How to Prepare Your Virtual Teams for the Long Haul

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Before the pandemic, there were no playbooks for how to convert a co-located team to 100% virtual in a matter of days and we’re finding in our research that the conversion process — and the results — has differed substantially from team to team, even within the same organization. This variability puts tremendous strain on individual employees who are now navigating not just one whole new way of working, but often several.

The pressures on teams will continue for the foreseeable future as companies shift their focus to how and when to return employees to the office setting. Now is the time to take stock of the design and status of your organization’s teams, considering both their tasks and people. Doing so will allow you to triage problems, create stability, and invest in sustainable solutions.

Teamwork Has Gotten Harder

In December, before the coronavirus was widespread, we conducted a survey of over 200 executives working in a wide variety of multinational companies. These professionals sat on an average of three teams each and even then, they found working across these various teams challenging. For example, 76% reported having difficulty feeling connected to their teammates, with cited reasons ranging from perceived differences in personality to the strain of working across time zones.

Now, during the pandemic, those executives have been traversing multiple teams with the added complications of being forced to work remotely and under the stress of the crisis. Plus, due to the rapidly evolving context, many are being more frequently shifted in and out of teams. Roles and missions are changing too, as companies adapt.

Years of research and study have taught us that these ingredients — unclear missions, inconsistent social norms, low common identity, unclear roles, and unstable membership — are the recipe for team disasters. They result in inefficient, often unproductive, teams full of disconnected, sometimes disgruntled, members.

With the pandemic, we are seeing warning signs of these disasters. Last month, for example, we solicited data from more than 275 managers across the world about how they are coping with Covid-19. They reported a lack of clarity about their team’s role in the
leadership agenda, fading interpersonal connections due to remote work, low motivation, and overwhelming workloads.

Further Reading

To prevent these types of problems from becoming permanent conditions — or worse yet, destroying teams — companies need to take careful stock of what is happening. Take the recent experience of a major medical device manufacturer we’ve studied. The firm’s bottom line has been massively impacted by the cancellation of elective surgeries and, as a consequence, they have been forced to aggressively rethink their business. A few weeks ago, they asked all division leaders to create a list of team projects to keep, accelerate, disband, or start to meet the new priorities of the company. With that direction in hand, team leaders are now re-evaluating their rosters carefully, including whether they have excess, just-right, or gaps in the people needed to deliver on those mission-critical projects.

Based on our combined years of research and our recent interviews with company leaders and team members, we’ve developed a model to help companies take stock of their teams and how they function in light of the crisis. It has three stages: triage, stabilization, and long-term care.

1. Triage

In times of crisis, leaders need to focus on identifying the most critical team problems. In the triage phase, companies should look within teams and across them for task- and people-related issues that pose immediate, serious threats to team survival.
**Within Each Team**

*Task: Are the team’s objectives or work no longer relevant or at odds with reality?*

Due to the pandemic, most teams will need to make changes and any team that is still largely operating as it did six months ago is a cause for concern. Ask team leaders to provide a quick summary of each team’s purpose and tasks. Assess that data against the revised projections of the company, as well as updated constraints like available resources. Is this team critical for the next few months? What adjustments are needed to align the team’s work and way of operating to the current reality? Do the team’s scope, output, and timing all still make sense given the current context?

*People: Is the team’s interpersonal foundation cracked?*

For teams whose work is still relevant, evaluate the team culture and cohesion. Is there disagreement in the team over its mandate or core priorities? Are role conflicts or task-related disagreements becoming personal? Are team members disengaging and tuning out? Are team members being pressured to conform or holding back due to a lack of psychological safety?

**Across Teams**

*Task: Are teams being staffed in an idiosyncratic or uncoordinated manner?*

Particularly in the face of fast-moving change, leaders often staff teams in a more ad-hoc and potentially unsustainable way. Do a quick census of employees who work on teams: how many teams are they serving on currently? Has that number gone up or down? Who is assigning members to teams, and is there consideration of people being on multiple teams? Look for star performers, senior leaders, and members of critical functions being pulled onto teams without full recognition of the competing demands on their time and attention. Also look for pockets of employees who are currently experiencing excess capacity who could possibly shore up overstretched teams.

