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Building trust in a virtual environment

How leaders can build successful virtual teams
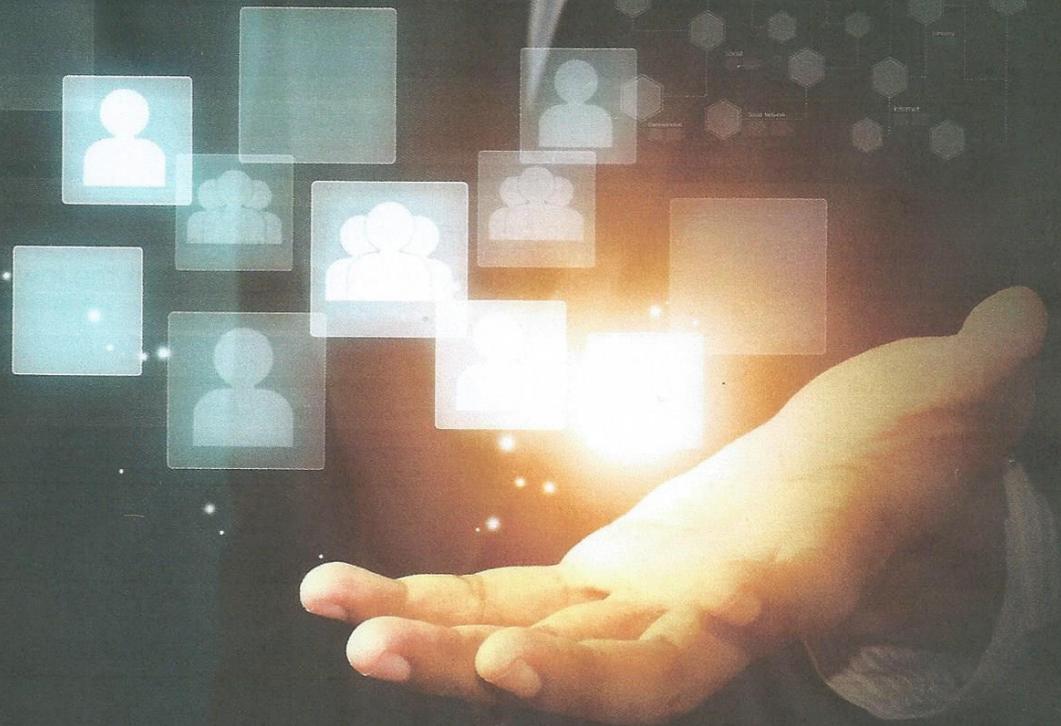
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Building Trust in a Virtual Environment

When it comes to building a successful team, trust is key. And when it comes to building trust, face-to-face communication is best. But in today's global business environment, an increasing number of professionals are working remotely. How can leaders foster trust in a virtual world?

By Shawn Ireland, Ed.D., Siri Marie Lindhagen Joli, and Monica Degerstrøm Haakonsen

Editor's note: The following article is based on the authors' research, published works, and experience working with leaders and members of virtual teams. They note that the study of virtual teams is still in its infancy, with a limited amount of research on virtual team performance available. In addition to offering insights from their own research, the authors share insights from colleagues in the field and discuss advances in neurobiology that help explain how the human brain manages emotions and influences decisions and actions.

Given similar resources, talent, and opportunity, why is it that some virtual teams are more successful than others? How can we explain the outputs of high-performing virtual teams that seem to defy conventional management or leadership wisdom? Why are organizations like Apple and Tesla able to deliver exceptional results using virtual teams in a competitive global business environment?

