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Take Responsibility for the Success of Your Virtual Team – Practical Tips

Be accountable for your own participation. In a virtual setting, body language is typically limited or unavailable. Interactions, therefore, must be intentional; if you don't engage your facilitator, then your facilitator will not engage you.

Tips:

- ☐ Participate in building the agenda. If you have input, share it.
- ☐ Complete pre-reading prior to the session. Come to the meeting prepared to interact.
- ☐ Plan to participate - put aside your devices, email and any distractions.
- ☐ Share openly what you're thinking and feeling (e.g. I'm not comfortable with that direction).
- ☐ If you feel your attention drifting, speak up or text/chat to become more involved. Answer questions, offer ideas, share your laughter, communicate expectations, and ask for clarification.

Never assume that people communicate in the same way you do. Misunderstandings lead to mistrust, so take the time to communicate clearly and effectively.

Tips:

- ☐ Collaborate with your colleagues to create guidelines around what, where, when, why and how to communicate shared information and use certain information tools (e.g. email, text, instant messaging, etc.).
- ☐ Identify and share expectations around responsiveness.
- ☐ Define communication priority types and what is appropriate for each (e.g., delineate the difference between important and urgent and agree on the best way to communicate each).
- ☐ Be consistent in how you communicate, so your colleagues know what to expect.
- ☐ Make your communications consumable. Employ clarity and brevity, avoid ambiguity, consider your format, and take the time to proofread.
- ☐ Acknowledge the receipt of communications and let the sender know when you can respond.
- ☐ If you want action or a response, say so clearly and provide a timeline.
- ☐ Ask colleagues about their communication preferences, and try to accommodate these preferences, when possible.

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Make it easy to share and receive information. Ensure everyone has easy access to the information they need and want. Seek out information you want but don't have.

Tips:

☐ Identify information that needs to be shared. Ask colleagues what information they want but aren't getting. Consider aspects such as project information, team profiles, business information (team, department, and organization), development opportunities, and political and cultural factors.

☐ Share information in a consistent way and on a consistent timeframe so colleagues can depend on it. This builds trust, improves decision-making and increases productivity.

☐ Identify version control guidelines and processes. If you're using a collaborative editing tool, articulate expectations around who should do what and how it should be done.

☐ Agree on central locations where all information can be uploaded, accessed and reviewed. Don't insist on reverting to "old methods" of sharing just because it's easier for you.

Be clear when you're working and when you're off-limits. People who need you may assume you're *not* working when you are, or that you *are* available when you aren't. Either way, problems can ensue.

Tips:

☐ Share your typical work hours with your colleagues. Keep your online calendar updated, and block out "productive work time" when you don't want to be interrupted. Ask your colleagues to do the same.

☐ Let your team know if you have important commitments that affect your schedule, like medical appointments, family time, vacation, or conferences.

☐ Provide a current status indicator (e.g. instant messaging status) to share when you're available. Ensure your colleagues understand what the different status options mean to you. If possible, note on your current status indicator what you are working on that day, this can help others decide whether to ping you with an instant message or send you an email instead.

☐ Share what your typical turnaround time is for common communication sources, like email.

Make progress and challenges visible to all. Don't make people guess what you're doing. Don't make people guess what you want.

Tips:

☐ Establish a consistent, simple progress reporting process for all project team members. (e.g., what you've completed, what you're working on, what challenges you're facing, and where you need help.)

☐ Establish protocols to make it easy for everyone to ask for and offer help.

☐ Use social networking tools to create an ongoing conversation with your colleagues for each project you are working on.

☐ Let colleagues know when you are available for immediate consultation, especially if you know someone is struggling.

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Cultivate cultural literacy. Awareness and respect for cultural differences goes a long way in building trust and strengthening collaboration.

Tips:

☐ Take the time to frame a conversation from the listener's perspective.

☐ Ask your colleagues what's important to them, and never assume you know the answer. (e.g., religious perspectives, caregiver requirements, meals and time with family, uninterrupted vacation).

☐ Respect your colleagues' work schedules and time zones. Be aware that different cultures handle the sharing of information, decision-making, disagreement, conflict, giving and getting feedback, and a host of other factors differently. Be aware of the differences so you can decide the extent to which you will modify your approach accordingly.

☐ Try to avoid acronyms and turns of phrase that may be popular in your culture but have little, different, or no meaning elsewhere.

Set clear boundaries. Be realistic about what you can take on, and know where you have autonomy.

Tips:

☐ If you agree to take something on, envision what you need to get it done before making a firm commitment. Better to decline than to set unrealistic expectations that you can't possibly fulfill.

☐ If you can't refuse, be clear about what you need to be successful (e.g., more time, narrower scope, additional resources, or delegation of other work).

☐ Clarify where you have autonomy. (e.g., At what point(s) is formal approval required? When can you act on an idea without vetting it with others? What aspects of your work can you do independently and when is collaboration required?

It's easy to let the blame and responsibility sit on someone else's shoulders, but in a virtual situation, if you want to be successful, you need to step up and take accountability for your own success and the success of your team. Start building new habits by employing the tactics above, a few at a time, in your virtual interactions and the next time you have the urge to complain about how someone else is handling a situation take a step back and consider what you can do to help make positive changes that will benefit everyone.

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