A Framework for Member Conversations
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Virtual teams are a popular form of collaboration for employers seeking to save money on travel expenses and bring together dispersed experts to solve complex challenges. That said, the distance and technology of virtual teams strain managers’ current skills and compel them to acquire new ones. This brief, designed for virtual teams lasting several weeks or longer, provides managers with an understanding of their roles and responsibilities in a virtual team, along with information on how to effectively manage these teams.

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Regardless of the nature of a team, leaders must possess a standard set of skills to achieve team objectives.\(^1\)

However, in global virtual team environments, managers need to have additional leadership skills to be as successful as managers of colocated teams.

**ADJUST TO VIRTUAL TEAM MANAGEMENT BY EXPANDING ON TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP QUALITIES**

Virtual Team Leadership Skills Expand on Traditional Team Skill Sets

*Additional Skills Required for Managing Virtual Teams*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Traditional Team Leadership Skills</th>
<th>Required Virtual Team Skills</th>
<th>Required Global Virtual Team Skills</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Developing and articulating the team’s mission and objectives</td>
<td>Building trust in the team</td>
<td>Cultural intelligence</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mentoring team members</td>
<td>Precision in communication</td>
<td>Logistical skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ensuring clear lines of communication</td>
<td>Technological know-how/aptitude</td>
<td>Traditional team leadership skills</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Updating the team regularly on progress</td>
<td>Traditional team leadership skills</td>
<td>Virtual team skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Measuring performance</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source:
- Anna Learmonth, "Managing Teams Well is the Key," *Construction Contractor*, August 2006.

Before starting a project, a virtual team must come together and establish common criteria for successful working relationships.1 Checklists, such as the ones on this page, help ensure the most important issues are resolved early on in the virtual collaboration process.

Research suggests that successful virtual teams depend highly on trust, but they do not operate under conditions supportive of trust-building.2 Therefore, managers must work diligently to promote trust during team interactions.

### PREPARE THE GROUNDWORK FOR A SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL TEAM

#### Checklist to Create a Focused Team

**Keep the Virtual Team Small (Approximately 10 Members)**

- **Create a virtual team charter:**
  - Explain the team’s mission.
  - Frame the business problem the team is attempting to solve.
  - Define the team's objectives.
  - Outline the decision-making process.
  - Specify each individual’s role.

**Agree on communication etiquette:**

- Respond promptly to all communications from fellow team members.
- State ideal behavior for audio and video conferencing, meeting facilitation, and e-mail usage.
- Listen actively, avoid multitasking, and demonstrate disciplined behavior.

#### Checklist to Build Trust Within a Virtual Team

**Conduct the initial team meeting face to face, if possible.**

Studies suggest that seeing colleagues in person helps teams overcome communication barriers and develop more accurate impressions of their colleagues’ trustworthiness.

**Make your actions as transparent as possible.**

Gather team input on decisions and communicate simultaneously. In turn, disseminate as much information to as many team members as possible.

**Be accessible and responsive.**

Virtual leaders need to make a conscious effort to encourage the sharing of nonwork-related information. This comes naturally in colocated teams but must be deliberately implemented in virtual teams.

**Create team profiles.**

Have team members create profiles of their personal interests, hobbies, and areas of expertise. Photos are particularly useful in profiles since some members may not be able to meet in person.

**Maintain confidentiality of team operations.**

Agree on norms for what information can be shared outside of the team.

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Managers and dispersed workers should plan communication strategies and discuss potential pitfalls of virtual management prior to its inception.

By asking the specific questions outlined to the right, managers and employees can ensure they have the same expectations about standards for communication. However, managers must also anticipate and avoid the common points of miscommunication in virtual teams.

**COMMUNICATE WITH AND ENGAGE THE TEAM**

Clarifying Questions for Virtual Manager-Employee Communications

**Q:** At what times will employees be available by phone?

**Q:** How often will employees check e-mail throughout the day?

**Q:** What are the most appropriate and efficient uses for each channel?

**Q:** Which or what are the most effective communication channels to use with teammates and managers?

**Q:** Which days will employees report to their supervisor?

**Tech Tool Tip**

The end goal of technology in virtual collaboration is to replicate the environment of a colocated team. Always look for tools that come as close as possible to simulating everyone being in the same office.

Imperatives to Avoid Common Points of Virtual Team Miscommunication

**When problems arise, inform and involve the entire team.**

Maintain your composure and provide status updates to everyone at regular intervals. Sending your team information preempts employee misinterpretation of silence as being a bad sign.

**Learn to read and hear body language in electronic communications:**

Because team members often cannot see each other in person, leaders have to learn how to correctly decipher non-visual and auditory cues.


