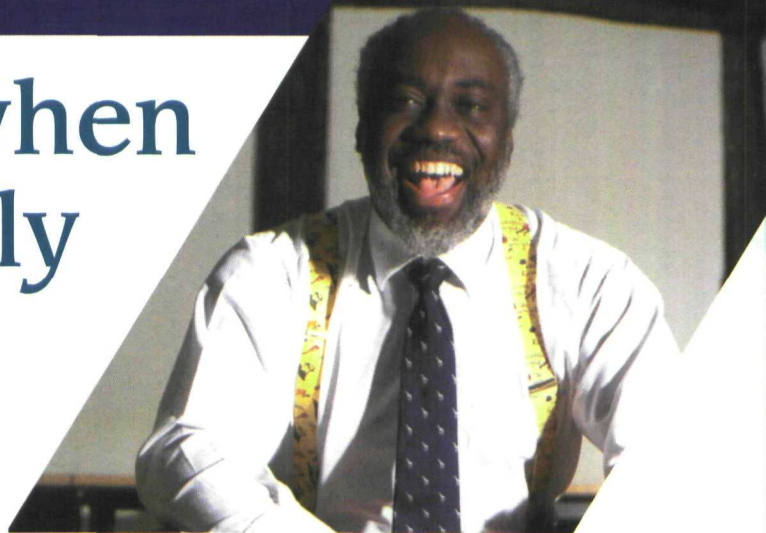# What to do when virtual is really all you have!

Eddie gives top tips for cyberspace tools

The die has been cast. The straw has been drawn. And it's yours. Your organisation has decided on madness – a cross-organisational global project involving divisions and affiliated companies around the world – and you're leading it. And for support what have they offered you? What was it your VP said? 'You'll have to run it with a virtual team.' You'd nodded and tried to look cool. What on earth had he meant by 'virtual team'? The first thing you'd done back in the office was consult the dictionary. You'd read the excerpt below.

virtual / 'veːrchuuol / *adjective* 'having the effect without the traditional form'. (see virtual reality) :- rem. **virtue:-** / virtue in meeting the challenges of New World, demonstrating non-conventional approaches- **virtual organisation** information based, cyberspace based, - / effective people, **virtual team**, non-hierachical building block of a virtual organisation effective across barriers of space, time, and cultural mindset / *noun* / *winning in a* **virtual world** see eddie, ''fon'nlearning- /ptvbs

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Great definition, but what do you practically do for success? And anyway who is that 'eddie' referred to?

For once I feel guilty. You see, back at the beginning of the 1990s it was me and a team I was working with in Mercury Communications who coined the term and gave it life. We did this by training up hundreds of young bright managers on a custom-built course called 'Achieving results through virtual teams'. The first questions everyone asked were: 'What is a virtual team?' 'Why virtual?' 'Why not just a team?'

The world has moved on, the term has

entered the language and managerial consciousness. It still means that when you work, irrespective of what part of the organisation or the world your team members are in, they should achieve and experience the effect of a team although they are *not configured in the traditional form.* This is the secret to success in virtual teaming.

And now, as I work in a virtual business school, I'm condemned forever to only belonging to virtual teams.

But everyone is at it. As the New World continues to ensure that the pace of change outstrips the pace that hierarchical organisations can learn, organisations need a filler for the gaps and cracks created as the rigid structure tries to flow flexibly and gracefully to meet its challenges. Virtual teams are the filler.
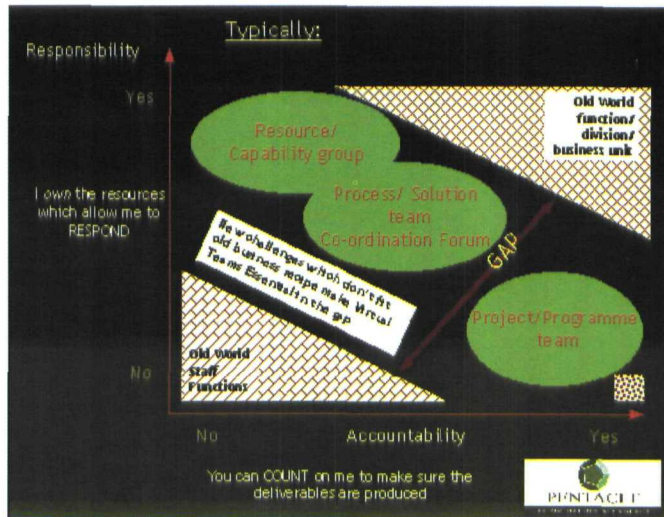
We know about real teams. It's not a team if it doesn't have a shared or common goal, interdependence and each person has a sense of personal accountability and *contribution.* But we also know that interdependence can only grow from trust. Trust is a result of making every one feel

