Seven building blocs to successful remote teamwork

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Collaborating in multicultural, geographically distributed, virtual teams has become normal in international companies. They hold the promise of combining talents, ideas, knowledge and perspectives from very diverse backgrounds into new solutions. When successful, such a team can achieve great results for the company. To its members the experience can be highly satisfying and personally enriching.

This does not happen automatically. Many mechanisms that contribute to building trust and creating a team spirit – physical closeness, informal contacts and meetings, shared principles of collaboration, easy access when things need sorting out for example – are absent in remote teams. Instead differences in culture and context, divided loyalties and distance and virtuality make it more difficult to develop trust.

To exploit their great potential fully, remote teams need extra orchestration to build trust, create "virtual closeness" and on that basis create the working processes that will lead them to results.

Beyond the classical team model of forming, storming, norming and performing, we find that the process in a very diverse and remote team needs to be one of alternation between differentiating and unifying elements. Team members need to know that their specific perspectives, constraints and opportunities are taken into consideration. At the same time the natural differences are so great that people need a particularly strong sense of what holds them together if they are to risk bringing in their best and most creative contributions. Without unity differences are just too threatening and people withdraw, with too much unity people withdraw because they do not feel seen and respected. Quite a balancing act. How can this best be achieved?

Seven building blocks for remote team performance
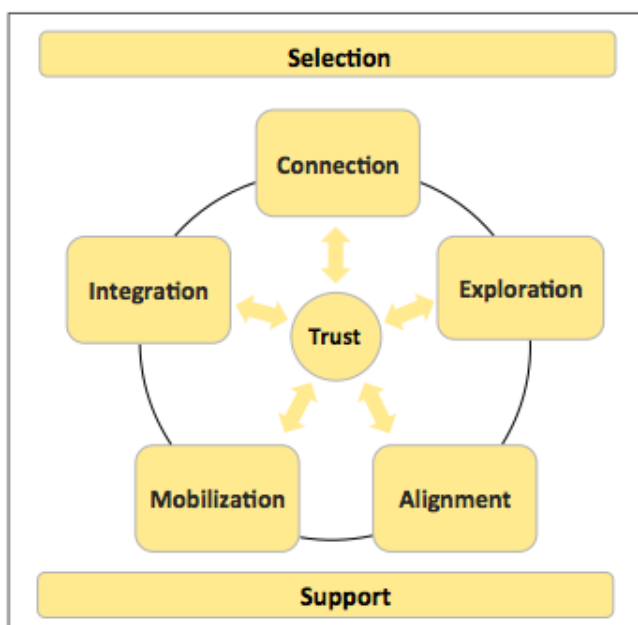
Our work with remote teams and partners and our research into this subject over the years has led us to develop a model that looks at a process of collaboration from a different angle. At the core of this model are five building blocks concerning the processes inside the team: connection, exploration, alignment, mobilization and integration. These are surrounded by two additional building blocks, selection and support, affecting the team from the outside. The core is a circle because, while it is particularly important to lay the base for all five elements at the forming stage of the team, all of them need to be revisited and strengthened throughout the life of the team.

When managed well, each element contributes to building trust in the team and lays the basis for achieving results together.

The five central building blocks represent the iteration between creating unity and mobilising differences mentioned above:

A ***personal Connection*** creates the base for both: a sense of shared humanity, with common concerns for things beyond the immediate task, but also a growing appreciation of the special talents and competencies of the different teammembers.

Exploration of the specific context of the team members as well as the consequences, constraints and opportunities that the project may represent for them assures that everybody is fully acknowledged and can be totally present.

Alignment in goals, directions and team identity as well as in working principles is what holds the team together and makes it function across the distance.

Mobilization of each individual team member means that everyone knows how to contribute his best talents to the team and is sufficiently engaged to do so.

Integration is about sharing, combining, building on each other and finally developing results that are more than the sum of its parts.

Let us look at each element in turn:

Connection

Most people have had this experience: when you get to know somebody on a personal level, finding out something about his history, family, interests, strengths and also vulnerabilities, this person turns from somebody holding a role into a true human being. This „social presence" rather than just the cognitive and task oriented presence contributes enormously to the building of trust. It is much harder to uphold stereotypes and preconceptions when you know somebody on a personal level. On the other hand it is easier to just call to talk through an issue, address a problem or uncover a misunderstanding when you know the other personally. In our seminars we hear regularly how people avoid calling a colleague they do not know personally when there is a problem, particularly when the colleague is from a foreign culture like China. Instead, emails go back and forth and often make things worse, costing time, energy and possibly "face", particularly when others are copied.

