

Virtual Velocity

How Effective Project Management Gives Virtual Teams an Edge

By Michelle LaBrosse, Chief Cheetah, Cheetah Learning

Remember when virtual team and virtual office were futuristic concepts? Today many of us find ourselves working virtually either from a home office, on the road or from a satellite office far from headquarters..

The right tools are easy enough to find. Most of us already have them or have access to them: email, Instant Messaging, conferencing (both video and tele), cell phones, iphones and Blackberries. However, once the tools that are right for your organization are in place, the biggest barriers are often around communications and work culture. Virtual velocity can be hampered without the right tools and ground rules that can increase your team's productivity and let you reap the rewards of the virtual workforce.

Ten Ground Rules for Virtual Velocity

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.

2. Hire people who work well virtually.

Self-starters that don't need to be micro-managed are the best employees in a virtual environment. I don't monitor employees. I tell folks that: "if you want to be a boss or you need a boss, you won't like working for Cheetah Learning." We run the projects based on projects and processes, and the people who work here are responsible for their processes and responsible for completing the deliverables of their projects.

People who love what they're doing work well virtually. It's difficult to keep anyone engaged when they don't have passion for what they're doing. So, when I hire Cheetahs, I look for passion.

If they don't like to carry a blackberry and a cell phone, pretty much work across multiple time zones and aren't very technically literate to start with, it makes it incredibly difficult for someone to thrive the virtual environment. You have to hire the right people to work virtually and have the right type of business to do this. We have a capability assessment process we do on people as part of the hiring process to insure that they will fit in this environment - being highly technically literate is a primary criteria - for every single person we hire.

3. Make flexibility work for you.

A big part of compensation can be the ability to work wherever you want and whenever you want. This means that employees work when they are in their own most productive hours. We also have learned when it is important to get together in person. For example, bringing a team together to plan for a major systems integration project or for a product launch.

4. 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.

5. 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 every one the discipline of a team check-in.

6. Create Communication that Saves Time -- Not Kills It.

Have you created an email 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 email conversation that could have been solved with a thirty-minute conference call? With email, being a critical tool in our work environments, it’s important to create a new culture of effectiveness around it. Ask yourself: how you can make your team’s email communication even more productive?

7. Create standards that build a cohesive culture.

What are your standards of quality? How do you define excellence? What does your brand mean to each employee? Making sure everyone knows the answers to those three questions is even more 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.

8. 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 email, an Instant Message 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.

9. Make sure there's a real system under the virtual hood

Working virtually is about systems, creating the systems that enable people to do their work from anywhere and everywhere. There has to be a very strong commitment to giving people the tools they need to help run the business and serve the customers. If they have to go somewhere to answer the phone to serve the customers, they cannot work virtually.

The Wiki is a central hub for our work where we coordinate our projects and processes. We started this for the marketing group to reduce the email and to better capture the various marketing initiatives and decisions. Within one week, it was adopted by all the other people in the company: IT projects, facilities to coordinate facility work, accounting to coordinate budgeting with the different parts of the business, course development to keep track of course upgrades.

10. Embrace the new water cooler

The virtual world has become the new water cooler - even in physical locations. When you go into companies these days, they are often very quiet – because everyone is communicating via email and in IM chat. Email, IM, conference calls, webinars and the Wiki are key parts of how we all stay connected and it's okay when a You Tube video gets passed around, as long as every one is getting their work done and meeting their goals.

Working virtually is not rocket-science, but it does require new rules for our workforce. These tips are a good starting point for your team as you build your own best practices for effective Project Management in the virtual world. Enjoy the journey and invite your team to help you create a powerful work culture.

About the Author



Michelle LaBrosse is the founder and Chief Cheetah of [Cheetah Learning](http://www.cheetahlearning.com). In 2006, The Project Management Institute, www.pmi.org, selected Michelle as one of the 25 Most Influential Women in Project Management in the World, and only one of two women selected from the training and education industry. Michelle is a graduate of the Harvard Business School's Owner & President Management program for entrepreneurs, and is the author of [Cheetah Project Management](#) and [Cheetah Negotiations](#). To contact Michelle and learn more about Cheetah Learning, visit www.cheetahlearning.com.