These types of questions inform our research and, in particular, our examination of the link between leadership and virtual team performance. A consistent outcome has emerged from our research to date—it turns out that one unique feature distinguishes the leaders of successful virtual teams: They focus relentlessly on fostering trust as a core relationship-building experience. In addition to supporting diverse communication strategies using technology and social media, these leaders believe that the ability to connect deeply—to be vulnerable—with others in a virtual environment is vital to virtual team success.
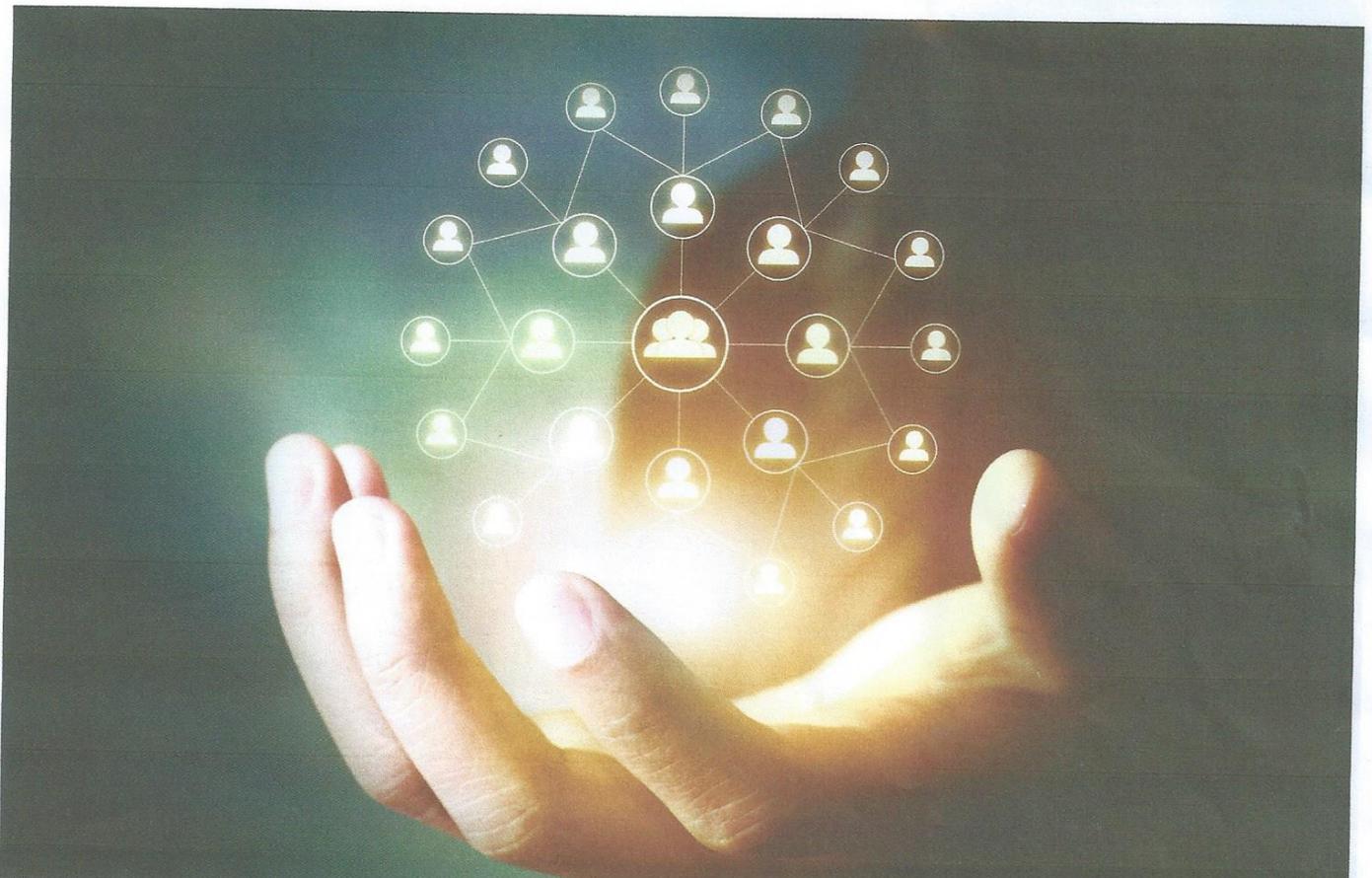
Several recent studies on the value of trust in developing high-performing virtual teams (including one conducted by a member of our team) support these findings, showing that trust—and a leader's ability to establish an environment in which trust can emerge—are the key determinants of success for virtual teams.[1] One major barrier for virtual team leaders, as identified by a 2010 study, is the challenge of replicating a high "touch" environment—an environment in which people are able to develop deep psychological connections through face-to-face interaction.[2] Touch is critical to communication, bonding, human health, and the development of trust.[3]

In this article, we explore the idea of building "touch to trust" in a virtual environment, examine the various forms of trust that shape human relationships on virtual teams, and describe how leaders can create virtual team environments that enable trust to build. *Note*: In the context of this article, "touch" refers to psychological, not physical, connections.

