



A few tips for facilitating **working at a distance**

The challenge

Nowadays, more and more teams work remotely. Advances in information and telecommunications technologies enable people who have hardly ever met to work together regularly and successfully complete shared projects. Nevertheless, this way of working often leads to frustration. Technology is a poor substitute for direct contact: at a distance, communication gets far more complicated! The absence of visual contact, little knowledge about the other person's context, cultural differences, logistical difficulties – such as time zones – increase the risks of misunderstandings, which everyone must work to overcome.

A few tips

Working at a distance presents special challenges that must be dealt with. Otherwise, frustrations and inefficiency often set in.

Three essential challenges

Some useful hints

1

Create a sense of community

At a distance, the sense of community and shared responsibility is not spontaneous. You feel naturally less "close" to someone when you don't have the opportunity to get together – and when faced with a conflict of interest, you may easily be tempted to favor your immediate contacts.

- Do not hesitate to remind everyone frequently of the **objectives** that should guide the team: at a distance, it is easy to forget them or re-interpret them according to one's own context. E.g.: *"Let's not forget that our goal is above all to improve the quality perceived by our customers"*.
- Take the time to **debate everyone's ideas and convictions**. Working in different contexts may lead to a variety of understandings of the same subject. E.g.: *"In your opinion, what is a quality service?"*
- Do not hesitate to clarify or remind everyone of their **roles and responsibilities**, in order to promote a sense of shared responsibility.
- If possible, get a **common working space** going, to make the reality of the group concrete. E.g.: Intranet, newsletter...

2

Instill a climate of trust

It is never easy to share information or make decisions with people you don't know well: can they really be trusted? You should therefore continuously try to win the trust of your contacts and never give rise to doubts as to your sense of the common interest.

- Where possible, insist on creating at least **one occasion to meet up**. "Putting a name to the face", taking the time to have an in-depth discussion of serious subjects, chatting informally: all this considerably promotes trust.
- Take the time to **get to know** your contacts (by mail, telephone, etc.) beyond just business relations: career, experience, hobbies, etc.
- Ensure you **portray a professional image**: respect deadlines (otherwise, inform and explain why), answer messages, take account of the constraints of others, etc.
- Offer your **services** without expecting an immediate return: in this way, you will show your concern for the common interest.

3

Adopt strict discipline to prevent misunderstandings

The constraints of remote communication can easily lead to misunderstandings: language barrier, cultural differences, wrong or differing interpretations, difficulty in perceiving the emotions of your contacts... Only strict discipline will minimize this risk.

- **Carefully prepare interactions**, to optimize their efficiency and avoid frustrations. E.g.: Send preparatory documents and read those you receive in order to save time and focus the telephone conference on the subject in hand.
- Follow **strict discipline** when speaking. E.g.: Brief speaking time, simple language, no interruptions, etc.
- **Combine the written and spoken word**, especially when participants do not speak the same language or when the subject is complex: this will minimize the risk of misunderstandings.
- Take the time to **reformulate** what your contacts say to check that you have understood the same thing.
- **Explain the non verbal** to compensate for the limits of remote communication. E.g.: *"Paul, you haven't said anything. Do you feel comfortable with what we have just said?"*