

Tips for Working With Virtual Teams: How to work more effectively when your team is dispersed

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Virtual Teams (also known as geographically dispersed teams) are still teams, so general team development principles still apply. Use the tips below, as well as general team development principles, to create a high-performing, sustainable virtual team for your organization!

➤ **Primary differences between virtual teams vs. co-located teams:**

1. Communication
2. Technology
3. Expectation setting
4. Trust development
5. How and when team development principles as well as team interventions are applied

➤ **Communication is key:** Creating solid, reliable methods of communication is critical to a virtual team's success. Help your team create a set of specific team agreements for how your virtual team will communicate and interact with each other, especially in the following areas:

- Phone
- E-mail and/or instant messaging
- In person
- During video or phone meetings (e.g. full focus on the meeting/no multi-tasking, etc.)
- How team will trust each other
- How team will hold each other accountable to team agreements

➤ **Technology is key:** Explore different technologies to help your team be more efficient in your meetings and your communications: web meetings, videoconferencing, online/virtual workspaces, shared servers, shared databases, shared calendars, shared discussion threads, etc. Choose the solutions that work best for your team's level of technological savvy.

➤ **Expectation setting is key:**

- Clarify expectations of all team members
- Determine what the right balance is for independence vs. control
- Creating and utilizing team agreements can help tremendously

➤ **Trust is key:**

- With virtual or remote teams, trust is extremely critical, since face-to-face interaction may not be often possible
- Building trust takes place over time
- Create regular opportunities for face-to-face or at least telephone interaction to occur as frequently as possible, as these will significantly help develop trust

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- **Relationship building:**
 - Create team agreements with your virtual team regarding how they will create and maintain relationships with each other
 - Schedule face-to-face meetings as frequently as possible to build trust, respect and camaraderie (the 3 most critical success factors for a team)
 - Create virtual “water cooler” opportunities for team members to get to know each other on a personal basis, as if they were running into each other by the office water cooler
 - Use the team’s agreements to support their relationships with each other

- **Mission, Vision and Values:**
 - Create a shared set of mission, vision and values so that the team stays in alignment while working from different locations
 - Frequently helping your team reconnect to its shared mission, vision and values will help keep the team moving in the same direction

- **Diversity:**
 - Appreciate and integrate into team discussions all of the diversity your team has to offer (diverse opinions, diverse cultures, etc.)
 - Create fun activities so that team members can share experiences or stories related to the diversity of their virtual office (e.g. each member can share something about their particular working style, office environment, culture, time zone, geography, etc.)

- **Managing virtual (web or phone) meetings** requires advance planning and creativity:
 - Create and utilize specific team agreements about how each team member will stay focused on the meeting and not multi-task (e.g. no checking e-mail, etc.)
 - Specific ways to keep every team member engaged in the meeting (e.g. each team member is responsible for a portion of the agenda, asking for feedback from each team member on a specific topic, etc.)

- **Visibility:** The activities of a virtual team may not be as readily apparent to other departments or within the organization as a team who is co-located in the same office, so be sure to discuss how to maintain this team’s visibility within the organization

- **Rewards and Recognition:** The benefits of rewards and recognition programs for virtual team members are likely even more important to them than to co-located team members

- **Benefits:** Remember the many benefits of virtual teams, including less commuting and travel time which can lead to greater productivity as well as greater work-life balance and satisfaction