How to Best Support VIRTUAL TEAMS During the COVID-19 Crisis

Navigating the pandemic and its impact takes time, thought, and energy.

During this challenging and confusing time, do all you can to assist your leaders and teams. Things will change as you go through the pandemic together; however, what you do as a leader has not changed... fostering and maintaining a high performing team remains the same. Continue to prioritize the development of relationships with and within your teams. Continue to support a culture of curiosity and learning and help teams effectively reach their goals... while paying attention to your team’s emotional needs. Opportunity lies in how to do this entirely within remote technologies. First and foremost, make sure you are communicating succinctly with others, prioritizing virtual presence over polish. Honest conversations create trust and authentic interactions are key to making virtual meetings engaging versus transactional. Make sure your leaders understand this and are communicating similarly with their teams.

Adjusting to a 100% virtual work environment happens in two phases...

PHASE 1: TRIAGE & STABILIZE

Under disruption, we need to attend to basic human needs first and establish a sense of safe ground before we can once again attend to other responsibilities.

1. People need to feel empowered and supported. Working from home 100% of the time is also a new experience that will bring stresses as well as joy. Children and/or partners are also confined at home and quiet working space is at a premium. Equally as challenging a circumstance is found with those who are alone and don’t have family in isolation with them. We often forget the different kind of stress they may experience.

2. It’s important to recognize the normal fear or frustration responses that surface for you. Help leaders understand their own responses so that they can help team members reduce anxiety, regain a sense of stability and refocus on their goals. This is a time for being exceedingly human. Be a leader of high character and display visible habits of integrity, responsibility, compassion and forgiveness. Be present - actively listen to the very real fears and anxieties that your people are experiencing both professionally and economically.

3. You won’t have the answers to all of their questions. Be transparent and don’t let that keep you from actively listening. This is a time when leaders need to convey patience and empathy. People are going to get sick. Acknowledge the initial needs that arise for team members and the challenges they will be taking on seriously.
PHASE 2: REFOCUS & FORTIFY

During a crisis, people need a concrete sense of what they can do with clear boundaries and expectations. The goal is to have people see the crisis as disruptive not destructive.

1. It’s very important when your team is remote to set a routine and establish norms for everyone! One of the things people miss most is routine. How can you create a new routine for everyone? Set schedules for team and 1:1 meetings, work with your team to create norms for work response/delivery times and other protocols, and then help the team to stick to these commitments.

2. Maintaining TRUST and EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION is essential.

Effectively overcoming challenges and navigating change is only possible when contextual and interpersonal security and trust is strong. Smoothing out the bumps and glitches of communicating in a virtual environment might take a bit of time and patience but this is also a fantastic opportunity for teams to identify and better understand the dynamics of how they work together. Here are some quick tips to help ensure trust and communication remain strong between you, the leaders, and their teams:

1. Your relationship with team members/team leader is more critical now than ever. Invest time and effort in becoming their trusted ally and help them shine as they help their teams adjust to change and disruption.
2. Conduct team development offsites as a series of linked, 90-minute online sessions using VC and supporting tools like live chat. This is an opportunity for more in-depth, sustained change.
3. Virtual communication relies heavily on verbal communication. Communication will be slower. Leaders and teams will need to be consciously inclusive. Chat conversations and video meetings will need moderating to ensure team members don’t talk over one another. Be sure to verify on-screen visual impressions in words.
4. Send people updates and regular communication, even if there is not a lot of new information and the message is largely personal. No one will look back at this time and say, “My manager was so annoying with all the encouraging e-mails checking in on me.” When people are isolated, over-communication is more important than ever - over-index on this behavior.

REMEMBER: YOU ARE A LIMITED RESOURCE

Your well-being matters, too. Keep as healthy and sane as possible. Model self-care with your clients to maximize impact. You cannot do everything every team needs but you can still do a lot. Activate colleagues, supervisors, coaches and experts to help you prioritize in this new context.
1. **How Do I Design Effective Virtual Team Meetings?**

   **Prior to the event, POST a list of PARTICIPANT contact information:** This helps participants quickly connect during the offsite.

   **Verify BODY LANGUAGE:** Even when using video, we can’t easily read a person’s full body language. So, check in with team members about how they’re feeling and what they’re thinking to confirm or adjust your assumptions.

   **Best LENGTH of TIME:** While live team development sessions are often 1-2 days in length, virtual team sessions should be chunked into bite-sized pieces. For example, design a module of work that is 90 minutes (or no longer than two hours) in length. Then, take a break. At the start of your virtual offsite, be sure to devote a bit of time to explaining how learning and working in the virtual environment will differ from what they’re used to.

   **Remember to design in ADDITIONAL TIME** to do these periodic check-ins with the team within a video meeting.

   **Keep people actively ENGAGED:** It’s much easier to “lose the room” when facilitating virtually because there are many distractions you can’t see nor manage. It’s also harder for people to focus when interaction is restricted to a screen. Consider assigning everyone a role (e.g. timekeeper, chat box monitor, etc.). Plan regular breaks. Change the tempo and task regularly. Ensure everyone has a voice in the room (e.g. when you notice a quiet individual, be sure to call on them). Include process checks every 30 minutes to take the team's pulse. Ask, for example: “How productive is this conversation so far?” and measure with a thumbs up, thumbs down, neutral, or have people enter their response in the chat box.

