Virtual Teamwork

As soon as you have chosen team members and assigned them to your team, you need to start building teamwork. Teamwork is what transforms a group of individuals working independently to achieve their own goals into a team working collaboratively to achieve the team's goals. As we have mentioned before, you, the manager, are the glue that holds the team together. You are the common link between the individual members of the team. You are the nucleus around which the team revolves. You must drive the effort to build strong and collaborative teamwork.

A strong team with a high level of teamwork is:

- ‣ Happy
- ‣ Energized
- ‣ Innovative
- ‣ Creative
- ‣ Collaborative
- ‣ Honest
- ‣ Effective
- ‣ Productive
- ‣ Supportive
- ‣ Successful

These team qualities create teamwork, and teamwork creates these qualities. If you are part of an awesome team, it doesn't matter how big or hairy the problems are. The process of getting where you need to go will be inspiring!

Discovering Commonalities

Some people are excellent party-givers. You turn up at their house, and everything flows easily: conversation, beverages, friendship, fun, activities. It seems as though everything just magically falls into place and happens at the right time to make the party perfect. Well, perfect parties are no accident! The hosts spend considerable time planning, preparing, and managing the party to make it a success. The thing that makes is so successful is that the hard work is transparent. It seems as though the hosts are just wandering around, chitchatting with everyone and having a nice time.

The most important part of the hosts' interaction with their guests is to introduce the guests to one another in a way that influences them to want to converse beyond the customary, "Hello, I am pleased to meet you." If the guests at a party feel connected to everyone else, rather than feeling part of a small clique or on their own, then the hosts have done a fine job of building rapport. This is accomplished by using introductions to help the guests identify commonalities that exist between them.

For example, if you introduce two couples to each other, you might say something like, "Steve and Julie, I would like you to meet John and Angie, old friends of ours who have just moved back to the area. Their daughter has just started middle school and she plays the piano." To John and Angie, you might say, "Steve and Julie have a daughter the same age as Emily, and she is also very musical. Julie and I work together at the bank." You have given them a few key words and comments that should be helpful in getting the conversation going. This kind of communication is inclusive.

Suppose, on the other hand, you just introduce the couples by saying, "Steve and Julie, meet John and Angie. Oh, excuse me—I have just seen my best friend arrive. I must go and chat with her. Help yourself to food and drinks." This is not conducive to building rapport or finding commonalities. It is almost guaranteed to lead to a polite "nice to meet you" before they go in search of their respective friends.

The same principles used in throwing a great party can be used to help your team members get to know one another and to build rapport. It can take a little time, as initially, you probably don't know much about your team members, either. With virtual teams, you need to be creative in finding ways to help people identify commonalities. You must find commonalities with each team member, and then help them share information with each other so that a commonality links each of them to someone else. It is unlikely that you will all initially share the same commonality. Over time, however, you will create some. For example, you will share experiences, projects, business trips, and meetings. Hopefully, at least one shared experience will be memorable!

> With virtual teams, you need to be creative in finding ways to help people identify commonalities.

A great icebreaker for a virtual team meeting is to ask everyone on the team to share one piece of information about themselves that other meeting participants will not already know. Just this one piece of information about each person can result in a lot of common links and can spark some offline conversations among team members. Once the network of commonalities has started, it will grow and weave itself together until it becomes a strong web of connections. When you have a web, you will know you have created a team, and not just a group of individuals who work for the same manager!

Creating Trust

You cannot demand trust from your team members, nor can they demand it from you. Trust and respect have to be earned, and they must be earned honestly! The virtual team needs to have trust and confidence in itself and its manager. Creating and maintaining trust creates a positive working environment for everyone on the team.

To create an environment where trust can thrive, you must ensure that every member of the team feels valued and appreciated. Each team member should feel comfortable speaking openly and honestly about issues, both with you and with other team members. Each team member should feel that he or she is entitled to have an opinion and that the opinion will be listened to and taken into consideration. This does not mean that you have to agree with every opinion; it means

that each team member has a voice and has equal rights to be heard and to contribute to discussions.

Speaking openly and expressing opinions does not mean that team members have carte blanche to say whatever they please to whomever they please. The manager must ensure that communication among team members is respectful at all times. Rules need to be in place about what is acceptable and what is not acceptable behavior and communication. If a team member has a very strong opposition to something that has been said or done, he or she is entitled to express an opinion. He or she is not entitled to make personal attacks or personal comments about anyone else.