Only when people feel comfortable being exposed to one another they stop worrying about protecting themselves and risk bringing in their true perspectives, which is the whole point of the collaboration.

In collocated teams some of this can happen spontaneously, around the coffee machine, over lunch or just by walking across the corridor. In virtual teams this is impossible. Therefore it takes extra effort.

Tips for Connection

- Give room to exercises and activities that help team members get to know each other beyond the business persona and discover similarities and differences. This is not small talk or "nice to have", it is fundamental as a base for teamwork.

- We are still strong believers in meeting face to face, particularly for a kick-off. Nothing can easily replace what can be achieved in a relatively small amount of time spent truly together in terms of bonding. However, if this is really impossible a process of connection can be moderated virtually. In fact, it is sometimes helpful to start a process of virtual connection before the face to face kick-off.

- A buddy system that pairs people beyond the task can deepen understanding and create bridges between cultures. Many such bridges finally become a „highway of under-standing".

- Develop team members' awareness and skills around building personal connections. This includes listening and sharing skills, praising others and asking for input as well as intercultural skills.

- Building connection is not a one-off. It needs to be nourished and sustained.
There are many ways to do this. Ideally the ideas come from the teammembers so that it does not feel artifical to them. Examples include designating a first part of each virtual meeting explicitly to the exchange of „gossip" and events in the different locations, providing informal interaction spaces on top of the formal ones, creating habits to interact at times specifically about non-work issues and others.

Exploration

When people in a remote team come from different geographical parts of the company, their first loyalty is to the local entity they are part of. Their local context is the one they know best and it is precisely for that knowledge that they can bring a special contribution to the team. This special context and the specific constraints and opportunities it represents need to find its way into the team. It requires team members and the team leadership exploring and actively listening to each individual member's specific perspective.

There are several aspects to this. As representatives of their entities and their markets they have to make sure that the voices of these entities are heard and respected. Projects may represent different things to different team members, different constraints and different opportunities. To fully leverage these differences and make sure that the project will achieve the best result for all markets they have to be acknowledged and taken into consideration. At the same time people are personally much more engaged, prepared to contribute to a common cause and even adhere to a common code of conduct when they know that their specifics are seen and respected. Seeing and acknowledging people for who they are and where they come from is a big trustbuilder. It is also the first stept to mobilizing people.

Tips for exploration

- Create opportunities from early on for all team members to explain their context and voice their view of the project and how it is going to affect them. Address their concerns and challenges, treat them as enriching rather than threatening.

- Demonstrate and foster a mindset of openness and curiosity and develop the skills of voicing and active listening amongst the team members.

- Not all team members will be equally confortable to speak up but it is important that they all do. Make sure that the more restraint receive extra encouragement and patience.

Alignment

For remote teams alignment is existential. Alignment creates the feeling of unity that is necessary to make a team want to work together and to start looking at differences as something enriching and not dividing. It creates trust because it makes people look in the same direction, reconciles conflicts of interest and develops shared rules that help avoid misunderstandings. Alignment is made up of three elements: goals, identity and working culture or, as some would call it, rules of engagement.

A strong common goal is the first step to create alignment. This is not always easy, because members may have divided loyalties. Objectives may be the same at the surface, but deep down there may be conflicting interests between the international and local perpectives. Therefore it is doubly important to find a formulation that everybody can wholeheartedly embrace and that people can reconcile with their local perspectives. In a virtual context leadership is mostly through influencing. A meaningful goal, developed together, checked for reservations and conflicts of interest and formulated with a clear and strong customer benefit – the customer can be internal of course – engages the team members and creates buy-in and commitment.

Identity goes further. As people we are highly social animals, belonging to many social groups, each with a distinct identity. These social identities also hold up in the virtual world. Research has provided insights that it is possible to trigger and foster social identities with relative ease and speed. The strong sense of a team's mission should lead to a concrete description or name that people can identify with. From here the team can develop a logo or other symbols that reinforce identification. Team lingo also contributes to this and can take the form of formulations and emoticons in the virtual space.

Finally creating alignment in a team requires rules of engagement and a set of behaviours that is common to the team members. In a multicultural team it is not effective if everybody has to adapt to multiple other ways of doing things. People need some common rules and processes, what we call a "working culture", for core interaction. Having said this, intercultural understanding and skills are still necessary. Even if common rules are defined they can never cover all interaction, and people do not adapt to them perfectly. So there needs to be an awareness about the impact of cultural differences so that people do not get offended and remain open with each other.

