

## Ten Key Elements for Team Leaders to Manage

Leaders of virtual teams need to manage the key strategies and projects related to the team's core work. However, managing this work is necessary but not sufficient to creating and leading a high performing team.

There are other key elements that make a critical difference in how well the team is able to work together. Managing these ten dimensions can help make the team more effective.

- **Purposes**
- **Roles**
- **Culture**
- **Conversation**
- **Feedback**
- **Pace**
- **Entry and Re-Entry**
- **Weaving**
- **Participation**
- **Flow**

Talking about these dimensions with your team can be a good way to develop a common framework for your work together. These ten dimensions can be the beginning of a vocabulary the team can share to help support conversations about team process. These themes are interrelated so you can cover a lot of ground by choosing one or more as a conversation-starter and letting the dialogue develop naturally from there.

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### **Purposes**

All the research on virtual and distributed teams shares the conclusion that having a clear, explicit, compelling, shared purpose around which everyone is aligned is the most important factor associated with team success.

But for a distributed team, feeling purposeful requires more than agreement on the global purpose of the team. It's also important to have many small goals in addition to the larger overall purpose, which are achievable early in the team's

existence. You can begin to build trust among team members via team-building exercises at an initial face-to-face meeting. However, trust really develops when team members count on each other for specific tasks. Therefore, it's important to create opportunities for team members to come through for each other early and often in the life of the team.

Some short-term goals may fall naturally out of the work of the team. But many good candidates for these early exchanges can emerge from processes related to building the team and establishing working relationships. It's important for the tasks to be relevant and valuable rather than busy work, but they don't need to be difficult or time-consuming.

For example, the team might decide to gather answers to a survey about a particular problem from the perspective of each country represented on the team and share those. You might decide on a common format for describing and sharing the experience, skills, and interests of individual team members for a collective resource bank. You might ask each team member to take on the task of exploring a particular communications option available to the team and work up a profile of it in terms of accessibility, team preferences, and where it might be used most effectively.

Create a process where the team can decide together on one or more short-term projects so that they can share, succeed and celebrate as soon as possible.

**What are some candidates for tasks/projects for this team that can be delivered in a week? Two weeks? A month?**

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## **Roles**

In a distributed team it's easy to default to a pattern where everyone looks to the team leader to play all the needed roles because we lack the skills necessary to sort out who is going to play which roles when we're not in the same room. This makes the team weak and over-dependent on one person.

When we're together face-to-face, it's easy for a group of people to look at each other and naturally work out who is going to do what. It's much harder in a distributed group to figure out where the gaps are, where a vacuum exists,

where it's appropriate to step up and volunteer to take something on. We don't have the experience and skills to "feel out" the group and be comfortable with informal mechanisms to negotiate roles.

In addition, roles are more complex in a distributed group because there are more roles needed and many of them are new and unfamiliar. Distributed teams may need technical support, knowledge archivists, and specialists in using different media. You might want to designate someone to notice when a team member hasn't been heard from in a while and follow up with them. The team could decide to take turns with the tasks of serving as liaison to other teams or functions.

For both traditional and new team roles, virtual teams need to spend more time being explicit about mutual expectations for facilitators, managers, and members because the patterns of behavior and dynamics of interactions are unfamiliar and it's easy to fall into misunderstandings and become frustrated with each other.

**What roles does our team need?**

**How will we define these roles?**

**How will we share the roles?**

**What's our strategy for reevaluating roles and players as we go along?**

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## **Culture**

The culture of a team is influenced by the personalities of the members and the team leader, the environment in which they work, the nature of the communications media they use, the stories they have to tell about the team, their rituals and celebrations, and their shared language.

Too often, distributed teams are missing many of the elements that are critical to developing culture because we haven't developed a repertoire of new strategies using the new media. How can we create celebrations virtually? How can we make sure we don't limit our communications to task-specific exchanges that leave out the all-important storytelling?

Whichever combinations of media you are using to support a virtual team, you need to think through how these media will affect the culture of the team's environment. What metaphors are you using for interactions? How will these metaphors cue team members to think about where they are and what they're doing? An electronic space called "Project Database" will invite a different style of communication than one called "What's Happening Where You Are?" Keep in mind that you are creating an environment to support relationships, not just to exchange information. What norms, styles and behaviors would help or hinder the ambience and create the team culture you want?