You need to be especially wary of this kind of reaction from team members with the Expressive interaction style (discussed in chapter 3). It is much harder to repair rifts virtually than it is in person. So much is impersonal when communicating virtually that it is easy to create a monster out of someone in your mind, just because of one comment. In face-to-face interaction, there is more natural camaraderie, and so people tend to be much more forgiving. Being able to see each other's stress makes it easier to make allowances for someone's abruptness or rudeness. This is not as true on the phone. Grudges are easily started, and they can be borne for years.

Team members need to trust that you will follow through on what you say you will do. If you are unreliable or unsupportive, your team members will not feel comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions with you. You should be honest about your own thoughts and feelings. If you do not agree with someone, you should tell the person (politely) that you do not agree. If you tell one person one thing and another something different, how will anybody know what is true? You must be consistent in your messaging, and not keep changing your mind or telling people different things. It makes you appear unreliable and untrustworthy. It is also important that you hold team members responsible for their commitments and their actions. If a team member commits to doing something, hold him or her to that commitment.

One of the worst violations of trust for a manager is to ask a team member to take some action the team member is not happy about, and then refuse to back the person up when he or she takes that action. It is inexcusable. Regardless of whether your team is virtual, local, or a bit of both, you must take responsibility for the things you ask team members to do.

Understanding the Dynamics of the Team

The dynamics of the team are created by the unique combination of personalities, interaction styles, learning styles, communication styles, and personal and business cultural backgrounds of the team members. The most influential contributor to the team dynamic is the team manager.

The team manager molds, shapes, directs, and guides the team. As the team members build trust and rapport with each other and start to share experiences and opinions, the personality of the team will emerge. The personality of the team determines its internal dynamics. If one team member leaves or a new team member joins, the team dynamics will change.

> The most influential contributor to the team dynamic is the team manager.

The dynamics are affected by attitudes. If the team is positive and enthusiastic, the dynamics will reflect this. If the team is negative and inflexible, this will be obvious in the way the team members interact with one another and with others outside of the team. You, the manager, are the person who creates the team attitude. It doesn't just happen accidentally. Outside forces can create problems such as unease and uncertainty that will affect the attitude of team members, but a strong virtual manager will protect the team members from as much of this outside influence as possible. The manager is the umbrella that protects the team from all the things coming down from above. If the umbrella is doing its job, the team will hardly be aware that it has been raining for the past week!

If the team is a permanent one whose members have been working together for a long time, the dynamics might be quite complex. For temporary teams whose members have been together for a short time, the dynamics will be more simple.

Creating the Virtual Community

As a team spends more time working and interacting together, the emergence of a virtual community is a natural progression. Most people are part of one or more virtual communities, even if they are not working in a virtual environment. Virtual communities are created from the use of email, instant messaging, phone calls, Websites, and any other types of communication or information sharing

that are not face-to-face. Leaving notes for other family members at home is virtual communication, as is sending jokes via email to your parents or siblings.

A successful virtual team community needs to be able to function and thrive without the continual input and supervision of its manager. This does not mean that the team does not need a manager—it certainly does. It means that the team members can interact, make decisions, and deal with problems together, so that not all of the communication needs the involvement of the manager. The virtual community might well include employees who are not assigned to the same team, but who have some common interest in some aspects of the team or a specific project.

Ideally, the virtual team members will have a place where they can interact with other members of the community. Virtual rooms, online bulletin boards, instant messaging, and phone conferencing are all great tools for facilitating community interaction.

A sense of community comes from a sense of belonging. The team belongs together because it is a team, but what makes its members a community is the way they feel about each other—the sense of duty and responsibility they have toward each other. For example, if one team member is involved in an accident, the other team members will be truly concerned about his or her welfare. If the only concern is about who will do that person's work and how the team will meet its deadline next week, there is no community.

It is impossible to create a sense of belonging without being inclusive. It is really horrible to be involved in any kind of work or activity and feel like you are not welcome. Being inclusive means not leaving people out of the activity, the fun, or the joke. If you have ever been around a group of people who started to speak to one another in a language that you do not understand, you will know how it feels to be excluded. If there is only one person who does not understand the conversation, that person will feel very isolated and uncomfortable. The worst thing is when everyone starts laughing, and the single person being excluded from the conversation doesn't know what is funny. That person is probably trying to figure out how to make an escape as fast as possible! This same feeling of isolation and embarrassment is present in any situation where someone feels excluded.

