Sponsoring Success in Virtual Teams

By Jeremy S. Lurey, Ph.D.

The Importance of Executive Sponsorship

As the marketplace continues to change, many of today's largest and most successful organizations have found themselves questioning the way in which their businesses are structured. The growing trends of mergers and acquisitions, e-commerce, globalization, and now off-shoring have created an urgent need to implement more flexible and versatile work arrangements.

In order to be more agile and respond to the market quicker then, a number of companies have begun redesigning their corporate structures to create more fluid team environments.

Organizations focused on achieving business goals such as speed, cost, quality, and innovation are now turning to virtual teams (groups of individuals working on shared tasks while distributed across space, time, and/or organizational boundaries) to create – and sustain – their business advantage. To achieve the intended benefits with virtual teams, however, new century leaders must create a positive and productive organizational climate that fosters high-performing teams.

While many believe that virtual team effectiveness is entirely dependent on the technical tools a team is equipped with, there are actually several factors that impact the performance of a virtual team. These vari-ables relate not only to the available technologies but also the social makeup, geographic dispersion, and the primary objectives of the team. As a result, virtual team leaders might focus on designing a supportive atmosphere that manages these traits rather than spending their precious resources simply trying to implement the "perfect" technical environment to enable their teams to do their work.

While different virtual teams may require slightly different solutions, six specific factors have proven to play a critical role in establishing the foundation for success according to empirical research conducted by this author as well as more than a decade of professional experiences working with and consulting to various virtual teams. These critical success factors are depicted in the model below.

As you can see from the model on the left, executive sponsorship is the most influential of all the critical success factors. With the help of the right executive sponsor, a virtual team can receive the full support of the entire organization. On the other hand, a virtual team that is not backed by the right sponsor might never receive the vital resources needed to be successful.

It is important to note here the distinction between an executive sponsor and a more traditional virtual team leader. The team leader is the person who actively manages individual job functions as well as each of the day-to-day work tasks. The
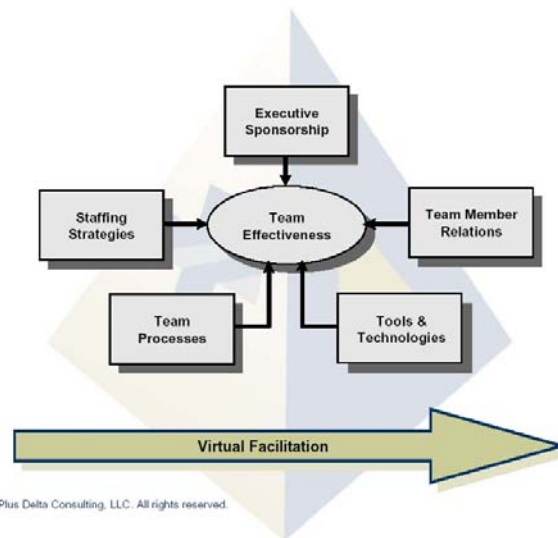
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executive sponsor, on the other hand, typically works "outside of the team". This is the person who marks the team's boundary to the rest of the organization and maintains many of the team's primary relationships to senior leadership. While these responsibilities are very different, it is possible for one person to assume both roles in an organization. It is more common though for the team leader to hold the title of Project Manager or Project Director and report to a particular business unit leader, while the executive sponsor is actually a Vice-President or Senior Vice-President who reports directly to C-level leadership – whether it is the CEO, COO, or CIO – within the organization.

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In this role, executive sponsors perform two critical functions. First, they establish clear expectations and guidelines for their virtual teams. Second, they establish the necessary environment and provide the resources the team requires to meet their stated business objectives.

These sponsors must empower their teams to be self-sufficient and trust them to perform their work. At the same time, they must be actively involved at all times, and quick to recognize when team members are struggling. They also need to offer additional resources if the teams cannot manage the work on their own.

Virtual team members must focus on performing their work in the new century order. They cannot afford to spend their time lobbying for more money or advanced tools.

If dispersed team members need to conduct a design session in person, the sponsor must endorse the meeting and approve the travel schedules and budgets for everyone. If virtual teammates are struggling to maintain communication with one another, the sponsor must recognize the need for additional team training and/or more integrated information and communication technologies.

