4 keys to boosting virtual and global team performance

We live in an increasingly connected and globalised world where even fewer teams meet in person. Our experience and research show that the lack of face to face interaction negatively impacts both trust and communication (no surprises there). So how do you unlock performance in virtual teams? We've distilled 4 factors which positively impact virtual team performance. The first two build trust and the second two focus on communication:

1. Stimulate social connection
2. Demonstrate competence and reliability
3. Leader interaction with the team
4. Communication between team members.

First build foundations of trust

"Trust is the glue of the global workspace" O'Hara-Devereaux & Johansen 1994

Certainly, that's our experience with teams. Trust is a foundation: teams that rate themselves lower on 'Feeling Trust' are most like to struggle to have the quality of challenging discussion needed to make tough decisions and then hold each other to account.

1. Find ways to stimulate human and social connection

MIT's Human Dynamics Laboratory developed a rigorous way of measuring team effectiveness using badges which captured 100 data points and identified clear communication patterns that make for successful teamwork. They found that "social time turns out to be deeply critical to team performance, often accounting for more than 50% of positive changes in communication patterns". It creates a sense of connection and belonging and more scope to understand each other.

This is especially important with multicultural teams where language, business and country culture and norms will be very different. Without informal opportunities to 'pop in' or meet at the coffee machine, virtual teams benefit from a more structured and planned approach to building trust. It might seem mechanistic or formulaic and without this, there's a risk that team members fail to build

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the quality of connection that gives them confidence they can rely on each other. Worse still team members can start making assumptions about others' intentions or actions without the verbal and nonverbal cues we use face to face.

What helps is finding creative and semi structured ways to stimulate what David Maister in his 'Trust Equation' calls 'intimacy'. Examples include

- Making time at the beginning of a meeting to get to share personal updates (it could be what they did at the weekend, something about family, sharing pictures of where they work).
- Virtual 10-minute coffee breaks.
- Taking time to build a positive climate by asking team members to acknowledge each other's contributions, qualities, and achievements.
- Being creative and sharing the responsibility among team members to find ways to do this can build stronger bonds.

2. Demonstrate competence and reliability

In his article entitled 'Managing in a Virtual Workplace', Wayne Casio argues that *"Trust is critical in a virtual team because traditional social control based on authority gives way to self-direction and self-control. Members of virtual teams need to be sure that all others will fulfil their obligations and behave in a consistent, predictable manner"*. For me this underlines the importance of 2 other factors that Maister cites as ingredients of trust – credibility and reliability.

If team members don't feel confident that their peers have the right expertise or doubt that they can rely on each other to deliver, performance will suffer. This is more challenging when team members have little exposure to each other's day to day activities. Paying conscious attention to building this pays off.

- Leaders play a critical role in establishing this by **creating clear roles and expectations and holding team members to account for quality delivery** (and as teams develop, they will hold each other to account).
- Successful global teams don't assume that other members share the same beliefs/ expectations and values) and **take time to establish their norms** (e.g. how decisions will be made).
- **Sharing** information about past performance – **the skills and expertise you bring to a team**. Also taking time to review achievements and challenges/ where you want to call on help and advice builds connection and confidence.
- Live chat and online tools (if used well) can provide speedy means of tracking accomplishments. Jeff Boss suggests posting yesterday's accomplishments so that team members can see how their individual efforts map against others. That seems a lot to me – the more important question is *"How can we ensure we all have confidence in the progress we are making towards our shared goals?"*

Next - focus on quality and quantity of regular communication

Research by Ravi S Gajendran (University of Illinois) found that **"members of globally distributed teams often feel isolated and excluded from their team's activities and decisions".** His conclusion was the both the quantity and quality of communication from the leader made a significant difference in team decisions.

3. As a leader, you set the tone

It seems that the most effective managers and leaders make a conscious, consistent effort to reach out regularly. A senior leader I once worked with took time to call each of his team at the beginning of each day to check in and find out what was happening, discuss priorities and offer support. And, of course, regular for one person might mean micromanaging for another, so agreeing the right frequency for different team members makes a difference. For some a weekly call to ask, "What are your priorities and how can I help you?" might be enough. It's about establishing the 'deal' the norms that will work – and then sticking to it.

4. Communication between team members

And, if it's only the leader who does this, this can create the 'hub and spoke' team. To stimulate interactions between team members, there needs to be shared activity and connection between team members. MITs research found that in effective teams (somewhat counter intuitively) there were side conversations between team members. So, if you want to create a more connected team ask yourself how you can make more of this happen. It could be:

- **Creating opportunities for shared learning** –several team members attend the same event share their reactions and learning and apply this to a live business question.
- **Using technology actively** – posing a question and asking team members to split into virtual 'break out rooms' to share their thinking and come back with conclusions
- A leader I worked with fast-tracked connection in his new team by asking smaller subgroups to work on key strategic questions and bring their first cut thinking for peer review to the next meeting. This meant they built awareness of each other's strengths and generated more discussion beyond the full group meetings. It also meant that precious time together was focused on more generative discussion and debate rather than 'inform' style meetings (which can sap energy)

In teams I have worked with all of this is boosted when the team meet at least once a year for several days.

And a final thought – all of the above sound simple yet become more intricate when you have the added complexity of different languages and cultures.

Alyse Ashton

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Alyse Ashton and Richard Spence are the co-authors of the Team Health Check and draw on over 50 years' combined experience as team coaches and facilitators working with global organisations.

alyse@eye2eyedev.com
uk.linkedin.com/in/alyseashtoneye2eye

richard.spence@clearpictures.org.uk
https://www.linkedin.com/in/clearpictures/

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