

## **Working In Contemporary Teams**

**Dr MP Ganesh**

**Department of Entrepreneurship and Management**

**Indian Institute of Technology Hyderabad**

**Week – 06**

**Lecture - 05**

### **Managing virtualness**

Welcome back to our course on Introduction to Contemporary Teams and Virtual Teams. I am Dr. M.P. Ganesh from IIT Hyderabad. I am one of the instructors of this course.

So this is our fifth lecture in this lecture series. I will quickly summarize what happened in the previous lectures. We looked at the definition of team and how teams are different from groups. We also looked at the idea of contemporary teams.

So what do we mean by contemporary teams? We also looked at what are the factors which lead to contemporary teams or what are the factors which influence the newer kind of teams. These are some of the contemporary teams. In this course, we will pick some of these kind of contemporary teams and talk about them. In this particular chapter, we are talking about distributed teams. We also call them as virtual teams.

We looked at some of the common challenges in virtual teams. The major challenge being distance. So distance or dispersion among team members can be of various types. So why there are more and more virtual teams which are used by organizations? Primarily there are two reasons, globalization and technology. Especially after pandemic, more and more organizations are forced to use distributed teams because of remote working.

So when people started working from home, invariably they don't have any option. So they have to sit in their own respective houses or wherever they live and they have to use technology to communicate between their team members. So that has led to more virtual teams. Virtual teams has a lot of advantages also. There are disadvantages, there are advantages.

Primary advantage being it gives freedom for the employee to work from the place they

want to work. From the organization's point of view, it reduces the cost involved in relocation or hiring the best talent and making them work in the organizational space. So these are some of the advantages of using virtual teams. So traditionally virtual teams are considered to be one specific type of teams, which means there is a differentiation in terms of virtual teams and face to face teams. So it's looked as if virtual teams are very different from face to face teams.

But when more and more teams started using technology for communication within them, virtualness have become an inherent quality of every team. It's not, there are two types of teams, virtual teams and face to face teams. It has become virtualness as a quality which exists in all teams. For example, everyone in an organization can be sitting in the same office, but they might be sitting in different floors. So they may not meet face to face always.

They may communicate with technological tools or even if they are sitting in different geographical locations, they might belong, even if they belong to the same time zone, they might be working in different shifts. So these are some of the reasons why virtualness have become an inherent quality of all the teams. The point here is instead of considering certain teams as virtual teams and conducting training programs or doing things to help them to manage virtualness, to manage the technology usage, it becomes important to handle virtualness, manage virtualness in every team, whether they use technology less, whether they are dispersed or not, whether they use extensive technology for communication, it becomes important for the managers and also the team members to manage virtualness in a way that it facilitates better performance of the team. So we looked at how do we measure virtualness? What do we mean by virtualness? Virtualness means the level and kind of technology used, how much are members physically dispersed, how much are team members temporally dispersed, what are the differences which exist between them. So the differences can be differences because of different functionality they belong to, different organizations they belong to, different cultural subgroups they belong to.

So if all these qualities are high, then it means virtualness is very high. Obviously, then they'll be like highly physically dispersed belonging to different time zones. If virtualness is low, all these qualities will also be less. And typically virtualness might range from completely dispersed, very diverse kind of, culturally diverse kind of team versus co-located, very homogenous kind of team members. So we also looked at some specific aspects of this definition through some theories.

When we spoke about kind of technology used, it becomes important to understand what do we mean by that. So it's not like all technological tools used for communication

are the same. So there are certain differences. So these are the theories which talk about these differences among these technological tools. So media richness theory talks about what are the qualities which make a media rich, make a media good for communication within a team.

Media synchronicity theory talks about certain qualities, even though they may not be considered to be rich richness, but they help in team processes. For example, rehearsability, if the tool helps people to rehearse and then communicate, then it can be an added advantage. Similarly reprocessability, if already you have communicated, but you can take it back and rework on it and then resend it, it can be a great advantage in certain context. So it's not always richness is preferred. We also looked at social presence theory, which means whether media tool is rich or not, whether it has certain qualities or not, it is important for that tool to create the social presence within the team.

