

Leading effective teams from home: It's not the same

By the Catalyst Research Team* on April 21, 2020



During the pandemic, many things have changed including where and how you work. Working from home on a team differs from working in the office with a team. Shifting your work base from the office to home involves a significant change in process as well as environment. This is especially true if you work on a team or lead a team. Extensive research has identified ways to make virtual teams successful. This series of brief articles summarize the principles and tips that have been generated by hundreds of

scholars and thousands of practitioners over the past two decades as a way of providing you with a framework for managing your team from a home base. Internet searches can provide you with rich additional information. This series provides brief coverage of specific topics with checklists to make implementation as practical as possible – averaging less than five minutes of reading.

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Team leaders have to pay attention to many factors to find ways to optimize the performance of their teams – whether in a face-to-face or in a virtual setting. Some of those factors are the same in either setting. For example, a dependable technology platform, team member skills in use of that platform, a clear set of goals that all members understand, effective routines, etc., are needed for effective teamwork in either setting. In the case of teams of professionals doing creative problem solving, the leadership challenge increases because creativity and innovation demand emphasis on factors that go beyond what more routine work requires. Even the leadership system changes, because shared leadership where each member takes appropriate initiative to move the team forward is important when team members with different types of expertise need to take the initiative to move the project forward.

Please read this checklist. Does this Design Challenge apply to your team situation?

1. output depends on many types of knowledge,
2. knowledge is resident in many individuals,
3. those individuals are geographically dispersed across locations and time zones,
4. members may span the globe, so contact crosses time zones, national boundaries, worksite boundaries, and cultural differences.
5. integration mechanisms can involve only small numbers of individuals, then what organizational structures work?

The nature of the work determines the appropriate design of the system. Designs must enable the work to get done. Which type of team are you working with?

- Networked where members collaborate to achieve a common goal or purpose, so membership is frequently diffuse and fluid, like a community of practice;
- Parallel where members work short term to develop recommendations for an improvement in a process or system;
- Project or Product-Development where members conduct projects for users or customers for a defined period of time, tasks are usually nonroutine, results are specific and measurable, and the team has decision making authority;
- Work or Production where members perform regular and ongoing work usually in one function; clearly defined membership, such as account processing;
- Service where members provide support for internal customers, sometimes 24/7;
- Management where member work collaboratively on a daily basis to organize oversight of employees doing the basic work; or
- Action where members offer immediate action responses such as emergency situations.



Why is it different?

We define a team as an interdependent collection of individuals who share responsibility for specific outcomes for their organization. Interdependent means member relies on each other and so need effective communications for arriving at shared insights, decisions, and goals. A key part of that interdependence is captured in “I am

committed to your success and you to mine” – mutual support. In the workplace, that communication can be face-to-face at least some of the time which means nonverbal behaviors and immediate responses allow for better channels of information flow and informal meetings can occur in hallways, at lunch, and at the watercooler. In a virtual team, members are dispersed geographically, perhaps in the same city or across the planet. Consequently, there is a pressing need for more care in planning interactions and clarifying

communications with a range of process challenges that include turn-taking, capturing ideas and decisions, stimulating synergy during the discussion, maintaining an adequate energy level, etc.. Otherwise, errors of both omission and of action occur that cost in time, rework, wasted resources, and reduced morale. Avoiding error is not the only payoff. When the team works well, there is an increase in intelligent planning and decision making, in innovative capacity, and in employee engagement. Good teams get better – learning and creating together in increasingly effective ways. No one wants to be a member of a mediocre team, so tap the energy members have for success to power teamwork. Excellent teams are rare.

Profile of an Excellent Team whether face-to-face or virtual

- every voice is heard and every point of view considered;
- plans, decisions, and actions synthesize all members' resources to generate a creative solution;
- leadership is shared around task planning, relationship building, and creative problem solving;
- members provide mutual support for each other.

Most teams are average or mediocre and therefore need improved skills for teamwork. Their output is limited in quality and quantity because their teamwork falls far short of optimum. “There is no substitute for competence” (Yourdon & Constantine, 1986).

What does it take to excel as a team? A lot, including the following:

- Training in teamwork
- Intelligent selection of members
- Motivational energy
- Shared commitment to collaboration
- Evolving group process
- Supportive environment, especially support systems
- Appropriate tools & equipment
- Energizing leadership style
- Clear, shared goals
- Luck (2%) and so on. Which of these need attention for your team to excel?



Investing in Team Processes Pays Off

Don't use a team to solve a problem unless you really need to. Most teams operate at a mediocre level, partly because their formal leaders do not know how to elevate process and performance or do not want to spend the time and effort investing in them. Team leaders (and their leaders) who invest reap significant performance payoffs. It's a choice. If you choose to develop your team's capability when members are forced to work at a distance, read the brief articles in this series as a guide.

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