Empowering remote teams to collaborate in a WFH world

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Many more people are working at home these days, and although much of this started with COVID-19, remote work from home (WFH) could become standard procedure for businesses around the world.

Team members may no longer work on-site, in the same building, but proper communication and collaboration is still the foundation of teamwork. Of course, this means teams need to conduct remote meetings on a regular basis, more than they ever have before. Many of us already attend conference calls all the time, but remote meetings—where every team member is working from home—that is a completely new encounter for most teams.

In this blog, I will share what I've found to be best practices that can make remote meetings— and more broadly, remote communication and collaboration—successful in the WFH world.

Retooling

If your entire team is working from home, the initial obvious need is to retool. You will need a range of new tools to enable remote communication and collaboration.

First, make sure all the team members are equipped with webcams. Cameras can feel invasive at first, and some team members may want to avoid using the camera in a conference call, but webcams are helpful. Seeing each others' faces and body language during remote meetings improves communication and can help build team trust. Since you may be conferencing regularly, this is very important.

However, when teams are forced to work remotely, communication must expand well beyond chat, and collaboration must expand well beyond video conferencing. You may need to adopt collaboration tools that bring your remote team together and inspire teamwork. For example, productivity management tools, like Trello or JIRA, can be used to track projects, enable collaboration, and keep it fun and interesting.

One tool I like is MURAL, a digital workspace for real-time visual collaboration. Visualization is useful when working remotely, helping team members become more engaged—and MURAL delivers this advantage.

With MURAL, team members can reach into the screen, into a shared collaboration space. MURAL provides unique features to stimulate collaboration, like the broadcast tool which allows the team to "follow" one team member in real time and see exactly what they see; and the sketch feature, which allows team members to illustrate ideas.

Create a Virtual Playing Field

The "virtual playing field" concept is key to any remote session that requires facilitated interaction, above and beyond a status meeting. The virtual playing field is a low-tech way teams can connect and work together in a more visual way. It serves as a one-stop shop for the team to see agendas, progress and more.

For example, a kanban board is a great tool for building a virtual playing field. A kanban board is an agile project management solution designed to visualize the team's work, and make it more tangible in a remote world.

MURAL also offers a virtual board (see a sample), where teams can outline a social contract, illustrate ideas with creative colorful design tools, create virtual versions of each team member, establish roles, visually track project milestones, and much more.

Change Behaviors

WFH is about more than just turning on your web cam. It is about more than retooling. The team does not just magically start to collaborate because you deployed a bunch of new tools. Building a remote team culture requires each team member to think differently, look at everything differently, and behave differently.

The following tips can help you and your team members adjust work behaviors to optimize your remote meetings when working from home.

Dress Rehearsal

Ramp up on the new collaboration tools before you use them in an official remote meeting. Practice makes perfect, so allocate advance preparation time to acclimate to new tools, collaboration methods and technologies. Let's call it a "dress rehearsal."

Test drive the audio and video prior to the meeting, and get all the kinks out ahead of time. This way you can focus on listening and participating when it's show time—and avoid spending the entire meeting distracted by the technology.

Prioritize Connection

Get creative about how you connect the team. Create live human experiences to make it exciting and interesting, and keep team members engaged. But also connect on a personal level, with your peers and community, to build trust.

Work effectively with the tools freely available to drive collaboration within the team, such as Zoom, Google Hangouts, and Slack.

Short and Sweet

Limit the time you spend on a remote meeting. Keep it "short and sweet." Remember that online sessions take longer—and are more draining—than on-site meetings. Time box and divide work into bite-size manageable chunks. I recommend breaking remote meetings into three parts: a warm-up, the main event, and a cool down.

Understand that remote collaboration can be more challenging when taking on large initiatives. Split up large groups, keeping synchronous time to a minimum, while optimizing asynchronous time.

Note that facilitation techniques come into play just as in a face-to-face engagements, such as:

- Continually "pulse check" to determine the team mood
- Ensure team members are engaged
- Take breaks
- Don't oversimplify the affinity mapping.

  - Affinity mapping is a practice to organize like-minded ideas and comments into categories for easy consumption. Where this practice can assist in seeing the 'big picture', individual details may be lost or misinterpreted.

Show up ready

Try to create a reliable, repeatable routine—just as if you were working on site. Be ready to turn on the camera (if you like) and engage.

Discipline is the only approach that will ensure you stick to the remote work routine, which delivers higher productivity and also greater work satisfaction.

Low-Fi

Maintain a low-fidelity virtual space for transparency. Use of a virtual white board—a single destination for checking in on progress—can facilitate a collaborative work environment. Feel free to explore additional tools and technologies if necessary, but aim to keep it simple.

Expect and Embrace Life

When you work from home, your WFH life is on a collision course with your home life. It is perfectly natural that these two parts of your life will knock into each other once in a while. One of the keys to working from home is learning how to handle this so it doesn't disrupt your work.

Always allow for life to happen. Distractions can easily happen at home. Acknowledge that it is human for unexpected interruptions to cause disruptions, and recognize that your colleagues are in the same position.

I personally welcome distraction. If my wife needs the garbage taken out, I do it. If the kids come into my office for some jelly beans, I have them sit in on my work call with me for a few minutes.

Role Call

Distribute roles and responsibilities in a democratic manner, keeping in mind that there will be a special emphasis on the roles of facilitator and note takers.

The facilitator should be focused on creating an engaging session, calling on team members while maintaining and adjusting the digital work environment.

Meanwhile, the note takers maintain the board, including:

- Taking notes on the board to help the facilitator during affinity mapping
- Ensuring items are locked
- Maintaining the quote and/or image walls
- Creating additional boards as needed
- Watching the clock

Co-facilitators are also recommended to expose one another to the different facilitation styles for continuous improvement. Co-facilitators should take turns on individual activities and try not to overlap opinions.

Gain Additional Skills with Red Hat Open Innovation Labs

Red Hat has a long history of distributed teams that work remotely, but we also have a lot of work that's traditionally been conducted face to face. For example, we have done quite a bit of work with companies in person to help deliver immersive training that helps teams develop solutions and accelerate business value.

Red Hat Open Innovation Labs has developed a virtual residency to meet the needs of customers and organizations—where the focus is to continue to deliver business value while building a culture of resilience. The virtual Labs residency extends the great work of traditional engagements to that of a virtual environment. Here are a few examples to show the virtual implications of that extension:

- Information radiation has never been more important in a virtual setting. Teams will still "walk the walls" together to ensure informational transparency and collaborate face-to-face individually and as a group, all through video conferencing tools.

- Sprint planning, daily standups, reviews, retrospectives, and many more virtual sessions can be recorded and replayed to wider audiences to increase learning and adoption of practices.

- Driving collaboration, a shared sense of alignment, and an immersive experience can build a virtually connected community focused on delivering increments as a team. Red Hat Open Innovation Labs teams are even hosting virtual movie nights and pizza parties to promote team-building and togetherness.

Leaders in open source technologies and fostering open source communities, Red Hatters are seasoned experts in building high-performing and innovative communities, remotely. For more information, join this webinar where we uncover the behaviors—enabled by tools like MURAL and practices from the Open Practice Library—that teams and leaders can use now to ensure that, despite the current working climate, teams are connected, productive, and engaged.

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Dereck Vanlandingham has a breadth of consulting experience with Accenture and Red Hat, leading large technical delivery teams across industries, sectors, technologies and methodologies. Today, He is a Digital Transformation Principal with Red Hat helping the large enterprise implement innovative solutions adopting the characteristics of *open* (community, collaboration, adaptability, transparency & inclusivity).