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# Is Your Virtual Team On Shifting Sands?



## Is Your Virtual Team Operating on Shifting Sands?

Teams operating across the Gulf Region and the wider Middle East typically face major challenges achieving the results they want due to the complexity and diversity of these markets. Because of a desire to leverage modern technology and the need to manage costs, managers in this region often find themselves managing “virtual team” structures. In fact, learning to communicate across geographically scattered locations is the standard reality for many organisations in today’s modern Middle East.

Unfortunately, although virtual teams have become an indispensable reality, over 50% of them fail to achieve their objectives.

Differences between team members, a lack of face to face meetings as well as the ambiguous nature of reporting lines, can generate break-downs in working relationships, communication, trust and ultimately productivity.

One of our key insights from working with major organisations over an 8 year period, is the importance of identifying the potential negative impact virtual team structures can have on team performance.

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We simulate the above challenges in our very popular programme On Shifting Sands, where teams retrace the footsteps of Wilfred Thesiger and his exploration of the Empty Quarter in the late 1940s. We create a simulated virtual structure in terms of how the teams “on the ground” need to interact with “headquarters” and also how they need to communicate with each other in different markets.

Replicating these challenges in a fun but engaging way highlights the importance of engagement, alignment and commitment in virtual teams creates. This acts as an excellent discussion catalyst to help teams see what they can do to improve their overall performance and efficiency.



Wilfred Thesiger with his exploration team, circa 1949



## Virtual Team Pros & Cons

Research on virtual teams has discovered several challenges. But there are also certain common advantages, when these opportunities are understood by the team.

Challenges	Advantages
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Little or no loyalty to the virtual team</li> <li>2. Trust between team members is limited to professional skills</li> <li>3. Low friendship between team members</li> <li>4. Fewer shared experiences</li> <li>5. Little shared vision</li> <li>6. Varied belief systems</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Access to precious skills and expertise</li> <li>2. Flexible in terms of resourcing and support</li> <li>3. Can respond faster than a traditional team</li> <li>4. Can adapt to meet different needs</li> <li>5. Better resistance in crisis situations</li> </ol>

## Virtual Team Challenges

Virtual teams have specific challenges that will need to be dealt with. The common virtual team challenges we see include:

- Headquarters can be blamed for difficulties experienced in the field
- Delays can be interpreted as evidence for the virtual team having low priority
- Questions (e.g. meeting deadlines, adhering to schedules) can be more easily perceived as criticism
- Unity within the local in-market teams can be created through a common disappointment towards headquarters! This can lead to splintering and even attempts to go in a different direction
- Headquarters can be perceived as treating some issues as trivial when the field team sees them as important (and vice versa)

**The virtual team will only be successful if individuals are able to identify with the group and feel united as one team**



## Meeting the Virtual Team Challenges

Whether it is through an experiential team experience like our On Shifting Sands programme or through other methods, managers need to intentionally manage the virtual team challenges and make the most of potential benefits.

There needs to be an outcome and focus on behaviours such as:

- sharing information more freely,
- showing an interest, empathy and appreciation of the different perspectives across the team and geography,
- agreeing on the right way for clear and timely communicating in the virtual reality,
- recognising the importance of being aligned and sharing the responsibility for achieving the common goal.

## Our Five Top Tips for Managing Virtual Teams

1. Make more effort to involve “virtual reports” in the planning process to increase their commitment to execution. It may seem to take longer but it will greatly decrease execution time.
2. Spend more time with “virtual reports” clarifying the final outcome and defining what success looks like. And make sure different functional and geographical teams are sharing with each other their specific team focus and priorities.
3. Accept the importance of *Influence* as the key leadership skill. When staff report directly to you and are in close proximity it is much easier to gain impact on performance from a management title. But in “virtual teams” you need to engage those who need to perform for your results to be achieved in such a way so they “want to perform”. You need to positively *influence* them. That starts with getting them more involved in planning and creating the vision for success.
4. Develop a communication plan. Communication across the team needs to be much more considered, concise & planned. Involve the team in this to decide how to best keep communication working effectively. Find ways to gain more face to face communication time, including using technology.
5. “De-personalise” the tensions and friction in the team. Make sure everyone in the team understand the issues of virtual teams and how these factors can damage relationships and reduce trust. Help them see that past communication problems with colleagues are likely to be less about personalities, and more to do with the common virtual team realities.

