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## **ARTICLE** **COLLABORATION**

# How Virtual Teams Can Create Human Connections Despite Distance

*by Keith Ferrazzi*

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# How Virtual Teams Can Create Human Connections Despite Distance

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In a recent Unify survey of knowledge workers, 79% of respondents reported working always or frequently in virtual teams, but only 44% found virtual communication as productive as face-to-face communication. The vast majority connected via email, phone, or conference calls even though 72% said video would make teamwork easier. Only 34% of people use video to collaborate with coworkers. And 43% feel confused and overwhelmed by the mishmash of collaboration technology at their disposal.

I'm seeing a new generation of technology emerge that can make dispersed teams more productive than collocated teams. Forrester Research's Henry Dewing says some enlightened users are beginning to prefer to meet in their video and web conferencing platforms instead of in a physical conference room.

However, to make virtual teamwork work this well, you'll need to move your team to a new set of behaviors, not just to a new generation of technology, with human engagement as the first priority.

The behavior gaps that keep virtual teams from reaching their goals fall in three buckets:

1. Setting ground rules for managing virtual communications
2. Aligning personal and professional goals

### 3. Strengthening relationships to enable the candor required for true collaboration

#### **Setting Ground Rules**

Do a personal and professional check-in: While it's common for employees who are co-located to chat about what's going on in their lives, sharing a recent success at work or a personal story before a meeting begins, it's much less common among virtual teams.

But this efficiency-driven approach to team collaboration overlooks something important: Humans are intensely social beings. They need to feel connected. Personal sharing is one of the easiest and most overlooked ways to create that connection, especially when staff are remote.

A personal/professional check in at the beginning of meetings makes people feel part of a team. It's probably the easiest way to overcome the isolation that can creep in when people don't work together physically.

Don't allow multitasking: Research shows that multitasking during conference calls is extremely common. In some studies, as high as 90 percent of people acknowledge they do other things during these calls, from a wide range of places, including the kitchen, the pool, and yes, the bathroom.

I can't emphasize enough how important it is for collaboration that everyone be mentally present and engaged during meetings, not working on another project or checking email. As a manager, if you set that as an expectation from the outset—and call on people often to share their thoughts—chances are good they will.

Limit mute whenever practical: Besides encouraging general disengagement, the dead air of mute kills any attempt at humor and eliminates the bonding value of shared laughter.

#### **Getting Alignment**

Melding personal and professional goals: Much as some business leaders would like to believe that people are motivated exclusively by the business's long-range objectives and will selflessly devote their full energies to a project because that's what's best for the company, it's just not so.

The more closely a leader can tap into and align her staff's personal goals with the business goal, the more committed and engaged her people will be. For instance, an up-and-coming employee might be told that if a new project turns into a viable business, she'll be promoted to run it. I've also boosted team engagement at clients by focusing on the mission employees and many organizations share to serve customers exceedingly well.

Making work more joyful by full engagement with the virtual project team should be one of the goals shared.

Striking the personal/professional life balance: People are slowly becoming more comfortable talking about the new work/life blend that comes with working remotely. “When you’re on a large conference call and a baby cries or a dog barks or a doorbell rings, people don’t make comments quite as much anymore,” says Forrester’s Dewing.

I’d go further than that. I’d recommend you focus for a moment on the bark, the cry, or the ring. Use it as a reason to engage in a way that goes beyond the initial “personal/professional check in.” Sharing about Spike the dog helps people bond, relax, and trust each other.

I know a very successful CEO who runs his company remotely—and readily admits he wears pajamas most of the morning. He doesn’t assume work is getting done because employees spend long hours in the office. The new work/life balance means that you do what you need to do at the time that’s most convenient. If that means taking your kid to the dentist at noon—or making a call to Singapore at midnight—so be it.

### **Creating Candor**

We’ve all been in meetings where the real conversation only starts after the meeting ends. But shame on you if you’re one of those managers who’s responsible for creating a climate where employees don’t feel they can speak their minds.

Achieving candor is hard enough for co-located teams. It’s all the more challenging in a virtual environment. But make no mistake, candor is the #1 indicator of team productivity.

To keep the conversation candid.

Appoint someone to be the team’s “Yoda”: Add a bit of levity to meetings by turning to the Yoda of the day at critical points during the meeting and ask, “So, what’s going on here that nobody’s talking about?”

Reward naysayers: Give warm, generous praise to team members who aren’t afraid to speak their minds when everyone else appears to be in agreement on an issue.

Leverage confidentiality: During the transition to candor, it can be helpful to ask team members to share thoughts anonymously. Keep in mind that employees who are used to unresponsive managers will be watching closely to make sure the facilitator doesn’t subtly dismiss issues or minimize their importance.

As you work to make this transition, it’s important to keep in mind how deeply ingrained many human behaviors are. In the early days of the human species, if you weren’t part of a tribe, you risked being eaten by a predator. Forming groups is a core component of who we are. Trust me: No team will achieve greatness as individuals working independently. We need to get people to let their guard

down, to be more vulnerable and thus open to connection to their virtual tribe, which translates into “because I like you, I want to help you.” That starts true synergy. “I’m willing to make small compromises for you.” Not for some greater good, for you. And with greater openness to each other’s point of view we can bounce ideas off each other candidly and get some real innovation going.

Technology has too often been disruptive. It sets us on edge and discourages us from coming together. But I’m seeing tools leverage the relationships and discussion threads captured in team interactions over time to foster very human connections. Tech will help the baby crying become our team’s kid crying.

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**Keith Ferrazzi** is the CEO of Ferrazzi Greenlight, a research-based consulting and training company, and the author of [Who’s Got Your Back](#) (Broadway Books, 2009).

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