

When Problems Arise with Virtual Teams

By Judith Filek—President
Impact Communications, Inc.

With companies spread around the world, virtual teams are now the norm. Obviously, everyone would like these teams to run smoothly and utilize the strengths of their diversity. However, often a group in one location is used to doing things in a particular way, while a group elsewhere does it slightly differently. These subtle differences can irritate either group.

The way virtual teams often handle things is by the “ostrich technique.” They bury their heads in the sand, hoping an issue will go away on its own. According to research done by Joseph Grenny of VitalSmarts, a Corporate Training and Leadership Development Company, 72% of people keep silent when a peer doesn’t pull their weight, and 57% let peers slide when they’ve skirted important workplace issues. As a result, not only is morale affected but productivity as well. Ultimately, the customer may be hurt.

When we have surveyed our virtual participants, they typically say they don’t speak up because they don’t know how it will be perceived. Grenny adds that the lack of physical contact makes people insecure about where they stand in a group. Until people feel safe, they won’t open up.

Project managers and team leads must provide an environment that builds trust. One suggestion is to create opportunities for people to get to know each other, perhaps by bringing the teams together for the kick off of any major project or by celebrating milestones or wins. Once people know each other well, they will more freely share information, even when busy, because they recognize it will make a difference to someone on the team. They do what it takes to get the project done successfully. It would not be unusual for someone to say, “This is tricky. If you need help, call me, even if it is after hours. I will make myself available.”

When it comes to addressing a thorny issue, Project leaders or team members must address these problems quickly. However, first, teams need to be in agreement about the acceptable way to confront someone about a workplace issue. They must do it in a respectful manner. The speaker’s tone of voice

must sound sincere, not annoyed. “I have an issue to address. I’ve heard a rumor. It’s sensitive, but I’d like to proceed if it is ok. Jacques, this pertains to something you’ve said. I know we all want to protect the integrity of the project so again, if it is ok, let’s bring it out into the open.” Notice that the speaker asks for permission. It’s a subtle thing that makes a difference. Since email or texts can be misconstrued and emotion read when none was intended, prickly conversations need to be live. If Skype is available, it is preferred.

Once an issue is raised, lay out facts without emotion. “Jacques, we agreed to do xxx. A rumor I have heard is that this process is being ignored.” Pause often to allow the points to sink in. Ask the person if your impression is incorrect. Allow the person to tell his side of the story. Invite dialogue about what now needs to be done.

Once a conclusion is reached, reconfirm what you have heard and, if appropriate, write up in an email what has been agreed to. State that you are glad this has been resolved. If the issue continues to be ignored, you will have to hold another critical conversation.

When you think of your company, ask yourself how well do the virtual teams communicate. Does everyone understand the importance of dealing with issues as they occur? Is there a strong sense of connection between teams? If your virtual teams are struggling, perhaps a closer look at how the teams operate is warranted.

Question: *What have you found has made the difference in building trust with virtual teams? We’re interested in your opinions. Click here – to comment on this article, share your concerns or ask questions. Judy will respond to all questions.*

Impact Communications, Inc. consults with individuals and businesses to improve their presentation and telephone communication skills. It is not what you know but how you communicate it that makes a difference. When you have to have impact, phone (847) 438-4480 or visit our website, www.ImpactCommunicationsInc.com.

Copyright © 2018
Impact Communications, Inc.
All Rights Reserved.