

Managing Virtual Teams

Executive Brief

A Framework for Member Conversations

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Virtual teams are a popular form of collaboration for employers seeking to save money on travel expenses and bring together dispersed experts to solve complex challenges.¹ That said, the distance and technology of virtual teams strain managers' current skills and compel them to acquire new ones. This brief, designed for virtual teams lasting several weeks or longer, provides managers with an understanding of their roles and responsibilities in a virtual team, along with information on how to effectively manage these teams.

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¹ Benson Rosen, Stacie Furst, and Richard Blackburn, "Training for Virtual Teams: An Investigation of Current Practices and Future Needs," *Human Resource Management*, 2006.

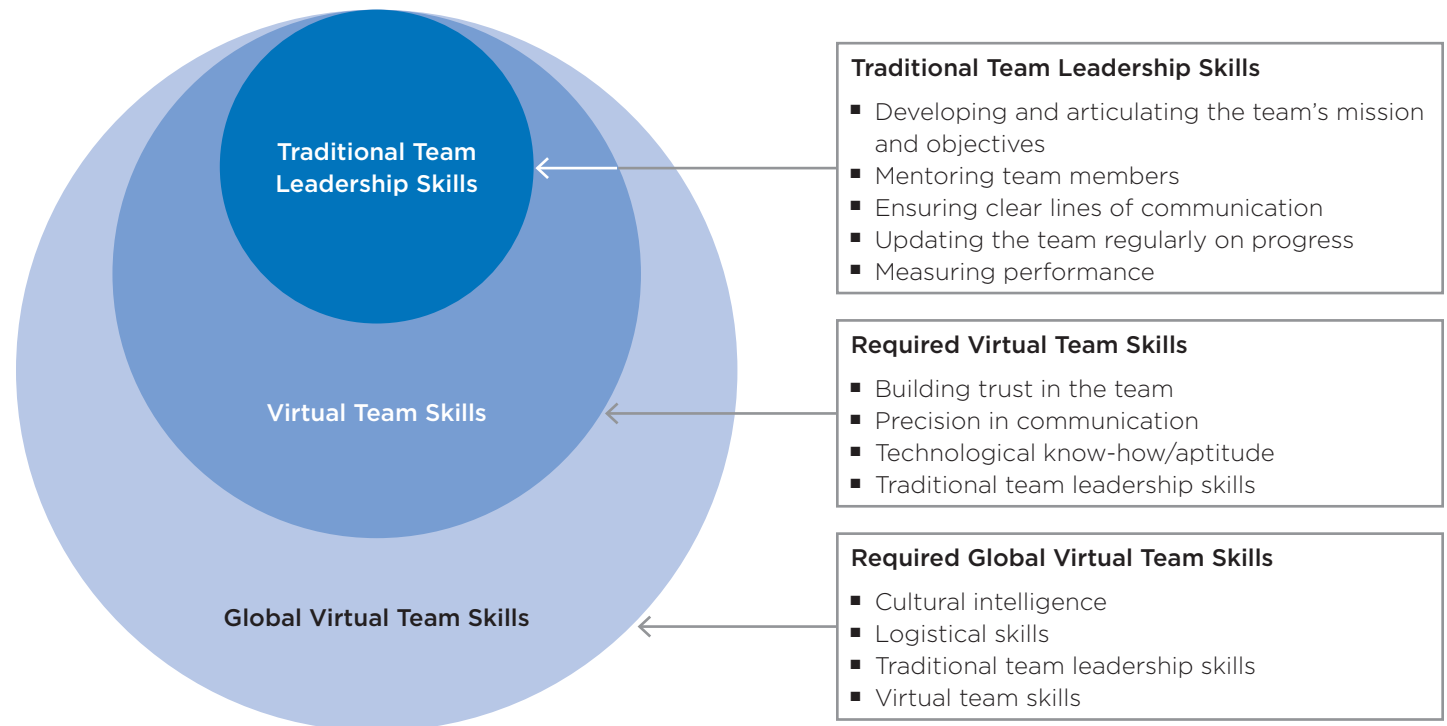
Regardless of the nature of a team, leaders must possess a standard set of skills to achieve team objectives.¹

However, in global virtual team environments, managers need to have additional leadership skills to be as successful as managers of colocated teams.

