4 Success Factors for Managing a Remote Team

Like many organizations, the technological age has allowed The Oxford Group to operate successfully in the global marketplace via remote teams. However, without good management, the lack of physical closeness can result in weaker working relationships, poor time management and demotivation, affecting the team’s chance of success.

From our own experience and years of observing and training teams, we have identified four key factors for managing a successful remote team.

In this paper we will provide you with tips and guidance on what to do to implement these four factors in your remote team.

The 4 Success Factors

1. **Communicate effectively**

This is possibly the most important factor in deciding the success or failure of remote teams.

Communicating effectively with remote teams requires a more conscious, planned and personal approach to replace the daily face to face interactions you would have if everyone was in the same location.

It is essential that you communicate a strong vision and mission to give the team a ‘presence’ when they are not together.

Regular updates and status reports need to be circulated to replace corridor conversations – this ensures that everyone gets information at the same time.

Finally, you will need to consider the flexible use of different media so that it matches the purpose of the communication and individual preferences.

The continuum below can be used to guide you as to what medium is appropriate for the type of communication you need.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>High context</th>
<th>Low context</th>
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<tr>
<td>(finish with the ‘truth’ after exploring other factors)</td>
<td>(start with the ‘truth’ and may explore other factors)</td>
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- Face to face
- Video-conference
- Telephone
- Audio-conference
- Web pages
- Email
A word on email…
- Be concise – send information not stories
- Remember that email is not necessarily confidential
- Don’t attempt to “discipline” your readers
- Don’t “spam” your readers
- Beware of linked messages with background
- It can be helpful to code emails to indicate what response is expected e.g. AR (Action Required)

…and when emails get out of hand – use the phone!

2. Create and maintain trust
“in remote teams, trust replaces traditional mechanisms of control and coordination.”
According to Jarvenpaa, Knoll and Leidner (1998), trust comes from:
- Our perception of other’s facial expressions
- History – our past interactions with others
- Established common business understanding.
When working in virtual or remote environment, building trust is more challenging and more crucial to the team’s success. With such limited face-to-face interaction, team members do not have the ability to read each other’s expressions so must trust each other on the basis of verbal cues only.
So what can you say and do in this setting? There are two parts:

Stage 1: Build trust between team members by:
- Promoting shared values.
- Demonstrating integrity and ability as a leader.
- Ensuring that there is as much personal contact as possible.
- Agreeing what the ground rules are at the start – and delivering on commitments you have made.
- Being open – disclosing and expressing feelings.
- Showing you care about the people and success.
- Ensure fairness and equality of opportunities – not just being fair, but being perceived to be fair.

Stage 2: Build trust between team member and team member by:
- Understanding the explicit (rituals, language, practices, rules) and implicit (beliefs, values, culture) factors that affect people’s behaviour.
- Monitoring and encouraging high-performance values and behaviours such as: integrity; personal accountability; empowering leadership; feedback, coaching and appreciation; openness to change and innovation; teamwork; a customer focus; positive work/life balance.

Characteristics of high-trust teams:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Behaviour/Strategy</th>
<th>High-trust teams</th>
<th>Low-trust teams</th>
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<tr>
<td>Styles of action</td>
<td>Proactive</td>
<td>Reactive</td>
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<td>Focus of dialogue</td>
<td>Task/output driven</td>
<td>Procedural</td>
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<tr>
<td>Team spirit</td>
<td>Optimistic</td>
<td>Pessimistic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>Dynamic</td>
<td>Static</td>
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<tr>
<td>Task/goal clarity</td>
<td>Team’s responsibility</td>
<td>Individual responsibility</td>
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<tr>
<td>Role division &amp; specificity</td>
<td>Emergent &amp; independent</td>
<td>Assigned &amp; independent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Time management</td>
<td>Explicit/process based</td>
<td>Non-existent</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pattern of interaction</td>
<td>Frequent, few gaps</td>
<td>Infrequent, gaps</td>
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<tr>
<td>Nature of feedback</td>
<td>Predictable, substantive</td>
<td>Unpredictable, non-substantive</td>
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3. Build team spirit
The team spirit will influence how motivated members are, and how well they communicate with each other. Start by creating a clear vision, mission and common business understanding that is:
- Intellectual – written down and repeated often
- Emotional – takes into account how achieving the vision gives the team satisfaction (what triggers their emotions e.g. excellence, success, failure?).
Further ways you can build team spirit:

- Promote the team in the wider organisation – celebrate team accomplishments and build prestige through external communication.
- Build on individual skills and preferences – provide opportunities for team members to demonstrate their skills and leadership.
- Build a community – encourage links and support between team members (use a visible symbol).
- Recognise emergent and interdependent roles – treat people as the leaders of their part of the project.
- Create an alignment tool – a question or statement each person can refer to daily that confirms they are on/off track.
- Reward members who take initiative.
- Create an atmosphere that encourages people to have fun!

Should a performance issue arise, it is imperative that it is dealt with quickly through a constructive conversation. Two important considerations when remotely managing a critical conversation are:

- Should this meeting be held via a teleconference? It may be a situation where the nature of the issue needs a face-to-face meeting
- Focus on the ‘micro skills’ you will need to make it beneficial for both parties e.g. creating the right tone for the meeting, the use of words, tone of voice, very accurate listening (to words, expressions, tone, what’s not being said).

And lastly… the team ‘health check’

Continually monitor and evaluate your team’s behaviour by using a scorecard like the one below which measures how well your team is doing against each of the four success factors. When you have made your observations and evaluation, set an action list based on the tips provided to help you improve or maintain your remote team’s health.

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