Skillbook

How to Manage a Virtual Team

Team Management
Skills

Mindtools

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Skillbook

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1. Introduction

B eing part of a virtual team is something that many of us are becoming accustomed to.

Working remotely with people who live in other cities, countries, or in different time zones is just one of the features of this "new normal." Some of these people you may have met already. Others you may never meet!

Pulling people together who are geographically dispersed and getting them to work together effectively can be challenging. We've covered some of these challenges in our **Skillb**ook, How to Set Up a Virtual Team, where we discussed:

- How to recruit and onboard new team members virtually.
- How to set up a Team Charter and team guidelines to improve communication and engagement.
- How to choose the right tech for your team, including communication, collaboration and online productivity tools.

But how do you keep a virtual team engaged, productive and motivated in the long term? How do you trust them to get the job done?

In this **Skillbook**, we'll drill down into some of the key challenges that managers of virtual teams will likely face. In particular, we'll cover how to:

- Communicate effectively and run successful virtual meetings.
- Monitor performance and productivity.
- Motivate your team members by empowering them, by removing factors that create dissatisfaction, and by recognizing and rewarding positive behavior.

2. Communication in a Virtual Team

Communication in a virtual team takes a lot more effort than with an office-based team. But communication is key if you want to build trust, encourage collaboration, share information, and give praise.

Luckily, there's a vast range of software out there that your team can use to stay connected. These range from messaging apps, such as Slack and Skype, to virtual meetings packages like Microsoft Teams and Zoom.

Virtual meetings are particularly important for staying connected to your team. So, in this chapter, we'll look at how to set up and run them effectively.

How to Run Effective Virtual Meetings

Team meetings are a great way for virtual teams to build bonds and to share information and ideas. They can also reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness – both of which can present particular difficulties for remote workers. So, it's important that you get it right.

1.   Choose the Right Tech

First, set up the platforms and software that suit your team's needs. (For more information on choosing the right tech for your team, see our Skillbook, How to Set Up a Virtual Team).

2.   Schedule Regular Meetings

When your software is in place and everyone feels confident about using it, the next step is to create a regular meetings schedule that all members of your team are happy with.

Start by establishing how often you want to hold your meetings: daily, weekly or fortnightly, for example.

For some team members, these meetings may be the only opportunity that they have to connect with others, to share their ideas, and to report on their progress. So make sure that people are given ample opportunity to share their thoughts or concerns.

Remember to take people's geographical locations into consideration, too. Are some team members working in different time zones? Can you schedule a meeting that everyone can attend, wherever they are based?

Before you begin your first virtual meeting, you may find it useful to agree on some simple Virtual Meeting Guidelines with your team. For example, will you always use video chat, or will audio be enough? Can people wear whatever they feel comfortable in or should they wear normal work attire?

Action:

Together with your team, agree on some rules and guidelines for your virtual meetings that you are all happy to follow. Write these in the boxes, below.

Virtual Meeting Guidelines	
Guideline #1	
Guideline #2	
Guideline #3	
Guideline #4	
Guideline #5	

3.   Make Use of Other Communications Channels

A weekly virtual meeting is great, as are weekly one-on-ones with each team member, but be careful not to go overboard. Scheduling too many meetings can cause stress and fatigue, and may also mean that you spend less time concentrating on your day-to-day tasks.

In other words, know when "enough is enough." And remember that there are plenty of other communications channels that you can use for quick "check-ins" or queries, including messaging apps like Slack and Skype.

4.   Take Time to Prepare

Virtual meetings may need more preparation than face-to-face meetings. There are technical issues to consider, such as:

- Making sure that everyone is able to connect.
- Ensuring that people know how to use the meeting software (for example, functions such as screen-sharing, in-chat messaging, and the mute and unmute settings).
- Providing people with the correct link and login details for the meeting.

Spend some time drawing up a meeting agenda that you can send out to people ahead of time. Be particularly clear about start and finish times. And, if it's going to be a long meeting, try to organize topics into 10-15 minute segments to keep everyone focused and engaged.

