

STAY CONNECTED + ALIGNED



How To Become a
Virtual Team Overnight
During Social Distancing

Mamie Kanfer Stewart

#1. Meet regularly

If the idea of having more meetings makes you want to cringe, don't worry. These aren't your typical meetings that may often feel like they have no purpose or could have been an email. When working remotely, meetings can be an important tool for maintaining relationships, alignment on priorities and work status, and accountability for progress. Use a mix of individual check-ins, team alignment meetings, coffee dates, caves, and more to keep everyone connected and on track.

Ask yourself:

- How frequently do I need to meet with my direct reports to feel comfortable we're staying aligned and connected?
- How frequently does each of my team members want or need to meet with me in order for them to feel supported, but not micromanaged?
- How frequently do we want to meet as a whole team via video call? Why does this frequency feel right to start with?
- What kinds of meetings do you need to build relationships, help people feel connected and focused, etc?

Try this:

- As a manager, schedule individual check-ins with each of your team members to occur 1-3 times per week. Ask each person how often they'd like to connect to help determine the optimal frequency. During these 15-20 minute calls, spend a few minutes on the personal relationship by catching up on how each of you are doing in life. Then review the status of various projects or work-in-progress, make a plan to address any challenges, and identify next steps or goals for the week.
- As a team member, if your manager hasn't yet offered, ask for a weekly check-in to help you prioritize, problem solve and stay aligned.
- Schedule a 30-60 minute team alignment meeting 1-2 times per week. Spend the first part in relationship building mode. Ask an opening question such as "how are you doing right now?" or "share something that made you happy since we last met." Spend the remainder of the meeting reviewing high level goals and progress, and identifying issues, challenges or decisions that need to be made.
- Hold a daily stand-up meeting live or via chat app. Hop on a video call or create a topic in your chat app. Ask people to answer the following three questions at the same time every day:
 - What did you accomplish yesterday?
 - What will you accomplish today?
 - What is blocking you from making progress? Or what help do you need from your colleagues?

How To Become a Virtual Team Overnight During Social Distancing

- Hold a 'cave meeting' as a virtual working session. Invite people to a video meeting during which each person will spend 45 minutes working individually. Start by having each person share what they will accomplish. Everyone goes on mute during the focused work time and reports out at the end on how they did compared to their intended goal.
- Schedule 15 minute coffee dates with team members just to catch up on life and connect on a human level. Consider talking by phone instead of video so that you can both move your bodies and enjoy a physical break in addition to the mental one.

#2. Figure out your tech

The most important (and often frustrating) aspect of a high performing virtual team is their use of technology to facilitate communication and collaboration. When you need to rely 100% on virtual collaboration, you've got to have your technology figured out. If your team is new to tech, take it slow. You don't want to overwhelm the team with multiple new apps to learn all at once. Instead, decide what is needed most (hint, it's a chat app if you're not using one yet.) Give it some time and then layer in another tool as the need arises.

In terms of what tech you might need, here the types of tools I recommend:

1. Chat app such as [Slack](#), [Microsoft Teams](#), [Chanty](#), [WhatsApp](#)
2. Virtual meeting software such as [Zoom](#), [GoToMeeting](#), [Join.me](#), [Google Hangouts](#)
3. Collaborative documents (real-time shared editing) such as [Google Docs](#), [Microsoft 365](#), [Dropbox Paper](#)
4. Project or task management such as [Asana](#), [Trello](#), [Basecamp](#), [AirTable](#), [Monday](#)
5. Online brainstorming such as [Stormboard](#), [Padlet](#), [Miro](#), [Cardsmith](#)
6. Online polling or interactive meeting tools such as [Lucid](#), [Slido](#)

Ask yourself:

- What technology is available through my organization?
- Are there any policies I need to be aware of when choosing software to use with my team?
- Which software tools will give us the greatest ROI (return on investment)?
- What are we struggling with most right now as a new virtual team?
- How tech savvy are we as individuals and as a group?

Try this:

- As your IT department if there are any tools they suggest or are making available to teams. Offer to help pilot a new software and share your learnings with them.
- Ask your team members what tools they're already familiar with that they think would help the team stay connected and aligned. Using tech people are already familiar with will shorten the learning curve and generate buy-in.
- Start with a chat app. This enables quick work conversations, like those you'd have in the office, as well as more casual relationship-building interactions. Create topics for work and for fun. Role model using both to encourage engagement.
- For meetings, have a back-up plan in case the tech fails. For example, if you normally use Zoom, everyone knows you'll switch to a Google Hangouts if needed.
- If your team isn't tech savvy, schedule a team practice session during which you or another team member orients everyone to the new software. Think of it like a live demo with interactive Q&A time.

#3. Use a chat app

I know it's mentioned above, but it's so important it's worth saying again.

Chat apps are the easiest and most effective way of staying connected at a distance. Most are extremely user friendly and the basic functionality is all that's really needed. The beauty of a chat app is that it will not only reduce your email communications, it will also make your interactions more efficient and more enjoyable.

In addition, nothing makes you feel like you know someone as quickly and as easily as seeing photos of them. It's why you can follow a friend on Facebook who you haven't seen for years and suddenly feel like you know them and their hobbies, kids, pets, etc. It may be a strange phenomenon, but we can use this to our advantage while we can't meet in person (and after!)

