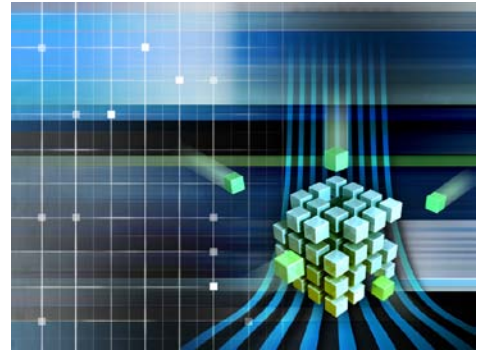# Inclusion in Virtual Teams

I have worked as a member of traditional and virtual teams for many years and based on my experiences, while there are some unique challenges facing each type of team, there are plenty issues that are the same. Both types of teams require significant trust to function as a high performing entity. When unable to regularly, visually and personally interact with another human on a regular basis, some team members may feel left out, irrelevant or worse . . . unengaged and uncommitted. Conservative estimates suggest uncommitted employees are costing organizations more than $350 billion dollars annually. This is not insignificant. As I considered how to help virtual teams work at a more concentrated level of effectiveness, I wondered how the Fruits of Inclusion™ might serve to strengthen virtual team members as they work to develop high performing work behaviors. Inclusiveness is important for both the traditional and virtual team to be healthy and high performing.

Inclusion is a state of being that enables diverse individuals and groups to function together in ways where differences are respected, gifts are valued and everyone is welcomed regardless of their diversity. We are all diverse but we do not all practice inclusion. When the conditions of inclusion are effectively practiced, inclusion may offer the added advantage of increased participation in decision-making, access to information, greater empowerment of employees to solve organizational problems and collaborative teamwork. Those influenced by an inclusive work environment will actively seek to remove barriers that prevent full access to employee's skills and abilities. Inclusion seeks to embrace and not merely tolerate differences.

The most significant barrier to growing high performing virtual teams is an inability to build trust across location boundaries. I currently teach at 4 universities, two which are entirely online. I like teaching online because the "veil of distance" stops me from critiquing learner's based on what I see or think I see as could happen in more traditional classes. My eyes (just like yours) may not always be giving me an accurate accounting or the "whole truth". My "lying eyes" (natural limitations) could influence me to unfairly judge what I think I know and what I believe I see when I see the learner every week. In the virtual classroom, my only barometer to a learner's ability is the work they submit. A similar yet opposite phenomenon happens in virtual teams. When we DON'T see someone, we often mistakenly fill in the blanks without enough information and end up drawing erroneous conclusions. So how are we to overcome this limiting defect and find success in the virtual team with others we may have never met or seldom get to see?

I highly recommend doing the following as a way to increase effectiveness in the virtual team: **Focus on building and maintaining a high level of trust!** That's it . . . this is my first and last step. In between, I suggest a focus on everything else. So how might you encourage this to happen? Here are my top 3 ways . . . there are others but let's start here.

Develop an effective communication plan

Confucius is credited with this thought: "*If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant. If what is said is not what is meant, then what ought to be done remains undone*." A well-designed communication plan based on understanding differing communication styles, skill-levels and roles and responsibilities, leaves everyone clear about expectations in work behaviors, outcomes and how team members will relate and respond to each other.

Always be fair

Because virtual team members do not generally have the luxury of going into the next cube or getting together for a cup of coffee to clear up a misunderstanding or get clarity from confusing messages, it is critical members make an even greater effort to ALWAYS be open, honest and avoid the appearance of unfairness. Once team members perceive favoritism, unfairness in how rewards, recognition, sanctions or punishment are meted out, trust is broken and it will be difficult to undo the damage. Be consistent in applying the values of equity (not equality) to ensure team members are treated and responded to fairly. In dealing with each other, be thoughtful and even-handed. Before you say something about another team member or make a hasty decision about another member's actions or decisions, ask yourself 3 questions:

- What information don't I have?
- What else could be true?
- What don't I know?

Asking these 3 questions should help deter a rush to judgment about another individual's motives and intentions. I would also encourage you to ask yourself if you want what you are about to say about a team member published so the world knows you said it. If not, then you may want to reconsider whether what you are about to say or do will help the team built trust . . . or tear trust down?

Deal with conflict

This is a tough one but if you want to create a work environment in the virtual world that is based on principles of trust, you cannot sweep conflict under the rug or wish it away. If you are a manager or leader, you must hold yourself and your team members accountable for dealing effectively and appropriately with conflict. Successfully dealing with discord is imperative if you want to guide your

group into higher performing team conduct. Conflict is often complex with multiple layers and plenty of *moving parts*. In these days of complex change, dealing with conflict means learning to be comfortable with discomfort and ALWAYS being prepared for change.

So . . . . what is the bottom line here? What are some ways to create a culture of inclusiveness that leads to a high level of trust in the virtual team? Engage in behaviors and activities that build trust.

- If possible, meet early on to establish common experiences
- Don't expect perfection . . . instead be more flexible and believe in possibilities
- Be truthful and honest in conversations, attitudes, and behaviors
- Be helpful and unselfish . . . commit to helping others succeed
- Share information, experiences and knowledge
- Ask versus tell (avoid accusing)
- Engage in positive social interactions with other team members including virtual activities ☺
- Forgive past grievances by letting go
- Separate intent from impact
- Realize that tone, timeliness and accountability matters!

In summary, making inclusion work in the virtual team is possible. Every virtual team may experience inclusion. Team members should be clear in how they communicate with each other, demonstrating they are engaged, listening and willing to help each other succeed. During team teleconferences, virtual teams could discuss ways the team may be more inclusive. Leaders should then hold everyone accountable for making it happen. For more information on programs designed to help teams be more inclusive, please click here.

About the author:

For more than 25 years, Dr. Linda Burrs has brought her rich dynamic approach to the corporate and professional training arena. The breadth of her experience crosses all walks of social and organizational life and includes law firms, technology organizations, educators, business professionals, public safety, leadership groups and non-profit groups.

Dr. Burrs designs and delivers targeted and successful coaching interventions and programs designed to **measurably improve personal, leadership and organizational performance**. Her experience, enthusiasm, and high energy provide the foundation for your memorable, life-changing, inspirational experience. When you attend a Step Up To Success! Program, you walk away with improved communication skills, better self-management skills, enhanced interpersonal skills and a clearer understanding of your individual strengths and how they contribute to your success both organizationally, professionally, and personally. For more information on Dr. Burrs and The Fruits of Inclusion, please click here.