> A successful virtual team community needs to be able to function and thrive without the continual input and supervision of its manager.

If some members of the team have worked together in the past and spend all their time talking about the "old days" and ignoring the newer members of the team, those newer members are going to start to feel left out. If the manager also behaves in an exclusive way, the problem will be exacerbated. You can talk about situations and experiences that others were not involved in, and still be inclusive. If the situation is told as a story, it can be enjoyed by everyone. If it is a funny story, everyone can have a laugh about it, rather than just the people who were there at the time.

One team member who feels isolated from the rest can change the dynamics on the team considerably. Someone who feels left out will gravitate toward others who feel the same way. By doing this, the excluded team members find somewhere to belong. They find friendship and camaraderie with the other "outsiders." Unfortunately, these actions are driven by envy, frustration, and revenge. Before you know it, you have two or more factions on your team plotting against each other. That's not exactly a positive foundation on which to build a highly productive and supportive team!

It is not difficult to feel isolated when working virtually. If you spend a lot of time alone, you will inevitably feel lonely from time to time. Perhaps you will even feel a little envious of those team members who get to travel and interact with each other more than you do. Allowing and even encouraging team members to interact with each other about non-work related things will enhance the sense of community on your team. Shared activities, such as online video games or puzzles, are a great way of bringing the team together without them having to be together. You could run team competitions and bring the team together on a virtual team day to discuss the entries and maybe vote on the winners. Introducing a fun and frivolous element into some of the team interactions will help to solidify the feeling of being part of a virtual community.

Team Member Interaction

The team members will interact in different ways and for different reasons. The most important thing about team interaction is making sure there is some! Actually, make sure there is a lot.

When working virtually, it is so easy to forget you are part of a team. You get into your groove with the work you need to accomplish and, by applying focus and discipline, you can complete the work on time and maybe even a little

ahead of schedule. Each team meeting or phone call is a distraction from getting your tasks completed. After a while, it is easy to just stop calling in for meetings and to not answer the phone if you can help it. As time goes by, people invite you to participate in fewer and fewer meetings, and you become almost a non-entity on the team.

If one of your team members has been behaving in this way, what has he accomplished? Perhaps he would say he gets more work done. He might think he is more productive because his work is always completed on time. Is this really true? If he is not participating in the team, then he is not completing all his assigned work. If he has no idea what is going on in his virtual community, how does he know his contributions are valuable? Is he working on the highest priority tasks, or the things that were the highest priority six months ago, when he last called in a for a meeting? If the team can function with hardly any input from this team member, why do you need him? If you hired this person for his knowledge, skills, and experience, what good are those things if the team is not getting any input from him? It is disrespectful to his team mates and to you to refuse to answer phone calls or to attend meetings. Maybe he is "too important" to attend. Is he, then, too important for the job?

If you have a team member who is beginning to skip meetings and not answer the phone, you need to deal with the situation quickly, before he or she becomes isolated from the team. Make sure there is a process for team members to communicate that they are unable to attend a meeting, and that the process includes communicating the reason for non-attendance. It is simple courtesy to let the meeting organizer know if you are unable to attend. If you notice a team member skipping meetings frequently with no apparent reason, speak to that person. Explain that his or her primary role is to be a team member and to play a participative role on the team. If he or she is finding it hard to complete assigned tasks on time due to meetings, phone calls, or other interruptions, work with the team member on prioritizing tasks to use time most efficiently.

> Being a virtual employee means you are working together, apart; it does not mean you are working alone.

If a team member is working on a critical task and needs to be excused from attending meetings for a week or two, that should be your decision as the manager of the team. The non-participation should not be allowed to continue

indefinitely. Make sure your team members understand how important the team-member interaction is to the success of the team. Make sure it is part of the job description and that your expectations are clear.

Let all team members know that being part of the team is part of the job. Working virtually is not the same as setting up a sole proprietorship and working for yourself. Being a virtual employee means you are working together, apart; it does not mean you are working alone.

Virtual Communication

Virtual team members communicate via phone, phone conference, email, Internet, virtual workspaces, online chat, and instant messaging. The method of communication is less important than its regularity. One team member might prefer to communicate by phone, but that does not mean nobody should contact that person unless they have time to call. An email or instant message is better than no communication at all. Team members should be encouraged to interact with each other directly, in addition to interacting at virtual team meetings. Try to add a personal note to team meetings. It is important to talk about work and to ensure that you are meeting the objectives of the meeting, but it is also very conducive to team building to allow and encourage some non-work chatter to occur before and after the meeting.

