Business magazine

Working in a remote team

Students Name:

Remote teams bring advantages but also challenges. How can we bring out the best in ourteam members when they are located in different places?

Before reading

Do the preparation task first. Then read the article and do the exercises.

Preparation task

Match the definitions (a–h) with the vocabulary (1–8).

Vocabulary	Definition
a) _____a facial expression	1. the quality of being a good leader
b) _____bonding	2. a group of people who work together fromgeographically separate locations
c) _____leadership	3. the look on someone's face that shows how they feel
d) _____an agenda	4. a list of points to be discussed at a meeting
e) _____multitasking	5. the process by which a close relationship developsbetween people
f) _____a misunderstanding	6. doing more than one thing at a time
g) _____a distraction	7. an occasion when someone does not understandsomething correctly
h) _____a remote team	8. something that stops you concentrating on what you aredoing

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Reading

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Aisha had been very successful managing her team in Edinburgh and was asked by the company to lead a remote team for an important two-year project. Keen to demonstrate her leadership abilities to the head office, Aisha got her team members together for a remote meeting. But right from that first meeting, she realised that this was going to be a different challenge.

For a start, Archie was late for the meeting by about 15 minutes because of 'technical problems'. Lucia kept asking about really specific details, while Aisha was hoping to use the meeting to get to know the team members and identify priorities. Archie and Lucia kept accidentally talking at the same time, and when they didn't speak, there was an uncomfortable silence. Valentina hardly said a word. No one had their cameras on, so there was none of the usual communication through body language or facial expressions. Without these visual clues, Aisha had no idea whether people were interested, lost, confused or bored.

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By the end of the meeting, Aisha didn't feel like she had achieved much of her agenda and wasn't sure what people had understood. She wondered how she was going to build trust and encourage bonding in her team.

As companies continue to think globally, and as modern-day technology makes remote working easier, remote teams have become common. Instant messaging, videoconferencing and other web-based tools all help. But communication via modern technology is not without its problems. Meetings, essential for team bonding and working together effectively, can be particularly challenging online. Aside from having to coordinate people in different time zones and ensuring that no one is multitasking and getting distracted, meetings on virtual platforms are not always helpful for good communication. As seen from Aisha's example, videoconferencing is often characterised by uncomfortable silences and people talking over each other.

So what can managers of remote teams do to improve meetings and encourage successful team bonding? Here are five tips.

1. Build trust quickly.

It can be hard to trust people you don't know very well, so make sure the first meeting includes proper introductions, where members of the team are able to share information about themselves, their role and their context. Encourage people to have their camera on for conference calls right from the start so that team members can put a face to a name and build stronger relationships.

2. Discuss preferred communication styles and approaches to work.

Schedule some time during one of the initial meetings to talk about things like time-keeping, expected amount of participation, how closely members prefer to follow the agenda and so on. Talk about the challenges of online meeting platforms and how members can help make meetings more effective.

3. Discourage distractions.

Minimise the risk of people multitasking and not paying attention during meetings by creating a culture of calling with video on. Another way to ensure that people concentrate during meetings is to give each member a role, for example, someone to take the minutes, someone to notice problems and someone to offer ideas and alternatives.

4. Try to understand what silence means.

If someone is quiet for a while, it might mean 'thinking time', and that's OK. But it might also mean lack of understanding or disagreement, so try to get more information from them. Ask for everyone's point of view at the beginning of a new project and make regular opportunities to speak to team members individually. This will help you understand other people's opinions on things and avoid misunderstandings.

5. Actively manage turn-taking and be careful not to let one person dominate the meeting.

If you notice that someone isn't talking much, ask them for their opinions and bring them into the conversation, or speak to that person later individually to check everything is OK.

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With team members located in different places, remote meetings are vital for team bonding and effective teamwork. By making an effort to build trust and encourage good communication, we can avoid common problems and find new ways of working that bring many advantages to the team.

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Tasks

Task 1

Are the sentences true or false?

	Answer	
1. Aisha was asked to lead a remote team because she was good at managing her team in Edinburgh.	True	False
2. Everyone was there at the start of the first meeting to introduce themselves to the team.	True	False
3. Archie and Lucia didn't like each other and so they kept interrupting each other.	True	False
4. Aisha was sure that Valentina was bored during the meeting.	True	False
5. More and more people are working in remote teams now.	True	False
6. Modern technology means that remote meetings are just as good as face-to-face ones.	True	False
7. Using cameras during meetings can be helpful for different reasons.	True	False
8. It is always better to speak to the team all together whenever possible.	True	False

Task 2

Complete the sentences.

pay	point	remote	team
facial	uncomfortable	avoid	leadership

1. Aisha wanted to use her new role to demonstrate her _____ abilities.
2. She realised that there are particular challenges to leading a _____ team.
3. During the meeting, some people talked at the same time and there were _____ silences.
4. It can be difficult to know how people are reacting if you can't see body language or _____ expressions.
5. If we want our remote teams to be successful, we need to find opportunities for _____ bonding.
6. If people multitask during meetings, there's a risk they don't _____ attention.
7. It's a good idea to ask for everyone's _____ of view on new projects.
8. Trying to understand why people are silent helps to _____ misunderstandings.

Discussion

Have you ever worked in a remote team? What challenges did you face?

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