

Accelerating Smart Teams

*How global teams at
Autodesk develop leadership
and soft skills virtually.*



 **AUTODESK**[®]
v-Teamwork

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SUMMARY

WHO



Gaurav Jain: Senior Manager, Cloud Delivery Platform at Autodesk, a \$2B revenue world leader in SaaS design applications.

v-Teamwork

V-Teamwork: innovators in leadership, productivity, and team learning for geographically distributed cross-functional technical teams.



OPPORTUNITY

Improve coordination and velocity, reduce re-work in four globally distributed teams of software development engineers that he manages (40 people)

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT PROGRAM DESIGN

V-Teamwork designed the Core Skills coaching program for leaders of distributed cross-functional teams. It focused on soft skills and attitudes for building trust, improving coordination, shifting to positive moods and maintaining goal focus.

For maximum convenience, effectiveness and psychological safety, the coaching was delivered in action with professional peers in an immersive online game simulation. Between weekly sessions, this experiential learning was put into practice at work.

IMPACT

- ▶ **Improved cross-cultural coordination across geographies and a reduction in unnecessary re-work**
- ▶ **Less need for hands-on by leader**
- ▶ **Increased velocity⁶ with improved quality**
- ▶ **Improved effectiveness of 360° employee performance assessment tool**

“V-Teamwork has been very effective as a catalyst to accelerate the development of leadership and teaming skills in our global engineering teams. I have seen participants rapidly develop deep insights about themselves, and about how to work more effectively with others”.

— Danny Ryan, Director of Technical Training, Autodesk



From the leader...

"I had to shift my leadership focus onto the effectiveness of the conversations I had with my team to make sure we got the job done between us."

"There was so much to be developed from this simple concept... every task is the fulfilment of a promise that someone has spoken and someone else has listened to."

— Gaurav Jain,
Senior Software Manager⁷

From the experts...

"Tech companies using Agile report that rework costs a software project \$0.2M on average."¹

"70% of people in remote teams find all forms of coordination and communication more challenging than in on-site teams."²

"Real leadership skills cannot be learned from a seminar or training manual; it takes concerted effort over an extended period of time."³

"Psychological safety – a situation in which people feel they can take interpersonal risks, is a necessary foundation for effective learning."⁴

"An effective team starts with a teaming culture, where people become curious, passionate, and empathetic."⁵

Situation

In a hyperconnected world of accelerating change, this technology team manager needed to coordinate commitments across functions, geographies & cultures...



Senior Software manager Gaurav Jain was recognised by his peers and his boss as a talented manager. With 17 years experience leading software development teams, he had an ambition to improve coordination and reduce rework in the four teams under his leadership.

With more than 40 people in three different geographies, his teams face two ongoing challenges: constantly changing requirements from a wide range of stakeholders across several functions in the business, and geographically dispersed team members.

Global teamwork essential

Autodesk is a global company that depends on highly skilled and coordinated software development teams to rapidly deliver world-class design software to customers around the globe.

With a market cap of around \$30B and revenues of \$2B Autodesk is a global market leader that can't afford to waste time and talent with low-functioning teams: they hire

top talent and have been on the Top 100 Best Places to Work list for nine years in a row.

As the senior manager for Autodesk's cloud-based product and service delivery, Jain is tasked with delivering a fully integrated cloud-delivery solution for his many internal clients.

Based in the Autodesk Singapore Research and Development facility (ASRD), with team collaborators in San Francisco, Portland and Singapore, Gaurav has a complex leadership burden of coordinating the many moving parts of a remote team to ensure quality delivery on an aggressive quarterly schedule.

Rework: balancing speed and quality

With the agile methodologies that Gaurav's teams use, rework comes in two forms: rework of requirements based on customers discovering what they really want; and rework of the software, when

"Tech companies using Agile report that rework costs a software project \$0.2M on average."¹

Gaurav knew his teams could do better...

development teams detect and remove bugs, and discover better ways to design it. The balance between these is largely dependent of the quality and effectiveness of communication between team members, including the product owner.

Jain's team members are both talented and dedicated. They rely on Atlassian Jira to create user stories, plan sprints, and track their work.

Their situation brings two key challenges that can compromise their teamwork and often slow projects down.

Challenge 1: Communication

First, communication challenges are exacerbated when teams work across different geographies.

Time zone differences, cultural differences, and lack of richness in communication channels all contribute to communication problems that arise, for example, in project inception, in hand-offs and scope-changes where a shared understanding of the customer's conditions of satisfaction is critical.

The miscommunication that often arises in these situations can be costly in terms of lost

time and revenue, especially with a platform on which multiple products and services are delivered.

Challenge 2: Alignment

The other challenge is keeping the team aligned. This is easier said than done with the tech industry's high velocity and relentless competition. With a complex infrastructure product like Autodesk's cloud delivery platform, requirements can change continually throughout development, so team members need to become skilled at learning together on the fly.

"Usually in a software project, the initial requirement is likely to change, which is why we use Agile methods. The difficulty is keeping everyone in our remote team aligned on the changes."

