



Potentials Realized

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Virtual Teams: Creating the Foundation for Success

The prevalence of virtual teams, teams which operate across geographic location, timezones and culture, continues to grow at an exponential pace.

Want to make sure your virtual team is built on a solid foundation for success? Here are some ingredients to consider:

1. Ensure a clear understanding of team member roles and responsibilities

As a virtual team, the need to clearly define roles and responsibilities becomes even more paramount than in face to face team environments. As a manager, or even team member, it is critical that team members (and managers) fully understand their roles and responsibilities, reporting relationships, as well as where roles and responsibilities overlap. If you are part of a virtual team, are you clear on this?

2. Negotiate matrix management relationships

A matrix management structure exists when a professional may be managed by two different managers, delineated often by projects they are involved with. Given the nature of virtual teams, individual members may often be part of a matrix management reporting process. It is quite common for virtual team members to report to face to face manager in their home location, as well as their main virtual team manager who may be in a different timezone or continent. If this is the case, it is often beneficial to have a three way discussion between both managers and the staff member, ensuring that everyone has a common understanding regarding who manages what, what reporting relationships exist, how work processes will be weighted and prioritized.

3. Equip team members with skills to work across differences

Given that virtual teams are often global in nature, or even cross-continental, it is important that cultural differences are understood. Staff should also be equipped with skills and tools to work with diversity. Differences may exist along several continuum, including varying priorities, language, as well as the concept of time and management approaches. Exploring individual cultural differences within the team can be an important process, as well as creating a "common ground" and ways of working for the team.

4. Create Opportunities for face-to-face interaction

The effectiveness of virtual teams can be greatly enhanced by budgeting and planning for face-to-face interaction at least once a year (preferably even more frequently).

A multi-day in person retreat can serve as a forum for getting to know each other and creating a shared vision for the team and its work. Other topics that may flow out of a session like this could be to discuss strategic directions, create a shared workplan, milestones, and a protocol for meetings and communication. The presence of trust is often noted as a condition for virtual team success.

5. Develop a Common Vision

A shared, common vision, understood by all virtual team members acts as an important anchor for decision making, accountability and results. There are a number of vision processes which can be undertaken, depending on the needs of the client. Developing this in a face-to-face session, at the start of the virtual team creation is ideal, although creating this mid-stream will also bring benefits to the team.

6. Create an Environment of Trust

The presence of trust within a virtual team is often cited by researchers as a condition for success. What can you do to foster trust within your team? What systems may need to be developed? What actions will build trust according to the different team members? Keep in mind that the concept of trust can mean different things to different generations, cultures and individuals.

7. Provide effective leadership for the team

Effective leadership for the team enables the foundation of the team to be further leveraged and built upon. Skills required by virtual team managers can differ from the skill sets of a face to face manager. Are you providing enough space for team members to do their jobs? Are you trying to micro-manage? Are you providing the resources that your team needs? Are you removing obstacles as they appear for the team? How are your influencing skills?

Virtual Teams can provide many opportunities for organizations, including the opportunity to leverage often multi-disciplinary professionals from a range of cultural, geographical and even generational employees. Which factors of success will you focus in on today?

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Jennifer J. Britton works with corporate clients and business owners to achieve the success and impact they desire in teamwork, business, balance and performance issues, through the provision of coaching, consulting and training services. A former virtual manager herself, Jennifer works with organizations to ensure that their virtual teams have the foundation and leadership they need for success!

Through her company, Potentials Realized, Jennifer regularly facilitates team building sessions and retreats (virtual, on and offsite) with governmental,

nonprofit and corporate clients. As a performance improvement specialist, she works with leading edge organizations across North America and the Caribbean to take their performance from ordinary to extraordinary. She is a Professional Certified Coach (PCC), a Certified Performance Technologist and a Certified Human Resource Professional. Jennifer provides team, group and executive coaching programs. Jennifer is known for her engaging, results-oriented, customized collaborations.