

A true story...

Several years ago I did a consulting job with a large pharmaceutical company in Chicago. It was an International organization and was setting up virtual teams. There were six vice presidents in the group I worked with, five men and one woman. Each of these VPs was to have his/her own International team for new drug development. A lot of the discussion in that session was around whether or not to bring the team members together for an initial face-to-face meeting as a kick-off. That is not the only thing we talked about in the two days I worked with them, but it was a recurring theme. While all admitted it would be nice to do, most resisted doing it because of the cost to their budgets. We are talking about team members from all over the world here. The decision by the time I left was that they did not all have to do the same thing, that each VP could make the decision on their own. What happened was that the five male VPs decided not to bring their team members together to kick off the team, that they would use their budget money to build technological support for their teams. The female VP decided she could not manage her team without such a meeting and proceeded to get one scheduled as soon as possible. When I went back six months later for a follow-up, the only VP who still had a functional team was the woman VP. None of the other teams had made it off the ground because they had never met face-to-face, in spite of all the time and money invested in their development, in their communication tools, etc. Meeting face-to-face allows people to get to know each other faster and to then talk to each other virtually in a more open and honest way. So far as I know, she continued to do these face-to-face meetings annually until the company went out of business. It went out of business because five of the virtual teams were not able to develop new drugs fast enough to keep the business going, and the one successful team could not save the company on their own. This company learned its lesson too late. "Penny wise and pound foolish."

The teams I developed at the manufacturing company met each week for one hour, even if they "had nothing to talk about." No one was allowed to cancel a meeting, no matter how busy the schedule was. Management had built into the staffing plan one hour per week of paid time for each person to attend a team meeting. That structure is one of the things that lead to their ultimate high performance.