



Building Collaborative Virtual Teams: A Personal Interview with Jaclyn Kostner

By Cinda Daly

“Fast is no longer fast enough. Incremental increases in speed just won’t cut it in a new era that demands quantum leaps in virtual team performance. Velocity is about hyperspeed – teamwork, performance, and results that are magnitudes faster than teams create today.” This reality sets the stage in Jaclyn Kostner’s latest book, *Bionic eTeamwork*.

She goes on to explain how the communication best practices that worked when teams worked in one building are too slow and ineffective in a world that demands a continual stream of record-breaking results. “The key to success,” says Jaclyn, “isn’t just to plug in or log-on to some new technology. Instead, it centers on the human side: how people embrace and use technology’s power to create fast teamwork, fast collaboration, and fast results from wherever in the world people happen to be communicating.”

Jaclyn is an international expert on collaborative, high-performance, virtual teamwork and best selling author of *Kings of the Tele-Round Table* and *Virtual Leadership*. She talks candidly about the need for speed and how to dramatically increase team velocity and cohesiveness from afar.

Daly. What is eTeamwork?

Kostner. eTeamwork is a significantly more effective and evolved form of virtual teamwork. eTeams are next-generation virtual teams. They work across many virtual locations (home or mobile offices, different buildings, vendor sites, and other global locations), yet they perform as a tightly aligned, high trust, superbly motivated unit. While virtual, they enjoy a quality in their communication that is human, interactive, and effective—even among team members that have never met. As a result, eTeams break all records for success because the leader and the team no longer have to wait for the next face to face meeting to work issues, communicate, and build rapport.

To the contrary, eTeams do it right from the desktop, but in ways that are distinctly superior, satisfying, and productive. The more global the business, the more critical is the need to evolve to eTeamwork.

eTeamwork is not about technology. It’s about technique and trust. It’s a whole new approach to communicating in your global help desk organization that will give you a competitive edge, and save you a lot of stress, as leader.

Daly. GroupWare, Webinars, conference calls wedded to PowerPoint presentations, and teleconferencing centers have been in play for years. How do eTeams use these differently?

Kostner. One of the greatest failings of virtual teamwork is the Death-by-PowerPoint eMeeting. People use interactive technologies, such as web conferencing, to connect with one another. But little to no interaction happens. Instead, everyone passively listens or watches a slide show, and most will process their email or other items on their desktop while the meeting plays out in the background, like a radio.

In sharp contrast, eTeams use interactive time and interactive technologies (like web conferencing) to vigorously interact in ways that often are superior to face to face. For example, in a conference call, only one person can talk at a time. But in a web conference, people can speed up verbal interaction by

combining it with chat brainstorming, live interactive polls, and onscreen annotations—all used in purposeful ways to solve problems, speed decisions, and secure alignment. Fast, relevant, continual interaction is the key.

No team was ever built by watching PowerPoint slide shows or listening to only one person talking. Trust requires interaction, and leaders need new skills to drive interaction in this new environment. Interaction must be planned into every aspect of the eMeeting, and those skills become very easy to master with training.

Daly. In a nutshell, what emerging technologies deliver collaborative capability?

Kostner. Three emerging technologies enable significantly improved eTeam collaboration: (1) web conferencing, (2) instant message, and (3) electronic team room (24x7). But here's a key point. Today's technology can do just about anything you want it to do. Thousands of virtual teams have these technologies today, and achieve no benefit. eTeams, on the other hand, achieve superior benefit from these technologies because they use them to significantly improve team collaboration, relationships, and results.

So, if you have any of these technologies and have not yet gotten a significant boost in team rapport and results, the problem isn't the technology. The problem, instead, is on the people side of integrating technology. People make a team. Communication makes a team. Trust makes a team. All of us that communicate virtually have to be smarter about how to leverage technology – not just to pass information, but rather to collaborate and build trust.

Daly. The technology can't be that difficult to learn how to use, can it?