included in the team, suitably open and with the right level of control over what's going on. But this trust must be built at a distance, across cultures and time zones.

How do you do this? I guess more effective communication could help to lubricate the development of trust. But communicating face to face is hard enough; communicating with people you've never met, who have completely different views, across a cyberspace void, is a nightmare.

'Communication is not two-way. It is a one-way process. A one-way process fraught with difficulty. You need to deliver the goods. And the person being communicated with needs to confirm that they're the right goods. But even the journey back is just as difficult. In everyday life this is bad enough, but in projects where things only happen once, and are not repeated day in day out, it is essential to get that one-way trip right each and every time.'

Most aspects of virtual teams blossom and thrive on effective communication. But virtual teams also provide a special challenge. Some things often go wrong but we can anticipate and therefore avoid them by:

Typically:

Responsibility

Yes

I own the resources which allow me to RESPOND

Resource/ Capability group

Process/ Solution team Co-ordination Forum

Old World functions/ divisions/ business link

GAP

Project/Programme team

Old world staff function

No

No   Accountability   Yes

You can COUNT on me to make sure the deliverables are produced

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- Providing clarity, avoiding misunderstanding and allowing for cultural norms
- Raising and maintaining emotional engagement and commitment
- Getting past time zones and virtual jetlag
- Effective and appropriate use of cyberspace tools.

Providing clarity, avoiding misunderstanding and allowing for cultural norms

For this you need one of my techniques. I call it the project leader's secret (clarification) question. At the end of a bit of dialogue, virtual team leaders anxious to know if their message has got across, will often ask pointless questions like 'Do you understand?' and 'Are you OK with that?' Pointless because someone who has fundamentally understood is likely to say 'yes', but in fact the worse the misunderstanding the more likely they are to say 'yes'. Instead, routinely ask, 'What are the implications for you?' 'How will this decision affect you?' and then listen carefully to the answer to discover if they have indeed understood.

Raising and maintaining emotional engagement and commitment

Imagine that I am one of your virtual team members and imagine that I've just sent you an email or added to a discussion space the line of numbers that follows. Read the line below and remember your immediate reaction and comment.

2+3=5, 5+6=11, 7+9=18

Remember we've probably never met. We're far apart. Perhaps we haven't spoken for a week. I have other, more local, pressing priorities around me in touchspace. Perhaps the emotional engagement and buy-in I have for your project, in relative terms, is weak. My local touchspace priorities loom over me.

I've put some effort in. I've made an attempt to contribute to your project. All you can do is tell me that 7+9 isn't 18. All you can do is to tell me that what I've sent you is wrong! No contact and then a telling off! What about acknowledging the other two sums, the other two bits of work, and the effort I've put in?

In a virtual space be careful about feedback. Praise and criticism do not have an equal weighting.

Getting past time zones and virtual jetlag

Our weekly video conference is set for 3 pm. (But whose pm? Winter or summer? GMT? I suggest you to use the Swatch Beat system at www.cnn.com/WEATHER/worldtime/. It's 646 beats everywhere.) Great for you, but in Tokyo it's almost midnight, and the Californians are watching the dawn. Share the misery, it will improve morale. Next time meet at 3 pm in Japan in your pyjamas! There is a practical point to this – having the same people constantly half asleep on all your e-meetings isn't a good way to build an effective team.

