

How to make working with virtual teams a bit easier

When you suddenly have to work remotely and/or virtually there are a lot challenges you might have to face. Not being able to meet face to face does not only change the way you communicate or make decisions and discuss things, it also changes the way you connect within the team and get a team spirit. Personal contact is essential to build a good relationship of trust, which in turn is one of the most important factors influencing the success of the team.

Three out of four teams that work remote solely fail – because the trust in each other and in the team as a whole is not strong enough. When you know and trust each other, you get over a misunderstanding faster or does not even let it arise. When you trust each other, you spend less time overthinking how things were phrased or that someone made a mistake. Instead, you focus on your actual work. When you feel safe in your team, when you know that making mistakes does not mean that you get judged on it, then you rather ask for help and are more engaged. In the end, this makes a team more successful.

When you work remotely and/or virtually you cannot meet for an informal coffee break, have short conversations before meetings and it is way harder to develop a feeling for the team, the atmosphere and the other team members.

Virtual meetings feel longer, a video conference is far more exhausting mentally and physically than meeting face to face. The nerves are shattered more quickly and the stress level is often higher overall.

So there is more than one reason to think about collaboration in virtual teams. How can we create transparency, how can we ensure that everyone is involved and how can we create a positive atmosphere in the team?

There is no patent remedy. We have put together a few tips and ideas here. Much of it is "old news", but all the more important in virtual collaboration.

Good luck and above all have fun working together virtually!

Rules for everyone when having a virtual meeting.

As with all meetings, the following applies all the more to virtual meetings: everyone must do their part to make it a success.

- We make sure our technical equipment works
- We are on time at the beginning of a meeting and after breaks.
- We come prepared. We pre-read the agenda, notes and other documents.
- We use our camera, this improves communication and increases team spirit.
- We pay attention. We do not chat, do our e-mails or use social media while being at a meeting.
- We keep it as short as possible and focus on the topic.

First of all: Meetings Basics – old rules are good rules!

- Every meeting has an agenda.
 - o The team leader prepares it.
 - o It includes a timeslot for each topic.
 - o It includes a tabular list of all to-do's with responsibilities and deadlines from the last protocol (see below).
 - o Every team member gets the agenda at least 24 hours before the meeting.
 - o The agenda is discussed at the beginning of the meeting and supplemented if necessary (should not take longer than 5 minutes).
- Every meeting begins with a round of how everyone is doing.
 - o How am I right now – important with regard to the organization of the meeting.
 - o How have I been since the last meeting.
- Every meeting includes a query about the workload until the next meeting.
- Every meeting ends with a short round about how everyone is feeling right now.
 - o This helps to uncover negative feelings, small conflicts and getting an overall feeling for the team.
- Topic number 2 of every meeting are the to-do's and deadlines from the last protocol.
 - o Go through the tabular list of the open to-do's.
 - o To-do's that got done are deleted.
 - o Open to-do's get rescheduled and stay in the protocol
- Every meeting has a moderator.
 - o Calls those who want to say something.
 - o Keeps the time in mind.
 - o Takes care that the discussion sticks to the topic.
- Every meeting is recorded.
 - o Record the main results in a way that you can understand it even without being part of the meeting.
 - o Make sure everyone can read it after 24 hours.
 - o Every team member reads the protocol.
 - o The person writing the protocol is not the one doing the moderation.

- o Every task is recorded with a deadline and responsibility. And the end of the protocol all tasks are summed up. This way you can find all your to-do's easily.

Preparation and follow-up of meetings

Video conferencing needs to be planned in more detail and designed more consistently so that no unnecessary time is wasted - neither before nor during the meeting.