ADJUST TO VIRTUAL TEAM MANAGEMENT BY EXPANDING ON TRADITIONAL LEADERSHIP QUALITIES

Virtual Team Leadership Skills Expand on Traditional Team Skill Sets

Additional Skills Required for Managing Virtual Teams



Source: Joe Nandhakumar and Richard Baskerville, "Durability of Online Teamworking: Patterns of Trust," *Information Technology & People*, 2006.

Anna Learmonth, "Managing Teams Well is the Key," *Construction Contractor*, August 2006.

Jeanne Brett, Kristin Behfar, and Mary C. Kern, "Managing Multicultural Teams," *Harvard Business Review*, November 2006.

¹ Arvind Malhotra, Ann Majchrzak, and Benson Rosen, "Leading Virtual Teams," *Academy of Management Perspectives*, February 2007.

Before starting a project, a virtual team must come together and establish common criteria for successful working relationships.¹

Checklists, such as the ones on this page, help ensure the most important issues are resolved early on in the virtual collaboration process.

Research suggests that successful virtual teams depend highly on trust, but they do not operate under conditions supportive of trust-building.² Therefore, managers must work diligently to promote trust during team interactions.

PREPARE THE GROUNDWORK FOR A SUCCESSFUL VIRTUAL TEAM

Checklist to Create a Focused Team

Keep the Virtual Team Small (Approximately 10 Members)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Create a virtual team charter: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Explain the team's mission. <input type="checkbox"/> ▪ Frame the business problem the team is attempting to solve. <input type="checkbox"/> ▪ Define the team's objectives. <input type="checkbox"/> ▪ Outline the decision-making process. <input type="checkbox"/> ▪ Specify each individual's role. <input type="checkbox"/> 	
Agree on communication etiquette: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Respond promptly to all communications from fellow team members. <input type="checkbox"/> ▪ State ideal behavior for audio and video conferencing, meeting facilitation, and e-mail usage. <input type="checkbox"/> ▪ Listen actively, avoid multitasking, and demonstrate disciplined behavior. <input type="checkbox"/> 	

Source: Laura A. Hambley, Thomas A. O'Neill, and Theresa J. B. Kline, "Virtual Team Leadership: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of e-Collaboration*, January 2007.
 Wendy Combs and Stephanie Peacocke, "Leading Virtual Teams: How to Successfully Manage Virtual Team Productivity Online," *T+D*, February 2007.
 Terrence Brake, "Leading Global Virtual Teams," *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 2006.
 Debbie Lawley, "Creating Trust In Virtual Teams at Orange," *Knowledge Management Review*, May/June 2006.

¹ David Creelman, "Interview: Gina Walker and Virtual Teams," HR.com, 6 August 2001, <http://www.hr.com/sfs?t=/contentManager/onStory&e=UTF-8&i=116423256281&l=O&ParentID=1120248824312&StoryID=1119646934046&highlight=1&keys=Gina+%2BWalker&lang=O&active=no>.

² Terrence Brake, "Leading Global Virtual Teams," *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 2006.

Checklist to Build Trust Within a Virtual Team

Conduct the initial team meeting face to face, if possible. Studies suggest that seeing colleagues in person helps teams overcome communication barriers and develop more accurate impressions of their colleagues' trustworthiness.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Make your actions as transparent as possible. Gather team input on decisions and communicate simultaneously. In turn, disseminate as much information to as many team members as possible.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Be accessible and responsive. Virtual leaders need to make a conscious effort to encourage the sharing of nonwork-related information. This comes naturally in colocated teams but must be deliberately implemented in virtual teams.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Create team profiles. Have team members create profiles of their personal interests, hobbies, and areas of expertise. Photos are particularly useful in profiles since some members may not be able to meet in person.	<input type="checkbox"/>
Maintain confidentiality of team operations. Agree on norms for what information can be shared outside of the team.	<input type="checkbox"/>

Source: Terrence Brake, "Leading Global Virtual Teams," *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 2006.

Laura A. Hambley, Thomas A. O'Neill, and Theresa J. B. Kline, "Virtual Team Leadership: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of e-Collaboration*, January 2007.

