Applying the Rocket Model to Virtual Teams

by

Gordon J Curphy, PhD

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Virtual teams are those whose members work in different buildings, states, countries or shifts. Some of the driving forces behind virtual teams have been the expansion of global trade, competitive pressures to provide 7 x 24 services, and adoption of the Internet and other modes of communication. Forrester Research estimates that 56 percent of employees will be working on one or more virtual teams by 2015, and it is not unusual to hear about software development teams with members located in the United States, India, China and Europe or medical product sales teams with members spread out across North America. More people are working out of their homes than ever before and virtual teams are rapidly becoming the norm.

Transforming collections of co-located individuals into high performing teams and groups can be challenging enough, doing the same with dispersed members is even more difficult. Cultural differences, time zone differences, limited face-to-face contact, divided loyalties and site-specific challenges are just some of the unique issues that virtual team leaders need to resolve. Fortunately, The Rocket Model© provides a roadmap for overcoming difficulties associated with building high performing virtual teams.

The Rocket Model©
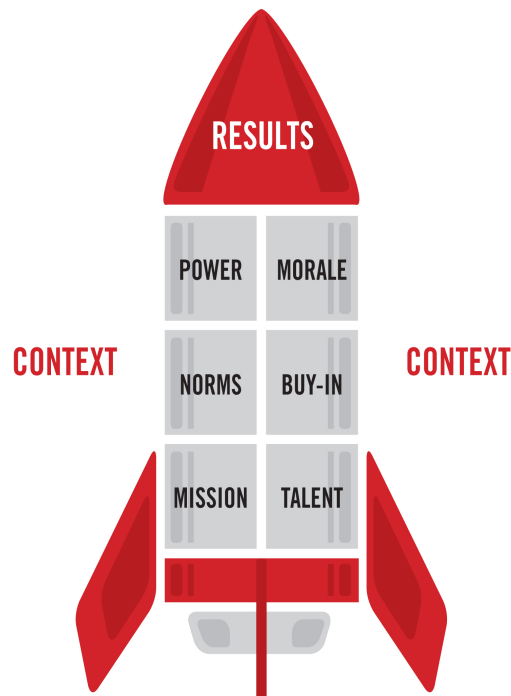
The Rocket Model© consists of eight components, which include Context, Mission, Talent, Norms, Buy-In, Power, Morale, and Results. Context concerns gaining team member agreement on the situation facing the team, and Mission involves setting team goals and benchmarks. Talent focuses on the number, roles, and skills of team members and Norms pertain to the rules by which team members operate. Buy-In

is about fostering employee engagement and Power concerns acquiring needed authority and resources. Morale pertains to the level of team espirit-de-corps and conflict whereas the accomplishments attained fall in to the Results component. The Rocket Model© can be used to diagnose team functioning, launch brand new teams, and improve the performance of co-located and virtual teams and groups. The purpose of this paper is to provide guidance on how to apply The Rocket Model© to virtual teams.

Set Up an Initial Face-to-Face Meeting: It will be much easier to lead virtual teams and groups if leaders and members meet face-to-face for two to three days to work through the issues outlined below. The ability to quickly execute plans and achieve intended results usually far outweighs the costs associated with this initial meeting. If a face-to-face meeting cannot be arranged, then leaders should set up a series one-on-one in-person visits and/or a series of two to four hour video conferences or calls to identify constituencies, set goals, etc.

The goals and agenda of the initial meeting will depend on the team's stage of development. If the leader is forming a brand new team then the proper sequence of events should be to begin by sharing his or her vision for the team (see the Vision exercise in the Buy-In chapter in The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 111-114) and then working through the Context, Mission, Talent, Norms, Buy-In, etc. exercises as described in the book. The sequencing of these activities is important; team members need to get aligned on the situation they face before working on the goals to be accomplished, the roles they will play, and the rules they will adopt.