- Before using a tool for the first time, all participants should test the technical requirements (does the tool/software work on my computer, how do I log in, do my microphone and camera work, am I easy to understand, etc.)
- It must be clearly defined who initiates the video conference; if a more comprehensive tool is used, this person should be online at least 10 minutes before the meeting starts (creates commitment, serves as a role model and creates certainty that the meeting will actually take place)
- Sets of slides should be sent in advance as a pdf so that everyone can prepare and have a backup in case the software goes down.
- Planning a meeting
 - o Create an agenda in which you set a fixed time for each topic. You avoid meetings becoming too long or ending up with too little time for the final topics.
 - o Send the agenda and all documents as well as the minutes of the last meeting to all participants at least 24 hours before the meeting so that they can prepare themselves.
 - o Schedule breaks: after 60 minutes, a 15 minute break should be scheduled. Be rigorous here, it increases productivity!
 - o Virtual workshops or conferences should have a maximum of 6 of these 60-minute blocks. Then plan at least one hour for lunch.
 - o During the breaks you can play music or do small movement exercises for everyone. It is best, however, if the participants get up, go to the window for a moment or get a new coffee, so that they do not look at a screen for a while.

Conducting virtual meetings

Poor execution of virtual meetings can ruin the best planning. Structure, clear rules and good moderation, on the other hand, are easy on the nerves and let the participants go back to work with a good feeling.

- Introduce clear rules
 - o Requests to speak are displayed by raising hands (virtual or actual). Only those who have been called up by the moderator speak. In this way you avoid that two people speak at the same time, then again nobody speaks and then the typical "You first... no you... so I... no you..." arises.

- Use non-verbal gestures to signal approval or rejection in a discussion (e.g. thumbs up/thumbs down, alternatively red and green cards can be held up). This way, everyone can express their opinion, but you avoid the typical "I just wanted to agree with XY, I also think that...".
- Assign two roles in each meeting: the timekeeper and the topic keeper. These help to keep track of time and to point out when the discussion strays from the topic. Both are actually the facilitator's job, but the support helps to meet all of them.
- Tips for the host of video conferences
 - If the participants can join the meeting themselves and do not need to be called in from the waiting room, the room should be open at least 10 minutes before the start - this time can be used for small talk or short bilateral arrangements.
 - Make sure that the microphones of the participants are automatically muted when they enter the room, but can be operated by anyone. In this way you can avoid babble of voices at the beginning that you first have to get under control. You can also wave into the camera to greet the participants.
 - For larger meetings, requests to speak can also be registered in a parallel text chat. This way you do not lose track of what is going on.
 - The same applies to questions on the topic. The questions can be answered by a co-moderator.
 - Connect with a trusted person via a private chat . In this way, feedback can be obtained/given directly without the need for criticism in front of the group (e.g. instructions were unclear, you drag out a topic too long, you seem unfriendly/annoyed etc.).
 - Keep the attention high by...
 - talking to a person directly and addressing them with their names. Ask questions or about their opinions.
 - showing slides for a shorter time than usually.
 - announcing that you will ask for opinions at the end of the presentation.
 - asking to take notes and send them in after the meeting/session.
 - asking to write a conclusion and send it in.
 - If discussions drag on for a long time or get rather heated or if there are a few people who rather talk a lot, announce that you will ask for the opinions of all participants one after the other. The same method can be used for meetings without video, when non-verbal signals about who will speak next are not possible.

Working together between meetings

When people work together in an office or building, we use an amazing number of unofficial situations to discuss things, clarify questions and also to make decisions: the coffee kitchen, the conversation in the canteen or when leaving the building. The short arrangement in the office door, the quick phone call, all this is more or less

eliminated in virtual teams. In order to prevent misunderstandings and raise fewer questions than usual, many things that have been clarified implicitly or unofficially up to now must be addressed explicitly and made transparent.