You can add some fun to the meeting by asking participants about their vacations or what they did at the weekend. Try throwing out the question, "Who had the most interesting weekend?" It is sure to get at least a few responses. Even if nobody has anything really exciting to talk about, someone is bound to say something like, "My weekend must have been the most exciting. I mowed the lawn, painted the kitchen, and went to dinner with my in-laws." If nothing else, the question will encourage some humor!

It is great to allow time for team building, but don't make it too contrived. For instance, if you schedule a half-hour meeting each week to "bond," what on earth will you all talk about? Work is the most likely thing that will come up. How about having a team lunch or happy hour instead? Get the team to all call into a conference and chat on the phone while eating or having a glass of wine. Have one rule: No talking about work! Some teams watch movies or TV shows together, virtually. By sharing a desktop, you can all view the same movie at the

same time. You can even call into an audio conference, so you can make comments to each other during the show.

One of the least effective team-building exercises we experienced was where the manager went around the room (the virtual room, that is) and asked everyone to say something positive or funny that happened that week. This is not building teamwork and rapport; it is putting people on the spot, trying to control the situation to make it turn out the way you want it to. Invariably, the comments will be about work. Nobody will feel inspired or closer to their team mates as a result of being forced to say something positive—especially if they are not feeling positive. Sometimes a good old moan is a great way to build camaraderie and discover mutual interests!

Instant messaging is another excellent tool for keeping in touch with team members. It is a great communication method for quick messages and for non-work chitchat. Don't discourage your team members from interacting about non-work topics. You don't want team members spending all day chatting and no time working, but you want to encourage some personal interaction. This spontaneous and non-scheduled communication will help you build strong and effective teamwork among your team members.

In-Person Communication

Face-to-face communication between team members whenever possible is great for team building. If the team members can be around one another, they will automatically start chatting casually about this or that.

When the team is together, it is an ideal opportunity to organize a team lunch or a happy hour. Remember the golden rule: No talking about work! If the team members are talking about nothing except work, they might be working together nicely, but they are not building rapport or finding any personal connections to each other. It also means that attending the lunch or happy hour merely means they are adding another hour or two of work to their day. If you have ever been to a team lunch or happy hour and sat bored to tears while everyone droned on and on about when this contract would be signed, or that client would be satisfied, you will know why many people try to avoid attending those kinds of events. It would be much more fun to go home and spend time with your family, and much more productive to be working on that pile of reports sitting on your desk!

Virtual Team Day

The virtual team day is a day that the team spends together virtually, or a day when the team comes together in person. In an ideal world, a virtual team day when the whole team is together in one location would happen once every two or three months. For many virtual teams, this is not possible, so you need to be creative in devising some interesting team activities that do not require all the team members to be in one location. Differences in team members' time zones also need to be taken into account. It might not be possible for the entire team to come together at the same time. In these situations, you might be able to split the team into locations and have the different locations coordinate their times. It is a great idea to have the virtual team day on the same day for all locations. This way, nobody misses out on the fun.

Team days should be fun, team-building days. You might want to organize some special events or training for these days, or you might want to make the whole day a "play day." Some activities that can be shared among team members are easily accessible, like online quizzes, online video games, online chess, and online sports such as fantasy football and fantasy soccer.

Many organizations offer team-building programs and activities that range from outdoor survival programs to Myers Briggs testing, and everything in between. Not as many companies offer virtual team building, however. Some companies offer programs to enhance virtual teamwork, but most require that all team members attend in person. This is ironic, since the goal is to teach you how to build teamwork virtually! The areas of virtual team building and training have a lot of potential, and we anticipate a lot of growth in the next few years.

> Bringing some fun into the mix will make a team-building event more memorable, whether it is held in a classroom or in the jungle.

If you *are* able to get all your team members together for a day, there are some really exciting opportunities for building teamwork and having fun at the same time. Organizations will work with your team to produce a movie, build a house, assemble bikes for children, or build dog kennels for animal shelters. There is no end of possibilities when thinking of fun ways for the team members to work collaboratively to be successful. Team building that focuses on identifying and understanding personality types or teaching communication and conflict

management are also very valuable, and these are great classes for the team members to attend as a group.

