

WORKING
THROUGH
COVID-19

From viral to virtual: Steps to create a culture of collaboration in virtual teams during a time of crisis

The novel Coronavirus has dealt business a hand of cards it needs to learn to play with, and fast. Across the world, organizations are being forced to reorganize the way they work and collaborate within a matter of days, if not hours. The million-dollar question on everyone's mind is: "How do we ensure business continuity when we're all confined to our home offices?" And while collaborating in virtual and remote teams is nothing new, the swiftness and extent to which entire organizations will need to do so during very uncertain times, is unprecedented.

Focusing your team on being productive will require conscious attention and ongoing efforts over the coming weeks.

Here are our five top tips to get your newly virtual team running smoothly.



1. LEAD WITH CARE AND FOCUS

Great team collaboration starts with great leadership. In times of uncertainty and crisis, teams benefit from a leader who exudes calm and creates a safe space for the team to explore how they can best work together under the new circumstances. Leaders who listen with care and attention and who act to support and enable their team will create a fertile ground for great virtual collaboration.



- Make time for people to voice their concerns and make sure they feel heard. Be sure not to minimize nor heighten their concerns. Listen attentively and use phrases such as 'I hear and understand your concerns' that confirm you are engaged and actively listening.
- List the actions you will take to support and enable the team to work together smoothly over the coming weeks. Report back and re-check their needs regularly.
- Some of your team members may not have worked from home before, either due to the nature of their work or personal preference. If they feel they are less productive at home, spend some time exploring their challenges and ask the team to create their best practice tips so that others can benefit.



2. SHRINK THE DISTANCE

Research shows that one of the factors that ensures the success of a virtual team is meeting up in real life when the team is formed. Your team has had frequent, if not daily, face-to-face contact and has built up a bond with each other. Capitalize on this foundation to help them adjust to the new realities of virtual collaboration.



- Ramp up the frequency of communication and leverage all the tools at your disposal: email, phone, Skype/ Zoom, Yammer, WhatsApp, and others.
- Set up team and individual meetings on the same day every week to create a sense of rhythm and community.
- Make sure communication is two-way. Build in ways for people to contribute to meetings regularly by sharing progress updates, sharing best practices or hot tips or giving a shout-out to a member of the team that did something helpful that week.
- Don't forget the importance of having fun together! Create a private Yammer or Facebook group for some social sharing. (Start your virtual meetings by asking everyone to share a picture of an object on their desks or a picture of what they see outside their windows, for example.)



3. MAKE YOUR TEAM STRUCTURE FLEXIBLE AND FLUID

Think of your team in three dimensions: the core team, project sub-teams and an outer team network that can support with specific skills and knowledge when needed. Promote collaboration across the team by mixing and matching team members to different tasks and projects.



- Let the team know that you'll be working together more flexibly and fluidly across projects and explain that you will do so to build connection and collaboration while you're not physically together.
- Form virtual sub-teams that pair diverse members and rotate sub-team members to help support continuous connection and collaboration.
- Allow team members to set up or volunteer to project sub-teams amongst themselves. Allow them to distribute tasks as they see fit but ensure clarity on ownership.



4. BE CLEAR ABOUT GOALS BUT FLEXIBLE ABOUT ROLES AND TASKS

It is easy for virtual teams to become disconnected and disjointed in their efforts. In a virtual team, it is even more important to set up clear, measurable goals and a system to assess them.



- Be explicit about focus and goals and make sure there is clarity about who does what and when.
- Be sure that after every team meeting, the minutes and future work plan are posted to a team repository.
- Periodically do "after-action reviews" so the team can share learnings and help shape the way it wants to work more efficiently going forward.



5. ENCOURAGE TRUST AND OPEN COMMUNICATION

Virtual teamwork brings its own set of challenges, most notably that nuance is lost, non-verbal communication is absent, misunderstandings happen more easily, and genuine conversations occur less frequently. Building – and maintaining – trust in virtual teams is key to keeping the team productive and collaborating well.



- Take a few minutes at the beginning of every meeting to check in with participants to help maintain and deepen personal relationships.
- Share and rotate leadership responsibilities among members to deepen the sense of shared ownership and responsibility. (As team leader of a virtual team, see your leadership role as one of 'monitoring and mentoring'.)
- Don't micro-manage, which conveys a sense of distrust. Instead, as listed above, schedule regular progress updates and "after-action reviews".

To conclude, the outbreak and spread of the Coronavirus presents us all with a unique situation which we must learn to navigate together.

This is also an opportunity to challenge our own long-held assumptions about remote working and virtual collaboration. We may even surprise ourselves and learn that virtual teams can do outstanding jobs, if we believe they can and we support them to do so.

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