**What adjectives do we want to associate with the culture of our team?  
(supportive, deep, fun, fast-moving, reflective, cutting-edge, information-intensive, risky, intense, focused, creative,???)**

**What do we need to do to create that culture?**

**What strategies can we develop so that we can celebrate team success even when we're not together face-to-face?**

**Where we will tell our stories?**

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## **Conversation**

One way to think about a team is as a network of conversations that cover a broad range of topics and questions:

- what will it take to meet our critical strategic goals?
- how are the team's processes working?
- how are individuals on the team doing?
- what's going on in the company?
- what's going on in the world?
- what are people on the team reading and thinking?
- what problems need attention?
- what should we be doing next?

A team will function best if it feels like everyone is part of a continuous, daily conversation with the whole team. This doesn't happen unless you think about the

design and facilitation of day-to-day interactions as well as special off site meetings and retreats. Typical meetings that rely on one-way communication don't engage participants adequately. Instead, draw on more "liberating structures" to allow the conversation to produce generative and innovative outcomes.

Of course, in a distributed team, this is not achieved easily. A big danger for distributed teams is that their communications get stale and boring. When we're together face-to-face we create a lot of variation in our exchanges by meeting in different settings, using multi-media to spark discussion, and changing the style of meeting from presentation to dialogue. It's critical to keep the team communications fresh and growing - both qualitatively and quantitatively.

At the same time, you need to watch for overload. Too many new messages overwhelm people. Assess the total volume of team communications daily and you'll see considerable variation from day to day. At the end of each week, ask yourself about the pace and the range of communications exchanged. Are the conversations still interesting, or have they become stale?

**What kinds of conversations are important for us to have regularly?**

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## **Feedback**

Since using technology as a primary means to communicate will be new to most team members, participants need to spend more time than usual talking about the quality of their communication. The team leader can provide some feedback but it's even better if participants develop a norm of providing feedback to each other about communication style, frequency, clarity, etc.

It helps if team members can learn how to access more of their own feelings and reactions to messages in different media. One good strategy is to create a space within the communication system for the meta conversation about how everyone is feeling about their own and the team's use of different communications media.

Any new unfamiliar medium can be problematic when we give feedback and the media associated with virtual teams is particularly difficult. Feedback meant as constructive could be misinterpreted easily when it lacks the facial expressions and other body language that communicates the spirit in which it is given. Give positive as well as negative feedback. Be direct but supportive.

**What norms can we create to feel safe when we give each other constructive feedback about our communications via new media?**

**What strategies do we need to make sure we integrate and learn from what works and what doesn't for us in different media?**

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## **Pace**

In distributed communications environments, pace is an important dimension to facilitate.

Different team members may access various parts of the team's communication systems more or less frequently. Some group members will sign on to get e-mail four times a day and some will let a whole week go by before signing on again. The term rolling present can be used to describe a phenomenon of distributed teams where the sense of team-time varies among the group. Generally, people consider material current if it has been entered since they last signed on. If you have several members who sign on four times a day, they may make it difficult for most group members to engage with the virtual group: it will all go by too fast. You may need to do some things to slow down the pace.

Ideally, the team should establish norms for how often everyone will engage with the team. However, it will inevitably happen that differences in pace will develop. One way to even out the rolling present is to provide cues that let participants know what's important so that they can catch up easily, for example via e-mail updates that summarize the ongoing discussion.

In addition to paying attention to the ongoing pace of the team's communication you also need to think about patterns of communication.

A living system has a pulse. High performing teams operate as living systems. Collocated teams have natural mechanisms for creating this feeling - they're in the same time zone, have coffee together, say good-bye as they leave for the day.

Distributed teams need to have a pulse too. One way to do this is to create cycles of activity so that team members start to feel the pattern - a weekly phone call, an

online check-in item, monthly celebrations.

**What kind of pace does this team need and want? (fast, slow, cyclical)**

**How are we going to give our team a pulse so it feels alive?**

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### **Entry and Re-Entry**

A fact of life of distributed teams is that members can seem to come and go because of many factors including travel schedules, local conditions that demand shifts in the individual's focus for periods of time, and cultural differences in calendars and holidays.