What exactly a common working culture comprises is different for each team situation, however some subjects that always come up are for example: What information gets shared, how and where does it get shared, what is reliability, how do you communicate urgency, how do you give feedback, etiquette for emails, telcos, virtual meetings. A common working culture in turn reinforces the feeling of a group identity. It increases trust enormously, as it directly impacts on the members' perception that others react to them in reliable and understandable ways.

Tips for alignment:

- Again, the best time to create such a sense of alignment is the kick-off meeting. If connection, exploration and alignment are achieved in a kick-off meeting, it will have been more than worth its' while. Defining the working culture can get a kickstart at this

point in time, however, is usually not all set in one single meeting. Rather, it is a process of progressive refinement. Once the foundation has been laid, it is much easier to continue the discussion virtually. To do it all virtually is harder and the chances to miss critical input from team members are bigger.

- Devote time to the careful formulation of the overarching goal or mission and the objectives involving everybody. This can become the single biggest bonding factor for the team.

- Once the goal is clear, mobilize the team to come up with a team name and elements that reinforce identification. It has to come from the team itself though, otherwise it might be interpreted as a tacky attempt to impose a we-feeling.

- The construction of a working culture should be preceded by some awareness of cultural differences, otherwise the team may not see the point in the effort. However, the focus should be on creating unity.

Mobilization

Mobilizing team members to contribute their very best in terms of competencies, knowledge and ideas inspite of the remoteness of the team and and cultural differences is essential for success.

Feeling connected and united in their goals and approach as well as respected in their uniqueness creates a sound basis. Special effort needs to now go into clarifying roles and expectations, adjusting leadership style to a degree to different team members and creating a mindset in the whole team to invite, search for and support active participation.

First, people have to know clearly what is expected of them and how they can make a difference. The degree of detail required in the task definition depends on the project. However, everybody must be clear on how much and what kind of individual initiative he is expected and allowed to take, what decisions he can make and what the limits are. When shared amongst all team members this increases transparency and helps to build trust.

If innovation is the objective of the team then it needs an explicit strategy and processes for learning and experimentation. When failure and learning from failure is recognized as a valuable contribution people dare to try out new things.

In multicultural teams members differ not only individually but culturally when it comes to speaking up and being proactive. In many cultures it is normal to await instructions and not surface own opinions and perspectives. Differences in communication style, in assertiveness and indirectness for example, and in language abilities further increases the barrier for some members to interact. To nurture an open, proactive and collaborative team culture requires the capability of the leader to adapt his style. Some team members will initially require much more explanation, direction, support and encouragement than others.

To pull these team members in and mobilize them may require closer and much more frequent, detailed and even more personal contact. A competent international leader appreciates that this is not bad intention but a result of cultural socialization and that it is the leader's task to help people adjust to a different cultural style.

<u>Tips for mobilization:</u>

- To achieve clarity on roles and tasks it helps to put them in writing.
  Sharing them both within the team and with the hierarchical superior adds transparency and thereby helps to manage expectations and ultimately to develop trust.

- As the team leader, apply the principles of situational leadership to the team. Some members may require strong direction, others only support and others again are happy to function rather autonomously. Everybody needs encouragement and feedback.
  It is the leader's role to balance these needs and gradually develop a common team culture. Role-modelling, coaching and feedback processes are important instruments to achieve this. If you are not yet very familiar with intercultural leadership you should organize some coaching or training on the subject for yourself.

- Mobilizing people on the team also requires clarity between the team leader, the local hierarchical superior and the team member on time spent on the project, performance evaluation and rewards. This involves a direct contact and a process of coordination between both leaders, the nature of which may differ from culture to culture.

Integration

Whilst mobilization is about the individual team members, integration is about bringing it all together. It is only when the team manages to integrate its individual contributions that new solutions that are more than the sum of its parts can come into existence. This requires the experience that developments build on each other, that team members work hand in hand, help each other and complement each other.

Integration is first a question of mindset and attitude. Next is the actual organization of the workflow and exchange within the team. And finally it is about clear and effective decisionmaking structures.

