As IT people, we know firsthand how critical technology is to managing virtual teams. And in today’s workforce, virtual teams and contractors are a norm. But here’s the rub: We often forget one of our invisible tools -- communication.

When you and your team don’t share the same physical space, you need to be even more effective at communicating. Having run my company virtually for several years, I have learned several key things that can be applied to any project.

1. **Build trust in person and grow that trust with clear expectations.**
   In order for people to work effectively virtually, there has to be trust. Trust doesn’t happen magically. It is built when you bring your team together for training or team building, and then continues to grow with clear expectations consistently set by leaders and met by the team. It’s important to bring people together at least once a year. During in-person meetings, I often get a handle on something that wasn’t obvious before, and then when we’re virtual again, I have invaluable insight that wouldn’t have been possible without the time we spent together.

2. **Manage results, not activity.** In the physical office environment, "busy work" often gets mistaken for real work. In the virtual environment, when you can’t see what people are doing, the key is to manage results. Set expectations and monitor the results, not the daily activities. This is empowering for people who are motivated and who take the initiative, and on the other hand it is a virtual microscope, which reveals people who don’t know how to get things done. You can usually spot a poor hire in a couple of months and save yourself and the individual a lot of time and heartache.

3. **Schedule regular communication.** It’s important that there is a regular time for reporting both progress and potential pitfalls to the team. This keeps people on track and gives everyone the discipline of a
team check-in. It’s amazing how much can be accomplished in a 30-minute conference call when you set expectations beforehand and tell everyone what you need to accomplish in that time frame.

4. Create communication that saves time -- not the kind that kills it. Have you created an e-mail culture that wastes time with endless "daisy-chain" conversations that take several hours to read? Does your team spend hours trying to solve an issue with an e-mail conversation that could have been solved with a 30-minute conference call? E-mail and instant messaging are critical tools in our work environments, but it’s important to create a new culture of effectiveness around them. Ask yourself: How can I make my team’s e-mail communication more productive? Set e-mail and IM rules for your organization. For example, we use IM for anything that can easily be answered with a simple yes or no. It is also our virtual water cooler where we talk about vacations and what’s happening. (See the sidebar, "E-mail rules to save time.")

**E-mail rules to save time**

E-mail is often a culprit when it comes to wasting time. Here are a few of my favorite email rules:

- **Survive the quick read by putting what you need in the lead.** I don’t have time to read a long rambling piece of prose about anything. Remember that I’m glancing quickly to know what is important and what you need from me. Put that in the subject line and immediately tell me what you need at the top of the e-mail.

- **Don’t cc: the whole world.** Don’t create work for your colleagues if they don’t need to be cc’d. Copy only those who need to know, and let the rest of us receive one less e-mail.

- **Don’t use e-mail to blow a fuse.** When you’re angry, step away from the keyboard. Nothing is more disruptive or upsetting to anyone’s day than getting negative garbage and anger in their e-mail box. Cool off and then send a sane response.

- **Don’t forget that old-fashioned device called a phone.** I love it when people say to me: "She didn’t respond to my e-mail." And then I inevitably ask: "Did you call her?" And I get this funny look while the person goes back in the memory bank and remembers the good ole phone. It still works wonders, especially if an e-mail chain is getting confusing and/or wasting people’s time. Pick up the phone when the e-mail isn’t saving time.

5. Create standards that build a cohesive culture. What are your standards of quality? How do you define excellence? What do you expect from the people on your team? Making sure everyone knows
the answers to those three questions is especially important when people are scattered geographically. Virtually, you need to create cohesion with excellence and a sense of pride in what your company stands for. People want a reason to belong, and a strong culture gives them a sense of belonging and also the confidence of knowing what the rules of the road are for them and the company.

6. Establish rules of responsiveness. When people are working remotely, it’s important that you define what your rules of responsiveness are for your culture. How quickly are people expected to return an e-mail, an IM or a phone call? What is your protocol when people are out of the office or on vacation? If you’re in a customer service environment, it’s important to have clear expectations regarding how to respond to all customer inquiries. No one likes to be kept waiting, and knowing what to expect immediately lowers the blood pressures on both sides of the customer/company relationship.

Once you have your communication keys in place, you need to model the behavior you want to cultivate. Set some boundaries for yourself, and let your team know when you’re not available. If you’re on a family vacation, give people plenty of notice, and let them know the time period when you are not available. Empower people when you are unavailable. You’ll be surprised at the solutions that magically appear when you are unplugged from your Blackberry. Revel in it.

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