10-MINUTE GUIDE

Managing a Virtual Team

Your 10-Minute Guide to Managing Remotely

This guide looks at how managers can lead their teams remotely and get results.

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Virtual teams are becoming the norm, with more people working flexible hours, from home, from another country, or from the other side of the world.

There are many potential benefits in using virtual teams. They can get your people closer to your customers, provide 24-hour coverage across time zones, and reduce travel costs.

With virtual teams you can also recruit the right people, with the right skills, wherever they are in the world. And you can more easily integrate team members who joined through mergers and acquisitions.

But, co-workers who rely on technology have fewer opportunities for informal, chance conversations, and they can miss out on key information if it's not shared effectively. And conflicts can arise in virtual teams when messages get "lost in translation."

As a manager, it's your job to guide your team members through these challenges. So, how can you lead a virtual team effectively?

1. Pick the Right People

When you recruit people, make sure from the outset that they are able to handle the challenges of virtual working.

Look for people who, as well as being experienced for the role, are self motivated and well organized. They should also have excellent communication skills and be comfortable with technology. And they'll need to enjoy solving problems without hands-on guidance.

Look at personality, too. For example, strongly extroverted people may not be happy in a home-based role, and someone who likes to work alone may find virtual teamwork frustrating.

Use competency based interviews to assess candidates objectively, and ask appropriate questions to discover how they'd deal with likely scenarios.

2. Focus on Communication

A lack of face-to-face communication is the greatest challenge for a virtual team.

It'll rely heavily on company intranets, conference calls, email, instant messaging, video chats, and collaborative software to tap into members' knowledge and expertise. And it could get overloaded and confused.

Without the nuances of face-to-face communication, you may struggle to get your messages across clearly and sensitively. It's your responsibility to ensure that information has been understood, so encourage people to choose the right channel for each situation.

For example, if you need to deliver difficult or uncomfortable news, and you can't do it in person, use video chat or phone. If you need to agree goals or give instructions, choose email or another written method, so that there's a record of your conversation.

Be sure to carry out regular one-on-ones — at least monthly. These are vital when you can't "Manage By Wandering Around," so that you know what's going on. Also, your team members can talk through any problems that they are experiencing, without delay.

3. Build Trust

Look for opportunities to bring people together informally. This will help them to build trust, and to look to one another, as well as to you, for support.

If it's appropriate in your organization, encourage your people to use IM and social networking to connect with one another. These tools can give them an insight into their colleagues' personalities and interests.

Let them know that it's OK to spend time on this (within reason) as it's a team-building activity. But remind them of brand reputation and the risk of public criticism.

Talk with your team members about the physical and cultural differences that impact the way that you work:

• **Be aware of differing time zones and public holidays** to help you to decide when to hold meetings.

• **Rotate your meeting times** so that one person isn't always expected to attend outside his or her regular work hours.

• **Bring your team together in person** at least once a year, if you can. Although this can be expensive and time consuming, it can also strengthen relationships.

4. Motivate for Success

Each person needs to find the inner drive to keep going, and to show initiative, while remaining part of a team.

That's why key objectives need to be clear. However, it's tougher to discuss goals and preferred working styles when you're not able to meet with your people directly.

So, set aside time to check in with each team member about targets and achievements. You may want to ask them to work through a personality test, such as the Big Five Personality Traits Model, or the Margerison McCann Team Management Profile, so that you can understand more about what drives them, and get an insight into their strengths and weaknesses.

Make every effort to eliminate any elements of job dissatisfaction that your virtual team members may have, and aim to create the conditions for job satisfaction. Read our article on Herzberg's Motivation and Hygiene Factors for more on this.

Remember, too, that people who work virtually will want to have the same opportunities as those at "head office," so be sure to treat everyone fairly.

5. Understand the Challenges

It's tempting to avoid discussing the challenges that virtual working presents, for fear of looking weak or negative. However, the same problems are common to many virtual teams, and it's helpful to recognize them, discuss them, and find ways of working through them.

For example, it's common for misunderstandings to occur in virtual teams. It's easy for people to take a comment personally, or to jump to conclusions.

Virtual team members can also feel isolated, while technical problems such as slow internet speeds can cause frustration.

So, ask your team members regularly about the challenges that they face, and coach them to explore solutions. Then, help them to use their insights into the team and its tasks to come up with answers.

For example, if a team member can't participate in a brainstorming session because of time zone differences, ask her how she could use technology to submit her ideas. If another member of the team is feeling "out of the loop," what tools can he use to reach out to colleagues?

6. Provide Support

Give each team member the guidance and support that they need, regardless of their location. Create the virtual equivalent of an "open door policy." That is, make sure that team members know how to get what they need from you, and give them regular and specific feedback. At the same time, avoid micromanagement!

Remember to manage team members' expectations carefully. There will inevitably be aspects of virtual working that they won't be able to change, and it's important that they don't take out frustrations on colleagues. Instead, help them to manage stress, and encourage them to ask for help when they need it.

Key Points

Set up your virtual team for success by hiring people who can demonstrate that they're self motivated, well organized, and confident with online collaboration.

Then, make clear communication your priority, while acknowledging challenges, and supporting your people to use their insight to find solutions.

You can learn about many other team management skills at www.mindtools.com/rs/management.