5.   Be Sensitive!

Communication in the virtual world can often feel more abrupt than speaking in person. The absence of body language can mask the true intention behind what you're saying. This may mean that you inadvertently appear rude or insensitive.

Try to practice active listening and be aware of people's tone of voice. Listening actively means making a conscious effort to hear not only the words that someone is saying, but the complete message that they are trying to get across. This means giving them your undivided attention. In other words, avoid getting distracted or forming counter arguments while they are talking.

It can also help to talk to your team about any communication problems that arise. You can decide as a group how you expect to communicate with one another. For instance, the tone of voice you expect people to use, how you will deal with interruptions, and how you might mitigate this by using video chat functions such as mute.

It's also worth having a contingency plan. For example, if a key person can't connect, what will you do? Will you reschedule or press on?

Action:

Think about a time when you thought someone was behaving negatively on a phone call, a video chat, or a messaging app. How did you interpret their words, body language, or tone of voice?

Do you think that you misread these signals? What could you do in the future to overcome these types of problems?

Describe a time when you had a negative experience communicating with someone remotely.

How did you interpret their words, body language, or tone of voice?

How do you think you might have misread these signals?

What could you do to avoid these kinds of problems from arising in the future?

6. Invite Participation

In face-to-face meetings people tend to fall into two main groups: those that are highly engaged and want to speak up, and those that prefer to remain quiet and observe. Virtual meetings are no different – but they can make it easier for those that want to take a "back seat" to do so.

Sometimes these participants are so quiet during virtual meetings that we may even forget they are there at all! But this means that the group can miss out on different ideas and viewpoints.

Encourage everyone to get involved in your meeting by calling on people individually. For example, if you notice that someone is being ignored or interrupted, you could say, "Excuse me, Delilah, what were you going to say?" Or, you could invite someone to contribute using a prompt such as, "Max, you've worked on similar projects in the past. What do you think?"

Tip:

Virtual meeting software often includes lots of useful functions that can help to drive engagement. So make use of them! Here are a few that you could use in your next team meeting:

- **The "mute" button** – encourage participants to mute themselves when someone is giving a presentation or sharing important information. This will help to ensure that people don't miss out on vital details.
- **Breakout rooms** – some virtual meeting apps, such as Zoom, enable you to divide a large meeting into smaller "breakout" groups. These can be particularly useful if you have lots of topics that need to be discussed. They can also help more introverted team members, who may find the prospect of talking in large meetings daunting, to get their voice heard.
- **Virtual whiteboards** – online collaboration tools such as Jamboard and Mural allow you to set up virtual whiteboards. These are ideal tools for remote brainstorming sessions, and can encourage those that do find it difficult to speak up to contribute in different ways.
- **Polls** – Zoom and other virtual meeting apps allow you to hold in-meeting polls. These can be useful if you want to vote on particular issues or get instant feedback from participants.
- **In-meeting chat features** – allow people to use this feature to ask questions and make comments throughout a meeting or during a presentation.

7. Encourage Informal Chats

Virtual meetings don't always need to have a specific business reason behind them. They can also provide valuable opportunities for team building. Encourage people to meet informally for a quick coffee and a catch-up. These are great ice breakers and can help people to build stronger connections and rapport.

They can also help to reduce feelings of isolation and loneliness – both of which can be common issues for people who work remotely on a long-term or permanent basis.

8. Be Cybersecure

Finally, data security is of paramount importance when you work online – and virtual meetings have been known to be targeted by hackers. There are several things you can do to improve your cybersecurity. These include:

- Checking that your meeting and chat software provide end-to-end encryption.
- Setting a meeting password and sharing these details with meeting attendees on a secure network.
- Using two-factor authentication for meeting attendees if the content of your meeting is particularly sensitive.
- Having a "waiting room" or "green room," so you can screen people entering the meeting and make sure that no one enters the meeting before the host joins.
- Using a dashboard to identify all of the attendees.
- Avoiding recording the meeting, unless it's really necessary.
- Disabling features such as screen- or file-sharing and chat if the meeting will contain sensitive information.
- Limiting who can share their screen to avoid people sharing unexpected or unwanted information or images. And reminding people to avoid sharing sensitive information.

