

30-Point Plan

Management in Virtual Teams



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Virtual teams only exist in large, international companies? Definitely not - more and more employees in mid-sized companies are working in project teams that span departments and locations. The term 'virtual team' applies to any team that is managed from a distance.

1 Flexibility Required

Nowadays, jobs are not bound to a specific workplace. Employees often have the freedom to work more flexibly, with regards to time as well as location. 'Virtual' describes the fact that these employees do not meet face-to-face on a daily basis, but rather rely on the use of technology. These teams are characterised by two key attributes: long-distance management and the increased use of collaborative technology to overcome this distance.

The modern workplace is everywhere - and this has far-reaching consequences for the managers of these increasingly decentralised and virtual teams. How do they manage to create a team feeling and keep employees loyal despite this distance? The concept of employee loyalty should be understood more broadly within this context. Traditionally, it aims to keep employees in the company for as long as possible and to motivate them to develop further.

This definition cannot be directly transferred to virtual teams, as project groups and work groups generally only exist for a short time. Here, employee loyalty means making sure that each group member can contribute in the best possible way, and feels comfortable for the duration of the team's existence.

2 New Definition of Employee Loyalty

What exactly are the problems faced when creating this kind of employee loyalty in virtual teams? On one hand, management per se is a complex topic and always necessary if any work group is to result in a specific outcome. Achieving this over a long distance is a significant challenge in itself. This is compounded by the issue that companies generally put together expert teams or project teams from different departments and backgrounds as they require certain expertise for a project. In most cases, the team leader has no disciplinary power i.e. they must carry out managerial tasks without the leverage that exists in classic teams. Tools such as direct instructions and specific control mechanisms do not work in virtual teams.

Practical Tip

There is a range of measures that managers can use in practice to ensure the successful management of their virtual teams. The following 30-point plan can be used as a checklist.

30-Point Plan for Employee Loyalty in Virtual Teams

Preparation	Availability	Personal Meetings	Connector	Feedback
Kick-off	Communication Routine	Use of Technology	Coach	Team Feeling
Reliability	Passion	Team Code	Agreements	Praise and Recognition
Find Common Denominators	Own Work-Life Balance	Coordination	Budget	Incentive System
Empowerment	Frequent Traveller	Team Development	Views	Cultural Sensitivity
Conflict Resolution	Own IT Skills	Process Set-Up	Commitment	Managing Expectations

3 Measures as Work Begins

To begin with, managers must create a connection between team members; it is their responsibility to facilitate good communication.

You need more time to prepare when working with virtual teams than you would for a kick-off for a classic team. Project teams generally have to work quickly. Therefore, managers have to answer certain questions and establish structures in advance - such as what technologies the group will use to communicate and how these technologies should be made available. It is important to analyse framework parameters - e.g. locations, functions, availability, tasks and network - in advance, and to come up with an overview and a vision for future collaboration. Only once the manager has developed this vision can they pass this on and provide direction from the very beginning.

Important

It is essential that the team leader ensures they are easy to reach before work begins - and also as the project goes on. This applies to e-mails as well as face-to-face and telephone conversations. This does not go without saying; the whole team must be informed and encouraged to choose and use this method of communication.

Regular meetings in person are integral to working in a virtual team. When organising these meetings, it is important to plan needs exactly. In creative or innovative projects, it is important that personal meetings can take place in various team constellations, and the right materials must be provided. Information is the non plus ultra here: the team should be informed about the nature and scope of this meeting, as well as aims, in advance.

In a virtual team, managers regularly have to function as a “connector” and act as a liaison between employees. This function is integral to holding everyone together in the virtual realm. Not every team member will have the initiative to connect with all other members within the team. It is also important that the team leader manages to establish the most meaningful aspects of tasks for each employee, and to establish how these tasks relate to each other. Feedback should be conscientious. On one hand, the manager must set a good example and uphold any promised feedback and communication. On the other, the manager should also be able to rely on this from each and every team member.

When setting up a virtual team, it is important to allocate sufficient time and budget for a kick-off meeting. A structured agenda also adds value and involves the team. The manager must set out the language, communication method and style of future collaboration. The mood of the kick-off also plays an important role.

4 Exchanging Information and Using Know-How

Communication routines established as a team - like jour fixe meetings, agreements and standards - simplify the process of employee orientation. Bilateral votes must also be integrated in order to make collaboration simpler.

Important

The choice of technology should not be underestimated. Often, technological solutions - such as chat or video conferencing tools - don't work, or employees have to wait several days for replies from their colleagues. This can leave team members resorting to a rather impersonal method of communication - email.

The result: team members hardly get to know each other. They are not able to weigh each other up personally nor with regards to their role within the company. It's clear that this could mean a loss of enjoyment in work. Modern, working communication methods provide a good foundation. It should also be ensured that each team member has the chance to be involved in the flow of information via the chosen technology in order to stay in the loop.

A lot is asked of team leaders - they must also be able to coach others, for example. It is important that there is a regular transfer of knowledge. This is not only necessary with regards to factual circumstances but also to individual experiences. The group can learn from each other and tackle certain situations better in future - whether this improvement is based on knowledge or the exchange of experiences.

