

Virtual Teams that Actually Work

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THE Competitive Advantage in a Global Workplace



Over Thanksgiving, a cousin shared how much she loves her new job but how frustrated she has become working, for the first time, as part of a geographically dispersed team. I wasn't too surprised because she's such a "people person." She's warm, witty, imbued with a high degree of emotional intelligence, and hard-working. Put simply, I can fully understand why she might be pulling her hair out. Susan is typical of an outstanding employee whose skills and abilities are being challenged in ways she didn't anticipate. She really didn't see this one coming. Yet, doesn't most of the world work in some kind of a virtual teaming environment? I mean, it is hardly "breaking news" that most of us interact regularly with people with whom we are not co-located. As we move from the Industrial Age to the Digital Age, we have to recognize that an office in "the cloud" is anything BUT the same as one in a brick and mortar building. We cannot pretend that working virtually is the same as working with someone next to you or down the hall. Working virtually has its own rules for job-sharing, strategies for effective collaboration, and discernible competencies for both leaders and team members. Guess what? We ignore them at our own peril!

So, what does this virtual world look like?

- Just as we “manage workflow” and “lead others,” we also have to manage distance. It doesn’t just happen. We have to direct the geographic dispersion and make it work FOR the team.
- We have to face up to the characteristics and challenges of virtual teams. Technology can make it easier, however, the nature of “work” today (less manufacturing) and the globalization of talent drive the trend to working this way. Yet, distance IS way too often an impediment to working effectively.
- Lack of face-to-face contact, cultural and language differences, time zone challenges, multi-generational issues, varying familiarity with technology, etc., are all real and deserving of their own exploration. Lost in the shuffle is the fact that some of us are better suited to working virtually than others. We all have varying tolerances for working autonomously, dealing with ambiguity, and working in what can seem to be a less-structured environment.
- Charles Handy, in an article in *The Harvard Business Review* writes, “Few are going to be eager advocates of virtuality when it really means that work is what you DO, not where you GO.”

Studies thus far indicate that creating a team identity starts with understanding two main factors - the Distance Factor (overcoming feelings of isolation and detachment) and the Culture Factor. The latter can be national, organizational, or functional boundaries. Other cultural factors are age, educational societal norms, family background, work history, and even physical/psychological differences. No news flash here. Cultural differences and distance issues are a fact of life in any workplace, but they are compounded when people work in different time zones. Contractual work also means that people don’t necessarily share a company/organizational heritage. In cyberspace, we know even less about “what we don’t know,” let alone how differences may show up and impact the team. Addressing all of the issues in such a complex environment could fill scores of blogs, but we can start by identifying one group of related challenges - the necessity to foster collaboration, create commitment, and build a sense of community. The magic word here? TRUST. It’s the foundation for team performance. Until there is trust, there IS no team. Ever. Once virtual team members begin to know and understand one another, the first step is taken toward trusting one another, but it doesn’t happen by accident. One of the buzz phrases flying around us today is “employee engagement.” Trust and engagement go hand-in-hand. In a virtual setting, you have to work twice as hard to pull it off. As noted in the NMA...THE Leadership Organization's short course, [Building Virtual Teams](#), success in working virtually comes from EVERY member of the virtual team executing specific strategies and carrying their own weight. Should the leader seek to develop particular skills that can make a difference? Absolutely. However, at the end of the day, the best-performing virtual team members (and leaders) are acutely aware of how others perceive them and how their behavior affects their team’s productivity. They are sensitive to all the issues that affect trust; and most importantly, they frequently seek and give feedback to one another. As my cousin looks at her virtual team, she needs to be mindful of a whole range of skills and tactics for improving the group’s performance. Some common “how tos” to focus on are:

- **Creating a team identity**
- **Discovering how to “jump start” a new team**
- **Assembling the “right” team of people and talents**
- **Developing specific communication strategies for the team**
- **Making sure there is clarity of purpose (you’d be surprised how often there is none!)**
- **Setting the stage for how decisions will be made**
- **Implementing “client management” strategies that keep the momentum going**
- **Focusing on accountability (the “lack of” usually identified as the #1 irritant in the virtual world)**
- **Managing conflict when you can’t see “the opponent”**
- **Providing meaningful feedback that will allow a group to move past seemingly “invisible” obstacles**
- **Being astute enough to “see” commonly recognized “signs of trouble” for a virtual team. Trust me, they ARE visible and discernible.**

Working together virtually can be especially rewarding to those who recognize it has its own set of rules and its own measures of success. It takes work, it takes the right mindsets, and you can argue that each team creates a culture of its own. We’ve all been on the “information highway” for decades. Now we’re learning how to drive on the virtual highway. While no one is suggesting that you have to take a test to get your license, you can learn how to avoid the most common accidents. Luckily, there ARE ways to improve the chances of success for a virtual team. Maximizing the “return” from a virtual workforce is contingent upon a planned, long-term commitment to growing and developing your remote employees.

About the Author



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Steve Bailey, CM, is Executive Director of NMA ... THE Leadership Development Organization. Since 1925, NMA has been a pioneer in developing working men and women via a federation of chapters and an Individual Membership Program. The Association began with foreman training, expanded to management training, and now focuses on helping organizations develop leaders at all levels of the business. Steve received both his Bachelor's degree and his Master of Public Administration degree from West Virginia University. He sits on the Risk Management Faculty of The Sigma Chi International Fraternity and is a facilitator at the Balfour Leadership Training Workshop each summer, teaching leadership skills to over 2,000 undergraduate college men nationwide.