



Team Development in the Era of Slack

Teamwork is happening virtually more and more. Team building should be virtual as well.

In my capacity as director of INSEAD’s **Leadership Development Programme** (Global Executive MBA), I frequently ask participants how many teams they are a part of in their organisation. These days, it is rare to hear the answer “one”; some report belonging to as many as six or seven.

The recent profusion of team affiliations in companies reflects a larger trend towards organisations becoming flatter and operating more in what Deloitte terms “**networks of teams**”. Increasing pressure to be agile in response to ever-changing challenges has resulted in the rise of independent cross-functional (and often cross-cultural teams) convened to tackle a particular project or assignment. Like a Hollywood film crew, they work closely together for a number of weeks or months and disband upon completion of their mission. During their work, they are largely left alone by higher-ups to formulate their own goals and work processes.

Technology has been a major facilitator in this transition to networks of teams. Slack, Microsoft Teams, Workplace by Facebook, Trello and other team-based platforms enable seamless, nearly instant virtual collaboration and communication across silos and national borders. But in my opinion, unless a conscious effort is made to also leverage digital technologies and new ways of working to actively guide team development, organisations will

not fully extract the true value of team performance.

Embedding team development in the work

As we know from the world of sports, winning teams make it a habit to review their performance on an ongoing basis, learning from setbacks, adjusting their tactics and celebrating success. In the same way, working teams need to focus on their performance and collaboration to identify challenges and fine-tune their practices.

For teams to become more than the sum of their parts, effective team development requires the nurturing of both individual and collective skills, as well as behaviours and attitudes beneficial for team dynamics, cohesion and trust. Collective and individual development needs to be aligned and synchronised. Team performance increases when individual members are progressing, while collectively working towards a team development target (e.g. increasing their level of trust, improving their decision-making process). This can only happen if team members each take full responsibility for their own development objectives. This in turn requires the right conditions, in particular, psychological safety within the team. When these conditions are present, team members will choose to make – and share with each other – individual commitments that contribute to the team’s specific development goal and improve the team’s

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overall functioning.

For co-located teams, development often occurs in occasional spurts at off-site retreats. There, teams engage in activities and challenges that usually have little to do with workplace tasks. Many teams find it difficult, therefore, to apply learnings and keep the momentum going once they are back in the office.

As teamwork migrates to the virtual workspace, team development can do the same, for the benefit of both virtual and co-located teams. I do not expect virtual team building to replace in-person interactions. But digital platforms can prolong and expand the impact of lessons learnt off-site. For example, I lead a four-session leadership “check-up” series with the INSEAD Alumni Associations where participants engage in personal development over a period of six to nine months. In the lulls between in-person meetings, participants stay in touch and hold each other accountable to agreed-upon goals via a digital platform focused on team development[1].

So I can attest that adding a virtual component can contribute to team building. But why is it necessary? A recent study found that **nearly three-quarters of cross-functional teams** fail because “siloes tend to perpetuate themselves”. At work, as in life, we tend to gravitate towards people like ourselves. And it is easier for us to trust people with whom we share a similar background and role than those who don’t. It’s a habit deeply ingrained in human nature that won’t change just because the company has a need for talents from IT, marketing and R&D, for example, to work together.

Slack, Microsoft Teams, etc. can erode silos by creating a space where professional distinctions simply don’t carry as much weight. These platforms are a kind of blank organisational canvas within a larger corporate structure, offering a chance to reimagine routines and workflows. Teams can either replicate the hierarchy that prevails outside the frame or use their autonomy to remake relationships among the team members in a virtual space.

Psychological safety

As mentioned above, teams operate at their best under conditions of emotional safety. It may seem as though virtual platforms would be worse for generating emotionally safe environments than the real world, but surprisingly it isn’t necessarily so. For example, in co-located contexts, we often don’t take time to show appreciation to colleagues. It can feel awkward, even unprofessional to do so. The “like” button – some version of which is used on almost every online platform – circumvents that obstacle beautifully. Kudos can flow back and forth within the team without anyone risking

embarrassment or feeling like a slave to politeness. This is particularly valuable for non-digital natives. Getting up to speed with new technology is less arduous when you know your colleagues have your back and are cheering you on, even if you may never have met them in person.

Data ownership is key

There is one significant caveat regarding virtual team building and team development. Coincident with the team-ification of work, HR solutions are starting to become embedded in the workflow. For example, companies like Glint and Culture Amp allow HR to take the temperature among employees with regular surveys. Firms understandably find this an attractive way to promote employee engagement, learning and talent management.

But if these solutions are to facilitate team development, they need to be attractive not only to HR but also to individual employees and the teams they form. As discussed above, effective team development requires the full participation and commitment of team members, and this will only happen if they trust and feel inspired by the development solutions they are provided with. They need to feel that these solutions support and address their individual development needs.

The question of data ownership provides a good example of how solutions can be seen to support individuals. The composition of teams is becoming more fluid as members join and leave teams more often and increasingly come from a range of internal or external entities. Team members belong to a team for a certain period (e.g. a specific project) and then move on. In this shifting context, individuals must be able to retain their development records so that they can maintain a coherent narrative throughout their various professional experiences. With these new ways of working, owning your lifelong development track record will be critical. Digital solutions that address this need by giving individuals control over their data are the ones that will be looked upon favourably by team members.

Companies that invest in employee development improve their talent acquisition and retention, since they are seen as more attractive by both current and prospective employees. This calls for HR development models and digital solutions that put individuals and teams in charge of their development, thereby increasing performance while contributing to the employer’s image.

Vincent H. Dominé is an Adjunct Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD. Specialised in top leadership team and board development, he directs the Leadership Development Programme in

the Global Executive MBA and also covers Team Coaching in the INSEAD Coaching Certificate programme.

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[1] The digital leadership development solution used – Grow (www.grow360.com) – emanated from the vision of Rudi Ramin (INSEAD EMBA 2014, ex-Google, Co-founder & CEO, Grow360 International). The proprietary approach and methodology were developed in collaboration with INSEAD faculty members and is deployed in various INSEAD leadership development programmes as well as in many leading organisations around the world.

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