

# TRAINING 101

## Virtual Team Interaction

Here's how to improve people's virtual-collaboration skills.

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Computers represent a great ironic dilemma: While they serve to connect us to information and people around the world that we'd otherwise never know, they also drive a wedge between people and inhibit genuine human, personal interaction. People seem to spend more time with their computers than they do with co-workers. Research from Gartner indicates that by 2010, 70 percent of the U.S. population will spend 10 times longer per day interacting virtually. With

more job duties taking place virtually, many people are working and collaborating with virtual teammates.

The job isn't easy for people who train others to collaborate and work together in virtual teams. The task becomes more complex when taking into account how people typically communicate. Humans communicate through body language and tone of voice. Those cues are missing when communication is distance-based and computer-mediated. That can cause

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confusion and anxiety for people who are new to virtual teaming. Working virtually takes intentional collaboration from all team members—a skill that must be practiced continuously.

Many people aren't equipped to handle the demands of virtual collaboration. It requires seeking consensus with group members, resolving to accomplish pre-established goals, keeping others on task, making decisions that affect the group, and helping others reframe their perspectives based on circumstances and tasks—all while using computers and technology in a dispersed work group. People on virtual teams often lose sight of team goals and become enveloped in their own work—an easy thing to happen considering the physical isolation of members.

To help virtual team members, here's a three-step process for developing virtual-collaboration skills:

1. Practice intentional action.
2. Broaden awareness.
3. Improve quality of communications.

### Step 1: Practice intentional action

The first step is to teach team members to practice intentional actions rather than taking action without planning or forethought of the consequences. That means making people aware of the effects of their actions and helping them apply meaningful and intentional purposes to each action. A first intentional action is to capture a vision of what effective collaboration will look like in the virtual team. The vision can be a resolve to encourage and nurture open communication or be more specific, such as a 15-point plan on how

the team will collaborate. Once team members have a clear vision for effective collaboration, they can learn techniques to develop strategies to fulfill the vision:

- Determine behaviors or practices that, if changed, will model the type and style of collaboration envisioned.
- Write a fictional article describing how the team developed its virtual collaboration environment.
- Identify what plans and strategies haven't worked in the past and why, and resolve to not repeat them.

When all's said and done, each member should have a solid idea about the team's purpose and how he or she will participate in achieving it. Each team member's vision can be to harmonize activity among the team. That can include helping others understand his or her activities and their effect on the team. Or a member's mission can be not to hold up other team members' activities by ignoring duties he or she thinks are unimportant.

### Step 2: Broaden awareness

A second step to developing virtual-collaboration skills is to broaden one's personal awareness. It's typical for people to be unaware of their behaviors and others' reactions. Team members can begin to broaden their awareness by testing their assumptions. That enables them to open themselves up to discovering more about their effective and ineffective virtual behaviors. The team facilitator or leader can help members test an assumption by having each person ask whether what he or she believes, sees, or thinks aligns with what the other team members

believe, see, or think. The results can be startling. When people discover inappropriate or ineffective actions, based on how others perceive them, they need to adjust their plans and actions developed in step 1. That will help team members increase their collaboration skills by refocusing actions to align with their visions, based on their broadened awareness of how they affect the team.

### Step 3: Improve the quality of communications

The third step is to help team members improve the quality of their communications. Virtual teams are greatly influenced by the effectiveness of communication. Unfortunately, many teams are unprepared for the steep communication demands of a virtual work environment. One way to help people increase their communication effectiveness is to balance these speech territories: framing, advocating, illustrating, and inquiring—as described by Dalmar Fisher, David Rooke, and Bill Torbert in their book, *Personal and Organisational Transformations Through Action Inquiry*.

**Framing** is the explicit statement of the purpose, dilemma, or assumptions associated with a situation. It's important because it helps people express intent (refer to step 1) and gives purpose to and reason for conversation. Framing keeps communication flowing and purposeful. It's important to help people understand and keep in mind that framing must be explicit to work, meaning that the originator of a message has to let others involved in the conversation know what the frame is for that particular communication so they know the context for the message.

**Advocating** refers to asserting an opinion, a thought, a feeling, or a proposal for action—also explicitly. It's important because it provides message recipients with a complete understanding of the message originator's point of view.

Advocating requires a balancing act that tempers the amount of information one tells people with the amount of questions one asks. State an opinion, but balance it with an inquiry.

**Illustrating** involves telling part of a story that orients and motivates people and provides an example. This technique is important because it helps others involved in a conversation understand the importance of what someone is saying. If used appropriately, illustrating underscores what's important in a communication.

**Inquiring** means questioning others to learn more. It lets people gather ideas and opinions from other team members so that everyone can contribute equally. Good inquiring takes the form of open-ended questions that let responders give an explanatory or descriptive answer rather than just a *yes* or *no*.

Here's a simple reflective exercise that can help virtual team members develop more valuable communication behaviors. Participants

- review an unsatisfactory dialogue, written or spoken
- determine how balanced it was against the four territories of speech
- make notes on how they could've used the neglected territories of speech to attain more satisfactory results.

In that exercise, people will likely find that they were focusing on one or two territories and neglecting the others. Every online discussion can be an opportunity to practice more effective communication to help build a strong foundation for better virtual team collaboration.

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