Bringing some fun into the mix will make a team-building event more memorable, whether it is held in a classroom or in the jungle. Fond memories of a fun time had by all will have a more positive effect on the team than memories of a really tough day stuck in an uncomfortable situation with coworkers trying to prove that everyone can work together toward a common goal. If your team members enjoy themselves while working toward a goal, they are going to build rapport and respect much more quickly.

Make sure that any activities are appropriate for all members of the team. If you have disabled team members, take any physical or mental limitations into account when deciding what activities are most appropriate. When planning activities that require physical fitness, strength, or a certain body type, make sure that you evaluate and compare the fitness requirements with those of your team members. For example, rock climbing might sound like a really fun way to spend a few hours to some team members, but if a team member is confined to a wheelchair, it is not a good option. Likewise, some team members might not have the level of physical fitness required to tackle an outdoor obstacle course. A virtual team-building activity or event should be something that all of the team members are able to participate in.

Sharing Best Practices

Before you define a process for sharing best practices, make sure you have a clear definition of what *best practice* means, and make sure that everyone on your team also understands it. For example, a best practice is a proven way of doing something "the best possible way," meaning that it is an efficient and effective way of organizing something or doing something. You can also think of it as a "best system" or "best process." A best practice is not necessarily widely or publicly recognized as being the best possible way to do something. A best practice is a way of doing something that you or one of your team members personally believe to be the best, as it pertains to your team processes.

Sharing best practices is a great thing to do whether a team is virtual, blended, or traditional. Many companies and teams forget to do this. They get so caught up in the day-to-day tasks and issues that taking time out to share a great way of doing something never seems to get to the top of the priority list. If you

are waiting for this type of communication to just happen naturally, you will be waiting a long time! First, you need to create an environment that is conducive to sharing best practices. Second, you need to create the opportunities to do this.

Sharing best practices for virtual teams is highly recommended. There are not many standard best practices documented for this type of team structure. It is a new way of working, and the virtual workers and managers are figuring out the best way to do a lot of things as they go along. The team members are working individually and not interacting as much as they would in a traditional environment, so the sharing of best practices is even less likely to just "happen" without motivation and some kind of forum.

> Sharing best practices is a great thing to do whether a team is virtual, blended, or traditional.

Best practices are relevant to all types of companies and teams, whether the employees are all performing the same function or their roles are completely different. Teams in which multiple team members perform the same function will likely have more opportunities to define and share best practices than teams where everyone has a different function. Often, best practices come from employees sharing information about the way they did things when they worked at another company or sharing something they read in a book. For example, a virtual employee might have some great suggestions on time management or scheduling meetings. Perhaps someone will suggest that whenever a team member schedules a meeting, he or she creates an agenda so the purpose and objectives of the meeting are clear to both the organizer and the attendees. You might define best practices around hiring and interviewing techniques that all team members agree to adopt. Alternatively, a team member might share a best practice for monitoring and maintaining home networks and computer equipment that will reduce downtime for virtual workers.

When you kick off a best-practices initiative, avoid the round-robin meeting approach to sharing best practices. Going around the room (real or virtual) and asking everyone to share a best practice is not going to result in much quality communication. It might sound ridiculous that anyone would try this approach, but some managers take the "put everyone on the spot" approach to management, and do not seem to realize how ineffective it is. This approach is more likely to hinder teamwork than enhance it!

What is even worse is when the meeting facilitator insists that everyone must contribute. You sit waiting for your turn, feeling agitated and irritated, or perhaps nervous or embarrassed. You hear suggestions from other team members that you think are ludicrous, but realize that they are only saying those things because they don't know what else to say. You then share information about the way you do something. It might not be a good way to do it. Possibly, it is the only way you know how to do it, but it doesn't really work that well. Feeling at a loss for anything really insightful or mind blowing to say, and knowing that you are being judged based on your contribution to the meeting, you make your best practice sound really fantastic, and urge everyone else to adopt this method immediately. Your manager will think you are awesome only because you shared your idea with enthusiasm and energy, not because you contributed anything of any real value.

We have discussed some ideas on what not to do. Let's discuss some ideas that should yield positive and useful results. When designing or implementing a new or improved process, it is very important to define the scope of that process. If the scope is very broad, break it down into sub-processes so that each one is a manageable size.

> A good way to start the process of creating and sharing best practices is to hold a team brainstorming meeting.

