

How to stimulate clear communication in virtual teams



Our last article highlighted “**4 Keys to Boosting Virtual and Global Team performance**”. Two key areas were generating good communication – firstly, between the leader and the team and secondly, between team members.

A senior leader, I recently coached, shared a Norwegian term for the process of creating a climate where open dialogue can happen – it’s “raising the ceiling”. I love the sense of space and possibility in this phrase.

So, if you are leading a virtual or global team, how can you ‘raise the ceiling’ and dial up the quantity and quality of communication so that the right conversations happen?

Here are some tools that build on the ideas in our last article.

Name of Tool: Effective communication for clear decisions and alignment

Group size: Up to 10

Problem statement: This (virtual) team isn’t yet managing to have the quality of interaction and communication that enables us to have the real conversations, solve problems together and make great decisions.

These ideas are particularly useful if your team needs to develop strength in building Courageous Challenge, Commitment and High Quality thinking – and some of you might argue that this is foundational in team performance.

Key message/ outcome:

Setting up a virtual meeting to create clear communication and dialogue so that you make rigorous decisions and generate alignment (and this applies to face to face meetings as well).

Facilitation step by step:

1. Be clear about the **purpose of the meeting** (obvious and in our experience, this is often missing). Why are you meeting? What will make it worthwhile? What is a successful outcome? What would you like participants to leave thinking, feeling, saying, and doing?
2. Decide on the **right approach/timing**. For example, at Intel in the late 90s, update meetings (to brief and inform) were short and sharp – usually less than 30 minutes. These were kept separate from problem solving/ decision-making meetings – which were longer and allowed more space for a topic to be fully explored. For a meaty topic, 45 minutes is a good rule of thumb. **Tip:** Divide the time you have in mind by the number of people to test whether there is enough space for genuine dialogue. Of course, trickier/ fuzzier subjects will demand more time.
3. **Establish your norms/ deal for decision making ahead of time.** You may choose to decide as the leader. And, if you want a more engaged, collaborative culture, I recommend involving team members – it takes time and pays dividends later. Some options:
 - Ask questions in 1:1 meetings.
 - Ask smaller groups of 2 or 3 to discuss these and come to the meeting prepared to share their combined views.

Questions for you to adapt:

- How are decisions made in your culture?
 - How would you like to be involved/ included in decision making?
 - What are your expectations of me?
4. How will you set up the **virtual room to encourage conversational turn taking** (see our article on How to Cultivate Shared Airtime in Teams) **and choose the question(s) that will focus the conversation and stimulate the appropriate conversation.** Remember that great questions trigger great discussion. Here are some options:
 - Send questions in advance and be clear that you plan to hear from everyone before an open discussion.
 - Set up a virtual round table and call people by name (this means you avoid energy-draining, uncomfortable silences or two people talking at once).

5. Actively surface debate

Prepare some questions to trigger discussion and debate. Examples are:

- What are the aspects of this we might not be seeing?
- If you stand in the place of our stakeholders/ clients/ employees/ shareholders, what would you want to add/ what reservations do you have?
- If there were something we are avoiding/ missing/ not saying, what would it be?

6. Getting to alignment

Yes doesn't mean people agree. And alignment doesn't mean we all agree 100% – I think it means; this is what we commit to so that we show up as a united team with a single message outside this virtual room. When you can't see people or only hear or see on video, subtle signals can be lost. If you add in language and cultural differences, it gets complicated. So, make it explicit. The quality of your question counts (sorry, did I say that before?).

The most common question I hear is “Does everyone agree?”. This works well if you have a vocal team with strong levels of trust and confidence to say what they think. And in most cases I would say ‘forget it’. Why? Because the ensuing... silence or ‘yes’ doesn't mean agreement. ‘Yes’ can mean anything from ‘Yes’ to ‘maybe’ to ‘if you say so’ even to ‘I understand’ in some Asian cultures. It's an easy question for the time pressed leader who wants to move on through an over packed agenda. The problem is that people find out at the coffee machine that they have very different interpretations of the outcome or, worse still, you waste time revisiting the same conversation and decision at the next meeting.

So, I recommend

- Summarise clearly the decision you are asking everyone to get behind and support (even if they don't personally agree!).
- Test that you've captured it accurately (e.g. Have I got that right?).
- Ask a clear question which tests alignment and then take time to hear from each person (briefly!) such as
 - To what extent can you align behind this? (1-10). If you have any reservations, what might they be?
 - Is there anyone who feels unable to actively support this decision when we leave the room (even if your personal viewpoint differs).

Original source: Alyse Ashton and a raft of learning around interaction in teams and meetings such as Behaviour Analysis in Training (Rackham); Utter Confidence (Ally Yates) and More Time to Think (Nancy Kline).

Alyse Ashton

References:

For more fresh thinking, resources and practical tools visit <https://eye2eyedev.com/resources/>

For more information visit:

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