Making sense of trust on virtual teams – the vulnerability factor

As author Thomas P. Wise points out in the preface to his book *Trust in Virtual Teams*, trust is fragile, and it can be short-lived: "Trust is simple, and yet one mistake can set us back on our heels for a very long time."[4] Trust is fragile, in part, because it's an emotion emanating from the limbic region of the brain. Interestingly, the limbic system is the centre of our emotions and our decision-making, but it is incapable of language. This means that team leaders can't rely on language to build or maintain trust.

Several studies indicate that fostering trust requires team members to be vulnerable with others, to value and think well of others, and to be optimistic that team members will have the competence to deliver results.[5] Our research supports and adds to these findings, noting that expressions of vulnerability foster a willingness to take risks with one another, support more candid and robust team conversations no matter the medium, and enhance a sense of personal and business competence.

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[1] These studies include: a) Lucy L. Gilson, M. Travis Maynard, Nicole C. Jones Young, Matti Vartiainen, and Marko Hakonen, "Virtual Teams Research: 10 Years, 10 Themes, and 10 Opportunities," *Journal of Management*, Vol. 41, Issue 5, first published November 24, 2014; b) Shawn Ireland and Paula Hart, *Virtual Team Excellence: Seven Steps to Virtual Team Success* (London: HRCgroup, 2014); c) Leigh L. Thompson, *Making the Team: A Guide for Managers*, 5th global ed. (Pearson Education Ltd., 2015); d) Thomas P. Wise, *Trust in Virtual Teams* (Farnham: Gower, 2013).

[2] Richard Lepsinger and Darleen DeRosa, *Virtual Team Success: A Practical Guide for Working and Leading from a Distance* (Hoboken: Wiley, 2010).

[3] Dacher Keltner, "Hands On Research: The Science of Touch," greatergood.berkeley.edu, September 29, 2010. Accessed June 2016.

[4] Wise, 2013.

[5] These studies include: a) Carolyn McLeod, "Trust," *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, Winter 2015 ed. Accessed April 25, 2016; b) Cristina B. Gibson and Susan G. Cohen, eds., *Virtual Teams That Work: Creating Conditions for Virtual Team Effectiveness*, San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2003; c) Jan Terje Karlsen, *Prosjektledelse – fra initiering til gevinstrealisering* [Project – from initiation to realization of gains], Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 2013 ed.

"The willingness to be vulnerable builds trust if it is reciprocated. In face-to-face teams, this is a natural part of interaction and collaboration. In virtual teams, this is more challenging..."

Researcher and speaker Brené Brown identifies vulnerability as the glue that holds relationships together.[6] How, then, can leaders of virtual teams foster touch to develop trust? To answer this question, let's explore three types of trust that shape a virtual environment:

Cognitive or rational trust

We explicitly or intentionally place trust in a person, group, or program based on past experience, our assessment of promises or outcomes offered, and the degree of predictability offered.

Our research indicates that where there is no face-to-face interaction, virtual team members: a) focus exclusively on task-based activities; b) default to agreed systems and structures for decision-making; and c) refer to the team leader more than to other team members to set expectations, establish goals, manage decision-making, and resolve conflict. In these circumstances, the development of trust is inhibited; therefore, it is essential for any virtual team to engage in face-to-face time to foster rational trust.

These findings are supported by a number of studies and by our own research and experience.[7] Face-to-face time promotes touch in developing rational trust. Unfortunately, location, budgets, and work demands can make it difficult to schedule this vital face-to-face time.[8]

Affective or emotional trust

We judge team members based, in part, on how they express concern for or interest in others. This includes making judgments about their levels of empathy and altruism, their sense of emotional security, the degree of goodwill they offer, and their personal beliefs.[9]

Research conducted in 2013 indicates that emotional trust is more important than rational trust in sharing interpersonal knowledge.[10] There are several building blocks of emotional trust:

- Ongoing conversations about work and self;
- Comfort with and support for offering or testing ideas;
- A willingness to engage in difficult conversations;
- The influence of organizational culture on team interactions; and
- Comfort in taking risks to foster cohesion and social connection or presence.

The willingness to be vulnerable builds trust if it is reciprocated. In face-to-face teams, this is a natural part of interaction and collaboration.[11] In virtual teams, however, this is more challenging—social media and other forms of technology can be used to foster an environment in which emotional trust can be established, but it takes longer to emerge due to the lack of touch. In addition, it can diminish if the team's work lessens in intensity.

Swift trust

Swift trust has been defined as a unique form of trust that develops as a result of "short-lived, transient, and fleeting" temporary organizational structures.[12] It is established by pulling together in a cohesive and organized fashion when speed is of the essence.