Gaurav was also keen to build on the essential collaboration skills that often compromise teamwork performance when they are lacking: giving constructive feedback, building trust, and generating positive moods.

While the Agile methodology facilitates much of their coordination among stakeholders, Gaurav knew his team could do better.

Danny Ryan, Autodesk's Director of Technical Training had been searching for innovative approaches to developing technical leaders, and when Gaurav learned of the V-Teamwork opportunity, he knew he had to enroll to see what impact it would have on his team.

*"70% of people in remote teams find all forms of coordination and communication more challenging than in on-site teams."*²

...so he had to enroll to see what impact it would have."

Intervention



Immersive experiential learning – weekly action projects inside a multiplayer game: learning to lead, building trust, managing moods and coordinating commitments in a small team, with support from professional coaches.

V-Teamwork transformed the way Gaurav approaches his role, and he found that the learning format enabled him to make real, permanent changes in the ways he leads and manages.

Onboarding

For Gaurav, as for a lot of other participants, the first challenge was getting comfortable working in an immersive virtual game simulation.

Jain was assigned to a team of five professional peers from three different geographies. They coordinated their schedules to meet weekly for live team leadership and coordination practice. Working on their projects entirely inside World of Warcraft (WoW), they communicated on Discord, a state-of-the-art VoIP and chat application.

“I’m not a gamer and I have never played the game, so it took me some time to get used to it. As it turned out, this in itself created a valuable learning experience.”

Gaurav’s inexperience with World of Warcraft would lead to the first of many breakthroughs.

Transferring to the workplace

At the end of each weekly simulation debrief, Gaurav and other participants committed to take specific actions in their work teams.

“A few weeks into the program, I began to learn a valuable lesson about how I can improve my approach to teamwork.

“To be a good leader, I usually rely on my expertise of the domain. Being a novice at WoW, I couldn’t rely on this when I led the rest of my team in the game. Instead, I had to shift my leadership focus onto the

effectiveness of the conversations I had with my team to make sure we got the job done between us.

“There was so much to be developed from this simple concept, and in the weeks that followed, I became competent in skills that effectively improved these conversations, and I began to close up the communication gaps in my remote team in San Francisco.”

“Real leadership skills cannot be learned from a seminar or training manual; it takes concerted effort over an extended period of time.”³

Learning through recurrent practice

As the program unfolded, Jain and his small learning team worked for two hours each week, in two four-week blocks.

In each session, they took turns at leading and were guided by skilled executive coaches who were specially trained to coach inside the virtual environment with participants in multiple time zones.

The coaches encouraged and challenged them to push their boundaries, learning from one another as they set goals, handled setbacks, exchanged feedback and celebrated victories.

The repetition made all the difference for Jain: “This would not have been effective if I learned it at a two-day workshop; I needed practice and guidance over several weeks, where I could put things into practice at work in between times, to really implement it into the way I lead my Autodesk team.”

To reinforce the experiential learning, background reading, preparation and written

reflection totalled 60-90 minutes per week. Brief additional individual coaching sessions were provided at the mid-point and end of the program

Amazing and powerful parallels to the real world

Every session contained amazing parallels to real-world situations. A couple of examples:

“As a leader, when I didn’t set standards, or check-in with the team, things got sloppy. People lagged behind, objectives weren’t reached; but as soon as I set standards of performance, reminded team mates gently and promptly when they slipped and acknowledged people for living up to them, the speed of coordination picked up.”

“When the leader invites people to speak up then reminds the team about the overall goal and how the present action contributes to it, valuable offers of support and assistance can follow quickly.”

A safe environment to make mistakes and learn from them

One of the standout learnings for Gaurav was developing the way he shared feedback with his team, and he needed the risk-free environment of WoW to practice this.

“Psychological safety – a situation in which people feel they can take interpersonal risks, is a necessary foundation for effective learning.”⁴

“Learning to ‘ground’, or provide reasoning for, assessments has already helped me a lot. Receiving clearer feedback from me is impacting every aspect of

my team's performance, from collaboration, to engagement, to productivity.

"However, providing constructive feedback can be a sensitive topic, so I really appreciated the opportunity to practice this in safety with my online team before giving assessments to my Autodesk team.

"My v-Teamwork team were the perfect "guinea pigs": while working together in WoW, we felt like a real work team and the stakes felt high, but the only consequences of our mistakes was our coach asking us how we could do it better next time."

The 'human' side of work and learning

Like nearly all participants, it didn't take long for Gaurav to feel at home in the WoW sessions – and not just because of the weekly rhythm of learning about new skills, practicing them, then implementing them at work.

It was also because he built a strong camaraderie with his v-Teamwork learning team, and as he gained competence making person-to-person conversations the focal point of teamwork, he began to connect more with the 'human' side of collaboration.

"All too often our work gets separated from our humanity," Gaurav says. "We come to work, do our job, and go home. In these sessions, we start to see that a team is bigger than just the work.