A good way to start the process of creating and sharing best practices is to hold a team brainstorming meeting. In addition to an audio conference, a virtual meeting tool should be used for this meeting. This enables the meeting facilitator to share his or her desktop and/or whiteboard space with the meeting attendees. The brainstorming process is an interactive one, so make it as interactive as you can using whatever tools you have available.

The Brainstorming Process

The following is an example brainstorming process that can be used for best practices and process-improvement brainstorming.

If some or all of the participants will be participating remotely, set up an online meeting where you can share your desktop and a whiteboard. This way, the team members can work collaboratively, and everyone can see what is happening with the ideas being captured.

Define the Purpose of the Meeting

The purpose of the meeting is to do the following:

- ▸ Identify best practices currently in use.
- ▸ Identify areas where best practices are needed.
- ▸ Prioritize areas for improvement.
- ▸ Define a process for sharing best practices going forward.

Set Rules

The reason for having rules is to ensure that the meeting stays on track and does not deteriorate into a general complaints session. The objective is to identify areas for improvement, not to complain about all the things (or people) that are wrong with the current process. Here are some basic rules:

- ▸ You can say anything about anything, as long as it is relevant to the meeting.
- ▸ You cannot name people or blame people for problems.
- ▸ You cannot defend yourself or others.
- ▸ Everyone's opinions are valid.
- ▸ Do not interrupt when someone is speaking.
- ▸ Nothing discussed in the meeting should be discussed outside of it.

Define Categories or Areas

Team members collectively create a list of broad categories that can be used to define best practices and areas for improvement. This does not have to be a full list—categories can be added later, as necessary. For example, a category list might include the following:

- ▸ Time management
- ▸ Client liaison
- ▸ Contract negotiation
- ▸ Scheduling
- ▸ Communication
- ▸ Escalation procedures
- ▸ Change control
- ▸ Meetings

The best way to capture these ideas is to create a brainstorming spread-sheet, as shown in Figure 7.1. (A blank copy of the spreadsheet is included in appendix B.)

To save time during the meeting, you might want to define the categories be-forehand. That way, you can have your spreadsheet ready to go as soon as you get started. You should share the spreadsheet on your desktop during the meeting.

#	Category	Best Practice Description	Description of Problem	Recommended Action	# Votes	Priority	Approved
1	Meetings	Prepare agendas in advance of meetings and send out minutes afterwards	Noone knows the purpose of the meetings without an agenda. If you miss a meeting you don't know what was decided in the meeting unless there are meeting minutes.	1-Continue using			
2							
3							
4							
5							
6							
7							

Figure 7.1: Brainstorming spreadsheet

Capture Existing Best Practices

You and your team members should discuss processes or best practices currently in use across the organization, within the team, or by individual team members. All team members' comments should be captured by the manager. Define each best practice as one of the following:

- Recommend that the best practice is continued.
- Recommend that the best practice is adopted by everyone on the team.
- Recommend that the best practice is updated/improved to make it more applicable.
- Recommend that the best practice be discontinued, as it is no longer a best practice.

Enter the best practices into the spreadsheet, as shown in Figure 7.1. Use the "Recommended action" column of the spreadsheet to define these four options as:

> 1–Continue using
> 2–Adopt more widely
> 3–Update/Improve
> 4–Discontinue Using

Capture Specific Issues or Areas Where Best Practices Are Needed

Team members discuss areas where best practices or new processes are needed. Once again, capture the ideas and comments from all participants and define these as:

- Area where a best practice or process is needed

Enter the best practices into the spreadsheet, as shown in Figure 7.1. Use the "Recommended action" column of the spreadsheet to define this option as:

5–Needs New BP

Sort and Review by Category

When you have completed your list of best practices, sort it by category, and then sort it by action. The items marked as 1s ("continue using") and 4s ("discontinue using") should be very straightforward; you can decide immediately if you wish to approve them.

Depending on how many categories you have and how many items are assigned to each, you can decide to do one of two things now:

1. Assign a category to each team member to summarize the issues, so the team can vote for which categories are the highest priority.

2. Ask the team members to vote on individual items to create a prioritized list.

Present Summaries

Each summary should be presented verbally to the group by the team member who wrote it. The summary should not contain any opinions, comments, or defensive or supportive statements by the presenter. It must present only the facts.

