The bad: Poor meeting management leads to virtual team performance issues. The good: A few steps can help team leaders successfully facilitate virtual meetings and lead from a distance.

HELLO, IS ANYBODY OUT THERE?
Six Steps to High-Impact V-Meetings

By Darleen DeRosa

We frequently hear about marathon virtual meetings or v-meetings, some of which last a full day, that quickly lose focus and end up being a waste of everyone's time. Unfortunately, many leaders have never been trained on best practices for v-meeting management. Given that successful virtual meetings are essential to team performance, here are six guidelines to help virtual leaders get the most out of them.

1. Build an effective agenda

We hear about regularly scheduled v-meetings that are conducted without agendas or clear objectives, but they take place because they are on the calendar. Poorly run meetings not only waste already scarce time, but they can also jeopardize the team's ability to meet its deadlines. This is especially true when people are on multiple virtual teams and need to better manage their time.

To get the most out of the meeting, outline what will happen before, during, and after the meeting. Determine who needs to attend, and invite participants, giving them as much advance notice as possible. At least several days before the meeting, send a meeting reminder with the agenda, any necessary materials, and information on technology that may be used.

2. Choose the right medium

Some virtual teams unwittingly choose certain technologies for communication and collaboration that hurt rather than help them reach their objectives.

Identify the appropriate technologies to support the meeting's objectives by considering how much collaboration will be necessary, and then determine the appropriate level of "richness." Some experts classify communication media by their level of "richness" based on certain factors such as their capacity for feedback, the number of cues used, and how personal they are.

On a "richness" continuum, face-to-face communication would be classified as the "richest," followed by video, telephone, instant messaging, email, and bulletin boards. For example, email—a one-way medium—is generally best for tasks that require little collaboration such as information sharing.

When teams need to solve complex problems or make decisions, technology such as videoconferencing or collaborative software tools, such as Hewlett-Packard's Halo or Cisco's TelePresence, are best. Shared web-based conferencing tools including WebEx or GoToMeeting have whiteboard functionality that can be used to brainstorm a team's ideas and polling questions that can be used to periodically solicit feedback and engage team members.

3. Address time zone barriers

One of the most common difficulties is finding a meeting time that works well for all team members, especially for global virtual teams whose members

may span multiple time zones. Team members often complain of having to work longer hours—working at 10:00 p.m. or even getting up at 3:00 a.m.—to accommodate their virtual teammates.

The challenge is finding times that are convenient for team members who are across multiple time zones. Effective virtual leaders rotate meeting times so that the same team members do not always get stuck working at undesirable hours. If you are a global virtual team, this is one way to alleviate a significant burden on team members.

4. Minimize tangential discussions

How do top virtual leaders keep everyone on track during the meeting? They are well-prepared, which makes the meeting more efficient. They also use process intervention techniques when necessary to keep the team focused.

An example of this is interrupting a discussion to refocus the participants or re-balance group interactions. While process intervention can be challenging in a virtual setting, due to the lack of visual cues, it becomes critical to the success of a meeting. Three key practices help meeting facilitators determine when an intervention is required and what type of intervention should be used:

Observation. Pay close attention to the flow of the discussion. Are the comments and issues being raised aligned with the stated agenda? Also, attend to team member's interactions by focusing on behaviors and patterns. Keep in mind that you won't have the luxury of being able to see the meeting participants' body language or other visual cues. Therefore, it is particularly important to keep up with the level of participation of individual members and to listen carefully to their tone and choice of words.

Diagnosis. Is the topic something the team should discuss even though it is not on the agenda? Is there enough time to take a "side trip" or is sticking with the planned agenda more important? Here you also analyze the participant's behavior to determine whether it requires attention. For example, is

the behavior getting in the way of team productivity or progress? Are team members staying focused on the goal and agenda?

Intervention. Finally, based on your observation and diagnosis, choose the appropriate intervention technique for the team. This might include asking a question to assess a point of view refocusing the team toward a goal, or summarizing a point under discussion.

Poorly run meetings not only waste already scarce time, but they can also jeopardize the team's ability to meet its deadlines.

5. Reinforce shared responsibility

Team members on high performing virtual teams often take on a facilitation role as needed. Everyone takes responsibility for keeping the group on track, ensuring that time is well-managed, and that meeting objectives are being met. To reinforce the shared responsibility, have different people lead parts of the session. If appropriate, rotate the facilitator role among team members.

6. Balance tasks and trust

Top performing virtual teams balance a focus on tasks with attention to building trust and communication, both of which are particularly important for high performance.

One common challenge on cross-cultural virtual teams is communication and language barriers, which can be a problem when people are not face-to-face. Some virtual teams start the v-meeting with a "warm up" or informal, non–work-related conversations. These informal conversations help team members transition from their native language and listen to one

another get accustomed to accents or unfamiliar pronunciations. The warm-ups also allow people to get to know each other and help build trust.

Consider a virtual team that had several members for whom English was a second language. The team leader asked each team member to share a brief story or update in English at the beginning of each meeting, which had positive results. Other virtual teams may use native translators to help clarify key messages and ensure that any cultural nuances are not lost when team members communicate with one another. By following the above virtual meeting practices, virtual leaders can better manage v-meetings and improve performance.

Darleen DeRosa is a managing partner at OnPoint Consulting. She recently co-authored Virtual Team Success: A Practical Guide to Working and Leading From a Distance*; dderosa@onpointconsultingllc.com.*

T+D

TRAINING + DEVELOPMENT

YES!

I would like to subscribe to **T+D** magazine—12 monthly issues that keep me at the forefront of workplace learning and performance.

❐ Individual rate $150 ($216 outside the U.S.)
❐ Institutional rate $300 ($366 outside the U.S.)

Order Information

TD0833

Name:_____

Title: _____ Company: _____

Address: _____ City: _____

State/Province:_____ Zip/Postal Code: _____

Country: _____ Email:_____

Phone:_____ Fax:_____

Check One: ❐ $150 (Individual USA)   ❐ $216 (Individual Outside the US)

   ❐ $300 (Institutional USA)   ❐ $366 (Institutional Outside the US)

❐ VISA   ❐ MasterCard   ❐ Amex   ❐ Discover   ❐ Check (USD)
   (Payable to *T+D*)

Card Number: _____ Expiration Date: _____

Signature: _____

Fax this form to 1.205.995.1588 OR Mail to:

American Society for Training & Development
Subscription Office, P.O. Box 11806
Birmingham, Alabama 35202-1806, USA

Order online at **store.astd.org**
Phone: 1.866.802.7059

Orders processed within three business days.
If you have questions, please contact **td@subscriptionoffice.com**

Prices valid through 12/31/2010. If you should wish to cancel your subscription for any reason, you will receive a refund on all unmailed issues. Your subscription to *T+D* may be a tax deductible business expense. Please allow 6 to 8 weeks to receive your first issue.

T+D is published by the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD)

090938.63250

ASTD
WORKPLACE LEARNING & PERFORMANCE