

When do virtual teams reach their limits?

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There are many good reasons for virtual teams: They work fast, are agile, and they combine people with diverse backgrounds and from various places. What they lack is a special ingredient any stellar performance needs, they lack a sense of «We».

The «We» factor

Have you ever worked in a group of people that managed to establish a special spirit? A sense that everyone was acting in concert and working towards a common goal? That all members of the team were on the same page? Have you ever worked in a genuinely great team atmosphere? If you have, you experienced what I call the sense of «We». It is what often makes the small difference between very good and outstanding teams, between succeeding and a great success. I had the immense privilege to be part of such teams, in some case to lead them. The teams of Weltklasse Zürich and of the 2014 European Athletics Championships had the «We» factor, and so did the Alinghi team. But so far, I have never seen it in a virtual team.

Trust a necessary foundation

The sense of «we» is based on trust, one of the most powerful human emotions. If people trust one another, they are more likely to consider other opinions, to accept various perspectives, and to subordinate themselves to a common goal. Trust is the necessary foundation for the sense of «We» and for the success of a team. But how can we create trust?

Focus on strengths

Always begin by recognising your own self. The process may be difficult: Much of our thinking and many of our actions are happening subconsciously and are therefore impalpable. The second step involves engaging with fellow team members. The best way to go about this is by focusing on positive personality traits first, which means looking at strengths only during both step one and two. The road to success as a team always leads via individual and common strengths and never via discussing

weaknesses. The latter will almost always create negative reactions and resistance.

Experiencing and cultivating trust

What trust also requires is a testing field, in which people can study and assess authentic behaviour. This involves subconscious processes, such as physical perceptions, a handshake, perhaps, or a hug in appreciation. Trusting team members as far as their knowledge and professional experience is concerned, is usually a conscious and rational attitude. The relationship aspect of trust is far more subconscious and therefore harder to control. Trusting that no one in the team will claim a success of the team, grows subconsciously – and slowly. But kind of common experience is much harder to build with a range of vision that is limited by the screen of a webcam. Cultivating trust will take more time.

A single meeting can provide stimuli

If virtual teams are groups of people who work together from a distance, who never have the chance to meet in person. Such teams are great when it comes to exchange knowledge quickly or to deal with purely operational tasks. I am not sure, whether they can develop a sense of “we” over time. But I have experienced that a single physical meeting can provide them with sufficient stimuli to manage exactly that. All it takes is for them to concentrate on the relationship aspect of trust. This will allow such teams to lay the ground for a sense of “we” quite effortlessly.