3. Monitoring Performance and Productivity

Managing the performance of virtual team members can be difficult. Work is less visible, which can mean that it's harder to catch mistakes and celebrate successes.

You can't always monitor each team member's work closely in a virtual team. Nor would you want to, particularly if they are an experienced and established group. But a team that is new to remote working needs to demonstrate that it can work independently, take initiative, and meet deadlines without the need for constant reminders.

To achieve this, you'll need to create structures and routines that replace traditional performance management and team development functions.

These should encompass the following three things:

1.   Providing effective, regular feedback.
2.   Setting clearly defined goals.
3.   Using online tools to track work.

1.   Providing Effective, Regular Feedback

It can be easy to forget about providing feedback when everyone works remotely, especially if you have lots of meetings filling up your calendar. But failing to do this can mean that you miss key opportunities to give praise, and to assess training or development needs. Other workplace problems, such as disputes or mistakes, can also go overlooked.

In fact, carving out dedicated time to provide feedback to your team members is critical when you work in a virtual team. It allows you to keep track of people's progress, their goals, and their achievements, and it's also an opportunity for you to build rapport and check on people's emotional wellbeing.

So, one of the first things you should do when you set up your virtual team is to schedule weekly one-on-ones with each of your team members.

Routine is vital when you work from home. People need to know that they have a dedicated time and space to air their opinions, share their concerns, and talk over any issues they've encountered.

It can also be a good idea to structure your one-on-ones so that they cover the following:

- Goals, planning and feedback that you want to go over.
- Issues, suggestions and solutions that your team member wants to raise.
- A wider, informal discussion about progress, personal development, training needs, resources, and your team member's well-being.

By addressing these points you'll be able to pick up on any issues or bottlenecks that your team member has encountered, and pinpoint opportunities for training and development.

Action:

Set out an agenda for a one-on-one with one of your team members. First, write out the goals that your team member is currently working toward. Then jot down some feedback that you want to give them. This could include some constructive criticism or some praise about a piece of work well done.

During your meeting, jot down some notes about any issues or suggestions that your team member raises.

Finally, write down the action points that you need to take forward after the meeting. This might include scheduling some training, or seeking out and providing specific resources (such as software or hardware).

One-On-One With:	
Points to Discuss:	
Team Member's Key Goals and Objectives:	
Feedback:	
Issues, Suggestions and Ideas: *(To be provided by team member.)*	
Action Points:	

It's important to have a clear agenda set out for your one-on-one ahead of time. Otherwise your meeting could lose focus, causing you to waste time talking about irrelevant points, rather than important ones.

At the same time, remember to be flexible and give people the chance to talk through any issues and concerns. Make sure that you cover all the points that your team member wants to address and that they are clear about what they need to achieve once the meeting has finished.

2. Setting Clearly Defined Goals

When people don't have clear goals to work toward, they can easily lose purpose and direction. They may no longer understand how their work contributes to the "big picture."

This may cause them to become demotivated and disengaged. So it's vital that you set your people clear goals from the outset, track their progress, and reinforce how their work feeds into your company's overall mission and objectives.

You can achieve this by using the SMART goal framework. This is designed to provide people with clear, measurable goals that are trackable and easily understood.

SMART stands for:

- **Specific.** The goal needs to be clear and specific, otherwise people won't feel motivated or able to achieve it. Ask yourself, what does this person need to accomplish? Why is this important? Who is involved? Which resources will they need to achieve it?
- **Measurable.** Making goals measurable makes them easier to track, and can help people to focus and get work done on time.
- **Achievable.** Goals need to be realistic and attainable to be successful. They should stretch people's abilities, but still remain possible. Think about how the person will be able to achieve the goal, and consider any constraints that may limit their progress, such as budget and time.
- **Relevant.** Make sure the goal matters to your team member and that it aligns with other relevant team or company goals. Think about how the goal matches their skills and whether it will help them to learn new skills or progress in their career.
- **Time-bound.** Every goal needs a deadline to work toward and focus on. Think about what's achievable in six weeks, six months, or longer.