5 Creating a Team Feeling

From the very beginning, it is the team leader's responsibility to create a group that actively promotes a team feeling.

Practical Tip

It is helpful to integrate team members into processes e.g. establishing project goals together and defining the meaning of each goal for each individual. Personal and informal meetings are also helpful. 'Virtual' team members generally have an interest in maintaining social contacts when the opportunity arises.

There are various values that have considerable significance in virtual teams, such as reliability, e.g. upholding deadlines, availability, exchange and support. When you know you can rely on each other, working is fun. Team leaders must set a positive example and openly lead tasks in the right direction. This encourages others to approach their work with passion as well.

Practical Tip

Passion is rooted in the person's own attitude. This means that self-reflection is to be recommended from the very beginning.

Management must make it clear what values they represent and which are important for the team, such as reliability, e.g. upholding deadlines, trust, independence, ownership etc. From these values, a binding team code can be defined.

6 Management in the Narrowest Sense

Team leaders must take more responsibility for individual team members within virtual teams. Clear agreements must be made, and clear deadlines must be communicated. In order to avoid bureaucracy, an email exchange is sufficient to ensure the agreement has been provided in writing.

Important

The most important thing for team members? That's easy: praise and recognition. Virtual teams require a healthy dose of praise, but also constructive criticism. Management plays an important role here, as they have to take the time and have a feel for the right amount of positive feedback. Praise and recognition are important for creating and retaining motivated employees.

Finding a common denominator can take many forms. In a specific team constellation, it should be established where this common denominator is even needed, where it is indispensable and where it is only a plus. The team leader also sets an example for the team's work-life balance. If the manager is stressed out, they often pass on their negative energy and their management suffers. It

is up to them to avoid passing their burden on to the team, and rather to demonstrate a healthy balance between results-orientated, efficient performance and other needs.

In virtual teams, the old control-based management system of direct instructions often collides with a new management approach. Modern management is characterised by the encouragement of self-management, and measures that build trust. The maxim here is: coordination instead of instruction. It is important to make sure that the team is based on clear instructions but not control.

7 Motivating the Team

Managers often have to accept the budgets they are given. Sometimes, a bit of engagement and persuasion can get you some more funding; this could be used to offer face-to-face contact but also incentives. You should consider what incentive system and related ideas fit with the project topic and team set-up, and implement these in a targeted manner.

Important

It is good if employees can decide for themselves whether they will respond to motivation or not.

Empowerment is an important tool when motivating employees. A team leader can empower a group member by providing them the means, goals and information in good time so they can begin their work in a well-briefed and well-structured manner. You can also empower employees by gradually allocating more responsibility over time, resulting in sustainable development.

Travel is often part of working in virtual teams. If the team leader is a "frequent traveller", they will be used to working on the move and telephoning a lot. If this travel has negative impacts, such as difficulty concentrating or tiredness, you should consider cancelling a personal meeting rather than attending late or hardly being present.

It is important to develop individual employees. However, it is also important to develop a group within the virtual team. The group effect can only exist when colleagues share results and knowledge. Managers must promote this synergy.

Practical Tip

Team leaders must always be in a position to provide outlooks into the following week and

following project phase, and main targets in both mid-term and long-term context. This means that employees are orientated, the team is motivated, and the big picture is promoted.

8 Organisation and Checks

In these times of globalisation, cultural sensitivity is something that every team leader needs to master. This skill proves its worth in the practical set-up of daily team work. In a group that works globally or that is made up of people from different nations, you should always treat everyone equally. However, there are some regional customs that must be taken into account e.g. don't telephone a Spanish team member during the siesta.

Conflict management is a key skill. It is especially important in virtual teams, as tensions can not only affect communication, but also results. This requires a managing role that does not get involved with employees' sensibilities. If required, the team leader must be present and establish new rules.

In a virtual team, it must be ensured that each team member has the necessary IT skills to use the devices and technology provided. Management must consciously manage and determine how technology is used e.g. when emails are sufficient or when a telephone conversation or meeting is needed.

How are processes set up within a virtual team? This is a question that all team leaders should ask themselves, as this determines how results and the entire value chain are set up.

Team members' commitment to the project team and project rules must also be encouraged by the manager. If this doesn't happen in the large group, it can also take place individually or privately.

Nothing is more satisfying than fulfilled expectations. Team leaders must manage expectations with regards to work atmosphere, project results and collaboration. This is best dealt with using clear communication.

9 Summary

In spite of all these challenges, virtual collaboration has considerable benefits: work groups are not limited to one location, so the pool of resources is larger. The heterogeneous set-up gives colleagues the chance to inspire each other and to develop parallel to their work. This mostly results in huge creative potential - which can only be successful when supported by managers.

In practice, there are a few rules to observe: coordination is more important than control, and results-orientated management is more important than behaviour-orientated management. Finally, each team member needs sufficient IT skills, whereby the manager should set a shining example.