

3 Steps To Building Effective Teams While On Lockdown

By **William Oxley and Meghan Rohling Kelly** (March 31, 2020, 4:14 PM EDT)

There are plenty of new challenges for those of us working from home during the COVID-19 outbreak. One is keeping the team in teamwork.

In ordinary times, it is difficult to create a team when people are working together from distant locations. These are obviously not ordinary times.

The COVID-19 pandemic brings with it deep layers of stress that magnify feelings of isolation: Will my kids or partner get the virus? Are my parents OK? How will I get food? How can I get my work done while taking care of my kids? And on and on.

Many recent articles, including The Atlantic's piece "The Coronavirus Is a Disaster for Feminism," explain that women are likely to suffer the most if these challenges are not handled the right way, because in times like these women often trade their career for taking care of their family. Part of keeping the team together is finding a way to work that helps women feel that they do not have to make the choice between career and family.

What to do? Over the past several years, we have found ways to build a strong team dynamic while preparing for dozens of trials with team members spread out across the country. More recently, we have tweaked the way we work to confront the additional challenges of working as a team while "sheltering in place" from the COVID-19 virus. Here is what works for us.

Stay Connected

Perhaps the most important thing about being on a team is the genuine feeling that you care about each other and that you have each other's backs. Team calls and videoconferences are extremely helpful, but they should not just be a rundown of the group's to-do list.

The situation we all are facing right now is unprecedented. Pretending that it's business as usual isn't just unrealistic, it is tone-deaf and demoralizing, and it saps motivation from team members who are being pulled in dozens of different directions as they try to adjust to this new normal.

To address this, we schedule virtual coffee breaks with our teams. These are short, 15- to 30-minute videoconferences that let people catch up with one another. We talk about how we are coping (and how we are not), share helpful tips, vent and show appreciation for one another. It's an old-fashioned coffee klatch that fosters a sense of connectedness without a set agenda. If we talk about projects we are working on, fine, but that is not the point of these get-togethers.

There are any number of great videoconferencing services. Most also offer a tool that lets users pick a background picture or video, which is great for covering up the dirty laundry or messy room (or both!) that is really behind you while you are on the videoconference.

We also plan our coffee breaks in a way that reduces the anxiety of being on a videoconference during a long lockdown. Many of us have small children (or pets) who love to make an appearance when we are working. So what do we do? We invite them, of course! This has been a huge hit because it eliminates a parent's concern that a child will interrupt, and it adds positive energy.

We also implemented a strict dress code — come as you are! Don't dress up. No need to spend time doing your hair or shaving. Put on a baseball cap and sport your stubble instead! We also let people know that they can turn off the video portion of our meetings if they would like — it is more important to us that our colleagues attend and feel comfortable being there.

These calls have been a great break for all of us, and they have allowed us to feel a sense of connection in an otherwise isolating time. If you're not able to schedule something similar, at least set aside time during team calls (ideally at the start) for folks to check in with one another.

Email Doesn't Cut It — Pick Up the Phone

Today, emails and texts have become the most common way we communicate, even with people whose offices are just a few doors away. However, when your team is working from different locations, it is more important than ever to ensure that the team is actually talking to each other on a regular basis — over the phone or through videoconferences. Don't default to just sending emails.

Having virtual "in-person" conversations is critical to helping team members collaborate. Team members may feel like their ideas aren't good enough or fully formed enough to put into an email to send to the whole team.

But when you have the team communicating by phone or videoconference, it's easier to brainstorm and share ideas that might otherwise be self-censored. Collaboration is also much easier when team members are communicating in real time. People can chime in and help improve and refine ideas in a way that emails and texts can stifle.

Perhaps even more important, calls or videoconferences maintain a sense of connection among team members and keep them invested in the work the team is doing. Knowing that they must give an update to the team will help motivate team members to move their projects forward. And hearing about the progress team members have made can encourage and inspire ideas and progress in others.

Schedule Regular Calls, but Understand When Team Members Can't Join

As our days quickly fill up, it can be all too easy to push off team meetings if a schedule isn't set in advance. To avoid this, we have found that setting weekly or biweekly team calls is critical when team members aren't physically together.

It can be tempting to let the complicated logistics of trying to set up these calls prevent them from happening altogether, especially when team members are in different time zones or working from home while also dealing with kids, significant others and pets. We've all been on the email chain where a team is trying to find a perfect time for everyone to talk and it seems like midnight is the only time everyone is free!

Don't let these obstacles stop you from scheduling and moving forward with these meetings. Try varying when you have the call each week to ensure that all team members have an opportunity to participate.

Set up subgroup calls just for team members who are working on discrete projects. But regardless of who can participate, keep the calls on the calendar and go through with them with whoever is able to participate.

Creating a great team dynamic is one of the best things we can do as leaders. It's harder to achieve during trying times, but much more important and much more satisfying when you succeed. Try out some of these ideas and see what happens. We bet they will work so well, you will be using them long after the COVID-19 pandemic ends.