Action:

Write a goal for one of your team members using the SMART framework. Use the template, below, as a guide.

| SMART Goal for:	
Details of Goal:	
Specific *What needs to be accomplished?* *Why is the goal important?* *Who is involved?* *What resources are needed?*	
Measurable *How will the person know when they've accomplished the goal?*	
Achievable *How will they accomplish this goal?* *How realistic is it based on other constraints, e.g. budget?*	
Relevant *Is the goal worthwhile?* *Does it match the team's other goals and needs?* *Is the goal right for this team member?*	
Time-bound *What can the team member do today, in six weeks, or in six months?* *What is the final deadline?*	

3. Using Online Tools to Track Work

There are lots of great online productivity apps available that can help you to set and delegate tasks, keep track of goals, and collaborate with colleagues.

These tools are also great for making everyone's work more visible to the team or to the organization as a whole, so that an individual's work and achievements don't go unnoticed.

If you're looking for a task management solution that allows you to quickly assign and track tasks, try productivity apps such as Asana, Trello or Jira.

For a more comprehensive performance management solution that allows you to set goals, track progress, give feedback, and keep tabs on what's been discussed and actioned during your one-on-ones, try programs such as 15Five, Culture Amp or Lattice.
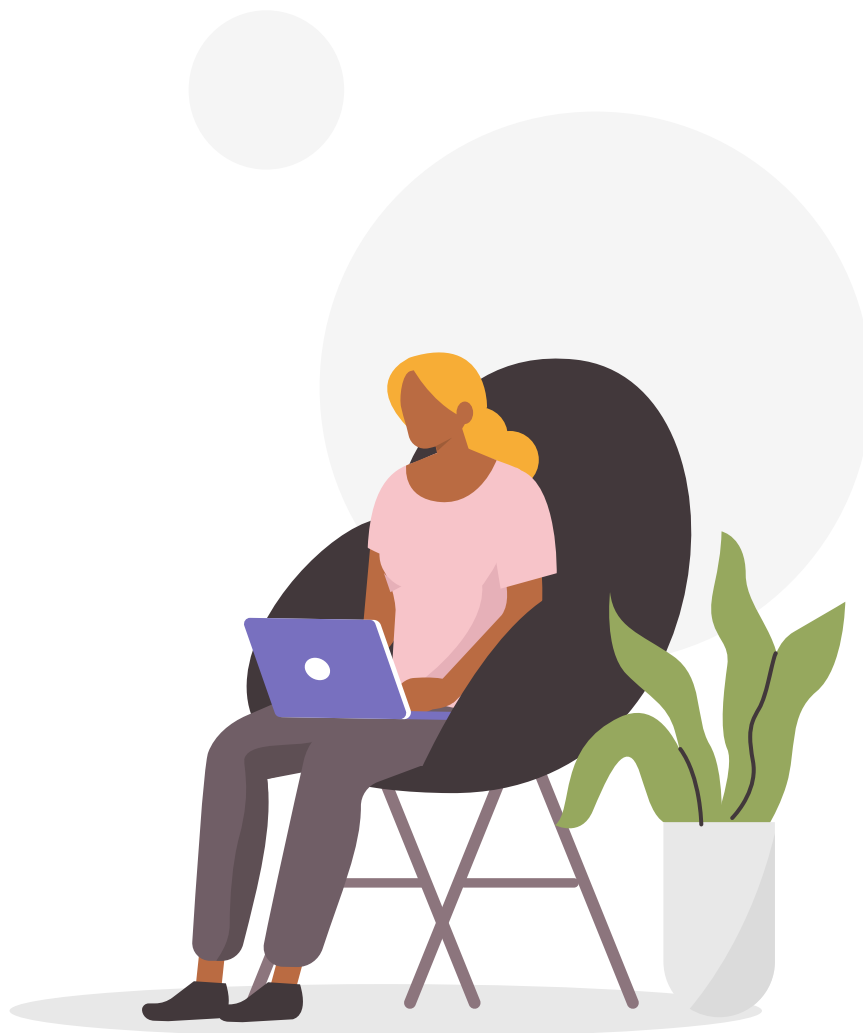
4.   Motivating Your Team