Kostner. Collaborative technology is intuitive. How to get the virtual team members to collaborate with it isn't. There was a time when people had the time to experiment with new technology, to learn it when they had some extra time. Today's fast-paced virtual teamwork, however, requires a level of human assimilation and human sophistication with technology that can't be learned on the fly.

The magic occurs only when people learn how to use electronic tools to enhance their human ability to communicate – to build trust, to collaborate, to get results, and otherwise be more effective. Bottom line: people have to learn how to communicate in ways that feel as natural, comfortable, and personal as being face to face. These new skills must be learned and practiced, and do not automatically happen because you use any new technology—no matter what the sales representative tells you!

Daly. A common thread in our discussion is that eTeamwork success requires much more than the technology.

Kostner. This is a critical point. How effective is web conference technology if it hosts a boring Death-by-PowerPoint meeting vs. hosting a highly collaborative team session? How effective is an electronic team room if it acts a messy file cabinet, rather than as a powerful eCollaboration space? How effective is instant message if it is a source of constant low-value interruptions, rather than as an essential “rubbing elbows” moment for eTeam members that must collaborate spontaneously?

Putting a technology on a desktop doesn't make a team. How the eLeader and eTeam communicate with one another *through* new technologies is the key to success. Communicating isn't about how to load a file or send an instant message. It's how to get people aligned when you can't see their faces. It's how to know people are engaged when you can't see their desktops. It's how to get everyone comfortable participating comfortably and eagerly when meeting across languages and cultures.

Daly. Assuming the right technology and a new level of skill for using that technology, how do you help people create this sense of teamwork across time, space, and culture?

Kostner. That's a simple question with a complex answer that I devoted three chapters to in my book!

Daly. Fair enough! What is the best way to leverage web conferencing technology?

Kostner. First, virtual teams must master how to build trust from the desktop, or they will never evolve to eTeamwork. The best way to create a sense of teamwork across distance is create exceptional team interaction every time your team communicates virtually. Every time a virtual team interacts effectively from the distance, they build trust and sense of team.

Take a moment to think about interaction when your virtual team travels to be together, vs. when they attend meetings virtually. Most virtual teams say that interaction is vibrant when people are face to face, but is very low during conference calls or Death by PowerPoint web conferences. The best way to build sense of team in web conferencing is to use its chat, polling, and annotation features to speed up interaction, problem solving, point making, and agreements.

Daly. How about electronic team room technology?

Kostner. The same rules of web conferencing apply to electronic team room technology. If your eTeamRoom feels like a repository of junk files that no one uses, the team will not interact there. On the other hand, if you and your team have strong norms to guide its use, and if those norms make this 24/7 resource a critical collaboration place for certain aspects of your virtual team files, then people will visit it, contribute to it, and collaborate on it. Value, organization, and norms are critical words to help you guide its use.

Daly. Finally, you offer a distinct way to view using instant messages as a collaborative tool.

Kostner. Instant message capability lets virtual teams eliminate the eight-foot rule. The eight-foot rule says that if people have the need to communicate, and they pass within eight feet of each other, that they will stop and talk. If they are greater than eight feet apart, their communication frequency drops exponentially. Instant message lets virtual teams be “one click away” from collaborating with each other. And the research shows that if they have the need to communicate, they will click to meet spontaneously.

The challenge with instant message is that many may use it too frequently for non-important communication that interrupts work for the recipient. So strong norms on this technology let the eTeam members communicate spontaneously with the frequency they need for success. As a result, they will feel a stronger sense of team.

Daly. Sometimes, face-to-face just can't be substituted for anything else, can it?

Kostner. Absolutely true! No matter how much technology surrounds an eTeam, teamwork is first and foremost a human process. If you want the best levels of eTeamwork, face-to-face communication is an essential investment in success. Every eLeader and eTeam needs to build trust and rapport, and face-to-face communication is still the best way to accelerate that.

