Cultivating a culture of trust across virtual teams

1 **Recognize and minimize power differentials – perceived and real.** Be sensitive to the perceptions of remote workers that you may be playing favorites with those closest to you. Ask people on your team for an honest assessment about the extent to which they believe you treat all team members equitably. Even when you believe you are being scrupulously fair to everyone, people working remotely are more likely to assume that those closest to you have a favored status.

2 **Define trust.** As a team, discuss openly how members would know if trust has broken down. What are the signs? Ask what behaviors or actions from you or fellow team members would help cultivate trust. (For example, admitting vulnerability, being willing to call out when a team member has violated an operating norm, offering to pitch in to help people get their work done.) Reach agreement about which behaviors are most important to uphold, and how best to ensure that all team members abide by the same norms, including the team leader. (*See Navigating Cultural Differences and Best Practices Norms sections.*)

3 **Hold each other accountable.** To build trust, all team members need to hold each other accountable to the same standards of behavior. When leaders permit some members to violate agreed-upon norms, they risk their credibility with team members who expect them to enforce the rules consistently. Encourage everyone to take responsibility for enforcing team norms. It should not always have to be just you calling out bad behaviors. (But if no one else is, then most of the time you really must, if you want to maintain the respect of the team.)

4 **Encourage small-group conversations to build trust.** Consider which team members most need to develop trusting relationships with others. Delegate projects and tasks in such a way that these people will need to have at least a few small-group conversations to complete their tasks. It's through conversations with just a few people that relationships are created and trust can be built fastest. When every interaction entails a

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conversation with eight or 10 people, conversations that build and deepen trust are nearly impossible.

5   **Reinforce candor.** To foster a culture of trust, the leader needs to ensure people feel safe about revealing vulnerabilities and can voice their reservations or concerns. As leader, you can start by acknowledging issues or problems you are facing, and then invite others to do the same. For a new leader, it may take a few times before people can feel safe to admit shortcomings or surface issues. Express appreciation when team members voice a difficult concern or surface a sensitive issue so that others know they can follow suit.

6   **Anticipate and address stress points.** When people feel pressured to perform, especially when deadlines are overly ambitious, unattractive behaviors can emerge. Without face-to-face conversations to smooth ruffled feathers, such behavior can quickly derail even a strong team. Openly discuss likely stress points in advance, and determine how team members can best help each other, and themselves, to avoid any dysfunctional behavior that might result.

7   **Let people know it's okay to say no.** Let people know they are free to push back on what they consider to be unacceptable requests. After all, you may not have a good sense of all of the tasks that your remote team members are juggling. Discuss situations where you need to intervene when determining priorities, and when your team member has latitude to decide autonomously.

8   **When in doubt, reveal more rather than less.** Team leaders are often privy to inside information. Err on the side of being more transparent rather than less, providing that you don't violate any policies. If you don't have an answer, say so, and let people know how soon it might take you to get one. It's true that nature abhors a vacuum, and in the absence of at least some information, people may assume the worst. Even more damaging: Remote workers may assume that you are deliberately withholding information, and may feel even more marginalized than they already might.

9   **Respond quickly to requests.** When team members have a question or ask for help, whether it's by IM, email, text, phone or some other way, respond quickly to acknowledge the request. Let them know how long it will take to get back to them with what they need, if you don't have time to attend to the request as soon as you'd like. If

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you are on the "to" list of an email, assume that the sender needs some type of response or acknowledgement. (If you are cc'd instead, that may be another matter. *(See Do's and Don'ts of Email and Best Practices Norms sections.)*

10 **Enable reasonable autonomy**. People who work remotely often feel a need to touch base frequently with their leader when their decision-making authority is ambiguous. Clarify the extent to which employees have decision-making authority right up front (which may be different for each team member), and encourage them to contact you when in doubt. If they overstep (or understep!) their bounds, take the opportunity to explain why for next time. The more decisions they can make on their own, the faster their professional growth and the more time you get back in your day.

11 **Encourage reasonable risk-taking and creativity.** Team leaders need to be clear about the type of risks that remote workers can take without having to check in. For example, it might be okay to include one senior manager on an email requesting feedback, but not another. Or it might be fine to vary the format of one report, while another is sacrosanct. Fleshing out the do's and don'ts is especially vital for remote teams who might otherwise have few opportunities for the kind of back-and-forth conversations that help co-located teams to assess how and where they can take risks or demonstrate extraordinary creativity.

12 **Keep an eye out for the small problems.** With virtual teams, little annoyances can lead to big problems. Team leaders need to be vigilant about addressing small rifts and immediately bring team members back to the sense of purpose. In some cases, this requires an open conversation with the whole team, and in others, a private conversation may be more appropriate. For example, if some people prefer to communicate with a steady stream of IMs throughout the day, while others prize their uninterrupted time to get work done, it's probably time to discuss communications norms with the whole team before resentment can build.

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