R esearch has shown that working from home is less motivating than office-based work. The study also revealed that when people weren't able to choose where to work, motivation fell even more.

There's no doubt that motivating a remote team is much tougher than motivating a colocated one. It's not so easy to have those small but important "watercooler" chats that help you to build trust, pick up on problems or conflicts, and celebrate successes.

At the same time, it's best to avoid being too "hands on" with your virtual team. Though it can be difficult to take a step back from tracking tasks in detail to make sure they get done on time, micromanagement can often demolish trust, particularly in dispersed teams where it's not so easy to pick up on feelings of discontent or to address conflict.

So, in this chapter we'll take a look at some things you can do to avoid these issues, and to motivate your virtual team so that they stay happy, engaged and productive.

Empowering People to Work Independently

Empowerment is particularly important when you work in a virtual team. When you empower your people, you trust them to make their own decisions. You encourage them to become more accountable and to use their own initiative to solve problems.

Empowerment can also help you to:

- Build trust.
- Boost confidence.
- Enhance creativity and problem-solving skills.
- Make people feel more valued and engaged.
- Increase motivation.
- Free you up to focus on other tasks.

There are four key elements to creating an empowered team. These are:

Step One: Encouraging Personal Mastery

People become more confident as they accomplish more. So create opportunities for them to do so, for example by:

- Setting SMART goals that allow them to achieve regular, measurable wins.
- Recognizing and rewarding people's accomplishments.
- Increasing responsibility.
- Providing opportunities for team members to manage and lead. For example, by asking them to mentor others, take the lead on a presentation, or manage a specific project independently.

Step Two: Setting Out a Compelling Vision

When people are unable to see the purpose of their work, they can easily become disengaged and demotivated. In contrast, someone who understands the value of their work is more willing to contribute to the "bigger picture."

You can set out a compelling vision to your people by:

- Frequently highlighting the value of team members' work in their one-on-ones and during team meetings.
- Discussing workplace values and what your team can do to uphold them while working remotely.
- Clarifying what is considered a success and a failure. If possible, point to measurable SMART goals or key performance indicators (KPIs).
- Providing regular updates on team and company performance.
- Staying positive and keeping your team motivated by hosting fun, engaging activities, such as virtual team-building exercises or virtual ice breakers.

Step Three: Providing Sufficient Information and Resources

When you provide clear information and give people the resources that they need to complete their goals independently you create a truly empowering environment. You're also sending a message to your people that you trust them and are willing them to succeed.

You can achieve this by:

- Putting people's work into context and giving them background information, such as your organization's mission statement, clear task briefs, and process documents.
- Regularly checking in with people on their progress.
- Ensuring that people have sufficient time, space, training, equipment, and so on to achieve their objectives.
- Taking the time to listen to people's concerns and doing what you can to address them.
- Communicating with people openly and honestly about industry and company performance. This is particularly important during times of crisis, and it can help people to cope better with uncertainty and change.

Step Four: Earning Your Team's Trust

A truly empowered, autonomous team should be free to experiment and share their ideas and thoughts openly and honestly, without feeling judged or intimidated. Team members need to believe that you're on their side and that you will back them up if necessary.

The best way to do this is by building trust. You can achieve this by:

- Being reliable, consistent and dependable.
- Following through on promises that you've made.
- Being fair and applying the same standards to everyone.
- Showing that you care about everyone's personal well-being and success.
- Promoting openness and honesty.
- Demonstrating your own competence and skill, so that team members are confident that you deserve their trust and loyalty.