If the leader is taking over an experienced virtual team then he or she should use a Team Assessment Survey II© and/or team interviews to diagnose current team functioning. Virtual team leaders will want to review the team diagnostic results with the rest of the team and make sure enough time is set aside to address all areas of improvement when designing the goals and agenda for the initial meeting.

Be Patient: Because virtual team members cannot walk down the hall or go to lunch with other team members to discuss issues, it will take some time for virtual teams to sort out roles, develop smooth work handoffs and establish team identity. Leaders who systematically adopt the advice described in this paper must appreciate that virtual teams often start slower in order to go faster; once best practices get firmly established the team will execute tasks more efficiently and effectively. Those who lack patience and ignore this advice are apt to lead dysfunctional virtual teams.

Whether leading brand new or more experienced virtual teams, some of the unique issues virtual team leaders need to address are as follows:

Get Clear on Context: Members need to have a "Vulcan mind-meld" when it comes to sharing the same understanding of the situation facing the team. Leaders can do this by helping their teams come to agreement on the team's internal and external constituencies, underlying assumptions, and key challenges. The Context Assessment Exercise (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 36-39) often generates some lively discussion, as team members can have different assumptions and little understanding of the challenges

faced by those in different locations. Leaders also need to spend time clarifying if members are better off operating as a group or a team and what constitutes everyone's first team. The first team discussion is critical, as the default for many geographically dispersed members is site first, country second, function third, and team fourth.

Because virtual team members may be based in other facilities or have dual reporting relationships, area, facility or functional leaders often represent unique virtual team constituencies. Virtual team leaders need to build good working relationships and stay in regular contact with these leaders, as they will depend on these individuals for local supervision and support. Virtual team leaders who neglect these relationships do so at their peril, as these leaders often exert more influence over their virtual team members.

Build Team Scorecards: If leaders want team members to operate as a team, then they need to ensure their virtual teams have shared goals, team members do interdependent work, and everyone shares a common fate. The more virtual members have a hand in building Team Scorecards (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 51-54), the more they will understand where the team is going and what they need to do to succeed.

Clarify Roles and Responsibilities: Two common challenges facing remotely located team members are role conflict and role ambiguity. Oftentimes team members get conflicting instructions from team and local leaders or very little guidance on their team deliverables. People with ill-defined roles have difficulty contributing to team success, so leaders can avoid this problem by working with members to complete Roles and Responsibility Matrices (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 68-71). A best practice for virtual teams is adding photos, titles, locations, and contact information to Roles and Responsibility Matrices and referring to them during team meetings.

Manage Talent: Hiring, on-boarding, training and managing the performance of remotely located staff can be difficult, especially if virtual team leaders have not developed good working relationships with their dual reporting counterparts. Sharing electronic versions of key constituencies and assumptions, team scorecards, roles and responsibilities matrices, operating rhythm and meeting rules of engagement, communication and accountability norms and team action plans can accelerate the on-boarding process. Having regularly scheduled one-on-ones with new virtual team members and their other bosses can help with on-going development and performance management.

Establish Operating Rhythm, Communication, Decision-Making, and Accountability Norms: Leaders may find that implementing effective team norms can be quite difficult, yet may be one of the most important things they do when it comes to building virtual high performing teams. Just setting up conference calls can be tricky with global teams, as time zone differences makes attendance more difficult. Some of the best practices for establishing effective norms for virtual teams are as follows:

- *Operating Rhythm:* This norm pertains to the frequency, length, content, mode, and behaviors associated with team meetings. Getting this norm right is critical, as meetings are often the only time teams get together. The operating rhythm for most virtual teams includes shorter, more frequent update calls and longer once a month or quarterly calls or meetings to go over team scorecard results, resolve

problems, review lessons learned, set budgets, etc. All meetings should have agreed upon meeting rules of engagement, keep time zones in mind, be scheduled in advance, and use the Goals, Roles, Process and Improvement (GRPI) format (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 85-89). GRPIs and handouts should be sent out before meetings and all meetings should start with a GRPI review. Meetings without GRPIs should not be held.