*People: Is being on multiple teams creating untenable difficulties for some individuals?*

Being staffed on multiple teams affects employees differently, so you need to find out who is straining to keep up with them — and why. Are they constantly switching focus because they’re staffed on too many teams? Consider the frequency and cadence of those switches, as well as how different and potentially incompatible the teams’ styles, norms, and schedules might be. Remember, team switches can be particularly difficult in a virtual work environment. Ask team members: Are they finding it difficult to prioritize and integrate the different team objectives and tasks? Are they in meetings around the clock just to accommodate the various team schedules? Are they struggling to keep track of different
communication channels and expectations? Look out for pockets of employees who may be overwhelmed by the breadth and variety of switches or who lack motivation and attention towards certain teams.

2. Stabilization

To stabilize your teams, you need to address any critical issues identified in the triage phase. Of course, you should immediately attend to any employee facing severe emotional or physical distress as the first priority. After that, you must work to address the issues through targeted interventions. Below are some concrete examples and approaches to mitigate these critical issues.

**If the team’s objective or work is no longer relevant or at odds with the current reality...**

The CEO of a clothing manufacturer we spoke with recently shared that many of her teams were working hard — but weren’t creating value in the current context. This is what we are seeing in our recent survey results too: “keeping busy” is one of the most frequently identified coping mechanisms. Even if employees are diligently focusing on their team’s original priorities, the team’s work may no longer match critical organizational needs. Assess whether the team’s work can be shifted to create value in the current environment; if not consider putting the team on hold or disbanding it. You may need to form new teams instead.

**If the team’s interpersonal foundation is cracked...**

With so much uncertainty and anxiety in the air, it’s easy for toxic dynamics to develop or worsen on a team. One manager we spoke with told us, “We are seeing a big spike in people playing the blame game.” These unhealthy dynamics, left unaddressed, can do permanent damage and make it difficult for the team to work together in the future. HR or another neutral party may need to step in to help teams surface their differences and find more productive ways of working. Ownership, however, must rest with the team and team leaders should be held accountable for creating psychologically safe environments in which members can raise questions, voice concerns, and offer new ideas. As you form new virtual teams, pay special attention to creating a solid foundation. Decades of research by Richard Hackman and others have shown that the launch period is critical, accounting for up to one-third of a team’s ultimate success.

**If teams are being staffed in an idiosyncratic or uncoordinated manner...**

A more systematic approach is likely to help reduce over-use of certain members and under-use of others. Look out for people hoarding too. As one executive commented in one of our surveys, “We had project managers with more personnel than they needed, but
because budgets were determined based on team size, they just kept people on staff to protect their budgets.” In those situations, the sought-after teammate is often put into a bind, wanting to go where they are needed but unsure how to do so politically. To alleviate the pressures on individuals trying to determine their team membership, consider how to make team staffing and allocation rules clearer and more transparent. Some form of centralized oversight or enforcement may be necessary.

**If being on multiple teams is creating untenable difficulties for some individuals...**

During this time when everyone is being asked to work in new ways, working across teams can be more stressful than ever. As one manager lamented, “I have to wear different hats for different teams. It is important to build some connection to have a consensus, but emotionally draining to have strong connections with each and every one.” This puts a cognitive and emotional load on team members and is likely to contribute to burnout and inefficiency. Reduce multiple-team membership whenever you can. Also consider setting common norms and expectations around things like the communication tools people use, how meetings are run, or how decisions are made. This will reduce the switching costs for employees who jump from team to team.

3. Long-Term Care

In times like these, just stabilizing your team can feel like a triumph and it’s tempting to declare victory. The reality, however, is that triage and stabilization are critical first steps in an ongoing process. After the first two phases, you need to shift your focus to keeping them healthy and avoiding relapses into the problems mentioned above. While many companies aren’t yet in the long-term care mode of this crisis, we urge leaders to start thinking about laying the foundations now, as this is your chance to make sure bad habits aren’t formed and established. Be on the lookout for the issues we mentioned earlier: unclear missions, inconsistent norms, lack of psychological safety, weak identity, unclear roles, and unstable membership. Remember to think across teams, taking care not to burn out your best performers by stretching them across too many teams, even when you know they would add value.

Sustainably healthy teams require ongoing attention and preventative care. All issues are easier to solve the earlier you catch them. Triaging to identify critical issues and stabilizing your teams sets the foundation, but long-term success comes from checking in on the health of your teams as part of an ongoing routine. Doing so increases the chance you identify small symptoms early, allowing you to intervene and ensure they don’t become big issues later.

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