

Promising Practices for Leading Virtual Teams

Abstract

Extension professionals are increasingly participating in virtual work. Leading these new virtual teams presents challenges to building relationships within the teams, establishing trust, and communicating effectively. As the national project leader of the Military Families Learning Network, I share promising practices developed over 8 years of virtual work delivering online professional development for professionals who assist military families, including Extension professionals.

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Introduction

In a recent *Journal of Extension* article, Ballard and Nix (2018) challenged those of us in Extension to embrace our history of innovation and "deliver value in a multichannel world" (Conclusion section, para. 4). One way of delivering value to our clientele is by embracing virtual work teams. Virtual teams are geographically distributed teams of professionals working together primarily through electronic means with little face-to-face interaction (Malhotra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007). Increasingly, Extension professionals are participating in and leading virtual teams for both state and national programs and committees. Research has shown that leading virtual teams is more difficult than leading traditional face-to-face teams (Liao, 2017). Despite the challenges, implementing virtual teams can be an efficient way to bring together geographically dispersed people with specific expertise to tackle the wicked problems of the 21st century (Alsharo, Gregg, & Ramirez, 2017; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017; Liao, 2017; Malhotra et al., 2007).

Virtual work teams potentially enhance our traditional face-to-face educational program delivery methods through increased efficiency, increased diversity, flexibility for team members, and decreased travel costs. Virtual teams also can help staff stay current in emerging educational technologies and experience how they might be implemented programmatically. The challenges of virtual teams relate to building relationships among team members and stakeholders, maintaining trust, monitoring work cycles, and establishing communication norms.

Nationally, examples of Extension virtual teams abound, including the Military Families Learning Network

(MFLN), the Extension Disaster Education Network, and eXtension communities of practice. At the state and local levels, it is not uncommon for programmatic groups to engage in some level of virtual work even when some or all of the team members are colocated. It is hard to imagine an Extension professional who does not participate in a virtual team, whether, for example, on a short-term search committee or on a longer term statewide program.

Ensuring that virtual teams are successful requires flexible leadership. Leading virtual teams presents unique challenges, including those related to technological competency, new types of work patterns, decision-making styles, relationship building, and conflict management (Alsharo et al., 2017; Hoch & Dulebohn, 2017; Sobrero, 2008). Virtual teams are embedded in how we in Extension work, making it essential to examine and understand promising leadership practices.

Promising Practices

MFLN, established in 2011, delivers exclusively online professional development to military service professionals, those professionals working directly with military families in communities, such as Extension professionals, and on military installations. MFLN content teams, called concentration areas, are distributed across 11 universities (Auburn, Cornell, North Dakota State University, Rutgers, Texas A&M, University of Florida, University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign, University of Minnesota, University of Wisconsin, Valdosta State University, West Virginia University). Concentration areas are supported by a leadership team distributed across three universities (Auburn, Texas A&M, Virginia Tech). MFLN has reached over 30,000 people worldwide and delivered more than 40,000 continuing education credits through webinars and podcasts since 2012. The experience of leading this virtual team has provided me opportunities to develop new leadership skills and, through trial and error, a set of promising practices. If your role includes or may include leading virtual teams, consider implementing the promising practices described here.

Understand that relationship building is challenging but essential to success. It is not news that strong leaders build strong relationships with their teams; however, building relationships virtually presents challenges that require leaders to be intentional in reaching out—you are not going to run in to colleagues in the break room, in a department meeting, or at an event. A core component of relationship building is trust, which adds another level of challenge when operating virtually.

Be responsive electronically. Leaders of virtual teams need to make space in their workflow to be responsive to team member questions and needs. Be responsive electronically, but do not underestimate the power of a phone call.

Share leadership. The MFLN leadership model relies heavily on shared leadership. This means that although ultimately the principle investigator is responsible for project success, the highly virtual work involved requires that dispersed teams develop and share informal and formal leadership roles.

Hire technologically competent people. Technical competence is nonnegotiable in staff. There simply is not the time or space to bring people up to speed on the applicable technology.

Meet in person. The MFLN meets face-to-face annually, and although the work at these meetings is important, the time to build relationships is perhaps more important. Time is built in to the meetings for teams to socialize and get to know each other and their funding partners. Absent "water cooler" opportunities, this time is critical to learning about one another, building trust, reading body language, and

laying the groundwork for another year of programming.

Use all the tools at your disposal. There is a myriad of tools available now to help teams work virtually. While no tool is perfect for every person in every group, we rely heavily on videoconferencing via Zoom, project management and communication via Basecamp, and instant messaging via Slack.

Be willing to fail. There is a nimbleness that even a 45-person team can tap into when working virtually. There is also an intentional culture of experimentation both programmatically and structurally. Failure may come in the form of a tool that just does not work. For example, we tried a Facebook group that never gained traction as well as a LinkedIn group that did not bring the results we were hoping for. We monitored those tools, found them to be inadequate, and moved on.

Conclusion

Virtual work is here to stay and will likely continue to evolve with available technologies. Implementation of virtual work and virtual teams is one method for staying ahead of our clients in technology adoption and maintaining our historically innovative culture. Embracing promising practices may ultimately enhance Extension's ability to stay relevant, reach current and future audiences, and keep good employees who need the flexibility of virtual work.

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