

Team Building for Virtual and Flexible Teams



How do you build personal connections with team members you rarely or never see? How do you keep from feeling isolated and build your professional brand with others when you don't interact on a daily basis? How can you make the most of virtual meetings and happy hours so that you can strengthen the bonds of your team without getting hokey or uncomfortable?

Here are 30 ways to build camaraderie and connection with virtual employees:

1 Social Networking

You don't have to invite coworkers to be your friend on Facebook. But team members can interact through private LinkedIn groups or Yammer pages. Yammer is like Facebook, but for the corporate setting. According to company stats, more than 80% of the Fortune 500 is already using Yammer to build employee connections.

2 For the Good of the Order

Remote team members don't have a chance to rub elbows at the coffee maker or lean over a cubicle for some idle chat. But it's that kind of personal "what'd you do this weekend" sharing that helps employees find common ground. Remote teams have to build time for that into group meetings.

Spend a few minutes at the start of each meeting getting those personal updates. Take it one step further and ask team members to send a recent photo to the event organizer. Assemble those into a slide deck to review at the meeting.

3 Virtual Happy Hour or Coffee Break

Teams all need time to bond with each other outside of their work roles, so top virtual teams take time for a happy hour or coffee break. This is a designated time where team members can connect via chat, conference call, or media to discuss personal and/or professional topics. Some teams have gone so far as to post a "Personal Conversations Only" note on their status bar. It's a time to connect on a personal level, have a little fun and unwind.

Attendance does not have to be mandatory, unless the group feels it would be beneficial to the team. This is a bring-your-own-drinks event, of course, send out coffee gift cards ahead of time to make it an employer sponsored event.



4

Comprehensive Calendar

It's always a juggle, managing personal and work calendars. Help team members avoid scheduling conflicts and build camaraderie at the same time. The comprehensive calendar allows employees to log their personal/family obligations in the company calendar system. They can mark personal events as private or use color-coding to delineate work and personal obligations.

This allows employees to earmark time for all their demands in one central place. Plus, knowing that Fred is at his son's basketball game can aid employee bonding and help team members know when/if it is okay to interrupt someone with urgent business.

5

Create a Team Charter

"Assumptions are the termites of relationships." ~ Henry Winkler. In order to work at peak potential, members need to commit to the team and agree on how they will behave as a team. The best way to do that is to come up with a virtual team agreement or a team charter.

Discuss how the team wishes to communicate, provide feedback, acknowledge team members, hold each other accountable, and best work together. When an issue comes up in the future, you can now ask: What agreement can we make to ensure this doesn't continue to cause frustration? Do we need to tweak any of our previous agreements to capture this new learning?

6

Rotational Leadership

Most members of high performance teams are fully capable of leading themselves and the group, but unfortunately they don't often get a chance. Rotational leadership allows each team member to lead the team—whether it's simply heading up the weekly phone call, planning a monthly team building activity, or organizing an educational event.

7

Shared Learning

Think of it as the book group model of team building. Classes, book discussions, and virtual conferences are a way for team members to connect around professional issues, apart from day-to-day work matters. Look for opportunities for virtual team members to attend the same webinar, read a business related book, or log in to a company conference. Afterwards, connect via phone, Yammer, or instant message to discuss the takeaways.



8

Acknowledgment Round Robin

More than any other reason, team members leave when they don't feel recognized. Establish a habit of sharing acknowledgments to boost morale. During your text team meeting, ask members to share two specific, timely acknowledgments—one for themselves and one for someone else.

What does it sound like to recognize yourself? Highlight something you did to further your education or the team's work, e.g. "I'm proud of myself for taking the time to attend my local [XYZ] association meeting and catching up on developments in our field."

9

Ice Breakers with a Purpose

We can learn so much about people through powerful questions. Their answers tell much about their personality, work style and values. Try asking one of these questions to start your next meeting... If you were stranded in the desert for an undetermined amount of time, what item would you bring? Or, if there was a fire in your home, what is one item you'd try to grab on your way out the door? If money were no object, where would you like to go on vacation?

