How to Lead Effective Global Virtual Teams

Insight from Nathan Zeldes, July 28, 2013

Things used to be simpler. For most of human history people worked in collocated teams. They met face to face, team members knew each other, and everyone was at work during the same hours.

These days, at least, things are interesting. Global, distributed teams are the norm in many industries, and most of their interactions are virtual and asynchronous. This does add potentially destructive complications, but since it is a given part of our reality, the question isn't whether we like it, but rather how do we make virtual teams work well – just as well as local teams?

This is a subject to which I devoted some years of my career at Intel, where I co-founded and led a team we called the Virtual Collaboration Research Team (VCRT), whose charter was to develop future collaboration tools and practices for global distributed teams. In this article I share some thoughts and observations on how you as a team leader should proceed to make this work mode succeed.

Note that I'm referring here to mission teams, small project teams and task forces that work closely together on a shared goal – not to managing a distributed workforce in general.

Acknowledge the problem

The first thing you need to do if you lead a virtual team is to acknowledge that you have a problem: distributed teams are not the same as collocated ones, and they face significant challenges. Just because we have telephones, email and collaboration platforms doesn't mean it will be business as usual; even video conferencing is rarely the same as face to face.

I'm not saying this to discourage you; I say it to encourage you to address the issues explicitly. I've seen managers reach this conclusion and seek specific strategies to make their global teams better; others may figure this is the spirit of the times, so nothing needs to be done. Be like the first kind!

Achieve trust

The most important factor in any team is mutual trust among its members, and nowhere is this more critical, yet harder to attain, than in a virtual team. Therefore your first challenge is to create trust among people who may never set eyes on each other.

The easiest way to do this is to actually make them set eyes on each other: bring them together! Not every week, nor every month, since travel is expensive in both money and precious work time. But try to get the team together at least once a year, and plan these occasions carefully to make the togetherness memorable. Include socializing opportunities both on and off work: teambuilding exercises, of course, but also simply having beers or coffees together, touring the local sights, perhaps a barbecue at your home if the culture and context permit it. Coworkers who spend such time together will never forget it. Be sure to snap photos and share them!

If you can't fly the team in during the early stage of its formation, be sure to devote time in the first of your virtual meetings to create trust, get to know each other, align expectations and set norms for the team's work. Allow members to describe themselves and their lives; make sure they connect through whatever social media are available in the company – or develop your own tools – or just go with Facebook. Photos, in particular, are really crucial. Research has shown that the mere act of exchanging one portrait photo makes remote coworkers much more trusting and ready to cooperate. No one can feel close to someone who they know only as one of those gray head place-holders seen on some LinkedIn profiles...

And you can go the extra mile and apply some of the ideas in my [post on workforce diversity](#).

Get a sincere commitment

One interesting aspect of the VCRT, whose members were dispersed around the globe, is how well it functioned as a team. The members were dedicated to the common mission, they had a great esprit de corps, they were friendly to each other – and they performed splendidly as one team, working together and delivering outstanding results in a timely fashion.

I had given much thought to the reason for this effectiveness, and my conclusion was that the members **really wanted to make it work**. Of course this had an element of wanting to prove virtual collaboration was feasible – it was, after all, the raison d'être of the team itself. Whatever the cause, there was a deep commitment by everyone to making our joint work a success despite the distance.

One way to build such commitment and keep it alive is to let the team itself develop and own its process, and take pride in its success. Have the team brainstorm – if possible, during a face to face meeting – and discuss how to make its work effective, what's hampering them and how they wish to deal with it. It makes for a great teambuilding exercise, and will give you decisions you can implement and track with assured up front buy-in. Then you must review these decisions periodically in explicit discussions devoted to identifying strengths and issues and crafting the required course corrections.

Craft an effective collaboration framework

These days you can buy any number of wonderful group collaboration platforms with very advanced capabilities. There is one factor, however, that you need to create yourself, and that is the definition of a framework consisting of processes, expectations, commitments, and the knowledge management structure to support these. For example, having a shared knowledge repository is useless unless team members are committed to looking at new content in the right timing, to reacting to it in the right workflow, and so forth. Given that much of the interaction is bound to be via email, with its [notorious runaway overload](#), it will be all the harder to expect members to adhere to the required processes.

The first thing to do when starting a remote collaboration is to reach a "service level agreement" with your coworkers as to email response times. If members agree on a way to signal the urgent tasks to each other, and further agree to react to urgent messages in, say, 24 hours, you have a good start. It's particularly important to discuss this in the team early on, and to have everyone realize the importance of such an SLA for a team that is barred from the "water cooler" and other channels available to collocated peers (with whose demands for attention the virtual team must compete).

