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# Collaborating in a Virtual World: Tips and Strategies for Working on a Virtual Team

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Virtual Teamwork is on the rise. Below are ten tips for anyone leading and/or participating on a virtual team.

A **virtual team** is defined as "a group of people working together across time and space, using electronic communication technology." Team members may be working with each other in very different cultures, time zones, and/or environments. One of the key benefits of a virtual team is that organizations can select the best talent from anywhere in the world. Virtual teams also save organizations money by reducing office space requirements, as team members can work from home, client sites, or shared workspaces.

Virtual team life is not problem-free, and in order to be as effective as possible, they have to overcome challenges, such as:

- **Time zone differences:** this alone can make it difficult to communicate in real time.
- **Minimal nonverbal communication:** virtual team communications are often limited by the lack of nonverbal visual cues, which are integral in developing trust and clear messaging.
- **Difficulty in measuring engagement:** it can be difficult to *proactively* detect any lack of engagement in virtual team members, which can lead to lower productivity and morale.

## 10 Tips for Working on a Virtual Team

1. **Educate yourself about normal group development stages.** A virtual team goes through the same stages as co-located teams. We have been using [The Drexler/Sibbet Team Performance Model](#) to help teams determine what stage a team is in, what challenges might arise in each stage, and how to lead the team forward toward high performance. Once you understand group development stages, you can leverage that knowledge and be a more effective team leader or team member.
2. **Learn to build & maintain trust virtually.** In face-to-face interactions, trust builds over time. In virtual teams, members assume others are trustworthy, then look for confirming or disconfirming evidence. Keys to establishing trust early on in a team include:
  - Start enthusiastically
  - Meet face-to-face
  - Communicate frequently
  - Respond quickly
  - Establish expectations
  - Broadcast your schedule
  - Make work visible
  - Interact socially
3. **Conduct a face-to-face kick off meeting.** If possible, schedule a face-to-face meeting when the team first comes together. This helps to build trust among team members and establishes important social bonds. If "in person" meetings are not possible, conduct a videoconference with the team.
4. **Spotlight a team member.** Another way to develop informal social bonds is to spotlight a member each week in a video or print interview about their professional background, family, hobbies, and other information that they are comfortable sharing with the team. We've worked with teams that created online team bios so that everyone knew their skill set, educational background, special interests, hobbies, etc.
5. **Create team agreements.** It is helpful for teams to establish norms upfront. For example, discussing and agreeing on how you will schedule meetings across time zones, or defining team member roles and responsibilities, are important to manage expectations about such issues. As with traditional teams it is recommended that a team charter be created that provides written ground rules and guidelines for effective team and individual performance. These guidelines become the "norms" for the group. Team charters can include things like: conflict resolution models, guidelines for communication response times, meeting blackout periods, recognizing positive contributions, embracing cultural differences, developing alternative call leaders in case of absence, and allowing for email authorization with paper follow-up.
6. **Establish communication guidelines.** Clarifying which medium to use for regular communication (i.e., email, chat, intranet, phone, videoconference), response time requirements, and criteria for prioritizing issues, goes a long way towards *effective* team communication. Studies have shown that virtual communication puts team members

on a more even playing field. It has been found that communication for introverted team members is higher than typical face-to-face meetings.

7. **Establish ground rules for virtual meetings.** Ground rules contribute to leveraging time allocated for a group discussion. Some examples include, "turn off cell phones," "one person contributes at a time," and "don't use the mute button." Technology is the lifeline to virtual teams. It is recommended that all team members use a common technology system. All members must be competent with the technology that creates virtual workspaces and interaction areas.
8. **Hold Team Members Accountable.** Research demonstrates that virtual teams have a high emphasis on individual accountability. This is both good and bad. The nature of virtual teamwork is mostly individual performance related, therefore individual accountability is critical for success.
9. **Team leader visits.** If possible, the team leader should travel to remote office locations, as this can increase engagement and trust with team members who may never get to visit their organization's headquarters or meet their team leader face-to-face.
10. **Acknowledge and respect cultural diversity.** Recognizing and educating team members about cultural nuances between geographical areas where team members live or work can help minimize potential culture clashes and miscommunication.

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