

This is an expanded version of a column first appearing as Thoughts on Leadership in the July/August 2006 issue of *Wildfire* magazine, the official publication of the International Association of Wildland Fire, published by Primedia Business Magazines and Media.

## Of Trust, Teams and Teamwork

Over the past 30 years, teams and teamwork have come to increasingly characterize the structure of organizations. In the past fifteen years, the use of team structure has exploded across the organizational world and teams have largely become the basic organizational unit. However, people use both “team” and “teamwork” loosely, and I’ve seen all nature of groups referred to as teams. So, for the purposes of this article, let us say that a team means a group of individuals, bound by mutual direction and common goals, who interact interdependently to accomplish work, action and results. Using that definition, we might argue that the fire world is one place where the word team has been used accurately.

A 1993 survey by the American Society for Quality Control (ASQC) and the Gallup Organization found that over 80 percent of the people surveyed reported participating in some form of team activity and that two-thirds of full-time employees indicated that they had played a part in some kind of team activity. Obviously, teams have become important parts of organizations, all indicators suggest that teams and teamwork will remain a critically important organizational concept in the foreseeable future, and research shows that organizations improve when they effectively employ teams. In fact, many organizations rely on teaming as a key to their productivity and attribute performance improvements including increased efficiency, improved participation and innovation, error reduction, quality improvement, increased responsiveness, cost-effectiveness, better customer service and improved employee satisfaction to their use of teams. In addition, organizations of all types are now turning to an even more flexible organizational form to structure their operations, the “virtual team.”

In their book, *Virtual Teams*, noted teaming experts Jessica Lipnack and Jeffrey Stamps, define a virtual team as “a group of people who work interdependently with a shared purpose across space, time, and organization boundaries using technology.” Advantages attributed to virtual teaming include the ability to recruit talent without location constraints, enable employee flexibility and work-life balance, reduce the impacts of commuting, and shrink infrastructure and utility costs. Virtual teaming advocates also cite improved cross-functionality, inter-organizational interaction, and the capacity to assemble an organization’s most qualified personnel to tackle a task without relocation or extensive travel as benefits of this flexible organizational structure. We can see that, with growing targets, increasing downsizing pressures, and the growth of nontraditional work arrangements such as telecommuting and virtual offices; virtual teaming holds a lot of promise in fire agencies.

Despite the many advantages attributed to teaming, the concept is not without its challenges, and trust has emerged as an issue central to successful teaming. Successful teams must establish and maintain trusting interpersonal relationships if they are to function effectively and succeed. No universally accepted, scholarly definition of trust exists; and there are different forms of trust. However, trust may be thought of as individual’s expression of confidence or optimistic expectation in the intentions and motives of others. Let us assume that a person trusts a group when they believe that group members make good faith efforts to stick to their commitments, are honest in their negotiations, and do not take advantage of one another even when the opportunity presents itself. At the bottom-line, trust represents an act of faith; a willingness to take a risk that another person will prove worthy of one’s confidence. Team members must know that everyone will fulfill his or her obligations and behave in a consistent and predictable manner. Experience in many organizations shows that successful teams focus specifically on building relationships to increase trust, and that unsuccessful teams do not.

Trust develops through frequent and meaningful interaction. In the team environment, trust builds, in part, as team members experience the competency and integrity of the team. When team members demonstrate their competence and integrity, they prove themselves as trustworthy. Trust builds as members continue to experience the competency and integrity of the team and as they experience their expectations being met by team members. In other words, their level of trust in the team members increases. Teaming scholars contend that work teams rely on visual, verbal and non-verbal communication clues to gain insight into each other's intentions in the workplace, and organizational experts view these opportunities as sources of trust-based relationships between organizational members. There exists broad agreement among researchers that relationship building occurs best in a face-to-face context and that frequent and meaningful interaction allows a deeper kind of relationship to develop.

So let's look again at virtual teams. For virtual teams, the fundamental issue remains how a team establishes and maintains trust in an environment based on interaction that is not face-to-face. How can we grow trust when our interaction is via voicemail and email? A virtual organization, because of separation between members and reliance on communications technology, adds a degree of complexity that conventional teams do not experience. Some teaming scholars have even asserted that a virtual organization restricts or even obstructs the development of trust. They contend that this is because virtual teams lack the opportunities for frequent and meaningful interaction, particularly the informal and spontaneous opportunities for relationship building that members of conventional, co-located teams experience during the workday. Traditionally people establish bonds through physical contact and socializing. In virtual teams, these interactions may be absent or, very limited. Teams organized "virtually" or in a physically separated manner typically communicate via technology and have fewer opportunities to physically come together to share experiences. Many people find it difficult to determine whether other people are trustworthy when interacting with them daily. Obviously, it becomes even more difficult to assess a person's trustworthiness when people are not physically working together.

My point is not that virtual teams do not work. On the contrary, I believe they are becoming an essential fact of organizational life. However, leaders must remember that establishing and maintaining trust presents a critical role for the members of virtual teams. Relationships based on trust are essential to the success and effective function of any team, but trusting relationships may prove difficult to create and maintain in a virtual workplace. Consequently, while some do, few successful virtual teams function in a purely virtual manner, and experts agree on the importance of face-to-face meetings to facilitate strong relationships between virtual team members, particularly early in team formation.

The leadership scholars tell us that teams and teamwork will remain critically important organizational concepts well into the future, and recent research suggests that virtual teams may indeed represent a necessary evolution of teamwork and a new way to work. However, remember that trust has emerged as an issue at the center of research into successful team management, and establishing trust is fundamental to the successful formation and growth of any team, but may prove particularly important in the virtual team environment.

Trust develops through frequent and meaningful interaction and, traditionally, people establish the bonds of trust through physical contact and socializing. Even in the virtual teaming research, there exists broad agreement that relationship building occurs best in a face-to-face context and that frequent and meaningful interaction allows a deeper kind of relationship to develop.

At the bottom line, trust is one of the key ingredients necessary for a team to succeed, and teams of all types must remain firmly rooted in trusting relationships if they are to function effectively. For all teams, how they establish and maintain trust remains the fundamental issue.

## **Author's Bio**

---

Mike DeGrosky is Chief Executive Officer of the Guidance Group, a consulting organization specializing in the human and organizational aspects of the fire service and an adjunct instructor in leadership studies at Fort Hays State University. His interests include leadership, strategy, and bringing the concepts of learning organizations and high reliability organizing alive in fire organizations. He is currently pursuing a PhD focused on organizational leadership. He can be reached at [info@guidancegroup.org](mailto:info@guidancegroup.org)