Coaching the virtual team

As the number of virtual teams grows and the amount of face-time declines, managers must take an innovative approach to trust in their teams and organisations.

BY IAN MITCHELL & SIÂN LUMSDEN

The virtual team

One significant arrival in the workplace is that of the virtual team, which is defined by leadership development adviser Beth Millar as being comprised of members who are not located in the same physical place but in different cities, states or even separate countries; using technology and specific skills to achieve a common goal.

This is all very exciting, but it presents challenges. There are challenges to team members themselves – how does a team based in five different locations and who predominantly use phone, tablet and screen to communicate develop what Prof. David Clutterbuck calls "situational team knowledge", the almost intuitive interpretation of each other's cues and intentions? And then there are challenges for their coach – be that an external or internal coach, or indeed their line manager – in helping them develop, harvest, build upon and leverage this situational knowledge for the benefit of themselves and their organisation.

Some of the most important work in this field has been carried out by American executive coach, Dr Pam Van Dyke, who concludes that a coach must understand that there is an art and a science to creating a virtual presence both during the session and in between sessions. Having understood this, the coach then needs to pay careful attention to developing both disciplines.

Commenting on Van Dyke's work, UK coaching guru Peter Hawkins argues that elements of this art or science begin with the need for the coach to work in real time with the team when it is working together. This will involve joining teleconferences and web-based discussion, and perhaps establishing a closed web-based workroom, where the coach can meet team members in a place that feels secure enough to allow them to become vulnerable.

The essential ingredient

Vulnerability is an essential ingredient in the building of trust between team members, which is itself vitally important to the development of a healthy approach to conflict resolution. In a world where online relationships can become almost synonymous with anonymity, pretence and manipulation, one vital role of the coach is to create and hold a space that is contracted to be secure, honest, confidential and non-judgemental. A place where, as Patrick Lencioni put it, team members can share their skills and display their weaknesses without fear of reproach.

Other productive areas in which a coach can work with a virtual team include two very helpful ideas from Harvard Business Review, the first of which is to help the team to build its own working rhythm. By its very nature, remote working offers individuals the opportunity to create their own working patterns and behaviours, and the very act of agreeing together to set some clear and mutually acceptable touch-points can be the first step towards a commitment to develop mutual accountability, which is a prelude to high performance. The other suggested area is for the coach to work with the team to create a virtual water cooler. The image of co-workers gathering around a water cooler is a metaphor for informal interactions that share information and reinforce social bonds. In its absence, team meetings can become task-focused at the expense of team cohesion and unity. As an initial coaching intervention with a virtual team, this change might generate some great ideas, create excellent working chemistry and set a very positive tone for the ongoing coaching project.

A new challenge

Michael Eisner, former CEO of Disney, has said that "the worst decisions I ever made were on conference calls". However, increasing globalisation, cost of travel in terms of money, time and world resources means that we will need to find ways to build trust with less face-time than we have previously been used to. This presents a new challenge for team coaches and managers, one that will have to be addressed both quickly and effectively if the potentially positive disruptive power of technology is to be fully leveraged into strong bottom line human performances.

Teamwork plays an increasingly vital role in organisational life. An impetus behind this development is derived from the ever-growing presence of millennials moving into positions of influence and leadership. Meanwhile, technology is disrupting old methodology fast and creating opportunities to develop new ways of working. This in turn presents new challenges for managers, mentors and coaches – many trained and developed before VUCA (volatility, uncertainty, complexity and ambiguity) times, and perhaps feeling ill-equipped to leverage their skills to good effect within the new paradigm in which they are required to work.

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