

Creating a Sense of Team with Virtual Workers



Creating a Sense of Teamwork with Remote Workers

How can you as the leader foster a sense of team among your direct reports when people are working from home? Here are some tips to help you promote teamwork, productivity and positive morale when people aren't working in the same physical location.

- 1. Up your communication frequency.** Communication on virtual teams is often less frequent, and always is less rich than face-to-face interaction, which provides more contextual cues and information about how people are feeling. Make it clear that you are changing the frequency and cadence of the team's communication. Use frequent, brief check-ins, even as often as once per day, to connect people, ensure everyone is in the know, and to check in on morale.
- 2. Build rhythm into team practices.** When team members suddenly shift to working remotely, it's all too easy to get disconnected from the normal rhythms of work life. Be disciplined in creating and enforcing rhythms in virtual teamwork. This means having regular meetings, ideally same day and time each week. It also means establishing and sharing meeting agenda in advance, having clear agreements on communication protocols, and starting and finishing on time. You can also coach direct reports and share tips on helping them establish new routines and methods to focus their energy.
- 3. Don't forget the 1:1s.** Leaders' one-to-one performance management and coaching interactions with their team members are a fundamental part of making any team work. Make these interactions a regular part of the virtual team rhythm, using them not only to check status and provide feedback, but to keep members connected to the vision and to highlight their contribution to what you are doing together.
- 4. Clarify tasks and processes, not just goals and roles.** With virtual teams, work coordination is inherently more of a challenge because people are not co-located. So, it's important to focus more attention on the details of tasks and the processes that will be used to complete them. Simplify the work to the greatest extent possible, ideally so tasks are assigned to sub-groups of two or three team members. And make sure that there is clarity about the specifics of who does what and when. Then periodically do "after-action reviews" to evaluate how things are going and identify process adjustments and training needs.

- 5. Create a “virtual water cooler.”** The image of co-workers gathering around a water cooler is a metaphor for informal interactions that share information and reinforce social bonds. Absent explicit efforts to create a “virtual water cooler,” team meetings tend to become very task-focused; this means important information may not be shared and team cohesion may weaken.

One simple way to avoid this is to start each meeting with a check-in, having each member take a couple of minutes to discuss what they are doing, what’s going well and what’s challenging. Regular virtual team-building exercises are another way to inject a bit more fun into the proceedings. Contact Learning and Development Solutions for ideas and teambuilding facilitation services.

Encourage team members to check in with each other from time to time with a spontaneous or planned conversation. Powerful work gets done when colleagues interact one-on-one, and collaboration tools like Microsoft Teams makes that easy to do.

- 6. Clarify and track commitments.** When teams work remotely, it’s inherently more difficult to do this, because there is no easy way to observe engagement and productivity. As above, this can be partly addressed by carefully designing tasks and having regular status meetings. Beyond that, it helps to be explicit in getting team members to commit to define intermediate milestones and track their progress. One way to make projects, tasks and completions visible and trackable by the entire team is to use the Planner application within MS Teams. That way, individuals can hold themselves and each other accountable and the boss can avoid micro-management.
- 7. Plan and facilitate action-oriented team meetings.** It can be challenging to get full participation at team meetings when held face-to-face. Virtual meetings can be even more challenging. Create agendas that are action oriented and meet clear outcomes. Utilize virtual meeting tools like polling, whiteboards, and screen sharing that encourage everyone to participate. Use less-technical techniques like round-robin sharing as well. These methods will help your meetings be both productive and fun too.
- 8. Foster shared leadership.** Defining deliverables and tracking commitments provides “push” to keep team members focused and productive; shared leadership provides crucial “pull.” Find ways to involve others in leading the team. Examples include assigning responsibility for special projects, such as identifying and sharing best practices; or getting members to coach others in their areas of expertise; or assigning them as mentors to help on-board new team members; or asking them to run a virtual team-building exercise. By sharing leadership, you will not only increase engagement, but will also take some of the burden off your shoulders.

If you need support during this time of leading remotely, don’t hesitate to reach out to your own supervisor or your HR Business Partner. Learning and Development Solutions is also available to consult with you. Our team can design and deliver teambuilding programs or other services to assist you during unsettling times.