Tasha's Leadership Tips: Building Thriving Virtual Teams

Virtual teams are everywhere. Companies that can assemble qualified people regardless of location can effectively compete in the global marketplace. Working virtually also benefits employees, who save time and money by not commuting to a physical office.

But virtual teams are not all puppies and flowers. Team members can feel isolated or have trouble building trust. And leadership becomes infinitely more challenging. One study by the Institute for Corporate Productivity asked employees how satisfied they were with their leader's ability to manage their virtual team. A quarter of respondents were dissatisfied or *very* dissatisfied!

If you've ever worked in a virtual team, you know that they're virtual breeding grounds (pardon the pun) for misunderstandings. E-mails are ambiguous. Team members receive different amounts of information. You don't know your teammates very well. Even silence is hard to interpret: "Did he not respond to my e-mail because he's mad at me? Or is he just busy?"

The secret to effective virtual teams often comes down to communication. In a *Communication World* article, Gail Hulnick declares, "If technology is the foundation of the virtual business relationship, communication is the cement."

Tips to Building a Thriving Virtual Team
Meet in Person: Assemble your group early in the team's lifespan—but not too early. A face-to-face meeting when team members are total strangers might trigger judgments based on superficial characteristics. Instead, give the team a few virtual interactions before your face-to-face meeting. That way, they'll have some background and context and you'll be able to get the work done much more easily. Try to meet face-to-face at least once per year, or as often as economically feasible.
Aggressively Share Information: Create a spot where team members can store and share information. By putting this information in the same place, you'll limit the confusion that may arise when team members don't have access to the same information.
Minimize Uncertainty: Communicate often and predictably. Rapidly provide feedback to team members and avoid silence at all costs. And make sure you have a set of clear goals that the team must accomplish, guiding principles for how you'll work together, and even communication guidelines for how you'll interface with each other.
Build a Virtual Water Cooler: Part of the way co-located teams collaborate is through informal interactions (the lunchroom, the hall, etc.). With a little creativity, virtual teams can create a similar forum. Make time for small talk at the beginning of meetings so the team can informally catch up. Or try "Virtual Coffee" where team members can spend 15 minutes on the phone just chatting and catching up.