



How do you manage a virtual team?

***Glain Roberts-McCabe** sat down with Roundtable member **Stephen Miles**, Chief Operating Officer - International at Harlequin Enterprises, who shares his experience on what to do to successfully manage a virtual team.*

MENTORING MATTERS

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“I’ve spent most of my career managing teams that sit near me in the office. I’m now moving to a national scope and will be leading people from a distance. What tips do you have for managing a virtual team successfully?”

Managing a remote team is now becoming much more common as companies embrace national and international business opportunities and matrix organizational structures.

A key distinction in remote teams is that they have more latitude with their time, their work environment, and the process they apply to get work done than they would if they were just down the hall from you. Distance, time zones, and potentially language and culture (depending on how distant your team is) can amplify this even further. With this in mind, there are a variety of things to think about when deciding how you manage differently with a remote team. However, the one thing that holds true, whether your team is local or remote, is the importance of bringing them onside to your strategy and goals. Once you've done that, there is less likelihood your projects will be pushed aside. They will manage their own environment and process to get the work done and you will have the confidence of their commitment, even though you have less access to monitor progress.

Once you have your remote team aligned and committed to your goals and strategy, here are a few considerations for how you may approach things a bit differently than you would a local team:

COMMUNICATE CLEARLY AND SPECIFICALLY

You will communicate with remote team members less often, and it will be with more structure. You will not bump into them in the hall several times a day. So, it is important to be very clear and very specific on what needs to get done, by when (objectives, actions and due dates); to be clear and explicit in your expectations; and to offer your support. If language or culture is an issue, choose shorter words, don't use jargon and drop the use of all the latest buzzwords. Short, clear, specific and understandable—that is the goal. It won't get the transcript of your call published in *Wired Magazine*, but it will get your team working on the right things.

FOLLOW-UP AND PROVIDE FEEDBACK

Touch base with your remote team on a regular basis and provide feedback on a regular basis. Put follow-ups in your calendar so you don't forget—even if it is just to remind you to drop them a note to ask, "How are things going?" twice a week. It's hard to keep them top-of-mind when you don't see them day-to-day, so leverage tools to help you. You will not see your remote team members at the coffee machine so you need to actively create the opportunity to catch up. As it relates to feedback from a distance, remember that it's not always as easy to "get a feel" for where you stand over the phone or in an email. Don't make them guess—tell them. Be specific about what they are doing well and what they need to improve or change.

BE THEIR TEAM LEADER NOT THEIR "HEAD OFFICE"

Coming from head office can have a lot of negative connotations to the distant office. I used to work for a company that called them seagulls. Head office flies in, squawks a lot, craps on everyone and then flies away again. Work hard not to be that manager. Build a relationship with your distant team so they really feel you are with them, part of their team.

LEVERAGE COMMUNICATION TOOLS APPROPRIATELY

There are various ways to connect and communicate. Choose the appropriate tool for what you are trying to achieve and use it effectively. Here are some considerations:

In person visits are particularly important when you first start to manage a remote team. Take advantage of every minute you can be together. Get to know them in business and personally. Lunch, coffee, meetings, etc. Ask a lot of questions and listen actively—"small mouth, big ears." You want to quickly get a feel for how much rope you can give them so they are empowered and successful but do not hang themselves.

Video/Skype is almost as good as being there. It conveys emotion, conviction and concern better than the phone or email, which are critical leadership messages that are sometimes lost with distant teams. It does not have to be overly formal or structured. Take two minutes just to ask, “How are things going with project X?”

Telephone does not allow you to use body language, or facial expressions to help you communicate, but can be very effective when combined with other tools such as screen sharing. If you are using the phone for a conference call, remember a few best practices: ask everyone to mute their phones except to talk; introduce everyone on the call or in the room; and engage everyone by asking each attendee by name if they have questions, or input, etc.

Email is the most commonly used tool, but least effective, except to communicate facts. It is easy to misinterpret, hard to convey intent, emotion, passion, etc. You will inevitably use it regularly, but push yourself to use the other tools that are much better at helping you lead a high performance team.



Steve Miles is the Chief Operating Officer - International, at Harlequin Enterprises. He has worked in international business for over 25 years and has lived in Canada, the US, England, and Germany and managed businesses in over 14 different countries around the world. Steve has led startups in Germany, India, and Turkey and also managed a 100+ year old business in the UK, and currently manages over 300 people, all outside of North America. His family is also international—he has three children, each with a different nationality.



Glain Roberts-McCabe is passionate about the art of leadership and supporting ambitious mid-career leaders. She created **The Roundtable** to provide emerging leaders with the navigational skills, tools and savvy needed to manage increases in scope, pressure and leadership complexity.