In a face-to-face meeting it would be very disruptive to the flow of conversation to have people coming and going in the middle of the meeting. The quality of the exchange would not be as good if people were never sure of who was really participating and who was only peripherally involved. After a while it becomes difficult to remember who was "there" during a particular exchange and who only joined later.

One of the advantages cited for virtual workgroups is that they are more flexible around time than face-to-face meetings. But it's still disconcerting when a group isn't sure of who is "there," what it means when they are not participating actively, and whether and when to expect their participation.

You need to develop some strategies to handle the entries and re-entries of team members so that everyone knows when everyone else is there, when they are leaving, and when they are coming back.

**How are we going to announce our comings and going to the rest of the team?**

**What strategies can we develop to help each other catch up when we've been away?**

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## **Weaving**

It's easy for a distributed team to feel disconnected. Their communications can seem disjointed, relationships can be fragmented, and connections to other teams and parts of the organization can seem fragile.

The team needs strategies to weave the threads of their communication together, to weave themselves together as a network of relationships, and weave their work into the fabric of the larger organization.

Weaving is a networking term that often refers to the process of summarizing and synthesizing multiple responses in a virtual group. The weaving item or response tells people where they've been, where they are, and where they might want to go next. It can identify issues people agree on or issues that still bring up many questions or require more information.

Weaving can also link what's going on in one part of the communication system with another. Weaving gives all members, however long they've been participating, a chance to start fresh or take off in a new direction. It can help keep the group from spinning its wheels.

A distributed team's internal communications are not the only things that require weaving. Distributed teams need to find ways to mesh what they're doing with what's going on with other teams in other parts of the organization.

**How can we weave together all the parts of our complex communication system so it feels like an integrated whole?**

**What strategies can we develop so that each team member becomes part of a coherent tapestry of the team?**

**How can we find ways to weave what we're doing into the fabric of other parts of the organization so that we are an important thread?**

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## **Participation**

What does it mean to be a full, active participant on a distributed team?

In a face-to-face meeting, you can watch body language and facial expressions and many other signals to develop a sense of how people are participating - who is engaged, who has tuned out, who is angry, and who is confused. Participants in virtual teams convey this same information in different ways. It's amazing how often your impressions of what's happening can be off base because we're not used to reading the cues people give out via new media. Distributed teams need to learn how to read each other's levels and quality of participation.

Participation in virtual teams needs to be very explicit. Nobody can see you nodding and giving other indications that you are there and paying attention. It's too easy for members of a distributed team to simply disappear off the radar screen of the team as a whole. Get a commitment from everyone on the team to be actively present all the time and define what that means in terms of specific actions and behaviors. For example, agree on how often the team expects to hear from everyone even when there's no specific agenda (that can be a good time for the team's conversation about future strategies).

**What are our mutual expectations around participation in the life of this team?**

**What are some of the ways we will signal to each other that we are present? Listening? Confused? Reflecting? Appreciative? What does virtual head-nodding look like?**

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## **Flow**

One of the key things in making a river flow is its banks... its container. Virtual teams can lose that feeling of flowing in a direction because their container is too weak and the energy of the team seems to leak out into the atmosphere rather than building towards something.

Distributed teams also have a hard time maintaining the awareness of the whole that helps them feel like everyone is moving together. They can feel like team in a rowing shell with no idea when or how hard to pull on the oars so the shell jerks

around in the water but doesn't get anywhere. It's important to facilitate a team process that heightens awareness of what is happening in all parts of the team so that the team begins to be able to sense and anticipate what's going on around the whole network of team members and can get the benefit of moving together.

It's advantageous to increase and intensify team interactions early in the life of the team. One of the reasons that so many team-building processes involve games or outdoor activities is that these demand a high volume of interactions among team members in a short period that accelerates the process of being able to anticipate what each other can and will do.

Using new communications media - particularly those that are not real time - can cause a team to communicate less rather than increase the interactions as needed. Teams need to develop a facilitative process that will support a higher level of engagement. Facilitation is paying attention to what is happening in your group, as distinct from what you wanted or expected would happen. It is not unlike facilitating any group: if participants aren't participating as much as you'd hoped, don't admonish them. Instead, notice what kinds of issues they are engaged in and find ways to weave those issues into your team's activity.

**How can we stay "in synch" with each other as a team?**

**How will we know when the team is in the flow?**

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