Episode #19: Tips to Improve Your Virtual Team's Effectiveness, Part 1

Welcome to THE CAREER ACCELERATOR, the podcast where corporate managers will find tips and tools to deliver results through others.

Hello. Now that so many teams are working at home due to COVID-19, in today's episode you will hear tips on how to improve your remote team's productivity and effectiveness. I'm your host, coach Percy Cannon.

In our last episode you heard several tips and insights from Jorge Montoya, a retired Procter & Gamble president. We can summarize his lessons as follows:

- "Never stop learning. You have to learn every day, even when you age."
- "Have a passion and love what you do, every day. That's the only way you are going to have fun, and to have fun, you have to love what you do."
- "Practice servant leadership—what you can do for your organization, for your company, and for your people—not the other way around. It should never be about what they can do for you."
- "And above all, be humble."

If you missed episode #18, go back and listen. It's packed with valuable advice from a president who ran the Latin America division of one of the world's premier multinational consumer goods corporations.

Today I want to provide three suggestions on how to improve a virtual team's effectiveness. This is especially timely given that many teams have transitioned to working remotely during the COVID-19 pandemic. My tips will build on what I have learned from the various companies and executives I've been interacting with since the lockdowns started in March. I will also leverage several elements from Patrick Lencioni's book, "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team", a model I have successfully used with more than a dozen teams.

You, your organization and everybody else who has managed to keep their job during this pandemic are likely facing one or more of these challenges:

- Working remotely in close quarters with other family members who are also working or studying remotely—perhaps without the right equipment and space to accommodate everyone's needs.
- Feeling overworked and understaffed, due to covering for coworkers who were laid-off or furloughed.
- Uncertainty about how long this pandemic and its repercussions will last, and
- Uncertainty about when and how you will return to your workplace. And once you return, fear of getting infected by coworkers.

On top of these and many other concerns, you have been facing the challenge of working remotely in teams, whether it's your own or cross-functional ones.

Being a bit sarcastic for a moment, one good part of all this is that the problems in-person teams faced before the lockdowns seem to be similar to the ones that virtual teams face now. The bad part is that they may have gotten worse…

Before we talk about the solution to these challenges, let's outline "The Five Dysfunctions of a Team" model from Lencioni. Once we have this down, I will lay out three suggestions that will get you started on improving your team's effectiveness now.

The first dysfunction is the **absence of trust**. This is the basis of teamwork. Trust, in this model, is defined as vulnerability-based trust, where every team member has to be comfortable asking for help, saying I don't know the answer, I'm not very good at doing this, I know you are better than me on this topic, among others.

Trust enables us to overcome the second dysfunction, which is the **absence of conflict**. If there's trust, each team member can engage in productive and unfiltered debate around the different alternatives being evaluated. No trust, no conflict, and no getting to the best possible decision.

Conflict is important because it enables us to overcome the third dysfunction: the **lack of commitment**. We shouldn't passively commit to a decision through a timid okay. Instead, every person should feel they have been listened to. They should know that they have given their point of view, it has been debated, and they can confidently walk out of the meeting room, real or virtual, 100% committed and aligned to the decision that was made by the team.

Commitment is critical because without it, members of the team will hesitate to **hold each other accountable**. This unwillingness to hold team members accountable is the fourth dysfunction, and it's typically the most difficult one to address. Simply put, if team members are NOT truly and fully committed, they're not going to hold their team peers accountable.

The final dysfunction is the **inattention to the collective results of the team**, as opposed to the results of your department or your own career or personal interests.

As promised, now that you understand the five dysfunctions of a team, we can start discussing some solutions. Let's begin with the following three suggestions:

1. The first one is, **what's your mindset during this pandemic?** Are you looking to come out of it better or worse than when it started? Beware that whatever your mindset is, it will permeate through your team interactions, whether you are the leader or a team member. Accept what you cannot change and recognize where you and your organization have space to grow and help your teams grow with you.

