

Team Effectiveness Strategies

Leading a virtual team requires more than working on the team's project agenda. Teams which are unable to meet in person frequently because members are distributed geographically need additional help to support their team process so that they can act and feel like a team.

Here are several strategies team leaders can use which make a significant difference in team effectiveness.

- **Make whole visible to everyone ...**
- **Provide "line of sight" ...**
- **Catalyze rich conversations ...**
- **Amplify energy ...**
- **Create tracks and footprints in physical space ...**

Get the whole team involved in the process of being conscious of making these things happen. That not only distributes the work but makes it more likely that opportunities to support these strategies won't be missed.

One way of involving the team is to share the list and talk about which one or two strategies would be worthwhile to work on for the next period of time (the next quarter, between now and the next face-to-face team meeting). Develop a shared understanding and an image of what it would feel like if the team was successful in implementing the strategy. Brainstorm a list of ways to achieve goals related to the selected strategy. Be as concrete and specific as possible in identifying actions for team members and team leaders.

Who will do what and when and how will they do it? How will we know if it's working? What will we do if it's not working?

Make Whole Visible to Everyone

<p><i>The idea of wholeness</i></p>	<p>One of the most difficult challenges for a distributed team is maintaining an image of itself as a whole. This is critical so that the team becomes more than just a loose collection of related parts. Working as a whole is what makes a team powerful.</p> <p>When a team is co-located they develop a shared image of themselves through experience - sitting in a conference room, meeting in someone's office, having lunch together.</p> <p>A distributed team will lack these images so you need other strategies for creating a sense of the whole so the team doesn't feel fragmented.</p> <p>The goal is to have the whole team present in all the individual members of the team.</p>
<p><i>Find images to illustrate the idea which the team can share</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the children's game where you connect numbered dots in a certain order to "see" a whole picture • pointillist paintings where the whole picture is made up of many little dots • a hologram where each part contains the whole image
<p><i>Brainstorm "wholeness" strategies with your team</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make sure there is a team photograph and that everyone has a copy (If you aren't able to take a team photo when you are together in person, make a collage out of pictures of all the individuals). Put it on something people are likely to keep in view (a mouse pad, a telephone contact list, a calendar). • Distribute a map showing where each team member is located. • Create a graphic which shows the name of each team member "sitting" at a place around a table (this generates a feeling of the whole better than seeing the names of team members in a list).

Provide "Line of Sight"

<p><i>The idea of lines of sight</i></p>	<p>One of the most difficult things for distributed teams is for members to "see" and feel what's happening above and around them in the organization. They don't have a "line of sight" to key parts of the system and so feel disconnected which reduces their effectiveness.</p> <p>When teams are co-located, members often sit in on briefings, company announcements, and meetings of related teams. In distributed teams, it's not unusual for the team manager to be the only one in regular contact with the team sponsor or other key players in the system and, therefore, the only one with a good view.</p> <p>This problem is exacerbated when there is a critical mass of members in one location and smaller groups elsewhere who will always feel that they are missing out on the action.</p> <p>CC'ing people on meeting minutes isn't adequate, they need the stories, the feel, the picture, the emotional tone which is the essence of what they are missing</p>
<p><i>Find images to illustrate the idea which the team can share</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a periscope which allows people in a submarine to see above the surface of the water • a fire observation tower • opera glasses which let people in the balcony see facial expressions of people on stage
<p><i>Brainstorm strategies to get lines of sight in all directions with your team</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Create "journalism" style (in contrast to "minutes") reports on meetings and publish to the rest of the team (including photos where possible) • Encourage people to acknowledge who is missing in the room at the beginning of meetings and develop conscious strategies to connect distributed members to the process. • Create space in the electronic communication system for informal swapping of stories and feelings about what's happening (the water cooler)

