Virtual team building: How to build trust in a remote team beyond games and activities

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Claire Lew

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You want your team to feel connected remotely... but how do you do it without cheesy games and activities? Here are 8 ways to get virtual team building right.

Virtual team building is top of mind for you.

Now that your team isn't working in the same office anymore, the things you used to say to each other in the hall – a simple “hello” in the mornings or a smile at someone as you walked by their desk – are absent. Gone are post-lunch catch-ups over coffee or asking about how a coworker’s weekend was when you go to fill up your water bottle.

So what do you do?

You google “virtual team building”... And what you find are instructions for how to hold a virtual happy hour and a game where you guess fun facts about team members.

Games and activities are charming, sure. But does it truly help build trust in a remote team?

Yes and no. They can help. But if playing online Scrabble together or sharing cat pictures are the only mechanisms of virtual team building that you’re relying on, then the bonds of trust in your team will fray fast.
If you’re looking for more meaningful, more sustainable ways of building trust in a remote team, we have to dig deeper.

Ready to dive in? Let’s peer at the research from the past 25 years and best practices from the past 30 years to fully understand how to build trust in a remote team – and how to get virtual team building right.

First: What do we mean by “virtual team building”?

One of the biggest misconceptions about virtual team building is that it’s only about helping our team “feel good.” Warm ’n fuzzy sentiments about each other on the team is unquestionable pleasant – but that doesn't mean you should optimize for them in a team. When a team that is constantly looking to “feel good,” they end up flattering each other while avoiding speaking the truth. Conflict is brushed under the rug. Preserving face is valued over honesty and mutual accountability. Your team’s culture – and performance – will suffer, as a result.

Rather, to get virtual team building right, you'll want to focus on fostering trust in a remote team. Trust, after all, has enormous benefits to a team’s culture and performance that we often don't fully recognize. Studies have found how trust is linked to improving job performance, increasing employee engagement, and opening up channels of communication. Trust is the oil in the engine that helps any team (remote or co-located!) get to where it's trying to go.

But trust can be a blanket word. Something we casually toss around, without precision. When we aspire to “build trust,” we can lose our sense of what that means to begin with.

To do virtual team building right, we must then distill specifically the type – or types – of trust we should be looking to cultivate.

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The 2 types of trust to foster in a remote team

The two types of trust we should foster are what’s known as “affective trust” and “cognitive trust” to scholars. Affective trust,” constitutes a form of trust based on emotional bond and interpersonal relatedness. Cognitive trust, meanwhile, springs from reliability and competence.

Another way to think about it is: Affective trust is how you feel about the person's intentions, while cognitive trust is how well you think that person will act on their intentions.
To manage a remote team well, you need both affective and cognitive trust. The question is, then, how do you exactly do this through virtual team building?

How to build affective trust in a remote team

To foster the emotional closeness and rapport that consist of affective trust, you want to make sure your virtual team building efforts include the following:

#1: Prioritize onboarding more than you usually do.

According to research, affective trust tends to be more important to foster at the beginning of a relationship. Accordingly, onboarding new hires well becomes even more paramount for virtual team building.

What should this onboarding process include? Here are a few key elements for remotely onboarding your team well:

- **Context about the team + business** – Create context write-ups on the company’s history, our purpose + vision + values, how we work (communication, meetings, etc.), business context (market analysis, product vision, etc.), and the key milestones you’re looking to hit in the upcoming six to eighteen months.
- **Direction to what success looks like** – Have a first clear project. Is it clear what success will look like in first 30, 60, 90 days?
- **Encouragement in carrying out the role** – Share why you hired them. You could even write up a “Here’s why we hired you” letter. Read more in a blog post I wrote on how to onboard a new hire remotely here.
- **Sense of rapport so you can work well** – Hold regular one-on-one meetings. Ask questions about work preferences + expectations – it’ll show you care + build rapport, more than anything else.

