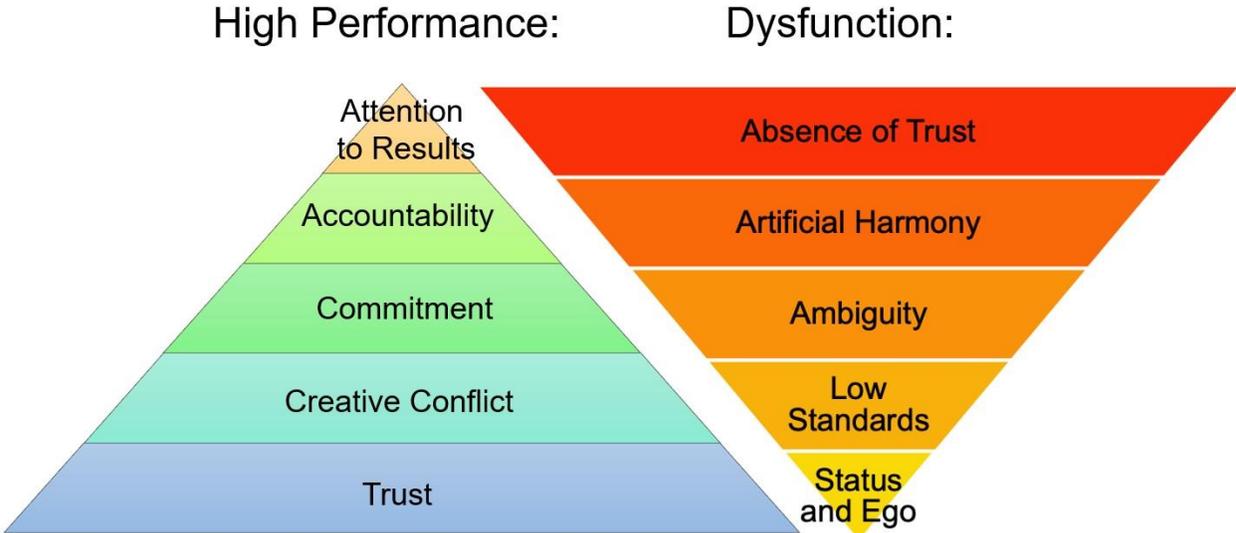


Five Habits of High Performing Virtual Teams

What characterizes a highly effective virtual team? We've put together the latest research into virtual teams to help you get a fresh, updated look at the **Five Habits of High-Performing Teams**, along with questions to help you assess how your team is doing.



The book “The Five Dysfunctions of a Team” by Patrick Lencioni provides an in-depth look at what high performing teams really do. Based on Lencioni’s work, these are the five indicators that a team is functioning poorly:

1. **Absence of trust:** People protect themselves. Roles are unclear. People stay quiet. They don’t bring “undiscussables” to the team. They appear to be invulnerable.
2. **Artificial harmony:** People don’t engage in tough questioning because they fear it will hurt people’s feelings and impede group harmony. The result is buried conflict.
3. **Ambiguity:** People are ambiguous in their commitment. Ownership of common goals is not shared. People have conflicting goals.
4. **Low standards:** When people fail to follow through on their commitments, people let it slide out of a feeling that they don’t want to hurt people’s feelings or “it’s not my job” to manage them.
5. **Status and ego:** Team members dismiss the monitoring process as “unimportant.” Members seek recognition and attention for themselves. The team does not have reports or data showing its progress.

On the flipside, Lencioni defines these as the five habits of effective teams:

1. **Trust:** Team members are clear about roles. They open up to each other. They admit their mistakes, weaknesses, concerns without fear of reprisal.
2. **Creative conflict:** People ask tough questions of one another and challenge each other’s assumptions. They probe an argument until they are satisfied.

3. **Commitment:** Everyone adopts a common goal or set of goals and commits to achieving them. Goals are defined simply enough to be easily grasped, specific enough to be actionable.
4. **Accountability:** Team members hold each other accountable for their performance. When someone under-performs, the team tells them immediately and in direct, honest terms.
5. **Attention to results:** Team members regularly monitor the team's progress toward achieving its goals. They don't gloss things over but focus on data and talk about actual results.

Now let's take a deeper dive into the research and main points of each positive habit and dysfunction.

Habit #1: Trust vs. Absence of Trust

In recent years, research has shown that trust is the key to high levels of collaboration, job satisfaction, and employee retention.

