LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS IN TIMES OF DISRUPTION

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More than ever before in our professional lives, we are forced to work remotely — which for many of us, also means leading in a virtual space.

It is likely that, in the past, you had to do some of your teamwork virtually. But now, most, if not all, of that teamwork is happening with members tucked inside their homes, miles apart from one another. And even where the set-up is not fully virtual, meter-apart meetings have quickly become the new face-to-face.

Compared to virtual teams, face-to-face teams have several advantages. First, there is less room (no pun intended) for miscommunication. Second, there is greater warmth and social camaraderie shared amongst members of face-to-face teams. Third, face-to-face teams are better able to make use of non-verbal cues and behaviors. And lastly, there is less disjointed, asynchronous rhythm to communication, which can lead to lost momentum and increased detachedness.

So how does a leader get around these hurdles in order to reach the desired results — both in terms of task and team spirit? What are the best practices for leading a virtual team and how can you achieve an equal (if not higher) level of engagement and effectiveness when working in a virtual environment?

Encourage more open information sharing

Teams share two types of information: unique and open. Whereas unique information sharing (UIS) is sharing information specifically about the task at hand, open information sharing (OIS) is sharing *any* information amongst members — sometimes information that has absolutely nothing to do with the project with which the team is tasked.

Paradoxically, while OIS better predicts team effectiveness because it helps bond team members and creates greater camaraderie, it is exactly the type of information sharing that virtual teams do less of. Virtual teams have the tendency to be highly task oriented; to focus on what needs to be done rather than how it is being done. This can be an advantage, as there is less distraction in virtual teams. However, it can also be a disadvantage.

Leaders of virtual teams can encourage more OIS by doing things like starting a meeting by requiring every team member to share something funny that happened to them in the last three days, or starting a Trello board where team members can post articles, memes or other funny or interesting material.

The leader should also be the one to "set the tone at the top" by openly discussing non-task-oriented information.

Take the emotional temperature of your team
One of the advantages that a perceptive leader has in working with a face-to-face team, is that he or she can detect the emotional tenor of the team and individual members. Does Marilyn seem particularly energized about the latest results? Does Douglas appear to be distracted? Is Kara more motivated than usual, while Christoph seems restless?

This ability for a leader to take the emotional "pulse" of a team is critical for successful team functioning, as it provides valuable data about the health of the team and their engagement. Such information provides the leader with week-by-week fluctuations in how the team feels,

while also allowing the leader to keep track of members who might be feeling disenfranchised from others or discouraged about recent events.

In a virtual team, this is much more difficult to do, risking that the team could experience difficult periods, which are overlooked by the team leader, or single individuals who get lost in the fray. The eventual result may be missed deadlines, inappropriate output, or in the worst-case scenario, departure from the team.

When a team is working virtually, I advise using what are known as "experience sampling apps" (a quick search for such apps will generate a variety of options). In short, these apps allow team members to register how they are feeling about the team and the team's work at various, sometimes random, points in the workday.

The leader can program the app to ask individual members specific questions like: "How motivated do you feel right now?" or "How much frustration do you feel about your work?" The answers can provide daily, weekly and monthly reports on the team's overall emotional state. They can also determine if there are emotional outliers in the group — those who might feel particularly discouraged, frustrated or motivated.

Introverts aren't better than extraverts in a virtual space

Extraversion is a personality trait that describes how individuals use energy from the outside world, as well as how they give energy back to those around them. People low in extraversion (or "introverts") tend to get energy from being alone and give less energy to the social space around them. In contrast, people high on extraversion (or "extraverts") derive energy from their social interactions from others (the more the better) and tend to give energy back to the world around them in abundance.

Because working virtually often engenders a lot of time working in isolation — either in teams that are far away and/or from one's home or a remote office — people tend to assume that introverts function better than extraverts in virtual teams.

But this is not what the research indicates. Why?

As extraverts crave human interaction and actually require it to stay motivated, they are more likely to reach out to team members more regularly and stimulate interaction amongst team members.

This is not to say that introverts don't have an important role to play on the team. They absolutely do! Introverts tend to be the ones who think before speaking in virtual meetings and can feel satisfied working alone for long periods at a time. By contrast, including extraverts in your team, you will increase the likelihood that your team will maintain important emotional connections with one another and experience increased feelings of "teamness."

Don't worry about over-engaging

Research on face-to-face interactions suggests that a competitive approach to resolving conflict, in which individuals try to assert their power to get a desirable outcome, is a highly negative and destructive force in teams. However, surprisingly, a competitive approach to conflict doesn't always have the same effects in a virtual space.

When interacting virtually, being competitive can often be mistaken for mere involvement, whereas more cooperative approaches, like compromise, can be misperceived as being uninvolved and disengaged. This is not to suggest that you should encourage ultra-competitiveness in your virtual teams. However, do consider setting an example of the tenor you expect from your team by taking your involvement up a notch; lean on the side of activity rather than passivity, even if it veers into the territory of being competitive.

Take advantage of the first opportunity to come together face-to-face

After a long period of quarantine, make an opportunity for your team to come together face-to-face. Perhaps not to work on a task, but rather to share some social moments together.

Humans are still fundamentally social beings. They thrive on social interaction. In fact, neuro-psychological research shows that the emotional region of our brain activates differently, and less fully, when we engage in virtual interactions versus real, face-to-face ones. In virtual set ups, it is still critical for teams to get together on a regular basis — the research prescribes no less than once every three months. This is truer than ever after a period of social isolation.

When you bring your team together after a long period of isolation, your first instinct might be to fill the first weeks with lots of task-oriented meetings, since you are so eager to get things done now that your colleagues are in front of one another rather than behind their home doors. But this important occasion should prioritize rebuilding the team cohesion. Such team-building activities could be something as simple as a relaxed lunch or as elaborate as a team cooking lesson, where all members eat what the others cook. After a long period apart, those social bonds need to be reinforced once again.