In some cases, the executive sponsor may be able to perform these actions without seeking additional approval. There are times, however, when the executive must consult with and gain approval from other business leaders. For this reason, executive sponsorship is critical for a virtual team to obtain the right resources.

Given the severe requirements that are placed on these executive sponsors, one might ask how a person could ever perform all these functions. Unfortunately, there is no simple solution because it depends on the conditions of the specific situation. The style of leadership one enacts must accommodate a number of factors, including the cultural conditions, geographic distribution, available technologies, and operational mission unique to the team. Because every team is dynamic and constantly evolving, sponsors must decide which method is best given their own circumstances.

Consequently, those responsible for designing and supporting virtual teams should concentrate their efforts on creating conditions that will truly enhance team performance. Instead of micro-managing group behaviors, effective Executive Sponsors will devote their energies to developing situations that increase the likelihood of team success. Executive sponsors will be effective only when they inspire virtual team members through a clear vision and communicate a sense of enthusiasm for this alternative work arrangement. The new role of a new century leader, then, is to guide and support the team, not drive them in one particular direction.

Key Areas of Focus for Executive Sponsors

In their book, *Teams & Technology*, Mankin, Cohen, and Bikson (1996) write that leadership in this technology-driven team-based environment "is more akin to group therapy. The leader asks the right questions, reassures the team members that they are on the right track, and helps them deal with tension and anxiety." In this regard, successful virtual teams rely on their executive sponsors to connect them to the corporate vision and business objectives, not regulate how they conduct their work. This style of facilitation and coaching, however, requires the executive sponsor to possess and enact several key skills.

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The following are some of the specific activities executive sponsors must perform to enhance team performance in this virtual environment:

Staffing the virtual team for success: The first step in creating an effective virtual team is to assemble the team itself. This requires the sponsor to clearly define individual team member responsibilities and appoint only the most qualified candidates to the team. Based on his/her intimate knowledge of the team's overall purpose and strategic intent, only the sponsor will be able to direct this placement effort and provide general guidelines as to the skill sets required for selecting individual team members.

Building supportive team member relations: After selecting the team members, it is essential to focus on creating strong relationships between them. Whether from Los Angeles to London or Boston to Bangalore, trust and respect will become increasingly more important for team members to share as they must now work – and support each other – remotely.

The executive sponsor can convene a face-to-face meeting early in the team's life cycle to explain the team's purpose and overall business objectives and give team members a chance to get to know one another informally. Regular teleconference calls and team updates to share information will also be required to ensure the team is still "on the same page" once they begin working remotely, and the sponsor can be sure to incorporate a sense of personal connection and social time during these calls to maintain team member relationships moving forward.

Establishing productive team processes: Executive sponsors need to develop positive team processes and encourage their team members by involving them in traditional management activities. The sponsors and individual team members must work together to define work parameters, including reasonable objectives, project timelines, and communication protocols, for maintaining regular contact with one another.

Effective virtual teams can often be measured by the extent to which team members perform their own

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internal task management, so the sponsor must be willing to relinquish authoritative control to those who are actually conducting the work.

One of the most important actions an Executive Sponsor can take with regards to team processes, then, is to set up a system by which he/she actively manages team performance through "virtual check-ins." These check-ins often consist of no more than 15-20 minute conference calls periodically (weekly or monthly), with the team's leaders. By scheduling this one-on-one time, the Executive Sponsor raises awareness to the importance of staying connected and can determine whether or not anything can be improved to enhance the team's integrated efforts.

Leveraging advanced tools and technologies: Executive Sponsors play a strategic role in creating high-performing virtual teams by providing team members access to the information and tools they need to get the job done. Only sponsors can allocate the resources necessary to equip team members with any necessary tools as well as by helping them utilize the technologies that support their work.

This might include any number of information and communication technologies that instill strong knowledge management and communication disciplines across the team and ensure universal access to team information.

In some cases, this may require implementing an online workspace (like TeamSite or SharePoint) to enhance document management or simply using web conferencing tools (like WebEx or NetMeeting) to enhance virtual team meetings. Either way, Executive Sponsors must excel in communication skills and be technically competent with all forms of electronic communication to support their dispersed teams. Successful virtual team sponsors, then, serve as positive role models and present the right message for using these technologies just as they expect their team members to do the same.

