Leading Effective Virtual Teams

Overcoming Time and Distance to Achieve Exceptional Results

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Make no mistake: Virtual teams have many advantages over their co-located counterparts. For example, they can make use of a 24/7 workday by parceling out tasks across time zones so their projects never sleep. Team members typically represent a diversity of cultures, skills, perspectives, and capabilities, creating an uncommonly rich resource pool from which all can draw. Plus, virtual team members are more likely to have access to valuable connections and resources they can share for the greater good of the whole team.

People who work on virtual teams often work on large complex virtual projects, which tend to have more visibility, and which, if successful, can help bolster credibility and advance careers of everyone on the team. And, when communications are working well and collaboration is strong, being part of a virtual team can be a rewarding learning experience, and a lot of fun.

1.1 Unique Challenges of Virtual Teams

Trouble is, despite advances in collaboration tools and technology, many virtual teams still struggle when it comes to working in lock step. They want to be able to work more efficiently, effectively, and enthusiastically, but they’re not sure how.

The special challenges of virtual teams, especially those that span cultural boundaries, include:

- Large enterprisewide projects tend to be highly complex, with many moving parts, requiring exceptionally well-orchestrated communications and carefully linked activities.
• In the absence of face-to-face (FTF) communications, including opportunities to socialize and get to know one another, virtual team members take longer to develop trusting relationships.
• Time zone differences can limit the number and length of real-time conversations, narrowing communication options.
• Cultural and language differences often act as invisible tripwires, making communications frustrating and collaboration difficult.
• Vacation schedules and multiple national holidays mean that many virtual teams have fewer days to get work done.
• Virtual teams tend to operate from an uneven playing field, in terms of proximity to leader or power base, access to resources, sharing of information, ability to socialize, and other factors.
• It’s harder for team members to tell whether they’re out of alignment about important issues, such as scope, dependencies, accountabilities, and deliverables. And once out of alignment, it takes virtual teams much longer to pull back together.
• Project team members who collaborate virtually, even more than co-located teams, often have multiple reporting relationships, making it hard to assess priorities.
• Giving and getting performance feedback, both across the team and between leader and each member, tends to be less frequent and more awkward.
• It’s easier for some people to tune out or renege on commitments when they don’t see others on a regular basis, which may jeopardize the deliverables of team members who operate under the assumption that all commitments will be honored.
• Team members have fewer opportunities for the kind of cross-pollination of knowledge and informal learning that co-located teams enjoy during casual conversations.

1.2 Unique Challenges of Virtual Team Leaders

Leaders of virtual teams face many additional challenges of their own, in addition to those affecting the rest of the team. Add to that, because many virtual project team members often work directly for
other managers, leaders of virtual project teams have to influence without authority from a distance, with limited opportunities to build relationships that can engage and motivate team members who must constantly juggle multiple priorities.

Other unique challenges of virtual team leaders include

- Establishing credibility and trust between leader and team members, and across the team, takes more work, planning, and time.
- Creating a healthy, open team environment that encourages cooperation and fosters collaboration is hampered with few opportunities for socialization.
- Without the ability to assess the skills, competencies, styles, and preferences of team members, it’s harder to match the best people to the given tasks.
- Ensuring that all share the same understanding of team goals, deliverables, roles, accountabilities, and success metrics requires more time and means frequent check-ins.
- Creating a truly level playing field where all team members feel equally valued, respected, and able to contribute fully to the team’s success takes a lot of energy, time, and planning, and many may still feel that some are favored over others.
- Developing and agreeing on norms governing vital aspects of communications and collaboration as a team are often skipped (at great peril) due to the time and planning that’s really required.
- With fewer opportunities for firsthand observation, determining team members’ true performance can be tricky, and as a result, performance feedback may be inaccurate or incomplete. Delivering feedback and performance coaching requires exceptional planning and special skills in the absence of nonverbal cues.
- Detecting when team members have become disengaged, and then offering the appropriate interventions, takes longer without visual cues or frequent contact.
- Maintaining focused productive conversations during virtual team meetings requires special skills that many team leaders don’t have. As a result, many team meetings waste time and sap the energy of the team.
1.3 Key Attributes of Successful Virtual Team Leaders