Action:

Think about the four steps to team empowerment that we've just discussed. Then, write down three things that you can do for each step to empower your virtual team.

Steps of Empowerment	How I Will Empower My Virtual Team:
Encouraging Personal Mastery	**1.**
	2.
	3.
Setting Out a Compelling Vision	**1.**
	2.
	3.
Providing Sufficient Information and Resources	**1.**
	2.
	3.
Earning Your Team's Trust	**1.**
	2.
	3.

For empowerment to be effective, you'll also need to avoid actions that disempower people. These actions may include:

- Second-guessing decisions, or using hindsight critically.
- Always delegating work to the same person because you presume that they are more competent than others.
- Giving and then taking away responsibility.
- Failing to hand over relevant information.
- Focusing on how your team member carried out a task, rather than the end result.

Removing Factors That Create Dissatisfaction

According to Herzberg's Motivation and Hygiene Factors, a vital part of creating job satisfaction is removing the elements that create dissatisfaction. These may include:

- Obstructive company policies.
- Too much or too little supervision.
- Poor relationships with supervisor and peers.
- Harsh working conditions.
- Uncompetitive or low salary.
- Lack of status and meaningful work.
- Lack of job security.

Factors that cause dissatisfaction in virtual teams will likely be slightly different than those that affect office-based teams. For example, working conditions may be difficult to change or improve for home-based team members.

However, there are still things that you could do to improve these conditions, such as providing monitors or encouraging team members to take a risk assessment test for their home workstation or desk. You could also provide advice on how to set up a home workstation correctly.

Action:

In the table on the following page, list some factors that may cause dissatisfaction in your virtual team. Take into consideration the particular types of challenges that could affect virtual teams, e.g. lack of a suitable home workstation, concerns over poor supervision, or lack of contact with colleagues.

Then write down some solutions you could implement to mitigate these areas of dissatisfaction.

Factors That May Cause Dissatisfaction	Solutions
1.	
2.	
3.	
4.	
5.	

Reward and Recognition

It can be easy to forget to praise people, or to celebrate project successes or events such as birthdays and anniversaries when your team is dispersed. But remembering these small things can help to motivate your team, cement friendships and loyalty, and build rapport.

Here are some examples of how you can reward your team virtually:

- **Give praise readily.** Take some time at the start of team meetings and in your one-on-ones to celebrate project successes, birthdays or work anniversaries. Highlight specific actions that your team made that resulted in group success.
- **Use communication tools to celebrate success.** For example, you could add a dedicated channel on Slack or Microsoft Teams, or add a special section in your company newsletter that is focused on celebrating individual or team successes.
- **Give people a treat.** This could be as simple as sending someone a "thank you" note in the mail, or sending an e-card, which everyone can sign, to celebrate birthdays and special occasions. Consider sending team members gifts and vouchers as rewards, or free company merchandise such as branded pens, mugs, or baked goods.
- **Virtual ceremonies.** If a big company or project milestone is coming up, consider setting up a virtual ceremony to celebrate it. You could even use e-certificates to mark the occasion.

5.   Key Points

The dispersed nature of a virtual team creates a new set of challenges for team members and managers. A lack of face-to-face interaction, different time zones, and learning new ways of working are just some of the issues that they may need to consider.

Technology helps us to meet these challenges, but the key to a highly effective virtual team is in how its members communicate with one another.

When you manage a virtual team, make sure that people know how, when, and why they need to communicate. And that they do it routinely!

You also need to ensure that you manage and monitor your team's performance accurately. This is best done by giving regular feedback, by setting clear goals using the SMART framework, and by using productivity tools that allow you to delegate work, monitor progress, and collaborate effectively.

Finally, you need to motivate your team. This can be challenging when you work remotely, and it may require a little more effort. But by giving praise regularly and remembering to reward good performance and behavior, you'll create a virtual team that is empowered, engaged and productive.