During the onboarding process, the initial one-on-one meeting is particularly critical. Here are some of the best one-on-one meeting questions you can ask remotely to new hire:

- **What are you most excited about working here?**
- **When have you felt frustrated in your first 2 weeks here?**
- **What feels unclear?**
- **What aspect of your job you would like more help or coaching?**
- **If you could be proud of one accomplishment between now and next year, what would it be?**

You can use our One-on-Ones Tool in Know Your Team to get hundreds of suggested questions and agenda items just like this.
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#2: Stop leaning on cliché icebreakers.

How often do you find yourself asking “How was your weekend?” to break the ice before you start a meeting? My guess is more than you’d like. Your team is feeling the same way too: Their answers to this question feel worn, tired, and unengaging.

To shift the mood for your team and build affective trust, you’ll want your virtual team building to focus on non-cheesy icebreakers. Cheeky, enlivening icebreaker questions can reveal something new and intriguing about the person you might not have known before.

For example, here are some Icebreaker questions you could try at the beginning of your next meeting...

- What’s been your “guilty pleasure” during quarantine?
- What’s been your favorite recipe you’ve cooked lately?
- What are you reading right now?
- If you could pick up a new skill in an instant, what would it be?
- Who’s someone you really admire?
- Got any favorite quotes?
- Seen a TV show or movie you watched recently that surpassed your expectations?
- What was your favorite band 10 years ago?
- What’s your earliest memory?

In fact, with Know Your Team, when you hire someone new, we automatically send a series of Icebreaker questions that includes questions like these to help everyone get to know each other better. You can put our Icebreakers in Know Your Team to work for you to save you some time and break the ice in your team.

Build rapport with our Icebreakers *
Try Know Your Team’s Icebreaker questions.
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#3: Invest in a buddy system.

An excellent way that remote companies can build affective trust is to build a buddy system as part of their virtual team building. We found that 51% of remote managers and employees do this, according to our 2019 survey of 297 remote managers and employees.
For example, at Help Scout, a remote company with ~80 people, they give each new employee a “work best friend” (they have a phenomenal write-up on their entire onboarding process here. At Automattic, a remote company with ~1,000 people, they “do a mix of self-guided training and buddy feedback,” as detailed by Valentina Thörner, Happiness Team Lead at Automattic.

In your team, here are two ideas you could try to put a buddy system into practice:

- Assign someone an official “mentor” with whom they have one-on-one meetings weekly or bi-weekly to ask questions.
- Randomly pair 2 – 3 people every week to have a fun video chat over something non-work related.

#4: Set up a dedicated chat channel for non-work related conversations.

My bet is that the lack of casual, non-work related chit-chat is something you’ve already felt the pain of missing. A place for “watercooler chat” is a real requirement to building the affective trust your team needs to thrive.

Here are some examples for what other remote companies do to set up non-work related chat channels as a part of virtual team building:

- Writing in the Campfire in Basecamp to say “Good morning” to everyone when you hop online.
- Having a #pets channel in Slack and asking everyone to share their pet pictures.
- Using our Social Questions in Know Your Team to ask fun, periodic questions via Slack or email that build rapport and uncover unlikely connections.

Create fun connections with our Social Questions 😊
Try our Social Questions in Know Your Team.
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#5: Give opportunities for non-work related video chats.

Chat is nice... But there’s nothing like getting to see folks’ facial expressions and hear them laugh, when it comes to building affective trust. As a result, video chats would be a key part of how you do virtual team building.

Here are some examples of what other remote companies do:

- At Litmus, a remote company with 100+ employees, week to week, they get “Coworker Coffees” over video, drink beers on Skype, and play video games online.
• At Help Scout, they organize 15–30-minute coffee breaks over video between randomly assigned team members called Fikas.

• Other organizations, as discussed in our online leadership community The Watercooler, will hold book club discussions or have specific topics or themes about video chats, such as food, music, etc.

One thing to be wary of if you decide to do this is that folks may be severely burnt out on being on video meetings all day. They may not be eager to engage in yet another video meeting, even if the topic itself is fun. As a result, make sure to make participation in these video hangouts 100% optional – and don’t guilt folks into attending.