So what is social presence? Social presence is whether that particular tool facilitates social and emotional cues to be transmitted during team communication. So social presence may not necessarily be static, which means you cannot say, okay, this tool has more social presence and this tool has less social presence. The team members can be very creative and can use these tools in a way that it can create more social presence. Like I mentioned earlier, even a very low media rich tool like chat or online live messages, chat messages, if you can use smileys or any other way which you can communicate emotional social cues, they can also be as useful as probably a video conferencing. So channel expansion theory talks about how or what will help team members to expand the channel or increase the social presence of any media channel.

So experience with the channel, experience in the messaging topic, understanding of the organizational context, familiarity with the co-participants, all those things can help people use media tools in a way that it creates social presence. So apart from social presence, we cannot say that this tool is better or this tool is not good. It depends on the task. So we looked at different ways of classifying tasks. So we use two by two matrix, X-axis being variety and Y-axis being analyzability.

So variety means whether the task is simple or complex. When I say complex, are there many subtasks? So when there are many subtasks, we call it high variety task. Analyzability means whether the task can be recorded or can we create a manual which can clearly mention how to do that task. So depending on the level of analyzability and variety, we have to choose the right kind of media tool. We also looked at what are the factors which can influence the performance of virtual teams.

These are not like linear relationships. It's not like, okay, task will affect performance,

choice of media will affect performance, team size will affect performance. These factors may also interact with each other. So if the team is in a certain life cycle and the trust is high, then performance will be high. If the team size is a certain level and they are in a certain life cycle stage and they choose a certain media, then the effect might be different.

So these factors play together or combine together and affect the performance. So we looked at what are the various factors, how they interact with each other to affect performance. We also looked at, if you look at this diagram, performance can be defined in multiple ways. It's not necessarily task performance. It can be creativity, efficiency, effectiveness, and things like that.

So this is where we stopped in the previous lecture. We will look at how can we manage virtualness. When you say manage, how can we best use virtualness or what can we do to handle when virtualness is high so that it may not affect the performance negatively. So the very first thing about managing virtualness is choosing the right kind of members, selecting the right member. When you say right member, what do we mean by that? It means you need certain qualities as a team member if you are working in a team which has high levels of virtualness because virtualness creates a lot of uncertainty.

There are chances that your communication can be misinterpreted. There are chances that people may not be able to build trust or familiarity with each other. So in those ambiguous conditions, how do you or what kind of qualities you require as a team member to handle those challenges. A very important quality of a team member who can cope well in high level of virtualness is motivation.

So they should not give up. They should have the motivation to work in that kind of a team which has high levels of motivation and high levels of virtualness and the challenges associated with it. Especially when there is diversity, cultural diversity, it becomes important for you to have that initiative to reach out and understand what other team members are saying or other team members are perceiving because perception might vary depending on the cultural context they belong to. Self-motivation, good communication interpersonal skills. When I say good communication, it's not just about you should be able to talk well. It's not about being a good speaker.

It's not about you are very good at telling or communicating your messages. It's also about being a good listener. Self-motivation, good communication skills involve being a good listener also and not being judgmental, being empathetic, being reliable and trustworthy. So all those qualities are very important if you are working in a team which has high level of virtualness because like I said earlier, there are chances that you might

be misinterpreted. There can be conflicts, there can be confusions, ambiguity.

So it requires a lot of listening skills and compassion and empathy. And also if you are working in a high level of virtualness kind of a situation, you should be able to handle multiple roles and role ambiguity. Role ambiguity means since you work in very different roles and your definition of your role can also change depending on the situation in a virtual team, you should be able to handle that confusion. Ambiguity means there is no clear cut definition of what you should do, especially in high level of virtualness, it's very difficult to clearly prescribe your job responsibilities or role requirements. So these role requirements might emerge over a period of time.

So for that, you need to be able to handle those ambiguities, uncertainties. Another important quality which is required is ability to establish rapport. Rapport means establish friendship. If you are able to establish friendship quickly in a team, it will help you to build the trust and create an environment where conflicts are managed in a way that it don't affect performance. We are not saying conflicts should not rise, but it's more important for you to manage the conflict, like virtualness.

Conflict is sometimes useful in the team. So if you establish rapport fast, you'll be able to handle conflicts in a better way. And also cultural sensitivity, like I said, compassion, empathy, all those qualities are very important in a diverse kind of an environment, because it gives you sensitivity. You will be able to look at things from the other team members point of view, and you will be using certain language which is not insensitive to other cultures. So selecting the right member is something which is very important.

