



Harvard Business Review

REPRINT H00Q1W
PUBLISHED ON HBR.ORG
MARCH 18, 2014

ARTICLE **MANAGING PEOPLE**

Get Your Virtual Team Off to a Fast Start

by Keith Ferrazzi

MANAGING PEOPLE

Get Your Virtual Team Off to a Fast Start

by Keith Ferrazzi
MARCH 18, 2014

Whether you're a virtual team leader or team member, there's no honeymoon period anymore. The pressure to be productive from Day 1 is enormous.

We can certainly do a better job of on-boarding people to teams, especially when teams are not co-located. Too often on-boarding plans consist of a dozen or more documents that team members are supposed to read and digest on their own.

What's missing at so many companies I work with is the time for virtual team members to learn from and form relationships with the people who are most important to doing their job successfully. And certainly no one should have to make sense of an organization in a vacuum. As [a Harvard research team led by J. Richard Hackman found](#), seemingly disconnected threads of information make sense only when people have an opportunity to interact with others who can help them to contextualize the information.

What's Your Relationship Action Plan?

I recommend that clients shorten the learning curve by helping every new hire put together a Relationship Action Plan. In it, list the 10-15 internal people who are most important to doing their job well and direct your new team member to build a relationship with each one in their first two weeks. Overwhelmingly, those who create a RAP report that it was the most useful thing they ever did in their first weeks on a project team or job.

My friend Ritesh Idnani, founder and CEO of a healthcare start-up Seamless Health, puts it this way: "You need to get people off to a flying start." Ritesh gives each new executive two weeks to talk to each person identified in the plan as "important to know," interviewing them about all aspects of the

company and the job. Then he checks up, and finds the full-bandwidth effort over the new hire's first few weeks pays off handsomely.

“At the end of two weeks I ask the person to sit down with me and tell me what he/she learned—their observations,” says Idnani. Not only do they have a new connection into the team: you renew yours. “You end up learning a lot from someone coming from the outside with a fresh pair of eyes.”

Planning a Great Team Kick-off Event

Newly-formed teams require more than a project plan and set of work streams to be high-performing.

Yet so often I see managers launch a team with a demotivating statement of the challenges the company faces coupled with a driving sense of urgency. The key to kick-starting a team is not to galvanize people into action through fear, but to ignite their desire to achieve both their own goals and the company's. Although people do not come to work every day purely for the good of the corporation, their purposes often align. Whether it's doing work that's challenging and stimulating, working synergistically with a tight-knit team, or being associated with a good job in a well-known company-help people to understand that unifying driver.

In our work with clients, planning a great kick-off meeting is critical to developing a high-performing team. My advice to leaders for the kickoff is: don't be afraid to show your vulnerability and humanity. It's amazing how readily others respond when you allow people to see you with empathy. It opens employees' porosity to the bigger message you're trying to get across—the goals the team is trying to achieve.

Equally important is to structure a small-but-significant first challenge that will move everyone on the team toward the eventual goal. It has to be something that every team member can contribute to and has a hand in designing. And it needs to be something that can be achieved quickly, ideally within 60-90 days.

In our work with a major automaker, we quickly realized that the relationship between the company's district managers (DMs) and its dealers was broken, limiting their ability to improve customer experience. So we challenged 300 DMs to choose a single dealer and turn the relationship around. The results exceeded even our expectations:

- Highest JD Powers owner-satisfaction ratings of any American car company
- Customer satisfaction index (CSI) scores more than doubled to 100% in eight out of 10 surveys
- Market share shifts in pilot regions

Another important part of launching a new team is getting team members to do something together that unleashes collaboration and innovation. A number of successful executives I know swear by going with something that merely puts everyone at ease. For example, building the tallest tower

possible using only stationary supplies (no fasteners). Even I have to admit it's fun and inspiring when a virtual team takes on the tower-building task connected only by video software.

Keeping the Momentum Going

A great virtual team launch has the potential to motivate members to deliver their best, but more is required. A study by OnPoint Consulting showed that excellent communication from the leader is a strong predictor of team performance. Anthropological studies show we're not the only primates that rely heavily on such communication: baboons, chimpanzees and gorillas glance at the dominant male every 20-30 seconds on average for cues.

Unfortunately, senior managers frequently assume that sending email updates and holding weekly conference calls is enough to sustain the momentum generated by a kickoff. It's not. In the absence of visual and body language signals, misinterpretations and misunderstandings often arise. Team members feel disconnected and reduce the level of engagement and contribution to the project.

Here's where leveraging technology can be a huge asset. I know of one company that uses an always-on, wall-sized video screen to stay in touch in with team members in Beijing, building relationships virtually and increasing the frequency of collaboration.

Another important way to keep a virtual team focused on its goals is to celebrate small wins along the way. Dan Ariely, professor of psychology and behavioral economics at Duke University, has shown that public recognition is far more important than financial incentives in the workplace. Despite this, many managers do a poor job of recognizing their people. I'm sometimes amazed by how difficult it is to persuade some executives of the importance of publicly celebrating an employee who exemplifies the behaviors senior management wants to cascade throughout the organization.

Whether you're on-boarding new executives or launching a newly-formed virtual team, people need the time and the permission to develop relationships. While it may sound more cost-effective to rely on collections of reading material and org charts to get people up to speed, their understanding both of the project and the company's goals will suffer, decreasing their effectiveness.

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).