How to build cognitive trust in a remote team

If affective trust is all about the “heart” – the emotional closeness and rapport someone feels – then cognitive trust is as all about the “head.” Cognitive trust stems from believing in the reliability and capabilities of someone else.

Cognitive trust is quite easy to forget – and yet, it yields tremendous results. For instance, one study found how cognitive trust tends to have a stronger correlation with leadership effectiveness.

In our own 2018 survey with 597 managers and employees, we found a similar confirmation. We asked survey respondents, “What do you believe is the most effective way for building trust?” and gave them nine options. The top three options that received the highest rankings from survey respondents were in fact all forms of cognitive trust. Here they are, below, so you can put them into action:

#1: Be willing to show vulnerability as a leader.

Twenty-eight percent of people said being vulnerable and admitting your shortcomings as a leader was the most effective way to build trust. For both employees and managers in the survey, they remarked vulnerability around your weaknesses and mistakes demonstrated empathy: The more empathetic someone was, the more likely they were to trust them. One person in the survey, in particular, remarked how their manager “needs to show more empathy,” and that “morally he is probably a good person but there are some times when it’s unclear if he actually has empathy due to challenges expressing it.”

To put this into practice, you can try saying something like this during your next one-on-one meeting: “I feel like the X project I’m overseeing is not going as well as I’d like... might you have any advice?”

#2: Make your intentions crystal clear.
Twenty-six percent of people expressed that making your intentions behind your actions clear was the most effective way to build trust. This means being open about why you’re saying something, and why decisions are made — and why some decisions are not made. When you’re opaque about why you’re changing your mind or choosing to sit on something for a while, and it destroys the trust someone has of you.

An excellent example of this is when you need to give someone tough feedback. If you make your intentions clear, they're most likely to trust you and be open to hearing that feedback.

**For instance, you could try saying during a one-on-one meeting:** “*I want to help you be as successful as possible, and help you get promoted. Could I share some feedback that might be helpful?*”

**#3: Walk the walk: Follow through on your commitments.**

Eighteen percent of employees said simply following through on commitments was the most effective way to build trust. This seems to be especially powerful given that we found that 48% of employees believed that the company has been all talk and no action on something lately — and 28% of employees said their manager has been all talk and no action.

How clear are you demonstrating that you’re following through on your commitments? **During your next one-on-one meeting or all-team meeting, try saying:** “*Based on your feedback, I’m changing X. How does that sound?*”

For each of these three ways of building cognitive trust, you may want to try using our One-on-Ones Tool in Know Your Team to help you prepare your agenda to include one (or more) of these ways to cultivate cognitive trust.

Use our One-on-Ones Tool⚡️
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This can be a lot to digest all at once. By no means am I recommending you try to implement all of these things, all at the same time. These are chaotic, heavy times, and the last thing your team needs is a shot-gun approach to virtual team building.

Rather, I might recommend focusing on one tactic to build affective trust and one tactic to build cognitive trust, first. Then, perhaps you can try another one or two.

Whichever you choose, I hope you’re as energized as I am to get virtual team building right. Beneath the surface of wanting our team to “feel good” is a deeper desire for our teams to trust our intentions, and trust that we’ll act on them.
If we can focus on building affective and cognitive trust – and not merely the vanity of how many people are showing up to a Zoom happy hour – our deepest desire for true team building can become a reality.

Use our Social Questions for virtual team-building 😊
Try our 300+ Social Questions in Know Your Team.
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🌟 Yes, that was 2,400+ words on how to get virtual team building right. But truly, the easiest way to build social connections on a remote team is to put Know Your Team to work for you. Use the Social Questions and Icebreakers: these fun, lighthearted periodic questions help people to find surprising connections with one another and also brings everyone closer together. They’re a huge hit in the remote teams we work with. See for yourself today.

Additionally, we are giving away our Guide to Managing Remote Teams – 60+ pages completely for free. Based on data we collected from 297 remote managers and employees, I wrote 11 chapters of best practices on how to manage a remote team.

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Written by Claire Lew

CEO of Know Your Team. My mission in life is to help people become happier at work. Say hi to me on Twitter at @clairejllew.