Arvind Malhotra, Ann Majchrzak, and Benson Rosen, "Leading Virtual Teams," *Academy of Management Perspectives*, February 2007.

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Managers and dispersed workers should plan communication strategies and discuss potential pitfalls of virtual management prior to its inception.

By asking the specific questions outlined to the right, managers and employees can ensure they have the same expectations about standards for communication. However, managers must also anticipate and avoid the common points of miscommunication in virtual teams.

COMMUNICATE WITH AND ENGAGE THE TEAM

Clarifying Questions for Virtual Manager-Employee Communications

- Q:** At what times will employees be available by phone?
- Q:** How often will employees check e-mail throughout the day?
- Q:** What are the most appropriate and efficient uses for each channel?
- Q:** Which or what are the most effective communication channels to use with teammates and managers?
- Q:** Which days will employees report to their supervisor?

Tech Tool Tip

The end goal of technology in virtual collaboration is to replicate the environment of a colocated team. Always look for tools that come as close as possible to simulating everyone being in the same office.

Source: Microsoft Corporation, "How To Manage Remote Employees," Accessed 21 January 2008, <http://www.microsoft.com/australia/smallbusiness/themes/mobility/remotemanagers.aspx>.

Laura A. Hambley, Thomas A. O'Neill, and Theresa J. B. Kline, "Virtual Team Leadership: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of e-Collaboration*, January 2007.

Imperatives to Avoid Common Points of Virtual Team Miscommunication

When problems arise, inform and involve the entire team.

Maintain your composure and provide status updates to everyone at regular intervals. Sending your team information preempts employee misinterpretation of silence as being a bad sign.

Learn to read and hear body language in electronic communications:

Because team members often cannot see each other in person, leaders have to learn how to correctly decipher non-visual and auditory cues.

Source: Terrence Brake, "Leading Global Virtual Teams," *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 2006.

Laura A. Hambley, Thomas A. O'Neill, and Theresa J. B. Kline, "Virtual Team Leadership: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of e-Collaboration*, January 2007.

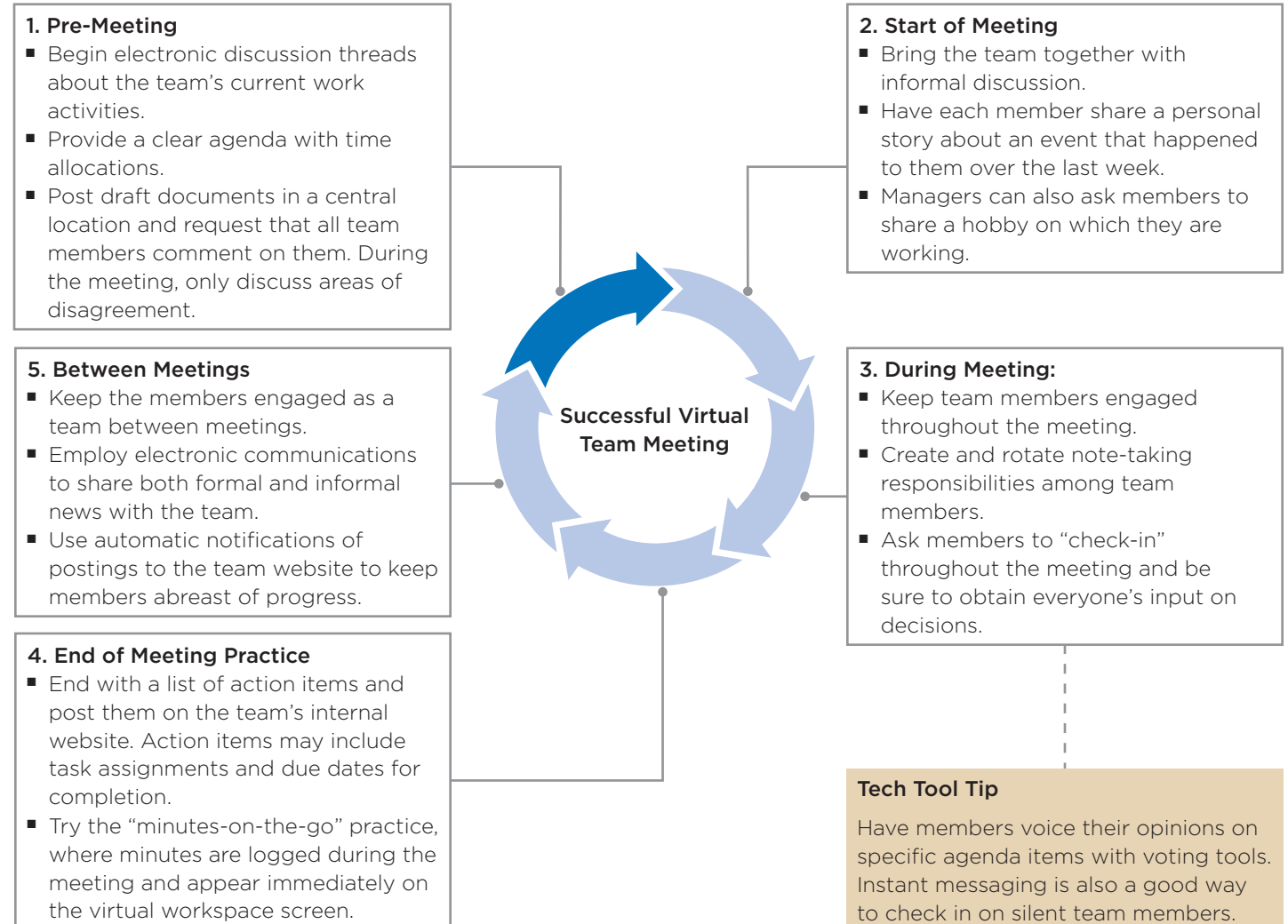
¹ Iris DeCastro, "Success with Virtual Teams," *Society for Technical Communication*, 2001, <http://www.stc.org/confproceed/2001/PDFs/STC48-000152.PDF>.

