

BUSINESS 101: Managing Virtual Teams

Technology has made virtual teams far more common, if only to deal with many workers' desire to telecommute at least one or two days a week. Managing a virtual team is far different from managing a "real" team, however, creating new challenges for those who are far more comfortable with "old-school" situations. The virtual-team manager's challenge is to make the virtual team a real team, to achieve communication, cooperation, coordination, collaboration, innovation, and satisfaction.

In her book *A Manager's Guide to Virtual Teams*, author Yael Zofi identifies eight fundamental characteristics of high-performing virtual teams. Those who manage virtual teams could strive to achieve these characteristics:

- Team members look outward where they can identify a common goal. Once team members have a shared goal, they can share in development, refinement, and maintenance of the mechanisms needed to get from here to there. The process creates buy-in, mutual respect, and realization that a team effort will be required to get the job done well.
- Team members realize they all are vital when it comes to achieving the common goal. They understand that they are mutually dependent, thus engendering the mutual respect that leads to self-respect within the team environment. Self-respect helps overcome the isolation that can otherwise occur in a virtual environment.
- Team members value the candor needed to create an atmosphere of trust and authenticity, thus helping to counter the miscommunication problems that are more frequent in virtual situations. Team members need to focus on behaviors, not personalities; all need to "walk the talk."
- Team members exhibit a "can-do" attitude based on the idea that, if everyone does what they are supposed to do when they are supposed to, all will share in project success. When conflicts occur, they should stem principally from the desire to get the job done well; i.e., differences of opinion about which approach will be best for all. In the case of other problems - e.g., failure to deliver X when due - the goal would be to establish a work-around rather than assign blame.
- A project plan is essential, especially when team members are geographically dispersed. All need to contribute to achieve a coordinated work plan designed to achieve the desired outcome ahead of schedule and under budget, thus creating a cushion to account for issues that may not and/or could not have been considered in planning.
- Team members must have access to various technologies to enable the reliable information exchanges needed to achieve an easy information flow. The flow should rely more on "pulled" data (e.g., websites and e-bulletin boards) than "pushed" information (unfiltered e-mails and phone calls).
- Team members hold one another accountable for communicating meaningfully, in part by creating and maintaining protocols for when communication will occur (e.g., every X-many days or weeks and/or when certain milestones are reached) and the modes of communication that will be used. Team members should speak with one another synchronously at critical times, be they scheduled or unscheduled.
- Conflicts, while inevitable, are kept to a minimum, because they can rapidly erode the trust that is essential to smooth-functioning virtual teams. The virtual-team manager needs to be able to identify

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potential conflicts and work to deter their realization. When conflicts become real, the virtual-team manager needs to encourage positive outlooks and work to resolve the disagreement. Ideally, those who are in conflict should be able to resolve the matter on their own; the manager needs to follow up to ensure that is the case. The focus needs to be on what's best for the team.



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