1.3.1 Leadership Skills

• Understands what it takes to establish credibility, and takes deliberate actions to earn it. Knows that credibility is a privilege and not a right.
• Knows how to influence without authority, and goes out of the way to reach and engage each team member, rather than assuming everyone’s on board.
• Creates a safe environment where team members know they can surface issues, ask for help, or admit they’re struggling without fear of repercussion.
• Finds creative ways to size up skills and strengths to enable effective collaboration.
• Values ability to see problems in different ways. Encourages debates and discussions to get to better ideas and new solutions.

1.3.2 Communication Skills

• Can clearly articulate and communicate a compelling vision to galvanize the team.
• Actively listens so team members feel they are being heard correctly. Knows how and when to paraphrase to ensure shared meaning.
• Discerns communications preferences of each team member, and knows which communication vehicles and styles work best for different team members.
• Detects when team members have become disengaged, disaffected, or otherwise need help getting back on track. Can sense when empathy is needed, even from a distance.
• Knows how to ask the right questions. Understands how certain questions have a way of evoking needed responses.
• Communicates effectively in all respects, including listening, writing, conversational, and persuasive skills.
• Understands that different approaches may be needed with a diverse group, and is aware how own style can affect the quality of communications.
• Values two-way communications and is authentic about the desire for candid feedback, ideas, suggestions, and comments.

1.3.3 Behaviors and Attitudes

• Shows patience and copes well with ambiguity and constant change, and helps others to do so as well.
• Projects enthusiasm and energy. Can be a good cheerleader, both for whole team and for each member.
• Demonstrates sensitivity to cultural, generational, and other differences.

1.3.4 Coaching Skills

• Assesses emotional content of a situation and knows how to dig deeper, resolve, and otherwise address problems.
• Understands motivators for team members, and knows that different members are motivated differently.

1.3.5 Technology Skills

• Understands the range of virtual communication and collaboration tools, and understands how each one can be successfully applied to a given objective.
• Is comfortable using a variety of tools, and helps inspire confidence in others to do the same.
• Knows which, how, and when to use a certain combination of tools to produce the best results.

1.4 Profile of a Successful Virtual Collaborator

Not all project leaders have a chance to hand-pick their own team members. Whether they can choose their own members or have inherited an existing group, virtual team leaders need to know which team members make effective virtual collaborators, and which ones need help getting there. Many who work remotely are poorly suited to make the connections they really need to thrive.
Here are some characteristics that make for a successful virtual collaborator, as well as some attributes that may cause problems for certain team members who have a tough time working remotely. Keep in mind that not all roles require a great deal of collaboration to get work done. Many team roles can, in fact, be performed competently by the “lone wolf” who works independently and remains relatively detached from colleagues. Large, complex virtual teams, however, tend to require that team members remain more linked than ever before, in many different ways.

- **Social butterflies tend to thrive.** The reason: They crave contact with others and are motivated to maintain connections with others, either virtually, through phone, e-mail, or social networking tools, or face to face whenever they can. Introverts who find it painful to stop and chat with an office-mate may find it infinitely more difficult to cultivate social connections in a virtual world. Maintaining a deep trusting connection with colleagues is tough for any of us who work virtually, but for someone who is reluctant or introverted, these deep bonds are almost impossible to create and keep up when working from afar.

- **Excellent organizational skills are a harbinger of success.** Virtual workers have to be more self-motivated and disciplined than their office colleagues, because they don’t have the luxury of having someone drop in to remind them of an errant deadline or an urgent action. Virtual workers have to set up their own systems for reading, filing, and accessing important content, performing tasks, and reporting progress. Virtual workers also have to follow an established protocol related to the use of file-sharing, e-mail, or social networking tools. Those who are perpetually disorganized or need constant reminders will suffer for their shortcomings even more in a virtual world, with no one there to look over their shoulders.