Or try a bigger exercise like breaking the group into teams and asking them to plan a seven course meal. After each team presents their selections, ask the large group to come up with one menu. The "light bulb" moment here is that more heads are better than one, and the best solutions are usually the result of a group effort. What's more, activities like these are also an opportunity for teams to talk about how they went about the process of brainstorming and communicating as a virtual group. What communication tactics worked well? Which team members felt frustrated by the process, and how would they rather have tackled the challenge?

10

Virtual Polling

Using the polling function in your virtual meeting software, ask a quick round of questions about personal and professional questions to get a read on attitudes and preferences. For example: You could ask "What is your favorite form of communication: text, phone, email, in-person meetings?" Or, "What time of day do you feel most energized?" Or try fun polls like "Who plans to watch the Oscars this weekend?" Display the results so that everyone on the team can see the synergies and differences in the group.



11 Care Packages

Many companies have products or promotional items (stress balls, beach towels, mugs, etc.) sitting around their headquarters. Remember to include your remote team members when goodies and product samples are distributed.

12 Team Profiles

Ask every team member to complete a profile and post them to a shared data folder. Include basic information like how to reach you, your communication preferences (e.g. text over email for emergencies), and your most productive time of day. Add photos of the most important aspects of your life such as pets, kids, hobbies, photo of your workspace or home, etc. Then include how you like to be recognized, favorite snacks, restaurants, or way to spend a Saturday night.

13 Profile Sharing

Use team profiles to get to know each other. Once a month focus on the profile of a team member (call it “All About Me” for example) and ask them to share a little bit about themselves. It makes a person feel special and helps everyone on the team realize the things they have in common.

14 Virtual Office Tour

Does your laptop have a webcam and wireless internet access? Take it on a walk around the office to show off your office digs and give remote employees a view of your work area. Then have them do the same.

15 Shift Overlap

Take the concept of shift overlap and apply it to your global team. Some managers have experimented with coming in early or staying late one consistent day of the week so that they can meet with their global team over the phone instead of limiting their interaction to exchanging emails.



16 Go Audio Visual

If shift overlaps don't work, try new ways of communicating. Instead of sending your overseas team members an email outlining the work that's been done for the day, change up the format: leave a voicemail, a voice text message, or record a brief video instead.

17 Virtual Networking

One manager makes it a point to call one virtual team member a day to talk only about personal matters. She says that investing in the time has helped build relational capital that she can use when she needs a favor or something turned around quickly. Set a daily or weekly call goal that works for you.

Take note of their personal and professional information and keep an eye out for news, articles, and books that might be of interest and forward it along. Acknowledge birthdays, company anniversary dates and promotions with a quick message to let them know you're thinking of them.

18 Celebrate Fifth Fridays

Every year there are several months which have five Fridays instead of four. One team celebrated these 5th Fridays with fun team-building exercises like virtual bingo, pumpkin carving contests, baby pic contests and the like. For virtual bingo, they sent every team member a bingo card, and sent email messages throughout the day with the call letter and number in the subject line. When someone got bingo they emailed everyone with BINGO! in the subject line.

19 Decorating Contests

You don't need a cubicle to have an office decorating contest. Consider alternatives like decorating a computer monitor, filing cabinet or company hat. Send team members the supplies they'll need and ask them to take a picture of their creation. Post the photos to a shared PowerPoint deck and ask everyone to vote on the best one. Then reveal the winner and send a prize. Or use video-conferencing so everyone can show off their creation and rally team members for their vote.



20 Level the Playing Field

Help remote team members feel more included in teleconferences by having all team members (especially onsite ones) remain in their workstations for the call. Or if you must meet in a conference room, bring teleworkers tags, photos, or name badges with you to place on the conference table, so you don't forget they're on the call.

21 Shared Storage

Sounds simple but creating one community or shared drive where all of your team's team-building documents go makes everyone feel included no matter where they're working. Store team member profiles, flex team agreements and blueprints, goals, project plans, etc. so that no one ever feels excluded because they can't find a document. It also makes the statement that team building files are as important as the documents required to run your business.