Virtual teams can foster swift trust if the project is based on a crisis response and requires a brief, intensive period of work. It also helps if the deliverable is focused and limited. As can be the case with emotional trust, swift trust typically diminishes once the intensity of work subsides. It can also erode completely if not nurtured.[13]

6   Brené Brown, June 2010. "The Power of Vulnerability," ted.com/talks/brene_brown_on_vulnerability. Accessed July 3, 2016.

7   These studies include: a) Connie J. G. Gersick, "Time and Transition in Work Teams: Toward a New Model of Group Development," *Academy of Management Journal*, Vol. 31, No. 1, 1988; b) Robert B. Cialdini and Melanie R. Trost, "Social Influence: Social Norms, Conformity, and Compliance," *The Handbook of Social Psychology*, Vols. 1-2, 4th ed. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1998; c) F. David Schoorman, Roger C. Mayer, and James H. Davis, "An Integrative Model of Organizational Trust: Past, Present and Future," *Academy of Management Review*, Vol. 32, No. 2, 2007; d) Ireland Hart, 2014.

8   Drawn from: a) Leigh L. Thompson, *Making the Team: A Guide for Managers*, 5th global ed., Pearson Education Ltd., 2015; and b) Thomas P. Wise, *Trust in Virtual Teams*, Farnham: Gower, 2013.

9   Bill Bleuel, Ph.D., "Rational and Emotional Trust," *Graziadio Business Review Blog*, July 19, 2011. Accessed June 26, 2016.

10 Peter E. Swift and Alvin Hwang, "The Impact of Affective and Cognitive Trust on Knowledge Sharing and Organizational Learning," *The Learning Organization*, Vol. 20, Issue 1, 2013.

11 Drawn from: a) Kirsimarja Blomqvist, "The Many Faces of Trust," *Scandinavian Journal of Management*, Vol. 13, Issue 3, 1997; and b) Shoshana Altschuller and Raquel Benbunan-Fich, "Trust, Performance, and the Communication Process in Ad Hoc Decision-Making Virtual Teams," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, first published October 29, 2010.

12 Debra Meyerson, Karl E. Weick, and Roderick M. Kramer, "Swift Trust and Temporary Groups," *Trust in Organizations: Frontiers of Theory and Research*, 1996.

13 Wise, 2013.

How to foster "touch to trust"

Given the limitations of a virtual business environment, what drives virtual team success is, in part, a leader's ability to foster and support an environment in which team members can develop rational, emotional, and swift trust; value some form of touch as a basis for developing trust; and deeply connect with each team member to support relationship-building.

So how can you, as a leader, foster touch to trust on virtual teams? Here are five recommendations:

1. Be intentional in fostering relationship-building

Recognize the challenges of working with others unseen over periods of time, the tendency of technology to de-personalize relationships, and the emotional connections required to sustain high-performance virtual teamwork. Fight the urge to focus on tasks to the exclusion of relationships. Be explicit in conversations about any relationship issues that emerge, and provide opportunities to explore team members' expectations and needs.

Relationship-building strategies include supporting collaborative problem-solving and decision-making, being explicit in identifying expectations for levels of commitment and involvement, supporting difficult conversations about individual competencies and skills, and challenging the status quo on how work is done as a team.

These strategies frequently run counter to organizational norms, values, and culture, so we recommend taking five action steps to manage these issues:

i) Create and communicate a shared vision and expectations for your virtual team, then share these with management and key stakeholders. Give team members and stakeholders a chance to address any concerns about the work.

ii) Identify stakeholders and influencers who can provide support for your virtual team. One of the key outputs from our work is that successful virtual teams often break the "rules for working" embedded in an organizational culture. Gaining stakeholder support is critical to enabling the team to develop its own style and culture of working.

iii) Identify systems and structures in your organization that either support or hinder the productivity of your virtual team. Many organizations still view work in a mechanistic manner, developing systems to provide consistency, predictability, and control. Discuss with stakeholders the opportunity for flexibility in reconfiguring systems to reflect virtual team performance.

iv) Plan for resistance from stakeholders and be intentional with conflict-resolution strategies. Be transparent in addressing any conflicts and seek team-based solutions.

v) Keep management, stakeholders, and influencers informed about team progress. Intentionally engaging with other leaders in this way opens the door for strategic reciprocity when support may be required at a later date. It also keeps the work of the team in perspective and allows you to shape the narrative on your team's work for the rest of the organization.