   **Establish intimacy and TRUST:** This takes sincere, deliberate effort but it is manageable with care. Make sure to proactively acknowledge some of the difficulties and downsides yet highlight the honest reasons why this process will still dramatically improve the team’s odds of achieving their goals, despite disruption, chaos or risks.

   **Team FEEDBACK:** Be sure to establish ground-rules up front about how and when to give and receive feedback. For example, consider a virtual walk-and-talk when team members provide feedback to each other, such as what new behaviors are desired. Structure questions focused on desired behaviors vs. past behaviors to increase members’ receptivity to suggested changes.
2. How Do I Facilitate a Virtual Offsite?

**BEST PRACTICES**

**How LONG:** While live team development sessions are often two days in length, virtual team development sessions should be chunked into bite-sized pieces. For example, design a piece of work that is 90 minutes (or no longer than two hours) in length. Then, take a break. At the start of your virtual offsite, be sure to devote a bit of time to explaining how learning and working in the virtual environment will differ from what they’re used to.

**How to keep people ENGAGED:** Alternate between a large group meeting room and sub-group breakout rooms. In the sub-group breakouts, have people work together for 90-minute sessions to divide-and-conquer the work, change up their interaction, and maintain momentum. Pay attention to when energy goes up and down. Use your good tactics as a facilitator to bring the energy back (e.g. do a poll, have people check in through the chat box, have people brainstorm their ideas in the chatbox, etc.).

**How do you know if it is EFFECTIVE:** Ideally, you can formally assess the team in the beginning, and do quick re-assessments every 30 minutes via show of thumbs up/sideways or down. Ultimately, the degree to which the team is achieving its business goals is the true measure of effectiveness.

3. What Kind of Tech Support Do We Need?

**BEST PRACTICES**

**Digital DASHBOARDS:** Highly effective teams use digital dashboards to keep the leader and fellow team members updated on their status/progress achieving their goals. Giving each team member metrics about their project, processes and outcome measures is key to them remaining laser-focused and productive. All team members must become proficient with using dashboards. Likewise, it’s a good practice for HR partners to use the dashboard and other measurements to help the leader/team quickly diagnose the root cause of business performance gaps and to celebrate successes.

**ZOOM/WEBEX/Etc:** Take time to master all of the features, especially break-out groups and live chat, to be fully effective in virtual meeting facilitation.

**WHATSAPP/SLACK/Etc:** When the entire team is constantly in video or phone meetings, sometimes short messages are the best way to answer questions, provide just-in-time support or gently nudge.

**TEAM MODEL**

**TEAMING WITHIN:** The team’s ability to monitor their own performance and quickly adapt to changing circumstances depends on having a digital view of the lead and lag indicators of success. This allows each member to back each other up, balance their workload, solve problems and manage conflicts that get in the way of realizing their ultimate goals.

4. How Do I Support a Virtual Team in Challenge?

**OPENLY ADDRESS ISSUES:** Supporting a virtual team during times of conflict needs to be led carefully and with sensitivity. It begins with cultivating trust with each individual. Each
### BEST PRACTICES

A team member needs encouragement to say difficult things to each other (within the context of the ground rules). Consider adding brief relationship “check-ins” at the start and end of each virtual session to your intervention design. When possible, **SCHEDULE** challenging conversations when people are more likely to better access their emotional and physical energy (e.g. morning vs. late at night).

### VIRTUAL TECH

**VIDEO, not IM/TEXT**: Similar to live team development interventions, conflict is more effectively addressed through group and/or one-on-one “live video” sessions, not through chats, posts, or short messages. Suggest that people use their phones to connect via Blue Jeans to minimize an unstable video connection.

### TEAM MODEL

**TEAMING WITHIN**: Consider addressing interpersonal conflicts before working on the team’s task and processes. When interpersonal conflicts are addressed first, the team is better able to remove bottlenecks and produce strong results quickly.

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#### 5. How Do I Onboard New Leaders and Team Members?

**BEST PRACTICES**

**RELATIONSHIPS first**: To better ensure that the team understands the qualifications of the new leader or team member and her/his value to the team, have someone introduce the new leader/member as well as the person’s past successes and credentials. (People think more favorably of praise said *about* someone then of praise said by the person about his/herself.) Then, it’s crucial to help the new leader/team member initiate relationships with each team member, highlighting what they have in common outside of work, as well as in the future work together.

**VIRTUAL TECH**

**TECH SUPPORT**: If the leader and team will work 100% digitally, it is crucial that technical resources (e.g. hardware, software, training) be made available as soon as possible **before** or **on the first day** the new leader/member will start their new role. Make sure they’re fully proficient with all resources so they can successfully engage with the team remotely and lead effectively from the start.

**TEAM MODEL**

**DESIRED OUTCOMES**: Before a new leader/member steps into the details of the team, make sure you begin with the end in mind. **Where are team/individual outcomes now and where do they need to be in the future?** Leaders need to identify whether a team development intervention is necessary and/or sufficient to help the leader and team achieve their goals.