

Tips for Managing Virtual Teams and Branch Location Culture from Afar



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Few things are less quantifiable, more important, and more difficult to directly influence than a company's culture. In the modern era, where managing virtual teams and other distributed entities is the rule, a measure of cultural consistency is a written-in-stone necessity. This is something small fish and big players alike must manage for the sake of the name on the awning.



The right technology can make managing virtual teams easier and more effective.

And, despite the challenges a long-distance working relationship can represent, today's executives can't just give up on imposing a singular culture because their virtual enterprise operates under more than one roof. Giving your locations the same feel, regardless of geography, can yield productivity benefits and make sure remote employees get a consistent workplace everywhere.

Here are a few takes on making your culture more portable in the mobility era:

Formalize and Centralize

The word "formalize" doesn't always conjure images of a happy, productive workforce, but according to Recruiter, building a distributed culture gets a lot easier when you know what it is and what you're trying to get from it. The first step in that process is asking yourself and your team questions about the company's end goal, core values, and approach to productivity, and coming to thoughtful, collaborative answers.

You may discover that your company puts a lot of stock into communication and collaboration. You could also find that you're in a laid-back workplace that doesn't dictate process or strict behavior standards as long as the ethical end results are there. Maybe you'll discover a more formal, buttoned-down environment. Or, maybe you'll discover something else entirely.

Whatever that "something" is, write it down. Since this is an attempt to instill or influence culture, you may wish to only include positives to emulate. That said, this could also be an opportunity to identify and eliminate negative factors, which can obviously affect employee engagement and productivity. Either way — and even if you think you have a good grasp of your company's culture — be sure to put it on paper first. You may be surprised at what you find.

Ears to the Ground

At the risk of sounding cheesy, it also goes without saying that workplace culture — both company-wide and on the individual-location level — is a living, breathing, organically cultivated thing. Keeping every location in cultural lock-step may not be fully possible because of this, especially considering how hard culture is to force.

However, that doesn't mean it can't be influenced or nudged in a certain direction. More, the high-level aspects you noted earlier can often be implemented through policy, management behavior, tone of internal communication, and other obvious and not-so-obvious avenues.

When managing virtual teams and other branches, one such not-so-obvious avenue — asking employees directly — can be huge in determining and dictating culture. This is especially pertinent since employees at all levels, from management to HR to ground-level reps, tend to believe their particular roles are the primary cultural influencers within their workplaces. Though you may not be present in every location long enough to get a real feel for their internal culture, and while employees are undoubtedly likely to understate any reservations, pinpointing trustworthy sources within branches and speaking to them regularly can yield real, workable results for individual roles and the company at large.

Translate with Technology

Once you've located positive cultural aspects and things worth changing, the next challenge is to replicate them. When you're managing virtual teams, chances are you're making heavy use of unified communications and collaboration (UC&C) tools. Just like they enable basic work, these solutions will likely play a key role in replicating your culture across office walls.

The "laid-back" office referenced earlier provides one example to follow. While lax attendance policy may be acceptable when the job's getting done, there will still be times when productive but MIA employees are desperately needed. This problem is easy enough to handle in single settings but increasingly difficult with a growing number of branches. Presence tools and cloud-based collaboration solutions can make it easier to track these troublesome-yet-productive employees and continue with the get-your-stuff-done atmosphere across locations. This will enable a greater level of collaboration than businesses working without cloud collaboration tools would be able to muster.

The other, more formal office can glean similar benefits from communication and collaboration tools. For example, weekly performance meetings could be held on a company-wide basis despite a growing number of locations, while particularly zealous regional management

could use video tools to check on compliance concerns at multiple branches at once.

In both cases — and countless others — the goal is to nudge branch office culture in the same direction as the rest of the business. In some sense, the policy governing these locations should do most of the heavy lifting. Instead of trying to force its hand, company leaders concerned about replicating a successful culture should do what they can to identify the positive aspects, then cultivate them everywhere within the company.

To mangle the old saying, you'll know you're doing the right thing when it seems like you haven't done anything at all. Happy growing!

To learn more about how technology can help you develop your company culture, reach out to a Vonage Business representative.