

Decoding Virtual Teams Worksheet

As UofT and the world continue to work online with virtual teams as the norm, those who can decode the keys to effective online teamwork will be set to have better experiences and achieve better results. If you want to improve your team's trust and connection, boost your online collaboration to maximize your meetings, and streamline your decision making and accountability processes for the virtual world, this fun and condensed resource is for you!

Instructions

1. Watch this video to learn broader context, concepts, and examples: <https://youtu.be/G2v-emrU6ng> (10 min)
2. Read this document with a condensed list of best practices and resources (15 min)
3. Answer the reflection questions later in this document (20 min)
4. Connect with ILead and other resources to have your questions answered and continue your learning

Your notes on the video (optional):

Framework & Summary - The Virtual Teams Process



Trust & Transparency

Overcoming the void of information, connection, and emotional responses: The central ongoing challenge of virtual teams is maintaining the contact & interactions that allow everyone to know, understand, and be comfortable with the work being done and state & reactions of others

1. Teambuilding & Psychological Safety

- Get to know & understand each other on a personal & professional level
- Create an environment where people are comfortable sharing ideas, concerns, problems openly
- Set team interaction norms & guidelines for predictability & trust

2. Collaboration & Meetings

- Use best practices for online meetings
- Understand importance of tone in text communication
- Optimize collaboration tools & tech

3. Distributed Decision Making

- Discuss & document who should make which types of decisions, and with what processes.
- Communicate & record all decisions for transparency

4. Accountability Online

- Set and record roles & expectations for each role
- Hold everyone accountable to norms, roles, & expectations, as issues arise
- Establish project and task management process and tools

Virtual Teams Best Practices

Trust & Transparency

The central challenge of virtual teams is overcoming the void of information, connection, and emotional responses that comes from working in an isolated online environment.

The rest of this framework builds off of essential factors and processes for any effective team and considers the added concepts and best practices required to maintain them and transparency in a virtual setting.

Teambuilding & Psychological Safety

GET TO KNOW & UNDERSTAND EACH OTHER ON A PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL LEVEL

- Start by everyone sharing personal & professional goals, ideal outcomes for the project, and hopes & fears for the team.
- Talk about what your work from home environment and conditions are like. Discuss internet speed, availability of quiet workspaces, family commitments, technology access, cultural differences, etc.
- Relationship building should be an ongoing process. Include meaningful time at the beginning of meetings to share a personal check-ins or news. Do regular check-in's in your chat channel.
- Play online games together to break the ice. (See list of games at the end of this doc)
- Give video tours of your workspaces.

CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT WHERE PEOPLE ARE COMFORTABLE SHARING THEIR IDEAS, CONCERNS & PROBLEMS OPENLY: PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY

- Seek out the voices people who don't usually speak up, or may be different from the majority. There should be no fear of being shamed or ridiculed for speaking up.(applies to text, voice, & video channels)
- Proactively share changes in your individual circumstances, priorities, & personal challenges.
- Be empathetic and support one another through challenging times.

SET TEAM INTERACTION NORMS AND GUIDELINES FOR PREDICTABILITY AND TRUST

- Set specific guidelines for team interaction; research shows that rules reduce uncertainty and enhance trust.
- Agree on how quickly team members should respond to messages, and steps if someone is slow to act. Consider time-zone differences.

- Virtual teammates often find themselves saying, “I thought it was obvious that...” or “I didn’t think I needed to spell that out.” Make sure communications and requests are specific and clear.
- Show you’ve received messages, even if no action is needed right away. (i.e. emoji reacts)

2. Collaboration & Meetings

Great meetings are built off foundations of Teambuilding, Trust, & Safety from above. From there consider:

USE BEST PRACTICES FOR ONLINE MEETINGS

- Take frequent short breaks in general! Stand up, stretch, and get away from the screen.
- Individually, turn off all other distractions and other work. Be fully attentive and engaged
- Use video conferencing with your camera on. Face time is a strong signal of someone’s attentiveness and commitment to their work and team and much needed transparency.
- Use video conference meetings for more complex discussions like problem-solving, group decision making, and addressing group norms and behavioral concerns.
- Set a regular schedule of video meetings that are shorter, but at more frequent intervals.
- Use one-on-one or smaller meetings to address individual performance issues.

UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF TONE IN TEXT COMMUNICATION

- Be sensitive to tone and provide more detail than normal when writing to others.
- Maintain a positive and supportive tone. Don’t write when you are angry.
- Use emojis to convey the emotion and tone that doesn’t normally translate in text.