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Facilitating engaging virtual meetings: Executive Sponsors must have the ability to coordinate teamwork across geographical and cultural boundaries. While face-to-face meetings may be possible at periodic intervals, virtual team coordination is most often achieved through teleconferences and virtual team meetings.

24 hours in advance of all meetings.

In addition to the key areas listed above, the following checklist highlights some of the most important activities Executive Sponsors can perform to design a supportive environment that promotes virtual team effectiveness.

The following chart highlights things sponsors can do to promote the success of virtual teams.

Checklist for Designing and Supporting Virtual Teams
☑ Consider organizational imperatives and define business case for implementing virtual teams.
☑ Clearly articulate vision and corporate objectives to all employees.
☑ Design virtual jobs that are challenging and intrinsically rewarding.
☑ Select team members based on individual talents and abilities, including technical competence and interpersonal skills.
☑ Explain team purpose, roles, and responsibilities to all team members.
☑ Conduct initial face-to-face meeting to clarify team objectives and facilitate team-building activities.
☑ Establish processes for sharing information, making decisions, and resolving miscommunications or potential conflicts.
☑ Ensure team members have clear goals and recommend potential approaches to perform work.
☑ Equip team with required communication and information technologies.
☑ Provide team members access to all information needed to perform work tasks.
☑ Demonstrate use of electronic media through on-going team communications and group conferences.
☑ Facilitate technical workshops and interpersonal training sessions to help team members work in dispersed environment.
☑ Encourage stronger interpersonal relationships through trust and respect for team members.
☑ Promote initiative by including all team members in important team activities.
☑ Recognize individual and team efforts through rewards and other performance incentives, such as team celebrations.

— J.S. Lurey, 2002

In addition to ensuring the use of appropriate tools and technologies, then, these sponsors must establish effective meeting management techniques to capture group decisions and hold people accountable for performing their work. This can be especially difficult with distributed work groups that span across international boundaries and time zones and may share a vast array of language and other cultural differences.

Even still, the Executive Sponsor can enhance team meeting effectiveness by implementing the use of several basic protocols, such as creating a regular schedule for weekly and/or monthly e-meetings, assigning virtual facilitators to prepare meeting agendas, and ensuring reference materials are distributed at least

Implications for Remote Leadership in the New Century

While there are clear differences in how virtual teams are arranged as well as how they perform their work, the true essence of a virtual team is not so different from that of a traditional collocated team. Virtual teams are still dependent on all of the same variables that affect the functioning of regular teams.

Though the tools and methods can be significantly different, any efforts to improve the effectiveness of a virtual team must be based on the same activities that one would initiate with a collocated team.

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Therefore, any action plan to improve the effectiveness of a virtual team must begin with securing dependable executive sponsorship.

Technology alone does not guarantee effective virtual team performance. Executive sponsors play a pivotal role in either supporting or inhibiting the abilities of their virtual teams. If these new century leaders focus their efforts on building strong interpersonal relations between team members, developing formal processes and procedures to manage their work, and encouraging effective communications while working remotely, their virtual teams will be more successful in achieving their objectives.

For this reason, team sponsors must attend to their team's internal dynamics and constantly stay in touch with the team's leaders to create a positive and productive work environment.

At its core, the executive sponsorship function depends on both the executive's abilities as well as those of the individual team leaders and members.

The sponsor can assume an advisory role and simply keep apprised of the team's activities through scheduled status updates or requests for additional guidance. The team members, then, become responsible for structuring their own work environment and monitoring daily performance. By enacting strategies that increase team member participation in these processes, Executive Sponsors shift some of the responsibility to the team members and encourage them to take ownership over their own fate.

In a team-based organization, executive leadership takes on new meaning. The style of command-and-control management that once dominated traditional hierarchical organizations will not work in this complex new century work environment. Methodologies based on the principles of micro-management and authoritarian supervision do not contribute to building trust over distances.

Virtual teams, therefore, need their Executive Sponsors to facilitate their work by clearly stating the objectives and providing general guidelines for their overall approach. They do not need them to define the exact process the team will use. The Executive Sponsor, however, is still ultimately responsible for the team's success and therefore must recognize the need to intervene when the team is not successfully performing their work. ೞ

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