Building Virtual Teams: Strategies For High Performance

Guest post written by Linda Stewart

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It’s possible that you’re reading this while also participating in a virtual team meeting – either by videoconference, a webinar service, or by phone. In fact, you might be the team’s leader, and guilty of the multitasking that plagues virtual teams — that nagging pattern where members quietly knock off to-do list items while connected to others around the globe.

Virtual teams are a fact of business life for most of us and running them effectively is fast becoming a major challenge. And the challenge is only getting bigger, according to a 2011 Forrester survey of large companies – including many in the Fortune 500. More than half of those surveyed by Forrester (56%) expect virtual teams to increase over the next couple of years. An almost equal number (57%) said earning trust is a key hurdle for managers of virtual teams.

There’s a widespread view in business that virtual teams are managed badly. Building relationship is perhaps the biggest challenge. Other issues cited in recent studies include: difficulty in building a shared sense of purpose; over-reliance on electronic communications; low team cohesion and trust; and the general sense that virtual team members are less satisfied with the team experience than team members in the same location.

There is good news though: Many companies across the business spectrum are discovering how to make virtual teams work. What’s more, they’re learning that the key to success lies beyond a reliance on the latest & greatest technology platforms and tools.

In fact, research on high-performing companies makes a strong case for the link between collaboration excellence and business results. Interaction Associates’ annual survey of some 211 business leaders at more than 150 companies — Building Trust in Business — had something to
say about that as recently as 2009, citing “people and process skills” as 90% of the collaboration equation; “technology” rated only 10%.

Of course, technology is vital to connecting virtual teams. Let’s assume that your company has all the latest and greatest tools. What else is necessary to help virtual teams get excellent results?

It turns out that a good, time-honored focus on interpersonal skills and process discipline – the nuts and bolts of collaboration – is key to driving strong results from virtual teams.

Here’s how you can make virtual collaboration effective and your dispersed teams a success:

- **Strike a balance**

Leading a virtual team requires a varied skill set, but the success of any kind of team relies on a balance of three key factors: results, process and relationship. Results are the output of the team, and typically the bottom line that the company measures. But it’s important not to lose sight of the fact that a leaders’ attention to process and relationship concerns will have an enormous impact on the team’s ultimate results.

Let’s break it down a bit more, in terms of team members’ satisfaction: “Results” relates to a desire to strive for a goal or accomplish a task. “Process” relates to their desires for predictability and influence. “Relationship” is about the need for rapport: how we’re treated, and the extent to which we feel valued, included, and safe. Successful team leaders, focused on keeping team members performing at high levels, will act in ways that meet all three satisfaction needs. When the three are out of balance, team performance suffers.

So, what can a team leader do to boost success in these areas of team satisfaction? The virtual team leader can’t rely on building rapport in hallway conversations with team members, nor can she use typical in-person visual cues like a smile, a nod or a pat on the back. Virtual team leaders can best build rapport and meet process needs during virtual team meetings.

Specific skills a leader may use are:

- **Ease off on results**

I’m not looking to get you fired – of course, results are important. But team leaders tend to focus on them exclusively, thereby making a serious error. I’ll let you in on a little secret about teams: Results are a lagging indicator of success, and you won’t get good results until you pay solid attention to the leading indicators, process and relationship. Virtual teams need strong processes and active efforts at building relationships. As team leader, make a strong investment of time and efforts there — and watch how the team’s results dramatically improve.

- **Beef up team processes**

Here the focus needs to be on increasing both predictability and influence. To increase predictability on the team: Ensure participants in a virtual meeting know why they are involved
and what is expected of them. This will help empower your team members, reduce their urges to multi-task, and help them remain engaged throughout the meeting.

To increase influence: Build understanding and agreement. Check your understanding when proposals are made: “Are you saying that . . . ?” Obtain explicit verbal agreements on any decisions – don’t assume agreement from silent team members.

- **Build relationships**

This needs to be a major priority, and the best way to build deeper relationships across a virtual team is to focus on trust, appreciation, empathy and rapport. Trust increases with transparency. Vocally express the rationale for your actions and decisions. Externalize your thought process (“I’m trying to figure out . . . and right now I’m thinking that . . . “) Provide frequent updates that communicate both what’s known and what’s not known.

To increase **appreciation**, focus on what’s working and express that frequently. Say “thank you” more – and call out team members by name. Learn what matters to the people with whom you work and begin meetings with relationship-building conversations.

To boost **empathy**, use active listening without judgment, and express acceptance of questions, challenges and differing opinions. Share your own feelings about facing uncertain situations. Be real. To deepen rapport, try sharing personal information about yourself and your vision of success. Enjoy relationship-building activities not specifically related to getting work done.

If it’s true — as I speculated earlier — that you might be reading this while participating on a virtual team, you’re not alone. Hopefully, though, you now have more insights into how to drive performance with team members across the miles.