OPTIMIZE COLLABORATION TOOLS & TECHNOLOGY

- Use online collaboration tools and technology that allow for everyone to view and contribute to ideas. (See sample list of tools at the end of this doc)
- Talk about your tool preferences together, and be willing to try out new tools to meet team needs.

3. Distributed Decision Making

- Discuss and document who should make which types of decisions, and with what processes. This can be part of your norms and expectations setting process.
- Involve fewer people in specific or smaller decisions, but be sure to communicate decisions to everyone.
- Involve the whole team in important communications and big decisions that affect everyone. Preferably in a ‘face-to-face’ setting.
- Record and communicate all decisions & justifications in shared documents for enhanced transparency.

4. Accountability Online

- Set and record specific expectations for each member’s role, and hold everyone to the written norms & rules. Discuss and adjust roles, expectations, norms and rules as necessary.
- When bringing up issues or missed deadlines norms or expectations, consider all the points about tone and online conversations from part 2 of the process.
- Set up online project and task management processes & tools:
 - Establish scheduled and consistent ‘check-ins’ for updates on action items and timelines; either through meetings or through written channels and shared documents.
 - Track team progress and see where work might need to be redistributed or supported

- Acknowledge milestones and accomplishments along the way, and at the end!
- Share schedules, calendars, and busy times, so everyone knows when you will be most available or not.

Reflection Questions:

1. Identify 2-3 concepts or best practices from above that you or your current team should implement or improve on, then 1-2 practices you or your team does well.
2. Describe in detail the steps you would take to apply each of these best practices, to improve on your weaknesses and build on your team's strengths.
3. What is your main insight after all these concepts and materials?
4. What remaining questions and concerns do you have about the materials or your own virtual team experiences? Reach out to ILead if you need further support: info.ilead@utoronto.ca

Extra questions or Notes:

Virtual Teams References & Articles

- [Functioning Effectively in Virtual Teams](#): Northwestern University Center for Leadership
- [Great insights](#) on remote working and virtual teams from UofT & ILead Professor Alison Olechowski
- [Global Virtual Team Leadership](#): Brigham Young University
- [Using online games](#) to skyrocket team productivity
- [Getting Virtual Teams Right](#): Article from Harvard Business Review
- [Managing a Remote Team](#): Article from Medium
- [More thoughts](#) on tools and remote work from Julian Nadeau in Dept. of CompSci at UofT
- [5 best practices for online facilitation](#): Search Inside Yourself Institute
- Online cohort community building tips for educators by Teresa Didiano from ILead UofT:
<https://web.microsoftstream.com/video/e37e4c4e-4c53-4c53-b752-362d94fd11fc>

Further Programs on International & Intercultural Virtual Teams at UofT

- International Virtual Engineering Student Teams: invest.utoronto.ca

List of Online Games & Activities

- Virtual escape rooms (this is the most recommended, note you will need a Flash-enabled browser; if you go with this option, take a moment afterwards to reflect on how you actually worked together, how did you communicate, make decisions, resolve conflict):
 - ShadowEscape: <https://kbhgames.com/game/shadow-escape>
 - Elements: http://neutralxe.net/esc/elements_play.html
 - Linkage: http://neutralxe.net/esc/linkage_play.html
- Sing Karaoke together: <https://community.watch2gether.com/t/how-to-use-watch2gether/736>
- Play: <https://skribbl.io/> or <https://www.qwiqwit.com/>
- Play Codenames: <http://codewordsgame.com>
- Play other board games online: <https://en.boardgamearena.com/>
- Have a team member host an online cooking class

List of Online Collaboration Tools & Technologies

- [Digital Connections Tool Kit](#) from UofT's dept of student life
- [Zoom](#) for virtual meetings, video chat, screen sharing
- [Google Hangouts](#) for virtual meetings, video chat, screen sharing
- [Slack](#) for team communication, meeting tools, integration with other apps
- [Discord](#) for voice and video chat
- [Google Docs](#) for virtual collaboration
- [Microsoft Office 365](#) for virtual collaboration
- [WhiteboardFox](#) for online real-time whiteboard
- Group collaboration spaces: [Stormboard](#), [Miro](#), [Google Jamboard](#), [Padlet](#)
- Time Zone Difference Management Tools: [World Time Buddy](#), [Time Zone Converter](#), [Timezone.io](#)
- Task Management Tools: [MS Project](#), [Trello](#), [Monday](#)
- Scheduling Tools: Calendar, [Doodle](#), [WhenIsGood](#)
- Other Tools: <https://tauria.com/>, <https://airtable.com/>