- *Communication:* Because many interpersonal cues get stripped out of e-mail and telephone conversations, team members often misperceive the intentions of others. This is especially true if team members have never met in person. Some best practices for communication norms include transitioning from teleconferencing to videoconferencing; rotating meeting facilitators; ensuring everyone has an opportunity to speak during calls; using Webex, Sharepoint or other document repositories; and ensuring everyone is trained to use more advanced telecommunication systems. Having team members complete Communications Norms Checklists (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 90-92) once or twice a year can help maintain effective team communication norms.

- *Decision-Making:* The most effective virtual teams use a mix of autocratic, information gathering and consensus decision-making styles. It can be helpful for leaders to include a particular style on the agenda section of a GRPI and discuss their rationale before making decisions. Virtual teams regularly use the Decision-Making Form (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 93-95) to set decision-making norms.

- *Accountability:* Many virtual team members have dual reporting relationships and conflicting loyalties can make accountability problematic. To establish strong accountability norms for all team members, leaders need to ensure team goals are understood by all, roles and responsibilities are explicit, work handoffs have been agreed to, team norms are clear and action plans have time lines and owners. Team leaders should also communicate regularly with local leaders to set priorities and work through role conflicts. Using the Accountability Norms Checklist (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 96-98) once or twice a year can ensure team accountability norms stay on track.

Gain Buy-In: Getting commitment and engagement for team activities can be problematic, as virtual team tasks may be a low priority for some members. The three most common techniques leaders can use to improve Buy-In include painting a compelling vision of the future, being seen as credible and involving members in setting goals, roles and rules. It can be hard for leaders to create a compelling vision via teleconferences, as important visual and interpersonal cues get lost in transmission. Credibility is made up of expertise and trust, and it can be difficult for leaders to establish either through teleconferences and e-mails. These issues all point to the importance of having an initial face-to-face meeting, as this venue allows leaders to effectively communicate their vision, get team members actively involved in setting goals and roles, and use Journey Lines (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing

Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 107-110) to demonstrate expertise, build trust and improve team member relationships.

Acquire Resources: All groups and teams need equipment, facilities, budget and authority to get their goals accomplished, and virtual teams are no different in this regard. Team leaders may need additional funding to support team member travel and the specialized communication hardware and software needed to stay connected and share work. Virtual team leaders can use the Resource Analysis Exercise (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 121-124) to identify team materiel and authority needs and may need to work closely with local leaders to gain access to needed resources.

Resolve Conflict: Many virtual teams suffer from artificial harmony, as conference calls, text messages and e-mails limit emotional and non-verbal communication channels and make raising controversial subjects more difficult. Leaders may need to go out of their way to encourage members to share contentious issues and have lively discussions during meetings. Team leaders should use After Action Reviews (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012, pp. 148-149) to foster open dialogue and build trust.

Teach Teams How to Win: The best military leaders and athletic coaches are constantly thinking about the competition, updating team goals and the plans needed to achieve them and formulating better ways to get things done, and one critically important but often overlooked task for virtual team leaders is teaching their teams how to win. Effective leaders also ensure everyone is aligned on key challenges and who is responsible for getting things done. Another best practice for teaching teams how to win is to have monthly or quarterly reviews of team scorecard results and previous and upcoming action plans. These reviews are used to identify what worked, what did not work, what the team intends to do differently to perform at a higher level and adjust team goals and plans accordingly.

With technology enabling more and more people to work virtually, it is only a matter of time before most leaders have geographically or temporally dispersed staff. Building high performing virtual teams has a number of unique challenges for leaders. The Rocket Model© provides a framework for gaining a deeper understanding of these issues, and the diagnostic assessments and exercises described in (The Rocket Model: Practical Advice for Building High Performing Teams, Curphy & Hogan, 2012) can readily be applied to people working virtually. This paper is intended to help leaders know what team exercises to use and when and how to use them in virtual environments.