- **Ability to manage time across many dimensions is a necessity.** Virtual workers must be adept at managing their calendars and syncing up with others, inasmuch as conversations and meetings must be so well orchestrated. They need to be disciplined and realistic about keeping their own calendars,
making sure they build in time for thinking, eating, and moving about throughout the day. Although some cram too many meetings into a single workday, forcing them to work after hours or risk falling behind, others may take too much time “off” for nonwork activities, simply because no one is watching. Those who have a realistic sense of how much time they need to get their work done will be far more productive than those who either can’t or won’t accurately estimate how much time they need to get work done.

• They need to be willing and able to use a variety of tech tools with ease. E-mail and phone as the primary means of team communication have given way to other communication tools. Social networking apps, shared repositories or team portals, instant messaging, texting, web meeting tools, blogs, wikis, telepresence, and more, have become commonplace for virtual teams. Some workers can choose the tool that best meets a particular need, and for others, their organizations have governing principles about the use of certain tools. Regardless, virtual workers have to be conversant about how tools work, and which work best in a given situation, and need to feel comfortable using those tools quickly and easily. Those who are slow to adapt to new communication tools may find themselves being left out of important online conversations or getting only a fraction of the information they need.

• They need exceptionally sharp listening skills. People who work virtually miss the vital visual cues that accompany a colleague’s disappointment, frustration, elation, or impatience. Virtual workers need to be able to hear verbal cues and read written clues to discern what’s really going on for others, much of which often goes unsaid. People from “high context” cultures, where both the context and the words themselves are considered key parts of the overall message, tend to be more successful than those who take another’s words simply at face value. Those who don’t listen deeply, such as those who chronically multitask during team calls, may never get a sense of the thoughts and feelings that may make or break the success of a virtual team.
• **They know what to communicate, how, and when.** People who know how to organize their thoughts into cogent concise messages have a significant advantage over their colleagues who struggle to put their ideas into writing. Knowing what medium works best for a particular message or a certain situation is a vital skill for a virtual worker who has few chances to make reparations if a message is misunderstood or misinterpreted. Those who insist on e-mails as the default communication mode, for example, may find themselves out of the loop pretty quickly if everyone else is sharing information across a variety of channels.

• **They ignite their own spark.** People who can move ahead without a lot of direction or guidance on a day-to-day basis are far more likely to be successful in a virtual world, where workers must deal with a high degree of ambiguity and the absence of information, sometimes for long periods of time. Those who crave constant feedback or need frequent affirmation will stagnate easily and frequently in a virtual world.

### 1.5 Summary

To successfully lead virtual teams that consistently deliver superior results, today’s leaders need a special set of skills, competencies, and attributes. These can take years, and a great deal of trial and error, to really master. It won’t happen overnight, even after reading this book!

What’s important is that virtual leaders do a gap analysis between their existing leadership skills and competencies and those outlined in this chapter. Ask your colleagues, peers, manager, or team members to provide input, too. Choose a few skills or attributes to work on first. Create specific goals for yourself, and determine how you’ll measure success.

For example, if you suspect that your ability for empathic listening is lacking, try enlisting someone you trust to give you coaching and feedback. Formal training in some areas may be available within your organization or elsewhere. Check in with team members to ask how you’re doing, either one-on-one (1:1) or in a team setting.
Sharing your goals with your team lets members know that you’re willing to invest a lot of yourself in the success of the team. It can also be a great way to cultivate trust by acknowledging some of your own vulnerabilities and aspirations, which helps create an environment where people can speak the truth, even when they can’t see eye to eye.
Contents

Foreword xi
Acknowledgments xiii
Introduction xvii
About the Author xxv

Chapter 1 Unique Challenges of Virtual Teams and Their Leaders 1
  1.1 Unique Challenges of Virtual Teams 1
  1.2 Unique Challenges of Virtual Team Leaders 2
  1.3 Key Attributes of Successful Virtual Team Leaders 4
    1.3.1 Leadership Skills 4
    1.3.2 Communication Skills 4
    1.3.3 Behaviors and Attitudes 5
    1.3.4 Coaching Skills 5
    1.3.5 Technology Skills 5
  1.4 Profile of a Successful Virtual Collaborator 5
  1.5 Summary 8