Catalyze Rich Conversations

<p><i>The idea of a variety of rich conversations include conversations that are:</i></p> <p><i>long-term</i></p> <p><i>short-term</i></p> <p><i>present</i></p> <p><i>future</i></p> <p><i>about projects</i></p> <p><i>about fun</i></p> <p><i>social</i></p> <p><i>creative</i></p>	<p>In order to realize the benefits of working as an aligned, interdependent, system teams need to have conversations which are diverse, complex, and deal with everything from key routines to major strategies. Collaboration can be thought of as a network of different conversations.</p> <p>A common problem for distributed teams is that their conversations deteriorate to being about logistical details, routine reports, and administrative matters except during infrequent face-to-face meetings. This just doesn't provide the "juice" you need to support the essential creative energy of teamwork because, in many cases, these conversations are the only shared experience the team has for long periods of time.</p> <p>It's critical to consciously create time and space for the team to have multiple, rich conversations between meetings - which means that you need to find ways to use a range of communications technologies to support these conversations.</p>
<p><i>Find images to illustrate the idea which the team can share</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the great philosophical "over dinner" conversations teams have during off-site meetings • the juicy dialogue catalyzed by reading an evocative article • the informal exchange in the hall on the way to lunch where critical information is passed along
<p><i>Brainstorm strategies to enrich conversations with your team</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hold periodic team telephone conferences described as "after dinner" talks (no admin matters allowed) • Rotate responsibility among the team to facilitate discussion on non-routine topics (theories of marketing, regional culture) in an online environment on the Intranet. • Invite "experts" (authors, consultants, key people from other parts of the organization) to engage with the team

Amplify Energy

<p><i>The idea of amplifying energy</i></p>	<p>The best team experiences are those where you can really feel the energy of the team. It feels synergistic. It's exciting.</p> <p>When a team meets in physical space, the room itself serves as a "container" which amplifies the energy of the team. At a great creative meeting it can feel like energy is bouncing off the walls and being absorbed by members of the team.</p> <p>Distributed teams experience a kind of entropy effect where energy dissipates and drains out of the system because there is no container for it.</p> <p>It's critical to find ways to identify energy in the distributed team and make it available to the whole so they can feel it and build on it. Blow on the distributed embers of energy to help the whole team catch fire.</p>
<p><i>Find images to illustrate the idea which the team can share</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a fantastic brainstorming session where the ideas are flowing and time just seems to fly by • the energy created when a team member comes running into the room to share the excitement of a new development or accomplishment • a team pitching in together on a tight deadline has the energy to work overtime until it's time to celebrate the accomplishment
<p><i>Brainstorm strategies to amplify energy with your team</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Find ways to "spotlight" individuals or parts of the team where something interesting is happening (initiate audio and video conferences from different places to feature different parts of the team) • Develop a team norm of sending "hot news" bulletins to the team (and a norm to respond to provide reinforcement and support) • Create ways to celebrate accomplishments as a whole team even when you aren't together.

Create Tracks and Footprints in Physical Space

<p><i>The idea of tracks and footprints</i></p>	<p>Virtual teams can feel very vague and abstract which makes it hard for both team members and others in the organization to experience the team as "real" and important.</p> <p>In a co-located team, the physical space and artifacts in it serve as reminders that the team exists - the names of everyone on in-boxes, the space around a shared secretary where you're likely to run into other team members, the corridor where everyone has an office.</p> <p>Without these, a distributed team can disappear off the radar screens of others in the organization and team members can lose a sense of themselves as part of the team. Lacking reminders, virtual team members can forget to tune into various team communication channels unless there is something pressing.</p> <p>Artifacts give a virtual team visibility in team members' physical space. They serve as an anchor to bring the team down to earth. Catching a glimpse of the team picture out of the corner of your eye is a subliminal reminder of the team, makes it present for you.</p>
<p><i>Find images to illustrate the idea which the team can share</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • the corridor where everyone on the team has their office (what does a virtual corridor look like?) • the break room with shared coffee pot, coffee mugs from a conference everyone went to, postcards from team members on vacation. • a team bulletin board which shows what everyone is doing
<p><i>Brainstorm ways of creating tracks and footprints with your team</i></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Even where there is only a single team member, create a sign or team in-box or some other signifier of the team so it's visible to everyone in that environment • Especially at the beginning, circulate team "output" with some kind of team-specific headings and formatting. This puts it in a team context and conveys the sense of ideas coming from the whole team rather than a single member.