

Leading Dispersed Product Development Teams

By Preston G. Smith, coauthor of *Developing Products in Half the Time* and *Proactive Risk Management*

Dispersed development teams have become commonplace during the past decade due to the globalization of trade, the never-ending search for low-cost manufacturing, corporate acquisitions, and by no means least, the availability of new technologies to facilitate dispersed operations. Vendors of videoconferencing, groupware, and web-enabled meeting tools often suggest that these tools will overcome distance.

Unfortunately, the reality of this new age is not so blissful. Although these new communication technologies enable a team to operate across distance, they are far from sufficient. Those who have managed dispersed teams recognize that many human characteristics cannot be overcome with technology and, in fact become worse with separation. You will definitely need the best technologies you can obtain to manage your dispersed team, but the following understanding is also essential.

Don't Abandon Co-Location

The opposite of a dispersed team is a co-located one, with team members in close proximity. Co-located teams have great advantages in communication and in building and maintaining trust--the core of team performance.

While often impractical to completely co-locate today, too many teams totally give up on co-location. Consider two partial co-location schemes. One, co-locate for only part of the project. Experts agree that if you can afford to co-locate for only a part of a project, it should be at the *beginning* of the project. This is when face-to-face interaction is critical for building initial trust, establishing working approaches, obtaining buy-in to project specifics, and dealing with fuzzy aspects of the product requirements, such as how user friendly it must be.

Second, you can partially co-locate geographically by clumping together parts of the team who are already in the same city. Few teams see this opportunity and thus create unnecessary disconnects by leaving team members spread across campuses or nearby locations.

Learn New Communication Skills

Communication is central to fast, effective product development. There are thousands of decisions to be made, and they all require intensive communication to arrive at an optimal result.

Remember bygone days when you could call someone on the telephone and actually speak with them? With modern voicemail technology, we play phone tag instead, and communication slows and becomes corrupted as voicemails ricochet back and forth. When we actually reach someone live, we can clarify differences in assumptions quickly and get on the same track. The same issues carry over to e-mail and other modern media.

On the other hand, modern technologies provide benefits undreamt of before. For example, I save every significant e-mail I send or receive—a total of over 23,000 over almost five years. This makes a marvelous searchable database to recall past "conversations."

The trick to employing modern communications to enhance your dispersed team is to recognize their weaknesses in the medium and put ground rules in place to overcome them. For instance, a common frustration with e-mails is lack of a reply. The sender doesn't know whether the message wasn't received, wasn't understood, was set aside to address later, or what. One possible ground rule here is that any e-mail will receive a reply within 12 hours, simply to acknowledge its receipt and specify when a complete answer will be sent. Another example comes from the U.S. Navy's nuclear submarine corps, which has been using e-mail-like media for decades for very serious messages. They require that all requested actions be only in a message's final paragraph, rather than scattering them throughout where they might be overlooked.

Worship Trust

Teams exist to provide performance, and performance delivered is directly related to levels of trust existing between team members. As important as trust is, it is not only intangible but also fragile. It can be destroyed far more easily and quickly than it can be built. Without trust, your team will plod along, but it is unlikely to be excited, innovative, or self-starting.

You can build and maintain trust much easier face to face than with team members who don't meet in person. Without contact, we lack information about our counterparts, so we tacitly make assumptions about how they look, believe, or will act. Have you ever communicated with someone remotely and developed a mental image of her over time, only to have it shattered when you actually meet her?

You can do several things to build and enhance trust within your dispersed team. One is to actually meet at the project's beginning, as mentioned earlier. Another is to have a team website with portraits, biographies, family information, hobbies, likes and dislikes, personality profiles, etc. for each member. Third, don't be reluctant to insert personal information into a message or conversation, such as, 'How is your mother recovering from her surgery?' or 'Did you actually catch any fish on your fishing trip?' This seemingly irrelevant material plays a vital role in building team trust. It is much easier to anticipate how a team member might react if you know that her mother suffered a relapse or that he just caught a boatload of fish.

Appreciate Cultural Differences

Most dispersed teams recognize that cultural differences exist on their teams, but they don't apply this insight. There are two things you can do. One is to recognize that cultural differences, while they complicate life within a team, also contribute valuable richness to exploit. For example, some teams are dispersed due to corporate acquisitions into other geographic regions. Often the acquiree is faster and more agile simply because it carries less baggage and bureaucracy than the acquirer. But all too often, the acquirer, while admiring the agility of the acquiree, squashes it inadvertently by imposing its bureaucracy on the acquiree. Instead, explicitly learn from the style of the organization you have acquired; how can you acquire its strengths?

The other way to gain from the cultural differences on your team is to divide them into categories for analysis and discussion:

- Individual styles, such as measured by Myers-Briggs Personality Type Indicators (strictly speaking, not a cultural difference, since it isn't connected with a social or organizational group)
- Functional, such as an engineer's need for facts versus marketer's need for context
- Organizational, for instance, the difference between the editorial staffs of *Time* magazine and *Fast Company*
- National, such as an American's desire for independence versus a Japanese person's desire for consensus

Recognize that even a co-located team has the first type of difference, but as your team becomes more dispersed, more of the others play, which increasingly both enriches and complicates team management.

About the Author: *Mr. Smith is founder of New Product Dynamics, a consultancy that guides managers in developing new products faster. For articles on related topics visit <http://www.NewProductDynamics.com>.*