



Trust-building for a virtual team

August 2004

Executive summary – Establishing trust among members of a virtual team is a prerequisite for being able to work as a team. Coworkers can help build trusting relationships in several ways: clearly communicating the value each brings to the team, demonstrating commitment to meet team expectations and being thorough enough to catch and fix the problems that will inevitably pop up from time to time.

This Executive Technology Report is based on a personal essay by Peter Andrews, Consulting Faculty Member at the IBM Advanced Business Institute, based in Palisades, New York.

You probably would not climb Mount Everest with a guide you'd never met or hand your life savings over to an investment counselor you only knew through a phone call. The more you have at risk, the more you need to trust those around you. Yet we are asked to trust our careers to people we may never meet face-to-face.

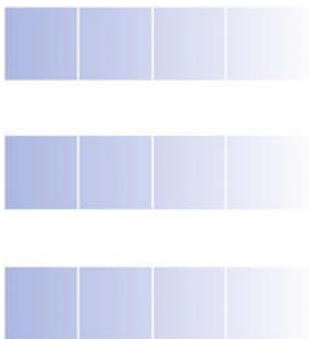
The world of virtual teams has many benefits in bringing together people of talent, providing international perspectives and saving a corporation travel dollars. Unfortunately, the team can't work as a team unless trust is established. So how do you build trust when you never get a chance to look the other person in the eye and shake hands?

Basically, it comes down to team members being able to answer three questions about each other in the affirmative:

1. Do you have anything to offer me?
2. Can I count on you?
3. Will you get it straight?

If I know you can help me, that you will keep your commitments and that you'll do the job the right way, I'll trust you for most business purposes. Let's see how each of these can be answered satisfactorily in a virtual environment.

Value. The first place to show value is in your first conversation with a team member. Even before you talk to any of your colleagues, you should make your qualifications available in the form of a resume, Web page or professional listing. Naturally, whatever form you choose should be up-to-date, grammatical and engaging. Include a picture of yourself, but not a candid shot. Select a photo you'd use to get hired.





Make your value proposition as clear and targeted as you can. “I help people evaluate and choose communications equipment for telemarketing” says a lot more than “communications consultant.” If possible, do your homework on other team members and even adjust your credentials to highlight for each what you have to offer them specifically.

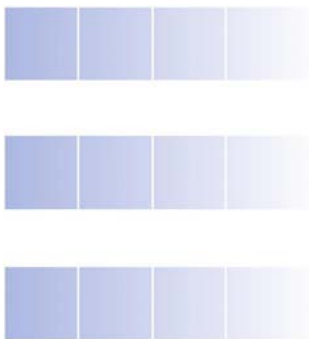
When you get a chance to talk to them on the phone, find out more about their jobs, what they want to accomplish and what they want and need from you. Set expectations by being as clear about what you *can't* do for them as what you *can*. Make sure your voice inspires confidence by 1) knowing your main points beforehand (and possibly rehearsing them) 2) smiling and gesturing as you talk, even though they can't see you and 3) mirroring back the same style, pace and level of formality as you hear from them. Also, be sure not to use a cell phone or a speaker phone with this call. You want to sound as clear and friendly as possible.

Finally, follow up the call with an e-mail that specifies what you will do for them, any limits or processes you need to work within and what you will need in return. This will reduce the chances of a misunderstanding, which is a sure trust-killer.

Commitment. If you want to deliver on expectations, you need to know what those expectations are. What is needed, by whom and when? Have you confirmed the specifications for what you need to deliver? Do you know everyone who needs to be contacted or provided with information? Are milestones in place and meetings scheduled? Can the work be done in the allotted time?

Remember that, when you are on a virtual team, no one is there to “bug” you. No one is looking over your shoulder. No one can see and appreciate the massive effort you are putting in. They only know what you tell them and show them. Delivering big projects in a piecemeal fashion is usually a good idea. It shows progress. Having a calendar application that is visible, or even shared, can demonstrate the steps you take to get things done. And making yourself available, especially through instant messaging, can remind the other team members that you are on the job and not away playing golf.

Thoroughness. In this world, things go wrong. Vendors fail; hotels mismanage reservations; estimates are wrong. Unfortunately, the burden of any mistake is more likely to fall on the absent person who “didn't get the job done.” To be considered thorough, you must take control of the situation. That means more double-checking and following up than in a face-to-face world. When in doubt, make a phone call or send an e-mail. Listen for concerns and questions from colleagues – they can give you a heads-up on where things could go wrong. Ask questions about the reliability of people you depend on and how much management they might need. And if something goes wrong that you can't fix immediately, let everyone who is affected know. Don't surprise them.





How do you know if things are going wrong, if you are losing trust? Sometimes you can tell by the tone of voice or the way things are phrased. Another indication is how often you are being cross-checked or asked for verification. But in the virtual world, the most common response to something going wrong – until it goes very wrong – is silence. You want to be invited to meetings; you want to be called on the phone; you want lots of responses when you ask a question. If you are not being included as much or more than other team members, it's time to make an effort. It may even be time to ask around and find out how the team is evaluating you.

If you are on a *blended* team – one that includes both colocated and virtual members – you face special challenges. You and your teammates need to work to level the playing field by ensuring that virtual team members are given respect and offered equal opportunity to participate. The information tools you use (instant messaging, bulletin boards, shared workflow) need to be available to all, and everyone needs to be educated on how to use them. Virtual team members should be asked to chair conference calls, and they should be allocated more time for help, direction and support.

Once you do establish trust on a virtual team, all its benefits can be realized. And, on a personal level, you'll find that things will go more smoothly, with everyone sharing a more positive attitude. Most of all, the team gets the opportunity to be more productive, respond to more significant opportunities and grow in both capabilities and confidence.

Sites of interest

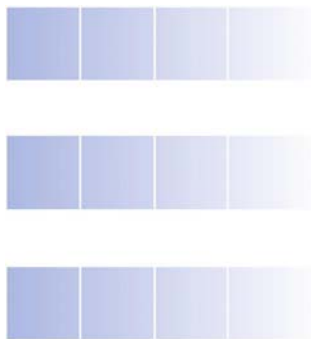
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Executive Technology Report is a monthly publication intended as a heads-up on emerging technologies and business ideas. All the technological initiatives covered in *Executive Technology Report* have been extensively analyzed using a proprietary IBM methodology. This involves not only rating the technologies based on their functions and maturity, but also doing quantitative analysis of the social, user and business factors that are just as important to its ultimate adoption. From these data, the timing and importance of emerging technologies are determined. Barriers to adoption and hidden value are often revealed, and what is learned is viewed within the context of five technical themes that are driving change:





Knowledge Management: Capturing a company's collective expertise wherever it resides – databases, on paper, in people's minds – and distributing it to where it can yield big payoffs

Pervasive Computing: Combining communications technologies and an array of computing devices (including PDAs, laptops, pagers and servers) to allow users continual access to the data, communications and information services

Realtime: "A sense of ultracompressed time and foreshortened horizons, [a result of technology] compressing to zero the time it takes to get and use information, to learn, to make decisions, to initiate action, to deploy resources, to innovate" (Regis McKenna, *Real Time*, Harvard Business School Publishing, 1997.)

Ease-of-Use: Using user-centric design to make the experience with IT intuitive, less painful and possibly fun

Deep Computing: Using unprecedented processing power, advanced software and sophisticated algorithms to solve problems and derive knowledge from vast amounts of data

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