Wherever possible use global sub-teams organised by slicing the world vertically like the segments of an orange. Then designate points of contact and protocols between the segments.

Effective and appropriate use of cyberspace tools

Not all the tools we have are useful for everything. For example, in a virtual team generally avoid using email to communicate. Use a shared space instead. You can set one up instantly using programs such as Sametime, Quickplace (www.lotus.com/products/lotussametime.nsf/wdocs/homepage) and Groove (www.groove.net/). The map below suggests when each type of tool is most effective to use.
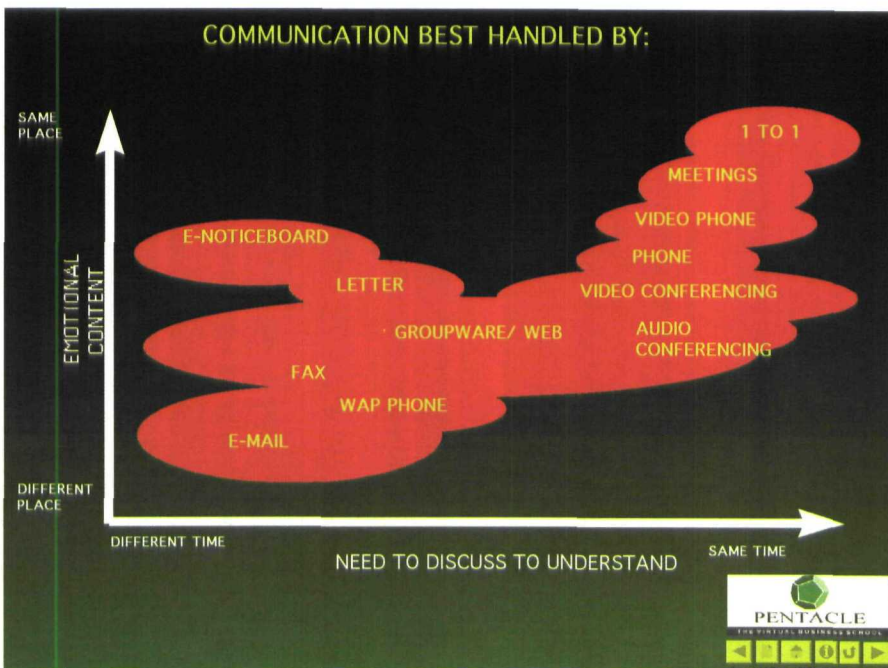
If you must use cyberspace all the time, make your communication come alive. Communicate colloquially. Add humour, be self-effacing and, if you do have a face-to-face encounter, do everything you can to imprint positive emotions in the other people's minds which will last until you meet again.

'Grow your cyber personality, it's the only thing your virtual friends will notice'.

Tool **Email**

Tip Don't use this. Email is for person-to-person communication of simple messages. To learn more, download a learning byte on email from allchange.com

Tool **Groupware, discussion forums**

Tip Allow people to contribute directly with no intermediary and also to delete their own comments

Tool **Applications**

Tip Always choose, as a standard, to save materials in the oldest version available within the team even if you lose some functionality

Tool **Audio conferences**

Tip Have short dialogues and structure the comments and participation - adding regular reviews and summaries and listing decisions. If possible back up communication by sharing a PowerPoint presentation or use Netmeeting

Tool Video conferences

Tip

Introductions in the early stages are useful to get people used to their own voice and image, and to break the ice.

Best wishes and see you in cyberspace!

COMMUNICATION BEST HANDLED BY:

SAME PLACE

EMOTIONAL CONTENT

1 TO 1
MEETINGS
VIDEO PHONE
PHONE
E-NOTICEBOARD
LETTER
VIDEO CONFERENCING
GROUPWARE/ WEB
AUDIO CONFERENCING
FAX
WAP PHONE
E-MAIL

DIFFERENT PLACE

DIFFERENT TIME

NEED TO DISCUSS TO UNDERSTAND

SAME TIME

PENTACLE
THE VIRTUAL BUSINESS SCHOOL

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