Select Highest Priority Categories or Issues

If there are only two or three problem areas, prioritization of categories or individual issues might not be necessary. It is more likely, however, that there will be numerous opportunities for proposed changes and improvements, and a limited amount of time to implement them, so you will want to choose a subset of the list to focus on immediately. Never try to implement too many improvements or make too many changes in one go. It is too difficult for the team members to remember all the things they need to do differently, which can lead to them slipping back into the old familiar ways very quickly.

The prioritization should be a collaborative effort by the team. An effective way of prioritizing is to give all team members a certain number of votes, and allow them to distribute those votes in any way they please among the categories or individual items (whichever method you chose). For example, if each team member is given 20 votes, he or she might decide to use one vote for 20 things, 20 votes for one thing, or something in between. You can make the voting open or confidential. The best way is to ask each team member to email or IM you with the number of votes for each category or item number.

Tally the votes, add them to the spreadsheet, and prioritize your list. Your spreadsheet should now look something like Figure 7.2.

#	Category	Best Practice Description	Description of Problem	Recommended action	# Votes	Priority	Approved
1	Meetings	Prepare agendas in advance of meetings and send out minutes afterwards.	Noone knows the purpose of the meetings without an agenda. If you miss a meeting you don't know what was decided in the meeting unless there are meeting minutes.	1-Continue using	20	2	Yes
2	Scheduling	Build contingency time into scheduling to allow time for team members to deal with client support issues.	Client support issues take time away from working on scheduled tasks. This is causing problems that results in team members missing deadlines.	5-Needs New BP	10	6	
3	Change control	All changes that will impact scheduled deliverables go through a change control process.	Too many undocumented and unapproved changes occur that impact ability to meet scheduled delivery dates.	3-Update/Improve	15	4	
4	Contract negotiation	Business managers are included in all contract negotiation meetings.	Business managers attend contract meetings to ensure that the legal team understands the implications of contract requirements on costs and timelines. Contracts are now standardized and legal team is very experienced. No longer necessary.	4-Discontinue Using	20	3	Yes
5	Meetings	Everyone turns up on time for meetings. If late, do not announce yourself. Do not ask for anything to be repeated. Read minutes!	Too many people calling in late for meetings. Delays start of meeting and requires repeating parts of the meeting.	2-Adopt more widely	15	5	
6	Communication	Stay logged into Instant messaging whenever at desk. Change status to "away" if not available.	Never sure where anyone is or if they are available to talk.	2-Adopt more widely	25	1	
7							

Figure 7.2: Prioritized list

Discuss the Top Priorities

Choose somewhere between three and 10 priorities to focus on for the next quarter or two. Discuss the top priorities and how and when they will be implemented. You might not be able to take responsibility for all of them yourself, and you probably shouldn't. This is supposed to be a team effort, so try to assign some of the responsibility to other team members. Document action items, agree on timelines and deliverables, and define the process for reporting status on action items and measuring the success of the best practices and process improvements.

Define the Best Practice Process, Going Forward

Discuss the process for creating, sharing, prioritizing, and reporting on best practices going forward. For example, perhaps you should hold a monthly or bimonthly meeting to discuss how the new best practices are going and to discuss any new ones that team members discover.

Communication is the key to good teamwork and to the sharing of best practices. If your team members are sharing ideas and helping each other be more successful on a daily basis, you will have a functional and successful team!

Making It Fun!

How does the virtual manager create an environment that is creative, productive, respectful, and fun? As a good start, try not to take things too seriously! Allowing and encouraging some frivolity and humor in day-to-day life on the team is a great way to make things more fun. Encourage team members to share amusing stories about things that have happened to them, either at work or in their personal lives. Better yet, share amusing stories of your own with your team. Be transparent to your team members by telling a funny story where you are the object of the joke. This is a great way to get the team loosened up a bit. If your team members know that you can take a joke, they will feel more comfortable using humor as a way to express themselves or to lighten the mood in times of stress! Discussing current work problems in a less serious manner and adding a little wry humor or sarcasm can go a long way in helping to ease tension and stress about a situation.

Bouncing off the walls with happiness, and making people feel they must always be positive and enthusiastic when all about them everything is falling apart is not the best way to rally the troops or bring fun into the process. In fact, it can just make people feel under more pressure. If the happiness is too forced or the positive attitude is too phony, it is not going to fly with your team. You will end up with a group of people who are good at smiling through gritted teeth while feeling totally downhearted and demotivated. This kind of environment builds mistrust, as nobody is being truthful about what they think or how they feel. If someone feels really angry or upset by a situation or decision, he or she should feel comfortable sharing that with fellow team members.

