



Working with Virtual Teams: Session One

Discovering and Fostering Characteristics of Effective Virtual Teams

Rachel Welborn
Sam Boyster
Dan Kahl
Julie Robinson
Neal Vines

Virtual teams are groups of individuals that work together from different geographic settings, relying heavily on different communication technologies to collaborate. They may be together face-to-face on a limited basis, but primarily work from remote settings.

Why Virtual Teams:

Advantages:

- Can provide a greater range of expertise / larger pool of talent
- More cost effective
- Broader perspectives
- Flexibility of scheduling and managing responsibilities
- Expands the potential scope of interaction that is possible

Challenges:

- Communication
- Scheduling across time zones
- Team rapport / teamwork
- Differing leadership skills
- Potential for lower commitment
- Technology issues
- Limited face-to-face interactions

The Verdict is In: Virtual Teams Win! Sometimes

Virtual teams have been proven to out-perform co-located teams when the characteristics of the team align well with their tasks. Some of the components to consider in forming a successful team include processes, membership, size, trust, communication, leadership, and shared vision and goals.



Team Processes—Two Categories:

- Task related processes (those that foster contribution of all members) include those that:
 - Increase coordination of tasks
 - Balance member contributions
 - Support members
 - Communicate efficiently and effectively
- Teamwork processes (those that increase cohesion of the group) include those that:
 - Establish and maintain interpersonal bonds
 - Provide mutual support
 - Resolve conflict effectively

The greater the degree of dispersion, the greater the effort needed to fostering strong teamwork skills.

“It is unrealistic to bring together individuals from different locations with the expectation that they will automatically know how to collaborate in a virtual environment.”

Siebdrat, et al

Right Team - Membership:

Not everyone is cut out for virtual teamwork. People that tend to work more effectively in the virtual environment have these qualities:

- Good communications skills,
- Able to work independently,
- A self-starter,
- High emotional intelligence,
- Adaptable to change
- Willing to adopt new technology.

Right Team - Size:

- Most effective virtual teams have less than 10 members
- A simple demonstration: If each team member needs to have a single one-on-one conversation with each other person this results in:
 - 10 conversations for 5 members
 - 45 conversations for 10 members
 - 78 conversations for 13 members
- Larger groups allow for “social loafing” – the tendency for a member to reduce effort when they feel less responsible for output.



- If a team is too large, one approach is to divide the large team into smaller sub groups with team leaders who then form a leadership committee.

Trust:

- The less physical distance among team members, the greater degree of emotional connection naturally develops due to “water cooler” talk, conversations that happen on a daily basis just because of proximity.
- Trust is essential to effective team functioning.
- So, virtual teams must be much more intentional about finding ways to build trust than co-located teams.
- Three anchors to building trust:
 - Swift trust – Develops “instantly” when team comes together around a common cause/goal. But can also disappear quickly if not nurtured.
 - Interpersonal relationships - Connects members to each other through true relationships. Must be intentional in virtual groups as proximity does not allow for more natural development
 - Necessary touchpoints – Even virtual teams need face-to-face touchpoints at key points in their work such as:
 - Kicking off the project – to kindle and deepen swift trust
 - Onboarding of new members
 - Celebrating successes
 - Tackling tough problems

Communication: Best when it...

- **Is predictable:** team leaders schedule regular meetings (video and face-to-face), create a communication routine, providing the team with something familiar which puts team at ease, reduces stress, and increases accountability and production.
- **Uses the right tool for right purpose:** leaders know what tools work best for the type of communication necessary such as:
 - Video conferencing—longer, more complex issues
 - Email—short answers that may need a “paper trail”
 - Chat—short answers that do not need to be archived
- **Ensures members are comfortable with technology**—leaders invest time in ensuring all members are comfortable with the technology the team will use. Proper use of video, for example, promotes social trust.
- **Provides redundancy**—leaders follow-up video conferences with an email of shared decisions, action steps, etc.



- **Clearly articulates expectations**—when sending communication, leaders make clear statements such as “I need [what] by [when],” or “This is an FYI—no action required.”

Good communication: Right Processes: Effective virtual team meetings use good basic meeting management techniques and foster engagement and interactions. Sample guidelines include:

- Set expectations up front; reinforce at each meeting
- Ask questions frequently
- Limit monologues — no more than three sentences before asking for an interaction
- Verify and validate that everyone heard you or another team member who is speaking
- Pay attention to who has talked and on what topics; call on quiet participants
- Send long explanations out ahead of time in writing
- Foster communication before, during, and after meetings

Communication: Right Technology:

- Use the right tools for the right purpose
- Ensure team members are all comfortable with the technology being used
- Use video calls to promote social trust and foster clear communication , especially on complex issues – chatting and emails can easily lead to misunderstandings
- Employ project management tools to promote shared understanding of deadlines, assigned tasks, progress, and responsibility.

Leadership:

Great virtual team leaders:

- Serve as coordinators vs “command and control” managers
- Share power by leaning on specific team member expertise as appropriate
- Foster a sense of balance of perceived power
- Slow down to speed up
- Provide and request regular status reports



Shared Vision, Goals, and Expectations:

- Establish a common purpose or vision – Establish and common purpose and vision about why the team is together
- Have clear and detailed deliverables – provide a detailed description of the tasks at hand, timelines, expected outcomes, and responsibilities. Give the team freedom to shape how it happens. (Don't micromanage.)
- Encouraging thoughtful critiques
 - Set the tone for caring criticism
 - Ask the question – what are we missing
 - Designate someone on each call to watch for blind spots or what is not said
- Establish and enforce team expectations—such as no multi-tasking, proper video usage, everyone engaged. Make sure to set up a reward system to keep your team motivated and to better pinpoint the team members that can take on more responsibility.

Summary:

Virtual teams have tremendous potential to outperform their co-located counterparts. However, to achieve this success, virtual team leaders must work diligently to foster the characteristics and processes that make virtual teams great.

“You can’t get away
with lazy leadership
[in virtual teams].

You must
proactively reach
out to people
regularly to create a
sense of teamwork
and community.”

--Laura Hambley