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Facilitating Asynchronous Distributed GSS Meetings: Eight Steps to Success

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It has long been a goal of group support system (GSS) researchers to enable team members to work together wherever and whenever they want to do so [7;8;3]. GSS technology has now advanced to the point that asynchronous meetings among geographically separated team members are a reality [9;10]. Team members from around the world can use GSS to jointly create and edit all the share objects a GSS can offer – lists, trees, texts, graphics and compound documents. However, shared objects are only one important kind of output from a GSS. The other equally important and equally tangible output from a GSS is Group Dynamics – patterns of group interaction [11;4;2].

If teams use GSS to create the group dynamics they want, how does a team create group dynamics when the group isn't there? Can group dynamics emerge in the absence of the group? Asynchronous discussion groups have long been a part of cyberspace. However, these tools tend to embody and support a single pattern of group interaction – comment generation. For successful problem-solving, teams must not only diverge as they generate ideas; they must converge on key issues, create and sustain consensus, explore certain issues in depth and detail, etc. For more than a decade Hiltz and Turoff [6;5] and others have conducted ground-breaking research on asynchronous teamwork. They identified a number of social and technical issues. However, asynchronous collaboration is still not widely practiced nor well understood. Little is known about how to establish and manage group asynchronous dynamics for long-term problem-solving and goal-seeking teams. What makes an asynchronous distributed meeting successful?

In answer to the preceding question, this paper presents lessons learned from a year-long action research project. In action research one uses a theory to intervene in a situation for the purpose of improving both the situation and the theory. Our work was guided by the focus theory of group productivity. [1] Our method was to convene a series of asynchronous meetings using GroupSystems over the Web. We then documented the difficulties that arose with each meeting and conducted interviews of participants to learn why the difficulties arose. Guided by focus theory, our interviews addressed issues of distraction, goal congruence, and the cognitive load associated with communication, information access and deliberation. Based on participant responses, we would reformulate our meeting process and try again. We present the lessons we learned in the form of a eight-point action list -- rules of thumb for the facilitator of an asynchronous team.

Steps in the Distributed Facilitation Process

Several of our early asynchronous GSS projects were failures: people did not get involved in the process, if they attended at all. Interviews suggested that people experienced high ambiguity when working asynchronously. Lacking the cues available in synchronous interactions, they struggled to understand the meaning of facilitator instructions, shared objects, and the contributions of others. Lack-of-feedback made them feel alone and caused them to question whether there was really any value in making an effort. They weren't sure who would see their work, nor how it might be interpreted. They therefore chose not to participate.

As the project proceeded we developed a set of eight rules-of-thumb, a set of steps a facilitator could take to engage the participants in a successful asynchronous interaction.

1. Select a task(s) with high vested interest for participants.

The participants were mostly middle and senior-level managers multiple responsibilities competing for their attention. Asynchronous meetings are harder work than synchronous. Consequently, if the participants didn't have a high vested interest in the goal of the asynchronous meeting, other demands would win their attention. Without a specified time and place for attendance, the meeting itself could not compete for attention. However, if participants had a high stake in the outcome, that overcame the other difficulties

2. Get someone with Clout to call the meeting and express interest in the outcome.

This is one way to create a vested interest in participation. It may not be quite as powerful as a vested interest in the deliverables, but it appeared to help. As one highly-placed leader said, “The rule here is, if my boss is interested, I’m excited.” Thus it is useful if “someone at the top” thinks the meeting is important and an absence will be noticed.

3. Explicitly verify that the task cannot be accomplished more easily by another method.

Participants who thought there might be an easier way to accomplish the task typically never participated in the asynchronous sessions. We learned to ask each participant well before the meeting, “Can you think of an easier way we can do this?” It seemed important for the participants to explicitly notice for themselves that the asynchronous meeting was, in fact, the easiest way to accomplish their goals.

4. Facilitator must directly contact each participant to confirm commitment to participate.

Because asynchronous meetings were harder to execute and easier to ignore than synchronous meetings, facilitators learned to pick up the phone and speak directly to each participant to get a commitment to participate. Further, the facilitators learned to walk each attendee into the prepared virtual meeting space before work began. They would explain the task and the collaborative objects and answer questions for the participant.

5. Each distributed project should kick-off with a same-time-different-place voice-and-GSS on-line activity.

This kick-off event let the participants become familiar with the space, and with the process it was to support. It eliminated excuses about technical failures preventing participation. How is the collaborative space organized? What is the purpose/meaning of each activity? Where should comments and contributions be submitted? At what level of detail? How do you move around the space and use the tools to participate? The synchronous kickoff event appeared to reduce ambiguity and uncertainty, and appeared to improve later participation.

6. Two deliverables of the Kick-off session should be (a) an explicit prioritized set of action items for asynchronous participation, and (b) a firm schedule for the next synchronous interaction.

Action items typically included an action, an actor, a deadline, a deliverable, and a way to measure the quality of the work. Awareness of the next synchronous interaction created a sense of accountability. Judgement day was nigh.

7. Participant instructions must be vastly more explicit than would be necessary for synchronous meetings.

In our experiences, if there were any way for participants to misunderstand their written instructions, they would do so. Because the meeting was asynchronous, the team might drift a long way into an unproductive process before the facilitator could identify and address the problem. Once identified, it was difficult to signal the team that a shift of direction was needed. In synchronous meetings such changes of direction may be implemented with a few words from the facilitator and a few questions from the group. In an asynchronous session, such interactions might string out over a day or more, depending on how often the facilitator and participants checked into the session. Therefore, the asynchronous distributed meetings required a very, *very* explicit set of participant instructions which had been pilot tested with several people to eliminate ambiguity. The instructions must be complete, unambiguous, specific, detailed, and easily understandable by all participants. No small order.

8. Every GSS Session should include a separate process channel monitored by the facilitator.

In synchronous GSS sessions, participants can simply speak to the facilitator and ask questions. Asynchronous distributed meetings preclude oral communication. Therefore, it is valuable to provide a back channel to asynchronous participants for discussing the meeting process. Persistent chat windows proved effective for this purpose. In some cases e-mail was an adequate channel.

These eight rules-of-thumb are the preliminary findings of a year-long action research study. They sprang from failures and were tested by successes. Armed with these tools a facilitator may be able to initiate and sustain successful asynchronous interactions. We are sure there are many more lessons to be learned beyond those documented here. Future research may reveal the underlying mechanisms that cause these rules of thumb to be effective. Much more remains to be learned.

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