Ask yourself:

- What work topics do we have regular conversation about?
- How broad vs granular do the topics need to be? (My recommendation: start with broad and make subtopics later if you find the broad topic begins to house too many conversations simultaneously.)
- What fun topics might we include such as family photos, funny news, interesting articles, etc.
- What norms or ground rules do we need to help us use a chat tool effectively?
- What am I comfortable sharing about my life at home? How can I show authentic pictures of my life? (Remember, this is not social media. It's more important to be yourself than to be polished.)

Try this:

- Brainstorm the topics with your team. Then set up the topics before inviting everyone to join. Be sure to invite people to the appropriate topics to make it easier for them to start using the tool.
- Have a team meeting about how to use the chat tool. Agree to norms such as:
 - If something is unclear, pick up the phone.
 - Set your availability so everyone is aware of who is on/off line
 - Be respectful in your messages. Treat this similarly to how you would interact in person.
 - Use emoji reactions to show you've read a message instead of responding "ok".
 - @mention someone when you are requesting an action or response
- Encourage everyone to download the app on all devices and keep it open on their desktop. This will be a visual reminder for people to collaborate within the chat app instead of email.
- Encourage everyone to set up their notifications to avoid being overwhelmed as the team gains momentum with the app.
- Encourage each person to take photos of their workspace and post them in your chat app so everyone can visualize where each person is sitting all day.
- Capture 1-2 pictures every day or so of your life at home. This could be your cute pet, your family, the results of a game or completed puzzle, a meal, etc. Anything that gives people a sense of your life. Share these pictures on your team's chat app.

#4. Do something fun as a team

Just because we can't be together, doesn't mean we can't have a good time. Team building at a distance requires some extra creativity and effort, but it's often well worth it. Not only can it strengthen the team relationships, it can help reduce loneliness and provide some positive mental distractions during a stressful time. Encourage the team to take risks and try something they might otherwise be less enthusiastic about. These are wild times, so why not be a little wild yourself?

Ask yourself:

- What might this particular group of people be excited to do together virtually?
- What type of team building or fun do we need right now? How strong are our current relationships? How comfortable are people with each other already?
- Is something more professional or more playful a better fit for this group?

Try this:

Ask the team to help brainstorm and decide on the fun activities. Start the group off by sharing some of these as options:

- Everyone bakes banana bread or cupcakes or pretty much anything (using their own or a shared recipe). Share photos of the finished result.
- Watch a movie, tv series or short video and meet to discuss it. (Could be something purely fun on a streaming service like Netflix or more work oriented such as TED.)
- Collectively join an online live class such as yoga, cooking, singing.
- Do a virtual talent show by setting up a video call and allowing each person to show off a talent such as music, dance, a craft project or dish they've prepared.
- Take turns selecting a podcast episode, article or book for everyone to consume and then meet to discuss. The person choosing decides what the topic is.
- Start your meetings with a fun check-in question. Questions such as:
 1. If you were a superhero, what would be your power and your name?
 2. What's your spirit vegetable and why?
 3. What was your favorite movies as child and why? How many people have seen it?
 4. Share gifs in your chat tool and play with other fun technology features such as Zoom backgrounds.
 5. Host a BYOB virtual happy hour and encourage people to join with their partner.

#5. Show up for your people

We all have preconceived notions of what makes for a rockstar manager and a high performing employee. But right now, all bets are off. Each of us is navigating this moment differently, dealing with our own particular situation. The best thing you can do as a manager is simply show up for your people. Do your best to be available when and how they need you. And, be honest about your own capacity and struggles. We're all in this together and your team is there for you, too.

Ask yourself:

- What can I do to let each of my team members know I'm here to support them and I'm thinking about them?
- What questions can I anticipate my team having about our work, our company, their role, etc that I can proactively find the answers to?
- What's hard about this moment for me that might inhibit me from being my best self?
- What do I need from my team right now to help me get through this?

Try this:

- Encourage people to take sick and vacation days to the extent they need them to help manage their physical or mental health.
- Reduce the pressure or slow down timelines when the dates are no longer meaningful.
- Ask your team members what they need from you or how you can support them right now.
- Be transparent in sharing information about the company or team's work in a timely manner. Let the team know you'll keep them informed. Then do it.
- Offer to meet with each person individually as often as every day if that's what they need.
- Give people the benefit of the doubt and some extra leeway. Life is so unpredictable and stressful that it's almost impossible to be at the top of your game right now. But, don't let excuses take over. Be kind and try to distinguish between genuine disruptions and a lack of motivation or focus. Respond to each appropriately.
- Talk to your team about what you need from them. Be explicit about behaviors, dates, workload, etc that needs to happen.
- Be honest about your experience right now. Share what is difficult for you and your vision for how you want to show up as their manager.
- Give yourself a break. If you make a mistake, miss a deadline, or otherwise don't meet your own standards, it's going to be OK.

Want more?

Join live or get the replay of the webinar *Staying Connected and Aligned*. Go to www.mamieks.com/webinars to grab your ticket or purchase the replay.

Mamie Kanfer Stewart is host of *The Modern Manager* podcast and author of *Momentum: Creating Effective, Engaging, and Enjoyable Meetings*.

Through her podcasting, writing, coaching, workshops and courses, Mamie shares best practices and practical advice for how to be a rockstar manager with a thriving team.

Learn more about Mamie and get more great content at www.mamieks.com