Chapter 2 Sizing Up, Onboarding, and Mobilizing Your Virtual Team 11
  2.1 Onboarding and Off-Ramping Team Members 11
  2.2 Assessing Capabilities, Aptitudes, and Preferences of Team Members 13
  2.3 Getting up to Speed in a Hurry 14
  2.4 Assessing How Cultural Differences May Affect Team Dynamics 18
2.5 Influencing without Authority across Boundaries for Virtual Project Team Leaders 21
2.6 Summary 24

Chapter 3 Building Trusting Relationships across Boundaries 25
3.1 Building the Foundations of Trust 26
3.2 Creating a Level Playing Field 28
3.3 Building Social Capital 31
3.4 Summary 34

Chapter 4 Best Practices Operating Principles for Virtual Teams 39
4.1 What Is an Operating Principle? 39
4.2 Principles Development Process for a Virtual Team 40
4.3 Characteristics of Strong Principles 41
4.4 Getting to the “So What?” behind Each Principle: Hammering Out Implications 42
4.5 Areas for Which Norms Are Especially Vital for Virtual Project Teams 43
4.6 10 Top Norms to Untangle Virtual Teams 47
4.7 Summary 50

Chapter 5 Communications for Collaboration and Cohesion 53
5.1 Creating a “Big Picture” Virtual Team Communications Plan 54
5.2 Virtual Team Communications: Steps to Success 57
5.3 E-mail for Virtual Teams: Using It Wisely and (Probably) Less Often 61
5.4 Connecting Virtual Teams through Imagery and Metaphor 66
5.5 Brainstorming across Borders: Stimulating Creative Thinking from Afar 70
5.6 Real-Time Conversations Crucial for Collaboration in a Virtual World 73
5.7 Summary 77

Chapter 6 Managing Performance from Afar 79
6.1 Challenges of Virtual Professional Development 79
6.2 Tips for Developing Performance from Afar 80
6.3 Challenges of Performance Coaching from Afar 81
6.4 Tips for Performance Coaching for the Virtual Leader 82
6.5 You’d Be a Great Virtual Leader if You Could Just Be Quiet: Listening Tips for Virtual Leaders 85
6.6 Balance Innovation and Expediency for a Supercharged Team 88
6.7 Ensuring an Equitable Workload 92
6.8 Celebrating, Recognizing, and Rewarding Great Performance
  6.8.1 Creating a Shared Sense of Community
  6.8.2 Recognizing and Appreciating Noteworthy Performance
  6.8.3 Planning and Running Virtual Celebrations

6.9 Summary

Chapter 7 Navigating across Cultures, Time Zones, and the Generational Divide
  7.1 Galvanize Global Virtual Teams with Clear Operating Principles
  7.2 Real Cultural Assimilation Takes Patience, Time, and Willingness to Adapt
  7.3 Surfacing and Addressing the Cultural Differences That Most Affect Virtual Teams
  7.4 Communicating across Cultures: Designing for International Transportability
  7.5 Listening and Learning across the Generations: Strategic Communications Planning for Better Collaboration
  7.6 Open Communication and Mutual Respect: Keys to Intergenerational Harmony

7.7 Summary

Chapter 8 Troubleshooting Tips for Virtual Teams
  8.1 Six Management Practices That Don't Cut It in a Virtual World
  8.2 Avoiding the Unintended Consequences of Micromanagement
  8.3 Recognizing and Addressing Signs of Dysfunction to Avoid Irrecoverable Problems Later
  8.4 When Your Team Is about to Impplode: Watch for Signs, Act Fast
  8.5 How to Disengage Your Virtual Team in 10 Easy Steps