COMMUNICATE WITH AND ENGAGE THE TEAM
(CONTINUED)

How to Plan and Conduct a Virtual Meeting

1. Pre-Meeting
   - Begin electronic discussion threads about the team's current work activities.
   - Provide a clear agenda with time allocations.
   - Post draft documents in a central location and request that all team members comment on them. During the meeting, only discuss areas of disagreement.

2. Start of Meeting
   - Bring the team together with informal discussion.
   - Have each member share a personal story about an event that happened to them over the last week.
   - Managers can also ask members to share a hobby on which they are working.

3. During Meeting:
   - Keep team members engaged throughout the meeting.
   - Create and rotate note-taking responsibilities among team members.
   - Ask members to “check-in” throughout the meeting and be sure to obtain everyone’s input on decisions.

4. End of Meeting Practice
   - End with a list of action items and post them on the team’s internal website. Action items may include task assignments and due dates for completion.
   - Try the “minutes-on-the-go” practice, where minutes are logged during the meeting and appear immediately on the virtual workspace screen.

5. Between Meetings
   - Keep the members engaged as a team between meetings.
   - Employ electronic communications to share both formal and informal news with the team.
   - Use automatic notifications of postings to the team website to keep members abreast of progress.


Tech Tool Tip

Have members voice their opinions on specific agenda items with voting tools. Instant messaging is also a good way to check in on silent team members.
Feedback is critical for maintaining team cohesion and identity in a virtual environment. Being proactive in monitoring team performance allows managers to provide feedback in real time, simultaneously keeping the team on track while also encouraging team members. This page provides tips on managing virtual team performance. \(^1\,^2\)

**ASSESS PROGRESS AND PROMOTE TEAM UNITY**

**Tips on Performance Management**

**Be Proactive**
- Identify areas of potential disconnect, such as competing local agendas and differing technology platforms.
- Make unannounced visits to enable virtual leaders to have one-on-one meetings and provide the opportunity to get to know his or her direct reports.

**Review Performance**
- Solicit team members’ anonymous feedback on the team’s performance. Collect strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement. Review results with the team to agree on desired changes.
- Give team members feedback on how well they communicate their ideas across virtual space, not just on the ideas themselves.
- Scrutinize asynchronous (electronic threaded discussion and document postings in the knowledge repository) and synchronous (virtual meeting participation and instant messaging) communication patterns to determine team members’ participation patterns and who needs support and prompting for further participation.

**Promote Team Unity**
- Start each virtual meeting with recognition of specific successes.
- Promote external recognition of the team. Some companies use their internal websites to post information on the achievements of virtual teams. Another option is to have the team present directly to executives.


Global virtual teams have an additional layer of complexity compared to virtual teams that operate in one country.

At the physical level, members are spread out across continents and numerous time zones, which can create logistical problems. Furthermore, cultural issues enter into play as divergent views on authority and communication lead to misunderstandings and conflict if not properly managed. This page describes barriers inherent in global virtual teams and ways to overcome them.\(^1\)\(^2\)

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**GLOBALIZE VIRTUAL TEAM MANAGEMENT**

Barriers to Virtual Team Success

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**The Language Barrier**

It is important to acknowledge up front that there will be comprehension difficulties. Send out important meeting documents ahead of time and work with the team to create common terminology with clear definitions.

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**Logistical Issues**

For teams with members living in multiple time zones, establish blackout periods to restrict meeting times to specific hours. Also note all local holidays on the group’s master calendar to prevent meetings from being scheduled during those times.

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**Different Cultural Backgrounds**

Be aware of which team members come from cultures that favor direct communication (e.g., US) or indirect communication (e.g., Japan). This may require team members to recognize and modify their behaviors to accommodate the group. This is equally important for cultures with divergent views on hierarchy and authority.

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**Leverage Diversity to Benefit the Group**

Managers can generate business value by leveraging differences to trigger breakthrough thinking and innovation. This may involve dividing the team into pairs to mix cultures or expertise.

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To help predict and prevent intra-team conflict, some organizations screen virtual team candidates using a cross-cultural rating scale, such as the one below from GlaxoSmithKline.

These rating scales can help companies understand candidates’ cultural preferences to predict areas of potential conflict within a team.

Example of a Cross-Cultural Rating Scale

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The leader should make the final decision after consulting with the group.</th>
<th>Decisions are best made in consensus with the whole team.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td>5 6 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Authority is derived from one’s position.</td>
<td>Authority is earned through one’s achievements.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td>5 6 7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>One should only state things that are relevant and thought through.</td>
<td>Talking about things that simply come to mind can lead to creation of new ideas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1 2 3 4</td>
<td>5 6 7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>