

Can Virtual Teams Demonstrate Emotional & Social Intelligence?

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When Manuel cut off Maria and implied her research was simplistic during the recent team webinar, most of the other team members checked out and started doing email. Maria wiped a tear away and swore to herself that she wouldn't risk participating again. The Team Leader, who is a top notch engineer and is signed up for his first management training class next month, said nothing. This interaction cost the team and the organization in terms of engagement, trust, and willingness to take risks with one another, yet nothing may ever be done about it. Virtual teams face big challenges in being able to connect at an interpersonal level. They are challenged with non-verbal communication, conflict resolution and forming a strong identity. Virtual teams are likely to struggle more than other teams in using their brain biology support system of mirror neurons, spindle cells and oscillators, which Dan Goleman and Richard Boyatzis recently described as core to using social intelligence (Harvard Business Review OnPoint, Spring 2011).

Yet no matter how big the challenges virtual teams are proliferating. So what should a good leader and organization do? Applying a team centered model to measure and build ESI (emotional and social intelligence) will provide the framework for understanding and proceeding successfully to build measurable team ESI skills. First, let's understand what we mean by ESI and by a *virtual* team.

ESI is a *set of emotional and social skills that influence the way we perceive and express ourselves, develop and maintain social relationships, cope with challenges, and use emotional information in an effective and meaningful way.*

Another way to think about ESI is that it encompasses your ability to recognize and manage your own skills and to recognize and respond effectively to those of others. These skills, or their lack, are exhibited daily by individuals, leaders and teams. The question is how well these engagement skills are demonstrated. The answer is to have a deliberate process for expanding the skills the particular team needs.

Virtual teams are teams that are working from dispersed locations so that they do not have the opportunity to work together face to face frequently.

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ESI challenges for virtual teams include:

- Developing emotional awareness of one another
- Resolving conflicts
- Developing trust
- Communications challenges prevail due to:
 - Confused or ignored commitments on response time to one another
 - Lack of visual and non-verbal cues
 - Often cultural and language differences
 - Lack of emotional and social tags that create a sense of connection
 - Relying on email to get work done

These challenges need to be taken seriously because they can cost the organization, team and individuals in many ways including through lessened engagement, decreased productivity, higher turnover, and missed creative opportunities. Fortunately, these challenges can be addressed. By using a solid model through which the team members are given a voice about their functioning as a team their ESI can measurably grow. The model we explore using is the Team Emotional and Social Intelligence Survey® (TESI®), which is composed of seven scales that measure a team's strengths or challenges. The survey is an internal 360 on team performance as it results from team members responding confidentially to a survey about their team performance. With the data in hand from the survey, the team can frankly discuss their strengths and opportunities as well as their different experiences of being on the team. Best of all they can then create an action plan to support their development. Later the team can retake the TESI and measure their progress, which will be depicted through a pre-post chart.

7 TESI Skills & Opportunities for Virtual Teams

Team Identity reflects how well the team connects with one another and demonstrates belongingness and pride in the team. It also includes role and responsibility clarification. Virtual Teams can grow this skill by:

- Making agreements and keeping them- trust builds through keeping commitments in virtual teams
- Establishing communication agreements, e.g. response time
- Clarifying roles & responsibilities
- Creating a logo or motto
- Naming themselves

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Communication reflects how accurately the team members send and receive emotional and cognitive information. It indicates how well they listen, encourage participation, share information and discuss sensitive matters. Communication indicates the extent to which team members acknowledge contributions and give feedback to one another. Trust must be built faster in virtual teams and if key components are not attended to early, the team is not likely to have the foundation it needs to get work done at a distance. Trust is initially built by making and keeping agreements. Thus strong communication strategies will support the team in moving forward to experiencing trust beginning with trusting the communication process. Virtual Teams can grow this skill by:

- Establishing a communication process with understood time commitments
- Practicing active listening virtually
- Setting up conversations in pairs – virtually have coffee or lunch
- Building reflective skills

Emotional awareness measures how sensitive and responsive team members are to each other's feelings. Does the team value and respect negative as well as positive feelings? This scale measures the amount of attention the team pays to noticing, understanding, and respecting the feelings of its members. Virtual Teams can grow this skill by:

- Taking a personality assessment and use the information, such as the MBTI or Emergenetics. Understanding work preferences will facilitate smoother interactions with team members.
- Working with the TESI to build understanding of preferences.
- Matching technology to task
- Telling stories about something that happened when working alone
- Asking questions and listening, checking out the accuracy of what is understood

Motivation is the competency that shows the team's level of internal resources for generating and sustaining the energy necessary to get the job done well and on time. It gives feedback on whether creative thinking is promoted and whether competition is working for or against the team. Virtual Teams can grow this skill by:

- Setting stretch goals
- Intentionally reinforce what works
- Catch each other succeeding and talk about it- make sure team members know this is a part of what they need to do as well

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Stress Tolerance is a measure of how well the team understands the types and intensity of the stress factors impacting its members and the team as a whole. It addresses whether team members feel safe with one another, and if they will step in if someone on the team needs help. Stress tolerance reflects the level of work/life balance that the team is able to achieve including its ability to manage workload expectations.

Virtual Teams can grow this skill by:

- Talking about a non-work joy
- Agreeing to all go for a walk at the same time
- Getting up and stretch during the virtual session

Conflict resolution scores show how willing the team is to engage in conflict openly and constructively without needing to get even. It measures the ability to be flexible and to respond to challenging situations without blaming one another. Virtual Teams can grow this skill by:

- Expanding dispute resolution skills
- Pacing one another
- Practicing paying attention

Positive Mood reflects the positive attitude of the team in general as well as when the team is under pressure. Positive mood scores indicate the members' willingness to provide encouragement, their sense of humor, and how successful the team expects to be. It is a major support for a team's flexibility and resilience. Virtual Teams can grow this skill by:

- Going to the movies together (in different cities)
- Supporting team members in setting up a time for two to use Skype or an equivalent and have a drink together, be it coffee or...
- Making a big and consistent deal of celebrating successes!

There are many resources that will support your ability to use these resources. Attend or watch our webinar on this topic, our books *Developing Emotional Intelligence: Exercises for Leaders and Teams*, *The Handbook for Developing Emotional Intelligence*, *A Facilitator's Guide to Team Emotional and Social Intelligence*, *A Coach's Guide to Emotional Intelligence*, *The Emotionally Intelligent Team*, and *Emotional Intelligence in Action*, Second Edition.

We welcome your contacting us for more information.

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