The mindset should be one of cooperation rather than competition, searching out and valueing different points of view but ultimately putting the team result over individual results. Satisfaction and reward should come from contribution to the team rather than stand out performance.
The actual workflow processes are again highly dependent on the individual project. However, what can be generalized is that a team that is supposed to develop new synergistic solutions needs permanent contact. One teleconference per week is not enough to create the experience of one idea leading to the next, getting the collective team juices into flow. Technically the possibilities for virtual collaboration are all there, but they are not always yet systematically used.

Nothing is more dispiriting to an engaged team than late, postponed or no decisions. They completely devalue the team's work and kill the team dynamics. Decisions are what makes integration tangible and visible, leading to the implementation phase and to obtaining results. Decisions can be hard to take in a remote team, as many stakeholders may get involved and divided loyalties may get in the way. Therefore it is particularly important to clarify early on who gets to decide what, who influences the decision and what the process is. There are three levels, individual decisionmaking, mentioned under "mobilization", the decisions taken by the team leader and decisions that need approval from outside of the team.

Tips for integration:

- Nurture a spirit of collaboration and shared responsibility

- Allow for a communication infrastructure that facilitates "virtual closeness".
  This involves on the one hand a Lync or Skype-like software, making it possible to see who is online, organize impromptu meetings between two or more people with the possibility of visual contact from each desktop, work together on a document and have a permanent chat function. On the other hand a virtual team platform with the possibility to share and constantly update documents. Make sure that people know how and are confortable to use these media.

- Next to organizing the workflow processes specific to the project, virtual team meetings in particular need special preparation. Obviously timing is an issue: it should not be always the same who have to participate outside of their office hours. To make sure that everybody participates send an agenda and distribute tasks in advance. Make it interesting enough so that nobody wants to miss it. Plan for a check-in or warm-up round. Moderate between the people who say a lot and the people who prefer to listen only so as to achieve some balance and engage everybody. Once in a while you should dedicate meetings to the process rather than the content of the teamwork. Have somebody take minutes.

- Design a decision architecture that clarifies the "what", "who", "how" and "when".

- Find opportunities and ways to celebrate the team

Two building blocks, selection and support, affect the team from the outside. A remote international team also requires specific attention to these:

Selection

Competencies of team members are key to achieve results and to build trust with colleagues in any team and are a major criterion for selection.

In remote teams the best technical competencies do not guarantee contribution to the project. Communication styles and language abilities are challenging. Team members mostly remain a part of a local work context. Bringing their competencies to bear on local challenges rather than the international project may be much more rewarding for them. The leader of the remote project team is competing for time and attention with local demands. Therefore motivation to be on the project, attitude and openness as well as communication abilities should be major factors for consideration in the selection process.

Tips for selection:

- Do not select team members on technical competence alone.
  Important selection criteria should be language and communication competence as well as attitude and motivation to participate in the project.
  Make sure you can interview the person at least virtually with video if not in person to get a fuller impression.

- Involve the local superiors from the beginning. Make sure they understand the project and how they benefit from it as well as the time and resources it will require from their local collaborators and make sure they are supportive.

- Team members often have a bridging function to the local entity.
  If so, make sure to check how well connected the individual is locally.

Support

Finally it is important how the virtual team is embedded in and supported by the organization.

Virtual teams can easily get "invisible", as their members are identified with their hierarchical functions and are spread out geographically. To make the team count, its mission and progress has to become visible in the organization. The greater the interest and acknowledgement from top management, the better the chances for global visibility.
Access to funding, information and power have to be clear and free from ambiguities that could arise from the matrix nature of their leadership.

The technical support and IT tools that are put at the disposal of the virtual team are obviously key. Again, since the virtual teams are outside of the mainstream structures their special needs are often underestimated. In many companies it is still forbidden to use video chat and video conferencing on individual desktops for example. However, it makes a huge difference when people can connect spontaneously, face to face, individually or in small groups, to discuss ideas.

Another important element is how the project work is included in each team member's overall targets and performance appraisal process. In a matrix structure this again demands of a team leader close cooperation with local superiors in the evaluation process. Individual boni tend to destroy the teamspirit, so the way compensation is approached can also make a big difference.

Tips for support:

- Acertain the visibility of the team and the importance of its work to relevant top management and parts if not all of the organization. This can be done more classically through presentations and the company newspaper, but to achieve global reach a presentation on virtual media may be more appropriate.

- Make sure that the necessary IT infrastructure and support is available for all team members.

- You have to find a way to recognize and reward the performance in and contribution to the virtual team. Most of the time this means collaborating with the local superior of each team member and finding a way to include it in a meaningful way in the overall performance appraisal process.