- Paul Zak published [The Neuroscience of Trust](#) which revealed people at high-trust companies report: 74% less stress, 106% more energy, 50% higher productivity, 13% fewer sick days, 76% more engagement, 29% more satisfaction, and 40% less burnout.
- A February 2021 study in the [Frontiers in Psychology](#) journal confirmed trust has the biggest influence on performance, moderated by leadership style, team cohesion, and communication.
- An article in the [Journal of Organizational Dynamics](#) (June 2020) identified several strategies to address the challenge of virtual teams: Managers need to closely monitor the levels of trust on their teams, foster inclusion through psychological safety, and assess teamwork often.
- In 2015, the [Journal of Management](#) summarized the last ten years of virtual team research, reviewing approximately 450 articles and focusing on 243 empirical studies.
 - Virtual team members tend to be more satisfied when their teams demonstrate an ability to manage conflict effectively, have reliable technology, are committed to goals, and demonstrate learning behaviors.
 - The mechanisms for enhancing virtual team success include early goal formulation, positive social environment, predictable communication patterns, structured procedures, group-based rewards, and training interventions.
 - Some of the things that predict team success include efficacy, team commitment, cohesion, team empowerment, and psychological safety.

Habit #2: Creative Conflict vs. Artificial Harmony

The research consistently shows that innovation and creativity can be sparked by a team's ability to express and debate differing viewpoints.

- Research published in the [Journal of Conflict Management](#) confirmed that there are two types of conflict in teams: Relational conflict and task conflict. Relational conflict is negatively correlated with team productivity. But task conflict is directly and positively related to team creativity.

- Further research by the [Harvard Business Review](#) showed that creativity and innovation can actually be enhanced via task conflict. Teams that express disagreements, negotiate between different views, and work under a certain amount of tension tend to be more innovative.
- An article in the [Journal of Creativity and Innovation Management](#) shows that team trust fosters a collaborative culture, which in turn enhances the creativity of the team.
- A 2020 review in the [Organization Management Journal](#) suggested that a high-trust climate along with successful conflict management is key to virtual team performance.

Habit #3: Commitment vs. Ambiguity

The research shows that virtual teams need to spend more time clarifying work priorities and expectations.

- An article in the [Journal of Management](#) identified several mechanisms for enhancing virtual team success, which include early goal formulation, positive social environment, predictable communication patterns, structured procedures, group-based rewards, and training interventions.
- A [Gallup Insights](#) report on remote work emphasizes the importance of frequent team communication, engagement, and feedback in establishing and attaining goals.
- An article in [Information Systems Journal](#) highlights the importance of developing shared meaning and understanding about goals and expectations.

Habit #4: Accountability vs. Low Standards

The research shows that more frequent feedback is key to the levels of accountability experienced in virtual teams.

- Ongoing coaching conversations that establish a rhythm of collaboration and create shared accountability are key to virtual team performance, according to an article in [Gallup Insights](#).
- The feedback and updates that support remote team accountability must be systematized and intentional. ([GetBusy Guides](#))
- Research from the [Harvard Business Review](#) notes that managers of virtual teams need to demonstrate more flexibility and empathy.

Habit #5: Attention to Results vs. Status and Ego

Finally, the research into paying attention to results focuses on adopting digital tools to help teams monitor their progress.

- [McKinsey & Co.](#) recommends that virtual teams adopt agile ways of working by setting well-defined goals, identifying short-term sprints, and holding more regular and frequent meetings. The article also encourages setting up a digital team room or dashboard for tracking progress to ensure the entire team is aligned on next steps and timelines with a focus on results.

- The [Journal of Organizational Dynamics](#) recommends focusing on results rather than on the number of hours that team members work.
- The [Australian HR Institute](#) published a 2021 report on managing virtual teams that recommended regular one-on-one time with each team member, setting clear priorities and work objectives, and using digital tools to track the flow of projects.

Conclusion

The research holds many insights into the productive – and non-productive – behaviors of virtual teams. Use the following list to determine how you're doing as a leader:

- Hold frequent check-ins – e.g. morning and afternoon huddles.
- Delegate – clarify expectations and then get out of the way.
- Follow up to ensure communication is flowing among team members.
- Provide feedback to team members often, both appreciative and constructive. Remember to be specific.
- Help people assume personal responsibility for their actions and behavior by asking powerful questions.
- Identify milestones and deliverables in writing.
- Assess results and progress on a regular basis as a team.
- Ensure that clear priorities are set and shared.
- Develop team “[operating principles](#)” such as responding within a certain time frame or regularity of check-in meetings.
- Set aside time for full discussion of challenging topics and invite full participation.
- Understand people's constraints and personal challenges. Be flexible and empathetic.
- Use digital tools to share information and enable your team to track its progress toward achieving specific milestones and goals.
- Keep asking: Where are we being successful? Why? What could we be doing better?
- Celebrate wins and milestones accomplished.
- Ask for feedback about how you're doing!