Choosing the right kind of technology, like we saw earlier, looking at the task and then choosing the tool is very essential. It's not like you should always use video conferencing, you should always use high sophisticated tools. Even if the tool is not rich in terms of media richness, it should fit the kind of task we are predominantly using in the team. So again, what kind of task is not always starting? Depending on the team life cycle, certain stages, for example, forming and norming stages or forming and storming stages, there might be a lot of ambiguity. That time, you may have to use video conferencing.

So after everything is settled, norming happens. Norming means everything is clearly written down. There is very clear understanding of what is expected of each other. The ambiguity becomes less. So everything is settled and people know, and there are standard protocols.

So there you don't need to use rich media. You can use lean media. You can use emails

and manuals which are posted in common online spaces and all those stuff. So matching the task and tool is very crucial and that requires a lot of sensitivity and understanding which stage the team is in. So these stages are not necessarily temporal. Temporal means after one month, people will go to storming stage.

After two months, they will become settled. It's not like that. These stages may vary from one team to another. So the team leader should understand which stage this team is in and depending on that, they should choose the right kind of team. And using rich media tools at the crucial stages of team lifecycle becomes very important. So like I said, sometimes these stages and some stages, teams may spend a lot of time and in some stages, they may quickly move on to the next stage.

For example, teams may spend a lot of time in, some teams may spend a lot of time in storming stage, but once storming is settled, they may spend very less time in norming. They understand each other. Everything is like quickly settled and immediately they jump to the performing stage. For some teams, they may spend less time in storming, but spend more time in norming. So as a team leader, you should understand what is happening in this particular stage.

And sometimes what can happen is even after norming, they may go back to storming or after storming, they may revisit forming stage because some team members may not fit into the team. So you need to like, bring new team members. So again, you may go back to forming stage also. So depending on these fluctuations, these are like very dynamic kind of situations.

You cannot clearly prescribe or denote. So as a team member, you have to be very careful, team leader, you have to be very careful in understanding these dynamics and choose the right kind of tool. Training is also very, very crucial because you cannot say that, okay, we have selected the right kind of team members, so now they will take care of everything. You cannot say the team leader is very good, very experienced, very effective. She will take care of everything.

No, we cannot say that. So we need to train members on regular intervals because like I said, many times these stages are very dynamic, many times it is very ambiguous. So constant handholding in terms of training becomes very important. What kind of training can be given? We can give training in terms of role, to manage role ambiguity, especially when people work in a situation where they have to handle multiple demands. When we say role ambiguity, there are multiple demands. They can be multiple interpretation of the role, which means you may think this is what I have to do, but your team member, other team colleague may think something else about your role.

Your expectation or understanding of your role may not match with others' expectation of your role. And also, different people, since you play different roles, what can happen is there are demands which make conflict with each other. So when you say role ambiguity or role conflict, it can be intra-role conflict, inter-role conflict, which means intra-role means you play only one role, which means you play only one kind of a specific designation in your team. Again, role and designation are different. For convenience, I am using the word designation because role is very subjective in nature, designation is clearly prescribed.

So for example, as a team member, you may think my role is a person who collects all information and shares, but from other person's point of view, they may think your role is to connect different people. There is a difference in that. So we are talking about inter-role and intra-role. Inter-role means same role, you are playing only one role, but different people have different understanding of the role.

So that is inter-role conflict. It is intra-role conflict. Inter-role conflict means you play different roles. Each of these roles, the demands are conflicting with each other. In one role, you are supposed to supervise, in another role, you are supposed to cooperate. So this demands might challenge your capability to handle these conflicts.

So what happens, there is high role ambiguity. So it creates a sense of exhaustion. You may feel you are losing your energy. You may feel you do not have enough resources to handle role conflict. What can organizations do? They can conduct training programs, one, to handle stress because the team members may feel drained out because of role ambiguity and role conflict. So stress management training and also help people manage these ambiguities by creating certain mechanisms for themselves so that role conflict can be managed.

