

Reflections on Virtual Teams: The New Normal

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Recently, I have been exposed to an overwhelming plethora of self-help material on Virtual Teams, which has flooded social media. Interestingly enough, there is a fine line that separates the two facets of literature in this regard. One refers to the volumes of research on traditional virtual or geographically dispersed teams and the other to publications post the global pandemic – a historical event that has changed, perhaps forever, the paradigm of how we work.

As I delved deeper this distinction became even more interesting on multiple levels.

Traditional view of Virtual Teams

Traditionally, virtual teams were exemplified by team members who were separated by boundaries of time and/or distance and who leveraged technology to deliver an outcome. Members are committed to a common purpose, goal and approach to working together, that holds them mutually accountable for their performance.

In theory, virtual teams give employers the chance to build a dream team without boundaries. For employees, it offers the freedom and flexibility to attain a healthy work-life balance. However, in practice, things aren't always so rosy.

The top four challenges leaders encounter with putting in place effective geographically dispersed teams are issues related to communication, trust, productivity and time/culture differences. Technology per se has become a hygiene factor. Another recurring issue is that of performance anxiety. Leaders often wonder if employees are tasked with too little - or too much, and employees fret about the lack of visibility and transparency around performance.

However, organizations the world over, who have realised the benefits of remote and/or hybrid teams, have invested a lot of time and effort to combat these challenges and help leaders take their virtual teams through the four stages of team development as documented by Tuckman; Forming, Storming, Norming and Performing. This has included, besides putting in place the right technology and support systems, selection of the right team members, effective on-boarding processes and norms for team engagement. At an individual level, remote workers have also looked into the strategies and home support systems they require to allow them to plan their space and time when working from home.

As the World Changed

On the other hand, today, a large majority of the workforce is working in remote teams not by choice, but because the environment has forced their hand. We see organizations being taken by surprise, ill-prepared for remote work.

Neither do they have in place the technology, nor the preparedness of their leaders and employees to deal with the onslaught brought about by a pandemic beyond their control. Offices and support systems which were a taken for granted necessity to function are no longer viable. Adding to the wretchedness is that “home”, which till in the recent past, was a sanctuary to retreat to after a hard day’s work has now become a confined jail cell shared by equally irate family.

Unfortunately, the vast expanse of material available on working remotely inadequately answers questions that are currently relevant:

- How do I create a home office when I have my children at home with no help?
- How do I cook, clean, be a single parent, a filial support to aged parents and yet maintain the productivity asked of me?
- And what of my leaders? When do I get some answers from them?

Reality check: Leaders are as lost as their team members trying to balance the paradox¹ of demonstrating highly visible and caring leadership that ensures involvement and engagement, versus being busy with urgent meetings and operational issues, triggered in part by the current situation, and magnified by their own underlying fears and a desire to maintain control.

As the business environment reacts to the bearish market sentiments, lines between home and work blur and unrealistic expectations come into play. All norms of mutual goal setting, a given in successful remote teams, get either bent or broken. From a psychological perspective mutual trust between managers and employees start to erode and performance anxiety intensifies – a classic catch-22 situation.

Under such circumstances, a key question emerges: what should the leaders focus their energies on?

The Leaders’ Focus

Definitely, the first response that comes to mind is the bottom line - keeping the business afloat is of prime importance.

But equally important is that they rise to the occasion as empathetic, authentic leaders who understand the predicament their employees are in. Understand, that as the boundaries between

¹ Tuning in, turning outward: Cultivating compassionate leadership in a crisis, by Gemma D’Auria, Nicolai Chen Nielsen, and Sasha Zolle, McKinsey & Company, 2020

work and home fade, there is a fine line that they, as leaders, must balance – the line that exists between tasks and relationships. While a lot of leaders cognitively may understand this, in reality, conversations across organizations reveal that more often than not, employees feel that their leaders are going through the motions when it comes to empathy and genuine concern for their wellbeing. Building and maintaining relationships with remote team members requires focus, initiative and consistent intentional effort – a lot more than is needed when teams are co-located. To help survive a crisis and set the stage for business recovery, literature propagates four important qualities in leaders that are worthy of further investigation: awareness, vulnerability, empathy, and compassion².

Given the ambiguity of the current situation, what leaders must understand is that despite the overwhelming challenges, they must take a step back and think about their actions from two perspectives.

The immediate present and the imminent future.

Focus for the Immediate present

For the immediate present, the learning curve is steep. The need to lead by example cannot be understated. Teams are looking toward their leaders for guidance. Transparency and trust therefore become very important. Transparency of goals, of processes, and more importantly of the measures of performance. Mutual trust is equally important – leaders trusting that their employees will display integrity and maintain work ethics, and employees trusting that their leaders will look out for them and act in their best interest. Trust and transparency, coupled with continuous and supportive two-way conversations, will go a long way in addressing the complexities which are an inherent part of remote teams. Rather than look for instant quick-fix solutions, organizations should address the current situation equitably, supporting the physical, financial and emotional health of their workforce. Leaders and employees alike should also take succour from the fact that they are not alone. What they are experiencing is not an isolated phenomenon, but something that every organization and every household around the globe is also struggling with.

Focus for the imminent future

As for the latter, leaders must question and address what will be the “new normal” for their organizations. While necessity is the mother of invention during the pandemic, what becomes important is how the experiences and lessons learnt during the lockdown can help build new tenets for a stronger tomorrow - in what seems to be a contact-less economy.

² ibid

If their vision stays myopic in dealing with the tactical challenges of the present, they may just take their organizations from the frying pan into the fire.

About Dr Kavita Sethi

With over 30 years of experience spanning entrepreneurial, business and managerial roles, Kavita is the Principal Consultant of ODE Consulting[®]. Her areas of specialisation include strategy, leadership and cross culture.

Kavita previously headed the Asia Case Research Centre at the University of Hong Kong. A visiting faculty at a number of institutes, Kavita has to her credit more than a dozen business cases available through Harvard Business School Publishing and The European Case Clearing House.

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ODE Consulting[®] (est 1996), Organization Development Excellence, is a consulting firm that drives transformation and change and embeds culture. We help individuals and teams drive change, uplift their skills and prepare for the work of the future.

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