8.6 Summary

Chapter 9 Special Challenges of Facilitating Virtual Meetings
  9.1 What Makes Virtual Meetings So Challenging?
  9.2 Six Critical Factors for Running Productive Virtual Meetings

9.3 Summary

Chapter 10 ABCs of Designing Great Virtual Meetings
  10.1 Creating a Realistic Agenda for a Productive Virtual Meeting
  10.2 Selecting the Right Participants
10.3 “Rightsizing” Your Virtual Meeting Depending on Objectives and Group Size
10.4 Selecting the Right Combination of Technology Tools for the Highest Level of Engagement
10.5 Making Prework Work
10.6 Importance of Thorough Preparation for Virtual Meeting Leaders
10.7 Creating a Realistic Virtual Meeting Agenda
10.8 Tips for Designing a Successful Hybrid Meeting
10.9 Setting and Enforcing Virtual Meeting Ground Rules
10.10 Guidelines for Great Global Team Meetings
10.11 Summary

Chapter 11 Keeping Remote Participants Engaged
11.1 Understanding How and Why People Become Disengaged
11.2 Discourage Multitasking with Clear Ground Rules and Focused Meetings
11.3 Rx for Problem Participants Who Threaten to Derail Your Virtual Meetings
11.4 Summary

Chapter 12 Troubleshooting Virtual Meetings
12.1 We Are Experiencing Technical Difficulties
12.2 Reconciling Time Zone Differences
12.3 Dealing with Uninvited Guests
12.4 Handling People Who Show up Unprepared
12.5 Keeping Remote Participants Feeling Connected
12.6 Summary

Chapter 13 Summary

Index
Foreword

Virtual teams are ubiquitous. Years ago, they were confined to specialist groups, but now most meetings have at least one remote attendee. Virtual teams are here to stay. Strong global trends are driving the growth in virtual teams. These include outsourcing, increasingly more global project work, home working and telecommuting, spending cuts, and higher gasoline prices. In recent years, even volcanic ash clouds and the threat of epidemics have played their part. Organizations are focusing on the need to reduce the costs of travel, as well as the time taken traveling, carbon emissions produced, and hassle involved. At the same time, technological advances make it easier and cheaper to collaborate virtually than ever before. Now companies can have teams working around the clock while tapping into a range of global perspectives from across the organization.

Unfortunately though, virtual teams often struggle. Virtual team leaders too often believe that they can apply whatever works for them in the face-to-face world to their virtual teams, and fail to understand what is really needed to make virtual teams work. As a result, team members can become disengaged and frustrated, often silently tuning out. Organizations are only now beginning to realize that specialized skills and competencies are needed to lead effective virtual teams, on top of providing the right combination of virtual
collaboration technology tools. Leadership is sorely needed, and that is why I welcome this timely book.

I first came across Nancy Settle-Murphy and her work many years ago when I started to lead virtual teams and came across these challenges myself. It was shortly after the 9/11 disaster. The multinational company where I worked at the time had imposed a complete travel ban worldwide which lasted several months. I was in the middle of running a global program, and needed to get up to speed with virtual working, and quickly. With Nancy's input, I not only survived but thrived in the virtual world. I have gone on to specialize in virtual working on projects and risk management, initially within my former company, and more recently as a consultant. Nancy is not only incredibly effective at helping other people to work virtually, but also models this in her own life. We've worked together on several successful projects over the years and have yet to meet face to face.

In reading this book, I particularly enjoyed the practical tips that can be applied to almost any kind of virtual team. Nancy knows what works and shares them with us in a way that is both easy to read and to apply. She covers the whole gamut from building trust to cross-cultural tripwires, in a way that will work for virtual teams, whatever their makeup.

A couple of years ago I interviewed Nancy as part of the very first Virtual Working Summit and was delighted to share her knowledge. It is a pleasure to write the Foreword of this incredibly useful book, which will equip readers with tips, tools, and techniques they need to become effective leaders of virtual teams. I hope you get as much out of this book as I have.

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