
Special Project Oversight Team Exercise

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TEACHING NOTES

The Special Projects Oversight Team exercise is a four-round, virtual team exercise designed to teach a variety of skills in distributed team process and decision making. The exercise is especially useful for demonstrating the challenges of working on a geographically distributed team and for teaching a variety of effective responses to these challenges. The exercise requires that the participants of the teams connect with the internet, gather materials and information from a variety of internet locations, bring their own specific information to their team, and ultimately forge an effective team process and a team decision.

The exercise has proven to be a very effective tool for engaging participants in virtual teamwork, and it has proven to be very useful as a precursor to other internet-mediated learning activities. In the course of the exercise, the participants master such tools as e-mail, discussion boards, and online chats. The net result of the exercise is to elevate participants to a level of expertise and experience that makes them feel at ease working and interacting in a virtual work environment.

Overview of the exercise.

The scenario posed in the exercise is that the participants have been asked by a prestigious “think tank” to serve on an advisory committee that will provide much-needed managerial expertise to aid in the oversight of several special projects. Specifically, the participants are told to imagine that they have been asked by the CEO of the think tank, the “R&D Corporation,”¹ to review the progress of a set of special projects that offer the potential for enhancing the prestige of the corporation. The think tank is seeking help from a group of outside managers, the participants’ Special Projects Oversight Team, because the corporation is strong in scientific skills but weak in management skills.

The task of the Special Projects Oversight Team (SPOT), the participants learn, is to read quarterly reports from five or six project. Each report contains information on the project’s progress in completing its tasks and on its use of its budget. The SPOT is to rate on a 100-point scale the level of managerial competence displayed in the project, and the team is also asked to make a judgment call, in each of the first three quarters, on whether the project should be continued or whether the CEO of the corporation should “pull the plug” and stop the project. The SPOT is also asked to provide a brief explanation of their rating and of their continue/discontinue decision.

The SPOT virtual teams consist of five or six members. At the beginning of each of the four rounds of the exercise, all members of the team receive a brief memo on each of the special projects.²

¹ The projects in the exercise, and the corporation itself, are entirely fictional; although many of the management issues are based on the author’s real-world experiences.

² The exercise can be run with either five or six participants on each virtual team; the explanation below assumes that there are six participants per team, and hence six projects to be evaluated by the team. If there are only five