

The 8 Most Common Challenges of Leading Virtual, Dispersed and Remote Teams

While virtual, distributed and dispersed teams are becoming very common in 21st century workplaces and make great business sense, only about 30% of these teams are successful in achieving their objectives. Virtual teams have the benefits of lower fixed operating costs, attracting and retaining talent and more engaged employees, which can lead to greater productivity and profitability. However, they also come with a range of unique challenges.

Management and Leadership Applied in the Traditional Way Doesn't Work

When our team members are spread across the city, state, country or globe, it is not possible to see what they're doing throughout the working day. For leaders of virtual teams, this therefore means managing by outcomes. By nature, this makes some team leaders nervous and uncomfortable, particularly those who like to be closely involved in what their team members are doing.

Feedback is more difficult to provide via telephone or videoconference and, therefore, virtual team members often report that they receive insufficient feedback or only receive feedback when something goes wrong. If they receive insufficient feedback, they can become nervous about whether they are performing up to expectations, which will affect their work performance and create mistrust and/or suspicion between the team member and team leader.

Consideration point: Are you and your team leaders trained to lead virtually?

A Lack of Trust

Many virtual teams experience 'swift' trust, but this type of trust is very fragile and temporary. Swift trust tends to occur when a number of diverse people are brought together for a temporary period of time to perform an urgent task. An example of this is a group of emergency services volunteers brought together to respond to a natural disaster. Individuals in the team trust other team members on the basis that have been trained in their role, know what they are doing and can therefore be trusted.

However, as quickly as swift trust builds up, it can be swiftly broken down. One wrong move, one broken promise or breakdown in communication and the trust will be gone. This form of trust is therefore insufficient for high performing virtual teams.

Virtual teams that fail to build real trust are far less successful than those that do. The challenge for virtual teams is to build trust quickly and then to work to maintain it. The development of real trust between people usually depends on face to face interaction. However, not all virtual teams have the luxury of a face to face meeting.

Consideration point: Have you worked to build real trust across the team?

Communication Breakdowns

When communicating electronically, particularly using asynchronous communication such as email and instant messaging, misinterpretation of the message often occurs. Miscommunication can then lead to tension, conflict and relationship breakdowns across the team.

Without clear communication of goals and objectives, team members have no real focus for their day to day activities. This can result in team members being side tracked on peripheral tasks, losing their momentum and/or getting caught up in trivial tasks. Any sense of urgency and focus will soon disappear.

Consideration point: Have you and your team developed communication protocols?

'Lost' Team Members

When team members are not in our office regularly, we can lose sight of them and/or they can lose sight of us. A team leader's perception of a team member becoming 'lost' tends to occur when we can't see what people are doing on a day to day basis and have perhaps tried to call and/or email them without a response. If there isn't a strong foundation of trust between the team leader and team member, it is human nature to become suspicious. We can draw the conclusion that they are 'social loafing'. Have they gone shopping or popped out for a coffee when they are supposed to be working? Have they diverted their time to a personal matter rather than focusing on the important work?

Working remotely can be very lonely for your team members. They can feel lost or isolated from the team if there has been insufficient contact with the team leader or the other team members. Without regular communication team members can easily lose their connection with the team and then lose their motivation for working towards team goals.

Isolation is a particular concern when a number of team members are co-located and one or two team members operate remotely. The remote team members can feel excluded from the team as they aren't part of incidental, informal discussions and social occasions such as birthday celebrations and morning teas. This feeling can be exacerbated by the behaviour of co-located team members in teleconferences, video conferences and webinars. Side conversations and 'in jokes' between co-located team members that are not communicated to the remote workers will often leave them feeling ostracised.

Consideration points: Do you have strategies in place to connect regularly with each team member? Do you have ground rules and protocols in place for virtual team meetings?

Absence of Rich Water-cooler Conversations

When we work in face to face teams, an enormous amount of rich interaction occurs in the hallways or at the water cooler. This is often where rapport and real trust is built between team members, due to the informal and personal nature of these conversations, and is also where creativity and new ideas tend to surface. This is also where important knowledge sharing occurs, as well as development of shared understanding around issues and solutions. Unfortunately, virtual, remote and dispersed team members don't have the luxury of these chance interactions between team members and need to replicate them in other ways.

Consideration point: Have you implemented strategies to replicate these conversations?

Time Zones

When team members are dispersed, different time zones can make it very difficult to connect. Even across continents, particularly during summer when some states observe

daylight savings, coordination can be difficult. Communication for a team that is spread across the globe becomes far more challenging, particularly if there are members in North or South America and Europe, as well as Asia and Australia. Bringing the team together means that there will almost always be team members who have to hook up to phone or video conferences in the middle of the night or early hours of the morning.

Consideration point: Have you and the team agreed on meeting times that are most suitable for all team members?

24/7 Connectivity

With mobile devices and differing time zones, employees are fast becoming connected to their work 24/7. This is creating a range of health problems for virtual, distributed and dispersed workers. Having to attend teleconferences or webinars and respond to instant messaging and emails in the middle of the night creates sleep deprivation which, over time, can erode our immune systems and cause illness.

In addition to this, the lack of opportunity for down time is increasing the levels of stress we encounter on a daily basis and therefore the levels of adrenalin and cortisol in our bodies. Research has shown that excessive adrenalin in the system can create stomach ulcers and elevated levels of cortisol are connected with obesity, heart disease and some forms of cancer.

Consideration point: Are you mindful of the health of your team members and your own health?

Cross-cultural Clashes

Teams that span geographic and organisational boundaries also encounter challenges with integrating differing national and organisational cultures. Among the many cultural differences that teams encounter are differences in interpersonal communication, time orientation, religion, dining habits and business protocols. If team members aren't open and transparent about the way in which they prefer to operate within their culture, team members may become confused, anxious and uncomfortable working with each other. Tensions can increase if members of one national culture appear to see themselves as superior to another cultural group, if team members misinterpret the culturally

appropriate behaviour of other team members and/or if team members aren't able to see the positives in cultural differences. If any of these occur, irritation and anger can develop within the team.

Consideration point: Have you trained your team members in cross-cultural communication?

If your team experiences any of the above challenges or you answered no to any of the consideration points, OD Consulting can assist you to optimise the productivity and performance of your virtual, distributed or dispersed team. We provide leadership development for virtual team leaders, training for managers in effectively managing remote workers and team development training for virtual, distributed and dispersed teams.

[OD Consulting](http://www.odconsulting.com.au) is Australia's leading specialist in real training for virtual teams. OD Consulting specialise in providing virtual team leaders and members with the strategies and skills they need to ensure highly productive and effective virtual teams.

For more information, go to <http://www.odconsulting.com.au>