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Even virtual Startup teams must work closely

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Almost every [startup](#) is a virtual team these days, since most don't start out with dedicated office space, and some or all members of the team work part-time or out of their own home. It's a small world, so these team members may not even be in the same town, or the same country. Outsourcing is just another extension of the virtual team concept to people you don't even know.

Working effectively with a virtual team of any sort has many challenges. How do entrepreneurs establish and maintain rapport with people they rarely see, and team members who have never met? How do they keep track of what everyone is doing and assure effective communication between all team members?

Experts on this subject, including Yael Zofi, in her recent book, "[A Manager's Guide to Virtual Teams](#)," has identified eight key characteristics of high-performing virtual teams, which every startup founder should understand and enable:

1

Members exhibit a global mindset – they look outward, not inward. Effective virtual leaders widen their focus from the local to the global, which implicitly creates an environment of respect. Respect engenders buy-in, without which members can't take ownership of work product and work toward a common goal.

2

Members share responsibility for achieving the mission. High performing teams have a sense of purpose where members internalize their piece of the mission, thereby transcending the isolation that defines working in a virtual environment. Team members develop an understanding about their mutual dependence to achieve objectives.

3

A culture of openness facilitates trust and authenticity. Effective founders work to create and maintain an environment of team trust to defuse miscommunications. They focus on behaviors, not on personalities, because they know this engenders trust. Then they "say what they mean and mean what they say" to model authenticity.

4

Members engage in meaningful communication with each other. High-performing virtual teams establish and maintain standards on frequency and modes of communication, and hold members accountable for acting accordingly. They also regularly use synchronous communication at critical points to speak with each other.

5

An easy flow of information exists using various forms of technology. Everyone must have access to appropriate technology to enable reliable, current exchanges of information. The amount of “pushed” information (unfiltered e-mails and phone calls) to team members is lower than “pulled” data (e-bulletin boards and intranets).

6

A conflict management mechanism. Conflicts are inevitable, and when even simple miscommunications don’t get acknowledged and fixed, trust gets eroded. The founder or leader must actively engage team members early, and follow up to ensure appropriate resolution. When this happens, lengthy energy-draining confrontations are avoided.

7

Work systems produce deliverables within defined constraints. When team members are geographically dispersed, a rigorous effort is required by all team members to coordinate and align components of critical work systems to meet deadlines within time and budgetary constraints.

8

Members have a positive “can do” attitude that spans time and distance. They must all assume their efforts will lead to success. When conflicts and tensions arise, as they inevitably do, members hold these situations within the context of the larger picture and look to quickly find solutions, rather than assign blame.

Technology has made virtual teams an everyday reality for entrepreneurs. Your challenge is to reduce the “virtual distance” between team members to zero, using personal communication, appropriate technology, and clear goals to maintain member satisfaction, collaboration, and innovation. Have you measured the virtual distance to your team members lately?

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