2. Support actions that foster team members' involvement and connection

Working in a virtual environment is not the same as being *engaged* in one. Being engaged means consciously making an intellectual and emotional investment in the relationships and outputs of a virtual team.

Engagement is especially challenging on virtual teams because it requires balancing three psychological demands that influence trust:

• *Autonomy* – Virtual teams accomplish work that is complex and non-routine, and that may or may not be delegated in advance. This often creates ambiguity, which can be uncomfortable for many virtual team members. To address autonomy, get to know your team's tolerance for ambiguity by assessing the level of need for structure and predictability and the level of tolerance for uncertainty. Engage team members in a conversation to address these needs and develop team structures to meet requirements.

- **Control** – A virtual team is still a social environment that reflects the personalities and psychological needs of its members. To address control, recognize the tension some team members may experience in a virtual team environment—tension between needing control and losing control. Acknowledge the value of a balanced approach by engaging your team to agree on systems and structures commensurate with needs.
- **Collaboration** – On a virtual team, collaboration means working jointly with other members on a level playing field using technology. To address collaboration, embrace social media collaboration tools to foster conversations, train team members on basic collaboration tools and techniques, support team-based work over individual work, and scan your environment for apps and tools designed to enhance collaboration via technology.

3. Enhance understanding by finding a common language

Establishing trust in virtual teams requires the use of technology that enables interpersonal relationships to develop and facilitates the creation of common values and norms. It also requires awareness of, and respect for, the interplay between culture and communication. As a leader, it is crucial to keep your team engaged in conversations about communication styles, cultural influences on communication, and the impact of communication breakdown. Distance affects understanding. Discuss the potential impact of culture, language, and styles of communication during virtual team meetings.

4. Place team alignment at the core of all team meetings

Providing alignment means providing a clear, straightforward pathway for your virtual team to achieve its goals. Supporting alignment involves supporting four team activities, each of which offers an opportunity to foster touch to develop trust:

i) *Checking assumptions* – Consistently explore and challenge any assumptions made by the team when it makes decisions or assigns tasks.

ii) *Managing resistance* – Consistently and rigorously debate areas where team members feel they lack enthusiasm or support. At its core, trust is based on the ability of team members to raise to the surface those issues that keep them from fully engaging in the team's work.

iii) *Checking culture* – While working virtually, decision-making can be slow and difficult due to differences in culture and mindset. Distance and a lack of face-to-face work supports personal mindsets, so seek opportunities to discuss the impact of cultural influences and create a "team" mindset.

iv) *Cultivating curiosity* – Each team meeting or communication benefits from what we refer to as a "curiosity corner"—a safe place where team members can ask questions, ponder new ideas, challenge assumptions, and even ask silly or outrageous questions for response from fellow team members.

5. Embrace technology and test its limits

The choice of technology has a direct impact on a leader's ability to foster touch to trust. Most virtual teams use two or three forms of technology to deliver work. Technology that is supported by the organization and readily available to and valued by all team members is crucial to fostering trust.

There's no consensus on the best technology tools for fostering trust, so determining this is the domain of each team. However, one interesting finding emerged from a study conducted in 2013 using 3D avatars (digital personas) in a virtual setting for virtual team meetings.[14] Researchers found that team members felt closer to the group as a whole through their avatars in a 3D virtual space, and a Skype session was unable to replicate this same sense of connection.

As communication platforms become more interactive, we may someday see virtual team members wearing virtual reality bodysuits to create high-touch environments.

[14] Emma Nordbäck and Anu Sivunen, "Leadership Behaviors in Virtual Team Meetings Taking Place in a 3D Virtual World," *2013 46th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences.*

Vulnerability and engagement are vital

The idea of leading a successful virtual team may seem daunting due to the complex issues involved when fostering touch to trust. We believe developing trust is about letting yourself be vulnerable, and that's something most people are reluctant to talk about—never mind experience. However, our study and those of other researchers assert the significance of vulnerability, touch, and trust beyond doubt.

We recommend that virtual team members meet face-to-face for optimal trust relationship-building. Absent face-to-face opportunities, we recommend that team leaders compensate for the lack of touch by initiating virtual alternatives that allow sufficient time for conversation alongside task work. And a kick-off meeting for each new team is crucial, whether it is held face-to-face or in a virtual setting. Lastly, we advise leaders to choose models and tools that are developed specifically to support the work of virtual teams. ∎

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