As to the collaboration platform itself – I strongly recommend you take it beyond its default settings. Since it will be the team's virtual home, make its look and feel welcoming, convenient, and – above all – **unique** (you must've noticed how 90% of SharePoint spaces look exactly the same...). Furthermore,

you need to discuss with the team what folder structure and notification settings will best enhance their ability to do the job together, and align the platform to their decisions.

Flatten the earth

One major issue with *global* teams is that the Earth is, well... a Globe. This means that your team inhabits different time zones, and are awake at different times. The worst case is when members inhabit three incompatible zones, such as America, Europe, and Asia. In this case you get what I call "Ouch meetings" – no matter how you try, someone has to be up at 2AM! Your challenge is to minimize the pain for these individuals while optimizing the team's processes.

To do that well you need some sensitivity. I recall a team where the folks in the US decided to alternate meeting times between US morning and US evening, so if you were in the US, you never suffered much; the poor people in Asia and the Middle East alternated with the Ouch part. The guy who came up with this schedule didn't even realize how unfair it looked through "offshore" eyes...

Better than splitting the pain is reducing it altogether, and there are ways to do that. The holy grail here (at least until Star Trek like teleportation becomes available) is to hold meetings that are asynchronous but as good as the real thing. This requires heavy reliance on proper workflows: instead of meeting at the same time to discuss a presentation, it might be routed around for comments and these can be integrated for final approval. Having a good workflow supported by an effective collaboration tool, and a commitment to honor it in timely fashion, can reduce the necessary frequency of synchronous meetings and the Ouch that accompanies them. Our Intel team actually patented its vision of this concept, among others, in "Multi-team immersive integrated collaboration workspace", available [here](#).

A big aspect of this synch/asynch mode is **optimization**. You have to decide what tasks will get done in the synchronous meetings, and what can be relegated to asynchronous offline interaction. No sense wasting precious time – especially if someone is well past their bedtime – on reviewing action item completion or discussing trivia: that's what online team spaces are for. Real meetings should devote every minute to that which cannot be done offline – brainstorming, interaction, unleashing of the team's mutual brain power. It's useful, it's productive, and it's much more satisfying for all!

Speaking of flat, you also need to level the playfield of your team by insisting that everyone work remotely. The case where five members are in the same room and two others in remote lands try to follow on the phone is disastrous for team cohesion: the two outcasts will never be able to follow all the side discussions, jokes, and body language of the larger team. Ironically, keeping everyone separate is the best way to make them all feel together on an equal footing.

Throw in some fun

For a virtual team to be worth the pain of those meetings at all hours, you had better make sure people enjoy being in it. Like everything else, this needs to be done explicitly and with forethought. Our VCRT went so far as to devise a formal methodology for a carefully orchestrated "Virtual fun day", where we all got together online and used all the tools and channels we had to enable a shared experience of having fun as a team – including having contests and playing party games together!

Then there is recognition – when your team does well, give members fun awards (and some tangible gifts, if the company permits it). Make sure the achievements are visibly appreciated. It feels good!

Go beyond "just as effective"

We started with the question "how do we make virtual teams work well – just as well as local teams?" – but actually, we may go one better and ask, "how do we make global teams work **better** than local ones?"

If this seems like going too far, remember that virtual teams do have some powerful inherent advantages over collocated ones. For instance:

- They benefit from having access to a wider range of disciplines and functional groups all over the company.

- They can leverage the cultural diversity of the members, who bring more viewpoints to the table.

- They can work around the clock, in "follow the sun" fashion, thereby compressing project timelines.

- Their constraints may force them to do a better job of documentation and project management.

So, it's not at all absurd that a virtual team can be better – but it takes some doing. Your role as the team's leader is to empower the team to realize these advantages by neutralizing the disadvantages.

In doing that you need to deliberately pay attention to the mechanisms of teamwork that are important for all teams, but in virtual ones are more critical. You need to train yourself in how to lead a virtual team, and the members in how to be parts of one. You need to distribute meeting agendas and meeting minutes as early as possible, so people can review them and act on their action items early, and have time to react to each other's output in a number of iterations, not five minutes before the next meeting (in my experience, people are very lax in meeting this requirement). Of course, all this is true for collocated teams, but in those there is greater margin for error. After all, if you forget to reserve a conference room, everyone can just go to the cafeteria; but if a bridge number is missing the virtual meeting doesn't have such a fallback.

In conclusion, a virtual team can be just as good, even better, as a collocated one – but it is far more sensitive to the quality of its process. A good team leader can make all the difference. Be a good one!

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For more insight articles on Knowledge Worker Productivity, see here. You may also want to check out Nathan's blog at www.nathanzeldes.com, and consider subscribing to his RSS feed and to his Newsletter on that site.