

Making Collaboration between Virtual Teams Succeed

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“If you want to go fast, go alone, but if you want to go far, go together” — African saying

Cory Booker’s DNC speech, July, 2016

Most mid-size and large corporations not only have a global presence, but now rely on virtual teams to help them accomplish mission critical objectives. It is not uncommon for people in Raleigh to work with team members in Toronto, Mexico City, Shanghai and Bangalore. While on the surface, these teams work, collaboration could and should be a lot better. How? A critical ingredient to any team’s success is building trust through strong relationships.

Obviously, team members are introduced to each other when they come together to work on a project, but beyond knowing titles and names, most teammates don’t really know each other. In contrast, those from the same office often develop trusting relationships and tend to discuss problems with each other, inadvertently excluding members on the virtual team. Consequently, global members feel “out of the loop.” Some have even complained that US locations think they are superior to other members on the team. In fact, one person from Mexico said he felt like the stepchild others tolerated but didn’t see as an equal.

Study after study shows that when people know each other well, they are more committed and productive. They are also more receptive to feedback and are better able to have open dialogues around issues. In essence, they trust each other. Thus, Companies must look for ways to help dispersed teams understand each other’s culture and learn about them on an individual basis.

Some corporations bring people together 2-4 times a year. Typically, teams gather in person at the start and at certain achievement milestones. The project launch is very significant since these sessions lay ground rules

and set team goals. Important people to know are introduced and often mentors are assigned for more junior members. Eye contact and body language go a long way to kick-starting personal connections and trust. As one teammate said, “A lot can be learned about a person by hanging with them over coffee or dinner.”

If financial constraints prevent members from actually shaking hands with each other, video-conferencing is a second alternative. One company I work with moves the trust needle by having each person video a typical day in their life. Each new teammate shows their office or cube, whether in Shanghai or Bangalore. They introduce colleagues from the same office. The video also typically includes clips on their commute, as well as personal information- their spouses, pets, favorite foods or drink. When not working, what do they do? Do they enjoy fishing, boating, soccer, marital arts? Consequently, others form mental images of the person and learn more about on what’s important in this culture. When it comes time to sending emails, ping-ponging them or texting them, team members feel they really know them and the best way to approach them for answers.

Building trust is on-going. It can’t just be a one-time initiative. Taking five minutes at the beginning of weekly conference calls for people to share what’s going on with them personally or professionally is time well spent. The more people know, the more they care. The better they are to collaborate and work with each other successfully.

Virtual teams are a necessity in today’s business world, but even with the best global talent, there are hurdles. Building trust is a must if your company wants to go far. It starts with helping your dispersed teams know each other on more than a superficial level. The out-growth of this will be greater productivity and respect for the value each other brings.

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***Question:** Think about your team. What is your perception on how well they collaborate with each other? How are you virtual teams building relationships? We're interested in your reaction to this article. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

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