integrated communications solutions for 75% of the Global 500. Unify is a joint venture of The Gores Group and Siemens AG.

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