

Teambuilding On-Line - Feasible or Inconceivable?



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You are leading a virtual team with people scattered in different locations and perhaps you wonder – is it really possible to do team building online? Do I have to wait until we all get together in the same place? Often when I am facilitating a workshop about working virtually across cultures, the question will arise regarding team building online. Is it really possible, and is it really fun? My answer is yes, and yes.

We need to remember our reasons for wanting to have team building exercises. They may include, but are not limited to:

- Help team members to get to know each other as people beyond the tasks. Perhaps develop an affinity for each other based on shared experiences.
- Learn the context in which each team member operates. This is often missing in the virtual team – we do not know the environment in which our colleagues live and work. We only know their face on the screen, email address, and task list.
- Build empathy and trust between team members and create an environment where people express respect for each other's talents. These are key ingredients when encountering difficult times as a team.

Team building is no longer an offsite event taking place once a year, but an ongoing process by the leader and team to create connection, appreciation and respect. Here are some examples for virtual teams:

Where do you work? Each team member gives a tour of their location, either by making a movie ahead of time, or by giving a real-time tour with their computer camera. This helps the colleagues have an image of the workplace and colleagues of the team member (thereby setting the context).

Together yet apart. Team members want to feel connected, even if they are not in the same location. Activities that they can do simultaneously and share the experience, even if remote, can help build the feeling of connectedness. Here are two examples:

- For a team in which each member sits in a different location: Once a month one team member is responsible to send to all the other team members a package of a unique food from their country. Then the team comes online together, and opens the package simultaneously. The sender explains the origin of the food, and if possible, everyone has a chance to try it and comment.
- For teams where a few members are together in each site. The members of each subteam do the same thing, but in their own location. For instance, all teams go to a cooking course, but in their own city. They send each other pictures and texts simultaneously, and can share the experience the next time they speak online. So their experience is shared, but in their own location.

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What is happening where you are? Often team meeting agendas are full of updates and topic discussions, which is a natural tendency when working online. Teams that include an update from each person in their agenda, help to build understanding of the context of each team-member and each individual feels that they have been able to disclose something about themselves. Beyond 'I am well and the weather is rainy', try to ask each person to comment on new happenings in their local company, country, or perhaps their own family.

One on One conversations: Every two weeks different colleagues are paired up and requested to have one synchronous conversation for 20-30 mins. They can be provided with conversation triggers such as 'How is your experience with the team', 'What do you hope to learn from this project', 'What is interesting in your location', but the conversation is very open. Perhaps the instructions are – no work topics! This helps team members to make connections, to share stories and impressions, and to learn about each other. Use the tool donut (www.donut.com) to organize random pairings.

Team Sites 'My Country' section: As many virtual teams are multi-cultural, the team members often experience cultural differences. Members that take the time to learn about the other cultures often have more respect for their colleagues and have an opportunity to learn about their own cultural preferences. The team can support this process in many ways. To begin, a section of the Team Sites which focuses on the cultures of each team member, and they can recommend books or movies about their countries. Other examples include celebrating the birthday of each team member with the song of the country or recognizing the different country holidays.

These are just a few examples of ways teams can build the connection, respect and understanding of each other. Teams that take the time to focus on the personal connections between their members are more likely to build the trust and empathy for a successful team.