

Building world-class cohesion, unity and alignment in a completely virtual, global team

Let me start by saying I love my job! I am privileged to lead a sales organization of 1,800 people, located in 52 countries and spanning 19 time zones. It's extremely challenging and rewarding and, thanks to the great team I have, we are delivering outstanding results for the company and have been for multiple years.

Almost any organization performs at a higher level, the more people are aligned to the mission or objectives they're working towards. I have learned that the sense of identity, purpose and achievement people feel propels them ever faster toward their results. When people work together in a more cohesive, joined-up way, they also drive improved results through stronger engagement. A genuine sense of unity, togetherness and camaraderie is a very powerful ingredient that separates great teams from merely good teams.

In my prior role I was able to drive strong alignment, cohesion and unity in my organization in a more straightforward and traditional way than I can today. I could hold a meeting to share our strategy, plans and objectives, and everyone could attend in person. I could take team members out for lunch. Spontaneously, I could have a one-to-one meeting with a colleague or employee over a coffee without thinking twice. And I could celebrate people's success in person every time. I could also sense disquiet more readily, feel when people became disengaged and smell undermining behavior. By leading in this in-person, face-to-face and local way, I was able to build and maintain that sense of alignment, cohesion and unity by physically being there.

Now I can't physically be there. In fact, even trying to be there would be a pointless approach. Attempting to visit 52 countries in a year.... well, you can do the math!

My story is about how I have been able to build and maintain a high level of alignment, cohesion and unity in a dispersed global team with whom 99% of my interactions are virtual and not in person.

Let me say right up front, it hasn't been easy and it has required me to take my personal leadership to a whole other level. But it has provided me with some invaluable insights and lessons that I want to share in this article, with the hope that they may help others in similar circumstances to lead more effectively in today's highly virtual world. I have put my thoughts in five areas. However, in reality, these topics are very interwoven.

1. *Building a cohesive and united leadership team is even more critical in a virtual organization.*

I have always believed that the health of any organization is directly tied to the health of its leaders – their ability to lead individually but also work together as a strong team. I have found that in a highly global and virtual team like the one I am leading ensuring that tight alignment, unity and bond between the senior leaders is even more critical. For me, everything starts and ends with my leadership team. They have to amplify and re-enforce the strategy and execution of our business plan. They are the custodians and drivers of our culture, therefore they need to embody the values of the organization and they have to play as a team. Because most of the time they sit in different corners of the globe, it is ten times more important that they do all this in a unified, consistent, responsible and mature way. Making sure my leaders feel comfortable operating as empowered leaders became very meaningful to me. In fact, it was and is a practical necessity. But I also spent a lot of time driving the notion and expectation that with empowerment comes great responsibility and accountability – to act, behave, lead and evangelize our team culture and vision in the most passionate and effective way.

2. *Balancing technology and face-to-face to communicate and engage.* There are some very powerful and effective technology-based tools out there. I know, because my company makes many of them. However, I have learned that these tools are only as effective and useful as the context they are used in. Thinking back now, I can see that in my previous role I became somewhat complacent with my use of face-to-face meetings because I could have as many of them as I needed. I would use face-to-face meeting time for presenting 'updates' or 'operations reviews' or other such 'read out' content that could have been dealt with via email prior to the meeting or in conference calls. This meant people were intermittently engaged and it made them feel the meetings weren't a great use of their time. I felt the same when I was invited to these type of meetings. In my virtual global role I have changed my practice. First, I bring my leaders together for a face-to-face every quarter and I compliment that with weekly video meetings. Some leaders feel that bringing a team together this frequent is too much. And when budgets are tight this is often one of the things that gets cut first. I have learned to think about this as a critical investment, not a cost, so I have ensured to continue this practice in good and bad times. This change has also caused me to be more thoughtful and deliberate about how I use

each type of meeting. The weekly video meetings are only for day-to-day updates, tactical issues and for the 'read out' related content. I reserve all the meatier topics such as strategy formulation, longer term thinking, reviewing talent, and assessing how we are operating as a team, for our face-to-face interactions where being physically together is an absolute necessity. Matching the right content to the right meeting has been both a major learning curve for me, and also a key element of my success in creating and maintaining powerful alignment and cohesion with my leaders.

3. *Bringing all my managers together in person one week a year goes a long way to fuel, energize and inspire 51 weeks of virtual high performance team dynamic.* Over the last 3 years I have brought all my managers together in person once a year for a week-long meeting packed with business strategy, personal development and fun. Again, because building a strong and genuine environment of communication, connection and ownership is so critical, but also more difficult in a virtual organization, I have viewed this practice as an investment and not a cost and kept it relentlessly. In addition, having only one chance to touch and inspire my people made the meetings very special and it required us to make sure these events were really impactful at a collective and personal level. I found the energy that came out of them lasted for the entire following year. In fact they are now viewed as 'transformational events' that people look forward to and are raving about, not merely 'meetings!'

4. *Making every interaction count.* Leading a team of 1,800 people remotely means that even over the course of 12 months I am unable to meet everyone in person. I meet my team members in virtual meetings throughout the year or in my visits to their countries. Although my leaders always represent me and our message in their regions and countries, it is important for me to still have a strong and meaningful presence and brand throughout my global team. So, I have developed the heightened awareness and orientation of making sure that every time I interact with one of my team members it is meaningful, impactful and it added value professionally and also personally. In short, I have become far more responsible about how I show up at any and every opportunity.

5. *Ensuring clear, simple and slogan-free communications.* It is tempting, and a habit, when communicating strategies and plans to use corporate phrases and jargon as we think it makes the communication more 'heavyweight'. I have to communicate, align and build cohesion in a team spanning 50 countries with huge diversity of language, culture and beliefs so I have learned to consciously communicate in 'plain English' and avoid slogans that are clear in 'American' or English but foreign to most others. I have had to make sure my messages are not only clear and simple enough for everyone across the globe to connect to and understand, but that they are relevant to people in terms of what they mean for their day-to-day roles in their local environment. When I was a

child we use to play the game 'broken telephone' where one of us whispered a message into another person's ear and it went around in whispers until the last person said what he heard. It was always a completely different message than we started out with. I have often viewed corporate communication of key messages in the same way. Typically by the time messages reach the third level down they are completely distorted and unclear. You can imagine the added complexity in a highly global and virtual team. I have found that by boiling down the messaging to the essence and core, we have been able to drive clear distinctions and simplicity in the key elements of our strategy, and we lose less meaning in translation through the ranks of our organization.

John Donovan, VP of Cisco Global Virtual Sales, is a genuine people-leader who is passionate about building the collective strength of a team and empowering people to do great things. Connect with John on [LinkedIn](#).