These are just a few ways to build virtual teams. If you have an in-office team in addition to remote team members, look for ways to include the virtual group whenever possible.

For example, it might not make sense to conference someone in to cut a birthday cake, but you can send them a card signed by their office teammates. They can't join the office fun run, but they can take part in wellness activities if you provide a way to track activity points online. It's just a matter of rethinking inclusion.

Need more ideas? Consider standard ice breakers and team building ideas. Think about how you can adapt each activity for a remote team. The goal is to foster idea sharing and problem solving among virtual team members. Do that, and they'll be able to operate in the same collaborative style as any traditional, in-office group.



Team Building for Introverts

The whole purpose of team building activities is to help people feel more comfortable in a group. Yet when it comes to icebreakers, ropes courses and team games, introverts are more likely than extroverts to be forced out of their comfort zones.

Many team building activities are based on the idea that extroversion is the norm. By definition, team building involves talking and interaction—activities that are extroverted in nature.

But that doesn't mean introverts are destined to be uncomfortable, or that team building should be abandoned altogether. Rethink your activities and you'll give both introverts and extroverts a chance to shine.

22 Structure

Introverts generally prefer more structured activities where there is a natural topic for discussion, like a book club or a class. Avoid impromptu group brainstorming, charades, skits or any improvisational activity.

23 Advance Notice

If you're working on problem solving or another activity that requires brainstorming, introverts prefer to be notified of the topic in advance. That gives them time to think and research ideas before going public.

24 Defined Introductions

Round-robin introductions can be difficult for introverts. We may not see the value in learning seemingly "irrelevant" details about our coworkers. We may be reluctant to share personal information or uncomfortable being the focus of attention. To make introverts more comfortable during introductions, ask participants to share work-related information and limit their responses to 30 seconds or less.

Sharing work related information doesn't have to be completely impersonal. Ask people to share their favorite cafeteria meal, their favorite (non-desk) location on the corporate campus, or simply what they like best about their job.



25

Semi-Personal

If you have a lot of team members who, for cultural or style reasons, don't like to disclose a lot of personal information, use icebreakers that highlight their personal style, not their personal lives. You might ask team members to show a photo of their first car, workspace, a favorite thing on their desk, or the most unusual job they ever had.

26

Personality Assessments

Use a personality assessment tool like DiSC or Myers-Briggs to help everyone understand each other's work styles. Give people a copy of their results in advance (so introverts have a chance to read and process), and notify everyone that they'll be asked to share highlights at the next group meeting.

These tools go a long way toward drawing people out and give introverts a way to talk about their communication style without framing it as being "shy." Plus, these discussions help extroverts understand which kind of habits are frustrating or limiting for introverts (group brainstorming, processing by talking versus processing by thinking).

27

Time

If you're working with a new team, give introverts time to get comfortable and meet people naturally before jumping right into a team building activity.

28

Ancillary Conversations

Head out to a ballgame or other activity where communication can be secondary, not the focal point of the activity. This gives introverts a structured topic for conversation and allows them to interact with the team at their own pace.



29

Varied Communication

Depending on the extroverted and introverted nature of your team members, there may be preferences as to the technology you use for meetings. Vary the types of meetings you conduct so that everyone has a chance to be comfortable (or uncomfortable). For example, video conferencing might help your Boomers feel more like they're getting face time, while a work-from-home might prefer a teleconference and avoid feeling like they're onstage.

30

Public Comment Period

Introverts may feel more comfortable contributing after a meeting or team building session. When it makes sense, provide a "public comment" period after a meeting to give those who didn't get their ideas across a chance to weigh in. Similarly, group chat, wikis or blogs give introverts extra time to process and respond.

Team building is integral to team effectiveness. Fundamentally people have to figure out how to work together, and they have to communicate to do that. The teams that are connected and feel comfortable communicating with each other are going to be the most effective.

About 15Be

15Be is a technology and training firm focused on the transformative power of human connection. We improve wellbeing for companies, people, and teams. Visit www.15Be.com to learn how we can help you create sustainable cultures of collective success.

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