Virtual meetings provide an opportunity for managers to bring their remote teams together but require significant advance preparation.

This page illustrates what actions managers should take before, during, and after a virtual team meeting to ensure that the session is productive and reinforces collaboration.

COMMUNICATE WITH AND ENGAGE THE TEAM (CONTINUED)

How to Plan and Conduct a Virtual Meeting



Source: Laura A. Hambley, Thomas A. O'Neill, and Theresa J. B. Kline, "Virtual Team Leadership: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of e-Collaboration*, January 2007.
Arvind Malhotra, Ann Majchrzak, and Benson Rosen, "Leading Virtual Teams," *Academy of Management Perspectives*, February 2007.

Feedback is critical for maintaining team cohesion and identity in a virtual environment.

Being proactive in monitoring team performance allows managers to provide feedback in real time, simultaneously keeping the team on track while also encouraging team members. This page provides tips on managing virtual team performance.^{1,2}

ASSESS PROGRESS AND PROMOTE TEAM UNITY

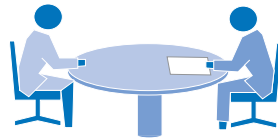
Tips on Performance Management

Be Proactive



- Identify areas of potential disconnect, such as competing local agendas and differing technology platforms.
- Make unannounced site visits to enable virtual leaders to have one-on-one meetings and provide the opportunity to get to know his or her direct reports.

Review Performance



- Solicit team members' anonymous feedback on the team's performance. Collect strengths, weaknesses, and suggestions for improvement. Review results with the team to agree on desired changes.
- Give team members feedback on how well they communicate their ideas across virtual space, not just on the ideas themselves.
- Scrutinize asynchronous (electronic threaded discussion and document postings in the knowledge repository) and synchronous (virtual meeting participation and instant messaging) communication patterns to determine team members' participation patterns and who needs support and prompting for further participation.

Promote Team Unity



- Start each virtual meeting with recognition of specific successes.
- Promote external recognition of the team. Some companies use their internal websites to post information on the achievements of virtual teams. Another option is to have the team present directly to executives.

Source: Arvind Malhotra, Ann Majchrzak, and Benson Rosen, "Leading Virtual Teams," *Academy of Management Perspectives*, February 2007.

Terrence Brake, "Leading Global Virtual Teams," *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 2006.

Laura A. Hambley, Thomas A. O'Neill, and Theresa J. B. Kline, "Virtual Team Leadership: Perspectives from the Field," *International Journal of e-Collaboration*, January 2007.