- Processes must be regulated clearly:
 - o Are there core times/days when each team member should be available?
 - o Who is available at what time and through which channels?
 - o How do we know if someone is sick?
 - o Which communication tool do we choose for which purpose?
 - o Does everyone know how to use these tools and do all team members have access?
 - o In what time frame do we react to e-mails (e.g. 24 or 48 hours)?
 - o Where do we save and organize jointly edited documents?
 - o How does the acceptance/release of final results take place?
 - o How do we structure feedback loops on interim result: Who gives feedback and in what time frame? How are these feedbacks filed/discussed/incorporated?
 - o What do we do if deadlines are crashed?
- Commitment and trusting the cooperative work are more important than ever:
 - o Agreement on and adherence to appointments and especially deadlines are therefore even more important.
 - o Phone calls are important - also and especially for short discussions. They should not always turn into long conversations. At the beginning of a conversation you can say directly, you only have 5 minutes time - so you don't get tempted to get bogged down in small talk.
 - o Calls from colleagues should always be answered, even if you just say that you don't have time - it's like knocking on the office door. This ensures that the team can still be reached in important cases.
- The follow-up of work and results should be accelerated and structured:
 - o All tasks should be recorded on a simple whiteboard, a kanban board or, if necessary, a simple Excel list.
 - o All team members should be able to access the list and follow the tasks of the others and enter their own results. This increases motivation and makes it easier to see what you can achieve together.

E-mail remains relevant

- E-mails remain an important means of communication, so a constructive approach is essential.
 - o Whenever possible, do not write e-mails longer than one screen height.
 - o Formulate explicitly what you expect from the recipient.
 - o Praise in public (cc), criticize in private.
 - o Do not write e-mails clearly and clear, but over-clear and over-emphasized.
 - o Irony, cynicism and sarcasm are taboo in e-mails. This almost always leads to misunderstandings.

- o Never type an e-mail in the heat of the moment. (Exception: positive feedback may be written immediately ☺)
- o When you receive an e-mail with important attachments, confirm receipt.
- o Always respond to mails if a work order or question is included. Even if only to say that it will take a few more days to process.

Team-Spirit

No (wo)man is an island – especially in virtual teams it is important to find and maintain a personal level.

- Fixed team times are important to keep in touch. The entire team should meet at reasonable intervals.
- Create continuous communication opportunities
 - o The team should use a Messenger/ChatApp where you log in in the morning and log out in the evening. This way, short and quick communication can be guaranteed, but also personal togetherness, jokes and a good atmosphere can be spread.
 - o Set up your own chat for jokes, memes and gossip
 - o Time for small talk should also be scheduled in meetings. Don't forget to gossip and talk about each other's lives.
- Success must be celebrated - with a beer in front of the screen and a pizza at the boss's expense.
- Meet for a virtual after work beer.
- At the end of the month set a meeting to discuss the following questions:
 - o Name one thing that the team handled really well in the last few weeks.
 - o Name one thing the team could do even better?
 - o Tell each other about one thing that you thought about a lot lately.
- But boundaries are also important:
 - o End of the working day means end of the working day.
 - o Chats for fun, gossip and gossip can be created separately from work chats
- Conflicts cannot always be avoided. But at least solve them as early as possible!
 - o The team leader sets a good example and regularly obtains feedback from the others on how they are doing as a team leader. Please do this in a safe environment, e.g. by means of an anonymous survey. Or ask the team members to rate you as a team leader on a scale from 1 = super bad to 10 = simply couldn't be better. Then ask what you should do to get one point better. It is easier to express wishes than to name criticism.
 - o Even small and at first sight irrelevant conflicts should be addressed and clarified. In virtual cooperation one does not have such a good feeling for whether "it is really ok".
 - o To avoid misunderstandings, queries and questions of understanding should be asked more frequently than usual.
- Trust plays a major role - uncertainties always arise when conditions change. For the team leader this means,

- o to not start micro-managing. This only frustrates and rather shows distrust in the abilities of the team members.
- o to give the employees a leap of faith.
- o to communicate clearly which goal should be achieved by when, which results should be available by when. However, do not specify in detail how this is to be achieved. That would be micro-managing ;-)
- o ask all team members what really motivates them. If you know this, you can act accordingly and shape the environment.