

## Nine Critical Actions to Prevent Team Dysfunction

*These are the nine critical actions we can take as leaders to prevent teams from being dysfunctional when working remotely.*

### 1

#### Get Set Up for Working Remotely

Ensure that you and team members have the right communications equipment and media.

This can include:

- A good microphone
- A decent Web cam
- Easy access to team-shared sites
- A place for team connections and chitchat such as Teams, Google Chat, etc.

### 2

#### Establish Clear Ways of Working

Ensure access to necessary work resources. Decide on and make known where documents will be consistently co-located and shared.

Common methods of establishing remote-work capability:

- VPN
- Virtual machine servers
- Remote desktop access

Common services for ensuring open communication and remote file-sharing capability:

- Microsoft Teams, Sharepoint, and OneDrive
- Google Docs and Hangouts

How will the team communicate?

- Daily stand-up meetings? Weekly team meetings? Weekly/biweekly 1:1s?
- How do we reach someone urgently—email? Text? Phone?
- Agreements on how often email will be checked/response times

If half of the team is in the office, how do you keep the other half informed about conversations that are occurring? Would you use email summaries? Daily stand-up meetings? Post notes on shared sites?

### 3

#### Communicate More and Use Different Media

Remote work involves increased asynchronous communication, which can lead to misunderstandings. We are missing certain cues—such as body language—that help us interpret others intent. When that information about the “source” of feedback or implied criticism is lacking, we can take things more personally.

- Make your thinking visible to others—not just your conclusions, but also how you arrived at them. Invite others to do the same
- Keep others informed by using agreed-upon methods of information sharing. It's important to keep those impacted informed of progress. This could be communicated directly or via agreed-upon updates in Teams, Sharepoint, etc.
- Signal your good intentions by generously sharing information
- Avoid making assumptions about others' intent—utilize your crucial conversation skills and plan a conversation with them to uncover what was really intended or the thoughts behind their comments

### 4

#### Be Intentional about Meetings and Check-ins

- Have tight agendas. Agendas can help virtual meetings not feel like timewasters; plan your time well
- Indicate each agenda topic as Inform, Discuss, or Decide to provide structure and stay aligned on outcomes for each segment
- Deal with topics in 10 minutes or less, as without the visual stimulation a face-to-face meeting provides, our attention spans grow short and multi-tasking becomes a greater temptation, so keep each topic short and move things along
- Encourage everyone to contribute in short, 2–3 sentence increments; Long, complex comments by anyone in the group can result in a loss of attention, so try to encourage everyone to make their points quickly and crisply. Anything more complex should be sent in writing
- Allow time for response, problem-solving, and some debate, but watch for escalating conflict and tensions that are emotional or beginning to get personal
- Select the right issues to address within the full team vs. assigned to individuals or sub-teams, and assign issues that will take more time/focus to be worked outside of meeting (and brought back to the team as appropriate)
- Assign roles at the beginning of the meeting to help with participation and purpose (facilitator/leader, note taker, timekeeper, “challenger”, etc.),
- Debrief how it went at the end of the meeting—what worked and what did not?

### 5

#### Find and Encourage Teaming and Collaboration Opportunities

- Ensure that people continue to work together on things outside of team meetings
- Partner different people up over time to foster and maintain relationships
- Recognize and celebrate both the collaboration and the results achieved
- Check-in with pairs or sub-teams regularly to ensure that they are not “stuck” due to lack of knowledge or misalignment on how to address the issue

### 6

#### Identify and Manage Conflict

Tension and conflict are natural in teams but tend to escalate faster in remote teams. Co-location provides more opportunity to work through conflict and can lessen it due to being able to read your colleagues more readily. Remote working can escalate conflict at a much faster rate as things might fester in the background. We are lacking essential data about where we stand in the group when working remotely and this can create mistrust.

Team conflict typically arises from four causes:

- Task conflict—This usually works itself out as the work gets defined
- Process conflicts—What time we'll meet, who will do what, etc. These may represent underlying issues, like concerns about roles and status
- Relationship conflicts—These typically stem from personality differences, political beliefs, etc.
- Status conflicts—These may derive from perceived lack of respect for one another's knowledge, status, experience, etc. These are usually expressed indirectly

Leaders must watch for unhealthy conflict and address it via individual and group interventions

### 7

#### Provide Feedback

Remote work requires an increase in the frequency of feedback. Feedback is based on observations, and so it becomes more challenging to provide feedback in a remote environment. Make each point of feedback meaningful for the receiver so they can take meaningful action.

Keep Feedback focused using the “What, So What, Now What” structure:

- Describe the behavior objectively. Discuss the actual behavior you saw, heard, or read about.
- Don't attempt to interpret the motivation behind the behavior.
- Describe the effect of the behavior on you, on others, on results, or on the individual.
- For all feedback: Ask for a specific future behavior

### 8

#### Ensure Accountability Mechanisms Are in Place

These five key leadership behaviors ensure that people have clear direction and priorities. They help you connect with and engage your team with the organization's work and purpose. They enable you to make the path smoother for people to achieve their goals, and help you ensure that employees have what they need to perform well and feel respected and valued as people.

Set expectations

- Make expectations clear regarding decision-making modes, communication media, and use of digital tools like MS Teams, Sharepoint, etc.
- Discuss what's on peoples' plates and ensure that priorities are clear and understood. If necessary, deprioritize lower-value or less-urgent work

Observe performance

- In virtual 1:1s and team meetings, be curious—ask, listen, and probe to understand how people are approaching their work and their collaboration with others before you offer any suggestions
- Empathize with others regarding the challenges and frustrations they are experiencing
- If virtual meetings aren't going well, offer to observe and provide advice
- Point people to resources on remote working and how to resolve tensions and conflict in remote teams
- Ask how well others are working together and if relationship-building or different behaviors are needed

Remove barriers

- Ask if remote working is creating obstacles, and problem-solve them together

Give and receive feedback

- Listen closely, in order to “catch people doing something right”
- Give 4 times as much positive as constructive feedback, and provide it ASAP after performance occurs
- Ensure that feedback is fact-based by sharing your perception, and by listening to the other person's perception. Ensure you have the full picture

Coach

- Reduce frequency of 1:1s, and media used (video, phone, chat, text, etc.) when working virtually to reduce feelings of isolation and detect lack of clarity
- Ask for and consider everyone's voices and perspectives. Show you value this collective intelligence by leveraging it for better approaches and solutions
- Observe how people's thoughts and actions while working remote are impacting other's experiences and outcomes, team culture, and systems. Give feedback and coaching if any team members experience an adverse impact

### 9

#### Celebrate Efforts and Successes

- Continue to foster a growth mindset by reinforcing and recognizing both the approach people take to their work and their results
- Organize social meet-ups—either in person or virtually—to keep the relationships within the team healthy
- Continue to celebrate birthdays, “Happy Fridays,” etc.—but do it virtually if you can't do it face-to-face

The “What, So What, Now What” sequence is adapted from a concept in Reach, Touch, and Teach: Student Concerns and Process Education, by Terry Borton (McGraw-Hill, 1970).

## About ALULA®

ALULA® is a management consultancy founded in 1993 as Continuous Learning Group, Inc. (CLG) to assist Fortune 500 companies with improving strategy execution. Today, ALULA exists to inspire and accelerate the extraordinary growth of individuals and exceptional performance of business. ALULA employs proven principles of behavioral science to help organizations more efficiently and effectively implement change, enhance leadership capability, and improve performance.