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² Terrence Brake, "Leading Global Virtual Teams," *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 2006.

Global virtual teams have an additional layer of complexity compared to virtual teams that operate in one country.

At the physical level, members are spread out across continents and numerous time zones, which can create logistical problems. Furthermore, cultural issues enter into play as divergent views on authority and communication lead to misunderstandings and conflict if not properly managed. This page describes barriers inherent in global virtual teams and ways to overcome them.^{1,2}

GLOBALIZE VIRTUAL TEAM MANAGEMENT

Barriers to Virtual Team Success

The Language Barrier

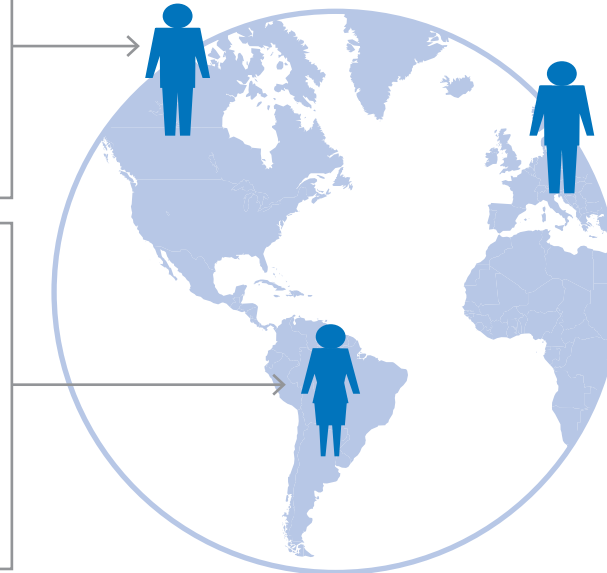
It is important to acknowledge up front that there will be comprehension difficulties. Send out important meeting documents ahead of time and work with the team to create common terminology with clear definitions.

Logistical Issues

For teams with members living in multiple time zones, establish blackout periods to restrict meeting times to specific hours. Also note all local holidays on the group's master calendar to prevent meetings from being scheduled during those times.

Different Cultural Backgrounds

Be aware of which team members come from cultures that favor direct communication (e.g., US) or indirect communication (e.g., Japan). This may require team members to recognize and modify their behaviors to accommodate the group. This is equally important for cultures with divergent views on hierarchy and authority.



Leverage Diversity to Benefit the Group

Managers can generate business value by leveraging differences to trigger breakthrough thinking and innovation. This may involve dividing the team into pairs to mix cultures or expertise.

Source: Jeanne Brett, Kristin Behfar, and Mary C. Kern, "Managing Multicultural Teams," *Harvard Business Review*, November 2006.

Edward F. McDonough Barczak, and Nicholas Athanassiou, "So You Want to Be a Global Project Leader?" *Research Technology Management*, May/June 2006.

Terrence Brake, "Leading Global Virtual Teams," *Industrial and Commercial Training*, 2006.

¹ Jeanne Brett, Kristin Behfar, and Mary C. Kern, "Managing Multicultural Teams," *Harvard Business Review*, November 2006.

² Edward F. McDonough Barczak, and Nicholas Athanassiou, "So You Want to Be a Global Project Leader?" *Research Technology Management*, May/June 2006.

To help predict and prevent intra-team conflict, some organizations screen virtual team candidates using a cross-cultural rating scale, such as the one below from GlaxoSmithKline.

These rating scales can help companies understand candidates' cultural preferences to predict areas of potential conflict within a team.

GLOBALIZE VIRTUAL TEAM MANAGEMENT (CONTINUED)

Example of a Cross-Cultural Rating Scale

The leader should make the final decision after consulting with the group.	Decisions are best made in consensus with the whole team.
1 2 3 4	5 6 7
Authority is derived from one's position.	Authority is earned through one's achievements.
1 2 3 4	5 6 7
One should only state things that are relevant and thought through.	Talking about things that simply come to mind can lead to creation of new ideas.
1 2 3 4	5 6 7

Source: Maggie James and Karen Ward, "Leading a Multinational Team of Change Agents at Glaxo Welcome (now GlaxoSmithKline)," *Journal of Change Management*, 2001.