



Article

Team coaching virtual teams

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Team coaching virtual teams

Virtual teams have a number of differences compared with co-located teams. On the plus side, their geographical dispersion means that they can draw upon a wider and more diverse pool of talent. It is also easier to maintain 24-hour oversight of issues, if people are in multiple time zones. There is also some evidence that power distance (people's inclination to defer to someone with greater rank or authority) reduces when using distance media.

On the downside:

- There is more likely to be conflict within the team – and this may be exacerbated if the team is culturally diverse
- There are more difficulties in sharing information. “Out of sight, out of mind” means that it doesn't occur to us to include a colleague unless we communicate with them very regularly on different levels. Virtual teams need string and effective mechanisms to remind everyone to appraise virtual colleagues about technical, tactical and customer information – indeed to put more effort into communicating with them than with co-located colleagues, because the latter pick up a great amount of information through informal conversations. One of the immediate impacts of team coaching is to raise team members' awareness of the interests and strengths of each of their virtual colleagues.
- People are more likely to feel isolated. This sense of being left out can be reinforced in virtual meetings, when not everyone shares experiences, or relates to metaphors and mental models, which other members of the team use as conversational shorthand.
- If some of the team are located at HQ, others may feel that these people's opinion counts for more than their own and that they are less likely to be listened to – so are less likely to voice opinions.

Preparing a virtual team for coaching

All the normal aspects of contracting with the team, which apply to co-located teams, also apply to virtual team coaching – plus a few more. These include:

- It's important to have ground-rules about being fully present in the team coaching sessions. Being on mute is useful to preserve sound quality for those who are speaking, but it allows people to carry on distracting tasks, which would not normally be possible in a face-to-face meeting. The contract should reinforce understanding that listening is more than just politeness to colleagues – it is essential in maintaining the pace and depth of the reflective conversation.
- Gain agreement on how contrarian ideas will be surfaced and engaged with. The mechanisms, by which constructive dissent is stifled, may differ between co-located teams and virtual teams. In many cultures, for example, it is inappropriate to be the one who usually gets their ideas in first. If a consensus appears to be developing, cultural inhibitors may make people reluctant to push back against it. The technology may promote groupthink, if people are swayed by the first comments in the chat room, so the team and the team coach need to establish clear methods to challenge emerging consensus.
- Help the team manage the tendency to avoid emotional data, because it is too time consuming and often more difficult to recognise emotional subtexts in a virtual environment. It's important to establish the expectation that everyone will be open with their emotions as well as their rational analysis. One of the reasons for this is the significant role our emotional brain takes in “rational decisions”.
- Initiate open discussion about where reflection takes place. In co-located teams, it is generally easier to engage in reflection together, not least because these coaching sessions will have a fair amount of time allocated to them. In virtual team coaching, every minute counts, so most of the reflection has to take place before and after team coaching. This is a fundamental difference in the structure of the team coaching process and the team needs to

become comfortable with reflecting on their own then combining their thoughts either during team coaching or in online discussions outside the team coaching session.

- Encourage the team to agree when would be an equitable time to hold meetings, to avoid some people always having to attend at unsocial hours
- Newcomers to a virtual team need to feel valued from day one. One-to-one virtual meetings with the rest of the team members, before team coaching, are an essential part of their induction.

Managing the virtual team coaching session

While it is possible to run a virtual team coaching session using email only, it is extremely difficult to make it work! The only plus point is that it can be asynchronous – people can contribute at different times, dipping in and out over a day or more, at their convenience and to fit in with their time zones. There have been no significant studies comparing this approach with having people together at the same time, but the consensus amongst team coaches is overwhelmingly that the whole team needs to be present and interacting in real time.

Some ground-rules include:

- Keep sessions short and focused – 90 minutes absolute maximum. This makes it even more important than with co-located teams to dispense with standard meeting formalities, such as minutes of the last meeting, or matters arising. Everything that can be done by email beforehand should be, along with any matter that concerns only some of the team. Given that you have such a short time, it is essential that everyone should feel engaged all through.
- Encourage social sharing before the coaching session. A short email from everyone, sharing personal highlights at work and outside work, is all it takes.
- Use the technology to its full. Make sure everyone is visually present, unless bandwidth problems prevent this. Encourage chat room conversations alongside spoken conversations. Run quick, impromptu polls to support the conversation. For example:
 - How energised are we today?
 - How positive do we feel about this?
 - How confident are we in these forecasts?
 - What should be said that no-one has yet said?
 - What are our priorities with regard to this issue?
 - What do you think are the top three risks?
- Set clear norms about preparation, promptness, interrupting, being in a quiet place, where background noise won't intrude and so on.
- Don't get trapped into Powerpoint presentations that take up valuable time.
- Do have a clear protocol for decision-making. Check through a poll or the chat room that everyone agrees:
 - That a decision has been made
 - Precisely what it is
 - Who is responsible for what
 - When it is to be implemented
 - When and how it is to be reviewed
- People who waffle can be a nuisance. Agree with the team how *they* will manage this. If you try to control this person, you will find that the team keeps looking to you to take charge – exactly the opposite of what you are trying to achieve. An effective intervention, if no-one in the team takes responsibility, is to say “Can I just remind you what you contracted to each other about trying to be succinct?” This emphasises the team's responsibility for managing the situation, while dropping an obvious hint to the offending team member!
- Agree a clear protocol for other issues that arise in the coaching session. Put these in a “parking lot” and take a few minutes at the end of the session to discuss how they can start the process of thinking about some or all of them before the next session. Ask them “What is the critical question you want to reflect upon with regard to this issue?” (You can always suggest a question at this stage, if they struggle – or perhaps the homework is to identify that question.)