Chapter XXI

The Challenges of Virtual Teams

We wanted to get a perspective on the challenges of virtual teams from people who prefer working face to face rather than in a virtual setting. Greg Todd has had roles as a manager and an engineer on virtual teams. Joe Gerardi moved from Georgia to California to manage a team based on the West Coast.

Joe comments in general about virtual teams as well as the challenges around meetings and people management. He also shares his views on how culture and tools can act as an enabler or barrier to the success of virtual teams. He considers himself about three-fourths of the way into the tolerate stage of the virtual team maturity curve.

Continuums

Joe: If you ask me if face to face is better than virtual, there isn’t a single answer. You need to consider several continuums: Is the content highly structured or variable? Is the content local only or does it apply globally? The physical distance of team members can then vary from people living together to being totally remote.

If you build a see-saw and put on one side the overall value (overall productivity and cost) of having a virtual team in the long-run and having

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a physical team that you can pull together infrequently, the virtual team wins out. But for specific situations, the newer the thing is, face to face wins out. If it’s new and we haven’t done it before and it requires creative thinking and needs full engagement, you need face to face. If you are already up and running, you can get as much out of the remote team.

**Meetings**

**Joe:** If you plan the meeting and have an agenda, you can get a lot of work done. But there are many challenges and barriers in setting up virtual meetings. Time zone differences are a major barrier. Folks in Europe are amiable in accommodating schedules in the US. You always feel you’re imposing. Sometimes it feels more fair to spread the aggravation around by rotating meeting times.

People seem to do a lot of email during virtual meetings. Using instant messaging for side chats relevant to the discussion topic is an appropriate thing to do during meetings. But sometimes people are just chatting about something totally unrelated.

Also, you get barking dogs, dishes, and crying kids in the background. People just don’t mute their phones. Cell phones are not really suited for phone conferences because the transmission quality is still not there.

In a virtual meeting, you need to explicitly check for consensus. You don’t get body language clues. The visual input is not the key thing. It’s the overall physical interaction that’s important. There is conscious and unconscious feedback when you are face to face. When you’re virtual, you only get the conscious feedback.

Virtual is not as good as being in the same room at the same time. People are reading body language. You are aware of disagreement sooner. You can tell if people are actually engaged. You can see people and what they are doing. When you’re there you’re there. Certain processes like kick-off kinds of things and brainstorming kinds of things have higher fidelity in person.

I haven’t seen a situation where everyone was remote that has generated a better end product compared to when everyone was face to
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