The trap that many virtual teams fall into is when they feel that face-to-face time is the only place where they can create the communication and rapport they need for success. If you hear your people say that the only time they feel like a team is when they travel to be together, you have a big problem. Most virtual teams spend at least 95% of their time apart, and some large help desk organizations spend 100% of their time apart. Yet, they have the same essential need to connect on a human level with one another, feel a warm sense of team, and be comfortable working together from the desktop.

It is important for people that work together to have traditional ways to build relationships—going out to dinner, participating in fun and interactive training, and otherwise doing activities that jump start relationships while together. The fastest way to give trust a boost is through strategic travel with the primary focus of accelerating human relationships. So, travel to build relationships, not to do the work.

Daly. What do companies have to do to prepare for working at hyperspeed virtually?

Kostner. Research has shown there is a right and a wrong way to get people to embrace technology and use it effectively to build rapport and results. Start with four proven best practices that make a difference:

1. Designate a technology champion, who commits to advocating the purchase of any needed software, supporting any needed training, and providing the leadership.
2. Set clear expectations for behavior. Don't say "Use WebEx for all eMeetings." Do say, "Use WebEx in ways that dramatically speed our decision making and buy-in."
3. Provide best-practice training with the emphasis on communication, trust, and collaboration, not on technology.
4. Understand that this skillset is the most significant change in communication since people learned to speak. The skills will evolve over time and will need continual attention and upgrading.

Daly. You've worked with dozens of companies and eLeaders to build eTeamwork. What are the most striking results you have seen?

Kostner. Trusting relationships that are built and rejuvenated from afar by the way people communicate with one another are the primary factors for success. In reality, virtual teams have an urgent need to create and build trust with each other—to an even higher degree than face to face teams. Whether your virtual team numbers in the 10s, 100s, or 1000s of people, pay attention to the human side of virtual teamwork.

The teams that are showcased in my book cut decision time by 50-90%, improved productivity by up to 900%, and all enjoyed a very strong and vibrant sense of team. They didn't get there with conference calls, email, or Death-by-PowerPoint meetings.

To the contrary, communication is disciplined to create relationships, interactive to create trust, and effective to reduce miscommunication. Effective eTeamwork is created by effective eLeaders. It's an experience that will change you and your whole team.

SIDEBAR:

Achieve eTeamwork

Adapted from *Bionic eTeamwork*, by Jaclyn Kostner

eTeamwork doesn't happen by chance. It happens by design. It's part of a highly disciplined focus on the human issues of communicating in a virtual environment. You know you have achieved eTeamwork when:

1. Collaboration from the desktop is warm, natural, and often more effective than face to face.
2. You and your team enjoy an energized sense of team when you collaborate from the desktop.
3. eTeam productivity is dramatically higher across multiple locations, and created with less stress.
4. eTeam relationships are solid, trusting, and collaborative—even among people that have not met face to face or have not seen each other for many months.
5. eTeam members no longer feel that they have to travel to communicate effectively.
6. eTeam members communicate with a personal touch in ways that feel like a handshake, yet is executed from the desktop.
7. No one is disadvantaged by location from being a full and equal participant in team interaction, problem solving, and decision-making.
8. People know how to choose the right media for the message, so trust and results flourish.
9. eCommunication is highly disciplined, so no one is left out, and expectations are clear.
10. eTeam members are comfortable and skilled to communicate effectively via collaborative technology so that rapport and productivity soar.

Jackie will share striking examples of companies that have built high-performance virtual teams in her high-energy, idea-packed keynote, "TOUCH-nology: Best Practices for the World's Most Successful Virtual Leaders," [insert hyperlink <http://www.thinkhdi.com/hdi2005/session.aspx?SessionID=429>] at

HDI 2005 [insert hyperlink <http://www.thinkhdi.com/hdi2005>]. She will follow up her keynote with an in-depth breakout session, “Next Generation Global Business: Getting High Performance Virtually,” [insert hyperlink <http://www.thinkhdi.com/hdi2005/session.aspx?SessionID=533>].

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