So that is the techniques like time management, techniques like maintaining a diary or techniques like planning and things like that will help team members manage role ambiguity. You can also help people create systems within the team which will reduce role ambiguity. So these systems can be resources for team members which helps them reduce these conflicts in terms of team because when there is clarity between all the team members in terms of each other roles, there is less team ambiguity. So training programs to create those systems help people acquire enough resources, reduce stress, create mechanisms within the team which reduces role differences of perception in terms of role. All those things can reduce the effect of role ambiguity on performance.

And also creating different communication tools, sorry, creating awareness about how

to use different communication tools because some people in the team may not be familiar with using a particular communication tool optimally and that may create something called technophobia. They might feel very nervous when they use certain communication tools because they may think they are not familiar with it, it is like a very high technology tool, I may not be able to handle it. So helping people get familiarized and also for people who are already familiar with the tool, using the tool optimally. For example, a simple Excel sheet or a Google sheet or a Google document can be used very optimally or something like video conferencing or an online meeting platform.

If you know how to use optimally, you can use it very, very usefully. It can be very, very useful for you. It can reduce your stress. It can make you more productive. So how to use those communication tools effectively? Those training is also very important.

Training in terms of communication and interpersonal skills. So you can help people how to communicate, especially in cross-cultural context. What words are culturally inappropriate? How do you be assertive at the same time, not hurt others feelings? And how to understand each other's viewpoints? How to manage conflict? So these are some of the very essential communication interpersonal skills which can be trained and also cultural sensitivity. Like I said, what language, I mean, what kind of words you have to choose when you are using it in other cultural contexts? And what does it mean in certain language, certain words, what does it mean in other cultures? For example, in certain cultures, you may not say directly no, but in certain cultures, they may directly say they may be very direct in communicating. So how to handle those cultural differences? We will look at cross-cultural teams in the next chapter, but that's also very important. Apart from selecting right team members, selecting the right tool to match the task and also training, there are certain other things which can help.

A very important aspect which can help manage virtualness is creating shared spaces. When you look at face-to-face teams or teams which are very co-located compared to highly dispersed teams, one thing is they miss a common shared space. They may have coffee together, they may go to dinner together, there are common spaces where they can come and sit and discuss informally. So these informal communication spaces, which is something virtual teams miss. So how to create these informal shared spaces like a coffee space? Not a physical coffee space, but a virtual coffee space where people can informally chat or informally interact with each other.

So how can we do that? So if you can create that, it will be very useful to create that trust or that open communication between team members and it will help them understand each other. You can also increase the frequency of face-to-face communication. If possible, once a month or at least at certain stages, it is where there is



a need for people to come and meet face-to-face. We need to do that, especially when the teams are highly dispersed geographically, at least during the forming stage. Initial stages, you should make people come together face-to-face and help them understand each other, meet each other.

So those kinds of face-to-face meetings can also be very useful because that will reduce that emotional distance. That will increase the sense of familiarity between each other. And also formal information sharing mechanism and knowledge sharing management systems. Especially when there is high level of virtual nurse, people may miss out on something which might be a very important information or communication information. So instead of relying purely on members to communicate certain knowledge or information, we can create systems where it can capture those information or like platforms where important information are stored, where people can access whenever they want to.

Video recordings of the meetings or manuals or minutes of the meeting or reports about certain tasks, all those things can be stored in a place which can be easily accessed to people. So information systems can also be a useful method which will reduce communication or information sharing related problems. You can also have communication integrative which means assign people in the team whose role is to ensure everybody gets the right kind of information, who ensures that there is less conflict because of lack of information or lack of communication between team members. Especially in a very cross-cultural team, you can assign members who have familiarity with both the cultures so that they ensure problems which arise due to cross-cultural communication does not happen.

So those kind of roles created can also be very useful. So this is the end of the chapter. So generally what we looked at in this chapter is what do we mean by team and what do we mean by contemporary team and what are the challenges, especially in virtual teams, what facilitates more and more virtual teams to come and what is the definition of virtual team and what are the challenges in virtual teams. And we looked at the idea of virtualness and how to manage virtualness, looking at different aspects like task, communication channel and how to help managers and team members manage virtualness. So training programs, aligning tasks and media and also some of the other factors like creating shared spaces, increasing face-to-face communication, creating management systems, information management systems, how all these factors can help reduce the negative impact of virtualness.

So this is the end of the chapter. In the next chapter, we will talk about managing cross-

cultural virtual teams and startup teams. So we will meet in the next lecture. Till then, see you. Bye.