Trust is the glue that holds virtual teams together

Building virtual team success is related to success in in-person teams, but it also means embracing the technology that makes them different.



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While some have headed back to the office, for others the world of virtual work is here to stay. But how can managers successfully lead teams operating under completely different rules of the game?

One way to conceive of team success is related to self-belief. Just as is the case for individuals, a team's belief in its ability to achieve a goal can be galvanizing, creating a self-reinforcing feedback loop. In teams, the performance of the group is heavily influenced by shared belief, and this can be boosted through techniques such as goal-setting, social persuasion and positive reinforcement.

But virtual teams deal with a unique set of challenges, and they also need to work with technology to cross these differences to a much greater extent than in-person teams do. Here again, belief in the ability of the team to navigate hard times will be key to their actually doing so.

How can this technology help or hinder the development of collective belief in the virtual sphere? What enables collaboration? What inhibits it?

IESE's Christoph Schneider, with co-authors Andrew Hardin, Robert M. Davison, Clayton A. Looney and Suprateek Sarker, conducted a field study of 42 teams in universities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States to find out. They found that belief in the team is vital to building trust — and that it is trust that overcomes negative perceptions of the difficulties caused by remote working.

Working "blind" makes teamwork and collaboration more difficult

There are three main stumbling blocks to successful virtual collaboration, and many of us have experienced one or all at various times in our careers:

- **Time differences** can make people think that remote participants aren't sympathetic to their scheduling needs (hello, 5 a.m. meetings), and everyone is capable of mixing up the hours.
- **Geographical differences** make it difficult to monitor teammates' behavior and can lead to suspicions about their motives and work ethics.
- **Cultural differences** cause misunderstandings, particularly when different

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languages are in play.

These are all hindrances, and the factor that can mitigate them is trust.

Trust is particularly crucial in the context of virtual teams, since it is vital to overcoming the side of colleagues that remains unseen and unmonitored.

At the heart of this is perception. If teams perceive situations (of time, geography or culture) to be problematic, they will be. These perceptions may conflict with reality, but they are important because they affect thoughts, feelings and actions. The solution, through building trust, is to break down negative perceptions.

Seeing results pays it forward where trust is concerned

Teammates who don't know how well a team member will perform will feel inhibited to take risks or face their common projects with confidence. Over time, this wears down the group's performance.

Trust develops as members start to appreciate each other's skills and see teammates complete assigned tasks on time. It binds and reinforces the usual collaborative framework of in-person teams in the virtual sphere, and allows the group to develop a true collective identity comprising:

- shared belief in the individual's ability to influence outcomes or bring about change;
- mutual support with a sense of unity and solidarity;
- task-specific confidence;
- self-reinforcing past successes;
- a shared understanding of goals and strategies.

The constraints faced by virtual teams are real — geographical differences, staff in different time zones, and cultural and linguistic factors all make collaboration more difficult. But sometimes the problems appear magnified, and there is limited face-to-face time to break down the barriers they present.

Just as the problems have specific dimensions, so, too, do the solutions. The authors emphasize that success in virtual teams cannot be built by simply applying in-person team solutions. The technology that allows collaboration isn't passive; it is a dynamic factor that

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influences relationships and shapes teamwork.

For virtual teams in particular, building self-belief in a group's ability to collaborate, despite external difficulties and using technology, is a crucial factor in building trust and mobilizing communities, social movements and organizations. Don't treat your virtual teams like classic teams; instead, work to overcome their particular challenges and see performance outcomes bloom.

Methodology

The study evaluates multiwave survey data from 42 global virtual teams of 201 graduate students attending universities in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the United States. The participants filled in a survey regarding their beliefs about the abilities, trust and perceptions of obstacles to collaboration in their teams during the project. The effectiveness of the test was heightened by the realism of working across various tasks, technologies, time zones, geographies and cultures.



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