2. The 2nd one is to **make building a more cohesive team a priority**. Most teams already had a set of dysfunctions before the pandemic, and your team was probably not the exception. As mentioned before, you and your co-workers are facing one or more challenges which, if left unattended during this pandemic, will likely worsen your team's effectiveness. There is no end in sight for when you and your team will return to situation normal. In fact, one potential

scenario is that working side by side—at least, in a full-time model—may not happen in the near future, so assigning a priority to improving your team's remote capabilities may be one of the smartest things you can do.

3. And 3rd, **promote human interaction**. You and your team members have lost the capability to run into each other in the hallway, eat lunch together and have unscheduled conversations. One way to overcome this deficiency is by creating alternative spaces and opportunities for your team to interact.

   a. One suggestion is to include an open dialogue at the beginning of your team meetings. You can ask each person to "check-in" and share what's going on in their personal lives: Do they have an elderly person sick in their family? Are the kids starting distance learning and that's demanding a lot more of their time than they had anticipated?

   b. You can also use this same concept when you have one-on-one conversations with your direct reports or peers. Instead of jumping into discussing the topic of the virtual meeting, first show an interest in the other person. Get to know them better. Ask what you can do to help them cope with their challenges.

   c. Another idea I picked up in a podcast from Lencioni is to "advertise" to your team-members when you will be working on your own. Since they do not have the capability to know if you are alone or busy with somebody else, you can let them know the blocks of time when you'll be working on a specific topic but will still be available through Zoom, Teams, WhatsApp or a similar application so they can speak with you if needed.

   d. A final suggestion is to always have your video on in your team meetings. I know that sometimes you may not be looking your best, but you will be perceived as more human. Like your co-workers, you will also have family members and even pets show up in the middle of your virtual meetings. This is a great opportunity to show an interest in the other person by asking who they are or even inviting them in for a brief hello during the meeting.

In summary, it's obvious that all of us are feeling the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Beware that other team members, especially those in junior positions, are paying close attention to how you, as a manager, are navigating the pandemic.

You have a choice to operate with a growth mindset, or a pessimistic one.

Yes, working remotely is extraordinarily different from in-person. But these are extraordinary times. Take this unprecedented window to choose to strengthen the capabilities of your team.

In addition, choose to continue to make building and fortifying the human component among your team members and co-workers a priority, more so now that they are also being challenged by understaffing, isolation, and unclear separation between work and personal spaces.

I hope you enjoyed today's episode. In the next one, I will continue to provide tips for improving the effectiveness of your team during the current period of uncertainty.

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Percy's BIO

Percy provides corporate managers and leadership teams with customized coaching programs that help them develop the skills and capabilities needed to significantly increase their business results through others and accelerate their career growth.

Percy is an "alumnus" from three multinational corporations, Procter & Gamble, IBM & Microsoft, with whom he spent close to three decades.

Since 2011 he has been helping corporate executives, managers and employees *make the rest of their life…the best of their life®.*

Percy has worked in the United States and across several countries in Latin America as an Executive Coach, Leadership Team Consultant and Keynote Speaker, serving companies such as Microsoft, Procter & Gamble, Citibank, Tiffany & Avianca.

Percy is a Certified Professional Coach from Wainwright Global, Authorized Partner for "The Five Behaviors of a Cohesive Team" and "Everything DiSC" and certified as a "Go-Giver" speaker & coach.

He published his first book in 2012-13 in English (*The Business Apostolate: Insights to Define and Achieve Your Mission in Life*) and in Spanish (*El Negocio Más Grande de su Vida*).

Percy is a Consulting Partner with Grupo Azimuth and the Chapter Director for the COO Forum in Southeast Florida.

He has lived in 9 different cities and 5 countries, and speaks English, Spanish and Portuguese fluently.

Percy is married, has 3 children and 6 grandchildren, and is a passionate runner & reader.

He can be reached at percy@cannon.consulting.