Cultivating a culture of trust across virtual/hybrid teams

1   **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. Reach agreement about which behaviors and principles are most important to uphold, and how best to ensure that all team members abide by the same norms, including the team leader.

2   **Hold each other accountable.** To build trust, all team members need to hold each other accountable to agreed-upon standards of behavior. When leaders permit some members to violate team 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. Team members need to agree how exactly they will do that in advance, so there are no surprises. (E.g., When you notice someone violating one of our norms, bring it up directly with the individual first. If this is difficult, confide in someone you trust to help you prepare to approach the individual.)

3   **Assume good intentions.** Give people the benefit of the doubt unless and until proven wrong. If you're puzzled by certain actions or behavior, ask probing questions (gently!) to try to uncover what s/he was thinking at the time, rather than automatically assuming the worst. (This approach has the added benefit of helping you both to capitalize on teachable moments that can help foster self-sufficiency and autonomy.)

4   **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. 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.

5   **Access to vital information.** Give everyone, regardless of location, equal access to information at the same time. Avoid sharing big news with people who work closest to you or those you know best. Resist the temptation to share the news first with people you see in the cafeteria or in the hall. Schedule an "all-hands" meeting at a time when most, if not all, can attend, so that everyone has a fair chance of hearing the news first.

6   **Share power.** Structure the team in such a way that power never lies with just one or two people. Give everyone a chance to lead something once in a while. Grant decision-making authority to those who are in the best position to make well-informed decisions. Likewise, provide everyone a reasonable opportunity to have visibility with senior managers or important clients, which is often missing when people work virtually.

7   **Give equal time.** Apportion your time evenly among team members. Make an extra effort to develop relationships with those new to you, or new to the team. You may need to schedule more time with those who work remotely to compensate for the lack of serendipitous conversations you might enjoy with those who work close by.

8   **Give everyone an equal opportunity to take on the most prized work.** Consider all qualified team members equally for important assignments and interesting tasks, which means you will need to spend more time guiding the work of more junior or newer team members. But ultimately, when people become self-sufficient more quickly, you'll spend less time handholding along the way.

9   **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.

10 **Reinforce candor.** Ensure that people feel safe about revealing vulnerabilities and can voice their reservations or concerns. Start by acknowledging issues or problems you are facing, and then invite others to do the same. 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.

11 **When in doubt, reveal more rather than less.** Team leaders are often privy to inside information. If you don't have an answer, say so, and let people know how soon it might take you to get one. Remote workers may assume that you are deliberately withholding information, and may feel even more marginalized than they already might.

12 **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

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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.

13 **Enable reasonable autonomy**. 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. The more decisions they make on their own, the faster their professional growth and the more time you get back in your day.

14 **Encourage reasonable risk-taking and creativity.** Be clear about the type of risks that remote workers can take without having to check in. 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.

15 **Respond quickly to requests.** When team members have a question or ask for help, acknowledge the request, and let them know how long it will take to give them what they need, if you can't attend to the request in a timely way. If 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.

16 **Use a team kick-off as a time to create social capital, and build from there.** Unlike co-located teams that can bond during face-to-face kick-off events, virtual teams also need these "getting-to-know-you" sessions. Dedicating a team meeting to a relaxed conversation about family, interests, professional background and aspirations, for example, can pay big dividends later on. Doing this early on gives members more reasons to keep in touch with colleagues, either 1:1 or as a team.

17 **Be a connector for the team.** Communications and connections don't usually happen by chance with virtual teams. Connect frequently with all team members, whether 1:1 or in small groups, and create opportunities and suggestions for members to connect with each other.

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