Even the act of someone coming in late for a session relates to what we are learning and becomes a learning experience itself."



Outcomes



- ☑ *Improved cross-cultural coordination and reduced re-work*
- ☑ *Increased velocity⁶ with improved quality*
- ☑ *Less need for hands-on by leader*
- ☑ *Improved effectiveness of existing 360° employee performance evaluation tool*

Within a couple of months of completing the program, Gaurav was still experiencing big improvements across the way his team runs, and is seeing these increase as he becomes more proficient at the skills he learned in v-Teamwork.

Bridging the geography and culture gap, reducing re-work

“In California, the communication style is quite direct, in Singapore, less so. In v-Teamwork I learned to listen underneath the cultural style to the underlying need and commitment to action.

“This means that the conversations for changing requirements have taken a different turn and we get to a clearer understanding of what our internal and external customers really want.

“In business terms this means two things: internal customers are more satisfied about the way we deliver and improve our mission-critical platform; and inside the team we waste less time and effort in the kind of

unnecessary re-work that comes from poor communication.”

Increased velocity

“Build - Measure - Learn is our mantra in software development. In v-Teamwork I developed my skills for helping teams to learn on-the-fly.

“In practice, this means speaking up and listening well to what others care about rather than just trying to make your own point.

“Since I have been modeling these practices and coaching my leaders and teams, using our measurement tools, we have observed a measurable increase in our velocity⁶ of 5-10% across all projects, and we are maintaining or increasing quality, which is great result.”

Less need for hands-on

“Because the v-Teamwork program gave me practice in thinking about how to manage commitments rather than tasks, I am spending

less time getting involved in the technical detail of projects.

“I have learned how to pay more attention to helping my team leaders craft their commitments with care, and as a result they have stronger relationships with internal customers and are more empowered and accountable for getting the best from their people. I am less directly involved in projects, and more of a customer for their work.”

“An effective team starts with a teaming culture, where people become curious, passionate, and empathetic.”⁵

Innovation in developing people

“Listening to the coaches work with us and seeing the progress that I and my fellow participants made through the v-Teamwork program focused my attention on the question of how I can develop the people who work for me.

“As a result I have modified the way we use the internal 360° performance evaluation tool so I now give more frequent and focused feedback.

“Combining this with the practice of offering and seeking grounding for the assessments

that I give and receive means that my feedback is more carefully directed to the needs of the person I am managing.”

Overall impact = lasting value

“This is one of the most impactful leadership programs I have ever completed, and I have been through more than a few in my career. Apart from a six-month program that was much less intensive than this, the other courses have all been two to three days offsite. They are enjoyable, but we usually come back and forget most of what we learned.

“I really liked the structure of this. I could physically and immediately apply what I learned so that it became part of my way of doing things. I got so much value out of each session, as it directly correlated to my work environment in many ways.

“As a result, instead of forgetting about the program and sliding back into old habits, I’m now established enough in what I learned that I am building on these skills and making them a bigger and bigger part of the way we do things. I’m going to make sure managers and other team members in my team also get to experience v-Teamwork!”



“V-Teamwork has been very effective as a catalyst to accelerate the development of leadership and teaming skills in our global engineering teams. I have seen participants rapidly develop deep insights about themselves, and about how to work more effectively with others”.

— Danny Ryan, Director of Technical Training, Autodesk

Takeaways

- ☑ Even the most talented technical teams face *soft skills challenges* with communication and alignment when they work across geographies and functions.
- ☑ Critical leadership and relational skills are not developed through informational learning, rather, they require repeated *experiential* learning and feedback.
- ☑ By learning in small teams with professional coaches, inside an immersive multiplayer game, these skills can be developed in *a matter of weeks* to impact real-world productivity and effectiveness.

Level up your team!

- We specialise in improving the productivity of people who work in geo-distributed cross-functional technology teams.
- Every team is different, so we have diagnostic tools to pinpoint the leadership and teaming skills that give you the most leverage.
- If you're ambitious to improve, a short conversation will get you started with one of our simple tools.

[Let's Go!](#)

More? www.v-teamwork.com

Quotation References / Footnotes

1. Culture Wizard by RW3, Trends in Global Virtual Teams: <https://www.rw-3.com/virtual-teams-survey-0>
2. Voke Inc, Agile Research Today: <https://www.vokeinc.com/agile.html>
3. Daniel Goleman, What Makes a Leader: <https://hbr.org/2004/01/what-makes-a-leader>
4. Amy Edmonson, Psychological Safety, Trust, and Learning in Organizations: <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.195.4023&rep=rep1&type=pdf>
5. Amy Edmonson, The Three Pillars of a Teaming Culture: <https://hbr.org/2013/12/the-three-pillars-of-a-teaming-culture>

6. AgileAlliance.org defines velocity thus: *At the end of each iteration, the team adds up effort estimates associated with user stories that were completed during that iteration. This total is called velocity.*

7. [Gaurav Jain's LinkedIn profile](#)

