



LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS

4 WAYS TO INCREASE ENGAGEMENT WHEN YOUR TEAMS AREN'T FACE-TO-FACE

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One of the most common questions (and complaints I hear) from managers in the digital age is, “How do I work better with my virtual team?” This is a 5-million-franc answer, as the paucity of rigorous research on virtual teams is astounding. We know a lot about what it takes to enhance the 3 E’s (efficiency, engagement and enjoyment) within face-to-face teams but very little about what it takes to build these in the virtual space.

Here’s what we do know.

1. **Take the emotional temperature of your team.** One of the advantages for a perceptive leader of working with a team face-to-face is that he or she can detect the emotional tenor of the team and its individual members. Does Tom seem particularly energized about the latest results? Does Karoline appear to be distracted? Is Sarah more motivated than usual while Marc seems restless? This ability for a leader to take the emotional “pulse” of a team is critical for its successful functioning; such information not only provides the leader with week-by-week fluctuations in how the team is feeling about things but also allows the leader to keep track of members who might be feeling disenfranchised from the other members or discouraged about recent events. In a virtual team, this is much more difficult to do, and there is thus a risk that the team leader does not see that the team is experiencing a difficult period or that an individual is getting lost in the fray, eventually leading to missed deadlines, inappropriate output or, in the worst case, departure from the team.

One recommendation is to use “experience sampling apps” with virtual teams (a quick search for such apps will generate a variety of options). These apps allow team members to register how they are feeling about the team and the team’s work at various points in the workday. The leader can program the app to ask individual members specific questions (e.g. “How motivated do you feel right now? “How frustrated do you feel by your work?”), receive daily, weekly and monthly reports on the team’s overall emotional tenor, and determine if there are emotional outliers in the group (e.g. people who are feeling particularly discouraged, frustrated or demotivated).

Of course, an app can never be a substitute for seeing and talking to one’s team members daily. There are also shortcomings in terms of interpretation. For example, the word “discouraged” might mean something different to Marie, a native English speaker in Ireland, and to Martijn, a native Dutch speaker in the Netherlands. And assigning five out of five on “feeling motivated” might mean something very different to Pascual in Mexico City and to Ye Chen in Beijing. But in the absence of the ability to meet face-to-face, it is the best substitute that I am aware of.

2. **Don’t underestimate the value of face-to-face interactions.** Even in an age of Facebook, YouTube and WhatsApp, individuals are still fundamentally social beings who thrive on human interaction. In fact, neuro-psychological research has demonstrated that the emotional region of our brain activates differently (and less fully) when we engage in virtual interactions compared to real, face-to-face ones. But in teams that work largely virtually, face-to-face interaction is often rare. In such contexts, it is still critical for teams to get together regularly (the going rate is no less than once every three months) and ensure that meaningful, team building activities are planned during this period. When we have primarily virtual interactions with our teams, our tendency is to sometimes jam-pack face-to-face interactions with lots of task-oriented meetings because we are so eager to get things done when our colleagues are in front of us instead of thousands of miles away. But these privileged occasions should allot as much time to building team cohesion and understanding as to work- or task-related activities. Team-building activities can be as simple as a relaxed lunch in a quiet location or as elaborate as a team cooking lesson, where all members eat what the others cook. This will help your team members see each other as individuals, build respect for one another, and form the network that must outlast the long-distance teamwork. Face-to-face interactions allow team members to enhance their bonds.

3. **Introverts aren't better than extraverts in a virtual space.** Introversion versus extraversion is a personality trait that describes how individuals use energy from the outside world and how they give energy back to those around them. Introverts tend to get energy from being alone and give less energy to the social space around them. In contrast, extraverts derive energy from their social interactions with others (the more the better) and tend to give a lot of energy back to the world around them.

Because working virtually often equates to spending 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 substantiated by the research. 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 among team members. This is not to say that introverts don't have an important role to play on the team (they tend to be the ones who think before speaking in virtual meetings and can feel satisfied working alone for long periods at a time). But the important take-away from this research isn't to exclude extreme extraverts from virtual teams for fear that they will be unhappy or to staff virtual teams with only introverts. Excluding extraverts will increase the likelihood that your team will lose important emotional connections with one another and experience reduced feelings of "teaminess."

4. **Don't worry about overengaging.** Research on how individuals deal with conflict cites two generally beneficial approaches to conflict – collaboration and compromise – and two generally destructive approaches to conflict – avoiding and competition. Collaboration means that you work with others over time to find a suitable solution and compromise means that you find a quick solution that is acceptable to all parties. In contrast, avoiding means either avoiding conflict resolution altogether or procrastinating as much as possible about dealing with the conflict. The competitive approach, on the other hand, is a power-oriented approach that involves trying to assert one's power in the situation to reach an outcome that is more desirable for oneself.

However, surprisingly, these approaches to conflict don't always have the same effects in a virtual team. Collaboration still has a positive influence and avoiding resolution still has a destructive effect on the team. But research has shown that while a competitive approach to conflict can be counter-productive in the real world, in the virtual world, being competitive can often be (positively) mistaken for mere involvement, whereas more cooperative approaches, like compromise, can be misperceived as just not being involved and engaged. So, what do you do with this information? Try to adjust your conflict management style when working in a virtual team so that you "kick your involvement up a notch" – meaning lean on the side of activity rather than passivity – even if it veers into the territory of being competitive.

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