

Virtual Team Building Resource

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Powerhouse



You can't just assemble a group of people and call it a "team." Well, you can, but a name alone doesn't make it so. There's an intricate dance involved when putting together the individuals who are going to build or grow your business. Of course, you want them to have the skills, strengths, and experience to move your mission forward. But you also want them to interact seamlessly. And that's particularly challenging when your assembled group of people isn't technically "assembled." But we've got you covered with ways to foster camaraderie with folks who don't have the benefit of organic interactions that a physical office allows.

Make Your Calendar King (or Queen). Repeat after me, "If it's not on my calendar, then it doesn't exist." Now pull out your calendar and make sure you commit to scheduling time for the important stuff.

- ▶ **Schedule "check-in" meetings** with your team via conference call or video (and choose video when possible because it's the difference between a random voice on the line and a real, live human who's sharing in this work of yours). Use this time to talk shop. What's working? What's not? Where could you use help? What are you excited about?
- ▶ **Schedule "office hours."** This doesn't mean you have to be sitting at your desk from 9 to 5 each day (unless that's a stipulation of your team's work environment). But block out a scheduled time each week where you're "on call" and your team members know they can catch you with any work-related issues in real time.

Create Opportunities to Connect. If you were in an office setting, you'd pass Bob on the way to the bathroom. Barb and you would make small talk over the Keurig in the breakroom. Jim would let you borrow his stapler (maybe...Jim's unpredictable sometimes). You would be engaging with others simply by virtue of sharing space together. In the absence of those interactions, you must create your own.

- ▶ **Meet your teammates.** Make it your goal to know more than folks' names and job titles. It's not enough that you know Amber does the accounting. Where does Amber live? What does she like to do in her spare time? What team does Amber root for during football season? (Okay, maybe not this last question or Amber's fate may be doomed before the relationship even has a chance.) You can highlight a featured team member weekly/monthly and take turns learning about each other—families, pets, interests, pet peeves, and weird hobbies. If your virtual team is a large one, you can commit to reaching out each week to a team member you haven't yet interacted with, even if it's only for a 15-minute online chat or phone call.
- ▶ **Hold brainstorming sessions.** Ask your team members for their ideas, constructive criticisms, and feedback. Take advantage of the fact that a fresh set of eyes is always a good idea (and keep in mind those eyes don't need to be in the same zip code as you to be helpful). You can either organize a formal brainstorming session (via meeting or call) or send an email or message to your team requesting their help. You get a fresh perspective and your teammates feel heard and valued. #Winning
- ▶ **Share your work.** Communicate how you're making a difference together. Share deliverables (marketing materials, video of in-person events, fundraising appeals, sales specials, etc.). This helps build a sense that you're all working together for the common good. It also takes you from being Randi, one of the team's technical writers (an abstract idea), to Randi, that cool team member who wrote that riveting piece on team building. Hypothetically speaking, of course.
- ▶ **Pat yourself (and your team members) on the back.** Celebrate your successes. Did you land a hard-to-get client? Figure out how to bring in more business? Finally get your moody Wi-Fi situation resolved? Wins are better when you share them. And while you're sharing, make sure to point out what you've seen a team member do to knock it out of the park, too. Like when Harriet captured the perfect video to tell your company's story. Create a whole back-patting circle. (You go, Harriet!)





- ▶ **Have theme days.** Agree that you don't have to be "all dolled up" for video calls. Have pajama day, crazy hair day, etc. (just check everyone's schedules first to make sure it's not also "meet with a potential client in person" day, too). You can take this even further. Why not have "Mexican food for lunch" day (insert your favorite cuisines or calendar celebrations here)? You can share recipes or photos of what you've all brought to your virtual meal or organize a working video lunch. (Easiest potluck ever—you only need to make enough for you!)
- ▶ **Support common causes.** Pick a cause (outside of your work/business) that you agree to care about together. Maybe it's saving the three-toed tree sloth. Or fighting cancer. Or helping transitioning veterans to re-enter the civilian workforce. You could even pick a charity of the month to rally around and work together to raise funds or build awareness. The company that cares together makes (virtual teams and) the world better together.

Use the Tools of the Trade. Google Apps, Trello, Slack, Asana, Evernote, Skype... Never have there been more apps or programs to keep us connected, even when geography separates us. Use them to your advantage! Find the tools that work best for your team and use them to coordinate calendars easily, hold video conferences, manage your projects, and more.

Engage in Coffee Talk. Those same apps that will keep you productive? They're also a fantastic way to establish and/or build relationships with your team members. Set up opportunities for more casual interactions (think virtual water cooler). Start a private team Facebook page or group that's designated for "unofficial business." Create a Slack channel that's just for fun. Share YouTube videos of that cat mama who took the orphaned piglet in as her own baby. Start a meme thread. Of course, don't do these things when you're supposed to be submitting a twenty-page proposal on a deadline, but make the time for personal exchanges with each other throughout your work day.

- ▶ **Want to up your coffee talk game?** Send out gift cards to Starbucks (or Dunkin', or Wawa, or whatever is a coffee shop franchise that's local to most folks) in advance of a scheduled time. Then "meet" (via your gift card and your favorite electronic device) over coffee.

“Meet Up” After Hours. Who are we kidding? If you’re part of a virtual team, you know that one of the downfalls is that the work day starts when you first look at your phone and ends with that email you send before your head hits the pillow. But happy, healthy employees (contractors, consultants, etc.) have boundaries between work and, well, not work.

Want to bridge those two worlds in a way that’s actually good for your sanity and great for your team? Why not try a virtual happy hour (BYO chardonnay), or game night (charades, anyone?), or karaoke ala video call? Maybe your idea of relaxing downtime is a Game of Thrones binge session. You can binge-watch with a team member who shares that interest (or catch up with them afterwards)! You can bond over movies, crocheting patterns, whatever your “thing” is.

Set Boundaries. When all is said and done, when you’ve worked together and played together and connected on a personal level with each other, remember this one important truth: Sometimes the best way to be a good team member is to set boundaries for yourself and to respect the boundaries of others. After all, there is in fact a “me” in team. But if you turn your team-building game upside down, there’s a “we” in there, too (if you ignore the way the “e” looks funky upside down). The secret sauce is in finding balance.

