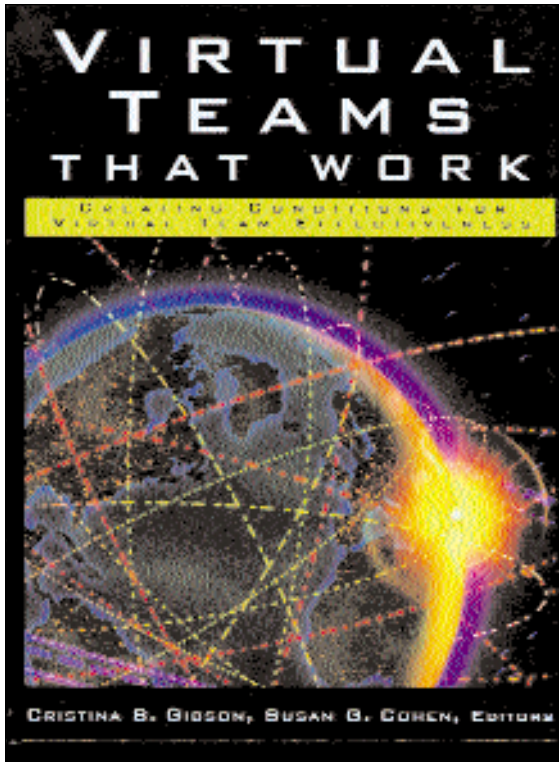# BOOKS

Virtual Teams That Work

Creating Conditions for Virtual Team Effectiveness

Edited By Cristina B. Gibson and Susan G. Cohen

Reviewed by Kevin Kruse

The virtual nature of work these days is astounding. Who isn't working (at least to some degree) with clients, co-workers, and partners in many parts of the world? With email, conference calls, FedEx, and Web-conferencing, it's now common to work with people we've never met. But just because the technology enables virtual teams, it doesn't guarantee that they'll be successful. In *Virtual Teams That Work*, professor Cristina Gibson, scientist Susan Cohen, and 36 others offer comprehensive research on the design, management, and support of effective virtual teamwork.

Cohen and Gibson begin by defining *virtual teams* as a collection of geographically dispersed (but interdependent) members, with real tasks and shared outcomes. This definition is important for what it excludes: The book isn't about virtual communication, learning networks, or communities of practice. Instead, the authors examine virtual teaming issues such as

- trust building
- member selection
- effective reward systems
- return-on-investment measures
- effective technologies
- conflict management
- virtual organizational politics.

In part 1, these enabling conditions are identified: shared understanding, integration, and trust. Virtual teams, by their nature, often lead to more culturally diverse groups than traditional teams, and the authors highlight the importance of finding members with similar backgrounds. Team leaders also need to devote time to building personal relationships. The book's research shows that telephone communications are more effective than email at fostering shared understanding. (Video-based conferencing is most effective, but currently it's not available or practical for most team members.)

Part 2 looks at team members and the organizational context of their mission. Using a classic model of KSAs (knowledge, skills, and abilities), the authors emphasize the selection and training of members based on traits of cultural awareness, sensitivity, and trust. One emphasized point is to increase team members' motivation by pay-for-performance plans. That's no doubt true, but it's hardly surprising. Doesn't motivation usually increase when there's some kind of monetary reward?

Team leadership, social structure, and information are explored in part 3. What's clear in this section is that the same success factors critical to traditional teams are magnified by the dispersed nature of virtual teams. Strong leadership becomes critical to task distribution, the development of clear goals, and building trust. One tantalizing finding is that many inspirational and motivational leaders are still able to exhibit those traits successfully even when limited to communication via email.

Moving into the role of information technology, part 4 looks at appropriate tool selection. The major factors in determination include local habits, security restrictions, number of time zones, and team size. The authors found that asynchronous technologies, such as email, are best for less complex tasks; synchronous tools, such as phone calls and videoconferencing, are more appropriate for highly complex assignments. Despite the allure of technology, research suggests that a simple phone call or email is the best virtual collaboration tool.

The book concludes with a review of the best practices for virtual team effectiveness. To help build trust and strong relationships, the authors suggest conducting the initial meeting face-to-face. Members should be selected, trained, and supported specifically for their teaming traits. To improve the odds for success, they also recommend tying together incentive rewards and outcomes.

Written by 38 academics, *Virtual Teams That Work* is a serious guide to virtual teamwork. However, its 436 pages of research and technical style make it an inappropriate handbook. But with good "implications for practice" summaries, it's of use to a wide range of OD professionals, especially those who have to craft formal, geographically dispersed teams.

Virtual Teams That Work: Creating Conditions for Virtual Team Effectiveness, edited by Cristina B. Gibson and Susan G. Cohen. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. 436 pp. US$45
Circle 290 on reader service card.

Kevin Kruse is the facilitator of www.e-LearningGuru.com and a principal with Kenexa in Lawrenceville, New Jersey; kevin.kruse@Kenexa.com.

ON THE NIGHTSTAND

By Roberta L. Westwood

My nightstand is sometimes mobile. As I write this I'm traveling, so I've brought my nightstand along (metaphorically); any more books and I'd have broken my back!

On top of the stack is *Assimilating New Leaders* by Diane Downey. Because orientation is my specialty, I find Downey's focus on senior executives compelling. It's a solid book, with some great tools.

I continue to digest *The Corporate University Handbook* by Mark Allen, a purchase I made after hearing him speak last summer. The world of corporate universities was sorely in need of another guide, and Allen's collection of contributions from leaders in the field is truly refreshing.

The most dog-eared book on my nightstand is *Corporate Tides* by Robert Fritz. Fritz's analysis of why organizations oscillate—-such as the shifts between centralized and decentralized models—-is fascinating, and his laws of organizational structure are brilliant. It's rare that I prepare a strategic planning session without referring to this book at least once.

I've also been rereading *Flawless Consulting*. Its author, Peter Block, actually penned this exceptional book with the consultant in mind, so I recommend it for everyone's nightstand.

The pile on my nightstand never stops growing, and the most recent addition is *The Leader's Digest* by Jim Clemmer. I'm a big fan of Clemmer's crisp, insightful approach, and I'm looking forward to cracking the cover.

Roberta L. Westwood *is president of Westwood Dynamics Learning & Development in West Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada; robertaw@westwood-dynamics.com.*