Be careful about the use of sarcasm. It can sometimes be misconstrued. It is vitally important that humor or sarcasm is not disrespectful in any way. Jokes

about a person's appearance, weight, height, religion, race, sexual orientation, or gender are not appropriate in the workplace. Keep humor clean and respectful.

Playing jokes on team mates can be very amusing. One example that springs to mind is when 10 people called in for a virtual conference call. When connecting to the conference, each caller was asked to state his or her name so it could be announced. On this particular day, everyone announced themselves using the manager's name. It was rather confusing for the manager to hear the participants all logging in using her name. It took her a while to figure out who they really were. Simple jokes like this are great for adding some levity into daily work life. They also promote teamwork, as the team members have to coordinate to pull it off. Teamwork is teamwork, whether it is being used to play a joke on the boss or to solve a serious client issue. The virtual environment can be very impersonal, so anything that gets the team working together and having fun should be encouraged.

> Teamwork is teamwork, whether it is being used to play a joke on the boss or to solve a serious client issue.

If you are in the midst of a serious business problem, maybe even what you would define as a "disaster," it is important not to lose your sense of humor or perspective. Serious problems are generally not fun things to deal with. Allowing some fun and humor to coexist with the tension and seriousness of a stressful situation will not make the problems go away any faster, but it might make it a bit more pleasant getting there! Take any reasonable opportunity that you see to make working on your team more fun. Ask the team members what they consider to be fun. Sharing funny stories, sharing jokes, or just allowing people to be themselves can all be fun.

Celebrations and Rewards

There are so many ways to celebrate success in the traditional work environment. It is harder to celebrate together, apart. However, it is not impossible.

Local teams can celebrate meeting financial goals or completing a project on time by participating in activities together. Competing in sports events like golf, or attending spectator sports like football or soccer matches are wonderful ways to celebrate success. Going out to dinner or organizing a catered party for the team are also nice rewards for team members. The virtual team, however, cannot

attend events together, so the manager needs to use other reward methods to celebrate success.

If you have created growth and development plans with all team members, you will know what motivates each person and what types of rewards each likes to get. If you have taken the time to get to know a little more about individual team members, you should have some idea of the hobbies and interests of each person. Use this information to choose appropriate rewards and gifts for celebrating success. For example, if there are team members who like to travel, travel certificates or air miles could be appropriate rewards. For team members who like sporting events, tickets for games would be appreciated. For team members who like to be pampered, spa certificates are a good choice. Restaurant vouchers are also a good idea. If there are team members located close to each other, they might choose to do some activities together. Gift certificates for stores are also good for rewards and incentives. Make sure that the person lives within a reasonable distance of a branch of the store before purchasing a certificate, however. It is no fun having to drive 60 miles to redeem a gift certificate.

Gifts of team merchandise can be good, too. Consider hats, coffee mugs, or t-shirts with the company or team logo on them. Team gifts are also good for establishing some team connections. If your team has its own logo, create merchandise using it. It is much more personal than using a generic company logo. It can be a fun project to create your own team logo, if the scope of the project warrants it. The team members can work together to design a logo, or each team member can submit ideas, and the team can vote for the best one. The creation of the logo can be a fun team-building exercise in itself!

If the budget is available, it is highly desirable to get the whole team together for at least one celebration per project or review cycle. If the team members are going to be in the same location at some point, use that opportunity to plan a team event. For example, all the team members might be attending a kick-off meeting for a project, or they might be attending the same seminar or conference. Take the opportunities as they present themselves. A virtual team might not be able to be brought together at the times you specifically want to celebrate, so celebrate when you can, and enjoy being together!

When you have something to celebrate, you can do it without a lot of pomp and circumstance. You can celebrate in your team meetings by having fun and congratulating one another. You can tell funny stories about how you almost

never made it to a successful conclusion. Just being together and getting good news can feel like a great accomplishment. It is always more fun sharing success with others than enjoying it alone.

Remember that you can also reward team members in more simple ways, like sending them an email to say congratulations or thank you for a job well done. You can phone team members or send relatively low-cost gifts like flowers, plants, or brownies as a thank you or just as an incentive not to give up on a difficult problem. A few words of encouragement can go a long way toward making it all seem worthwhile!