Are You Skilled at Leading in a Virtual Environment? What It Takes to Lead Successful Virtual Teams

by Yael Zofi, ILA member

Not that long ago a video conference with participants located on different continents was cutting edge, and the very idea of texting someone from a hand held device was straight out of a science fiction movie. Well, things have certainly changed, haven't they?

Whether you are comfortable communicating with colleagues in the next cubicle or in another time zone is not the issue. The twin forces of globalization and technology have made it equally plausible that you are working on projects with co-located and virtual teammates. To complicate matters, your team members may be from other cultures, with a limited ability to communicate in English. Individuals who lead these diverse work teams need to develop (or refine) skills that are crucial to meeting goals in this increasingly common environment. Leaders must understand differences in worldviews, communication styles, ethics, and etiquette of the people they deal with. They must understand the historical, political, and economic reference points of different people. And they have to do all that while juggling their own responsibilities.

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If this sounds familiar to you, there is good reason. Even if you work for a small or mid-sized company, you are probably interacting virtually with global stakeholders, and therefore facing challenges that can prevent your team from achieving success. For example, keeping everyone in the loop requires greater energy when distances grow. How often will team members check in with you, and with each other?

Building a cohesive team requires some thought when people may never have met each other. How do you know when conflicts arise, and what procedures have you put in place to resolve them? How do you assess performance, thereby eliminating poor performers and promoting appropriately?

For almost twenty years I have researched these leadership issues in virtual teams, and for my recently published book on this topic *(A Manager's Guide to Virtual Teams)* I interviewed over 150 virtual team members and managers. On the basis of my own experience as well as from the resulting data, I have concluded that four themes recur in high performing virtual teams, regardless of size and types. That is, if your team is to be successful, four elements must be continually mastered throughout the team's life cycle. They are: 1. Ensuring effective context communication; 2. Developing accountability and trust; 3. Defusing conflict and overcoming roadblocks; 4. Developing work systems to get deliverables out the door.

It is not possible to focus on these four themes in the confines of this brief article, but I would like to address the first theme—effective context communication—because it is the foundation for the other three. In the virtual world it is even more important to consider the essence of the human connection. As you know firsthand, connections that occur during face-to-face exchanges become more elusive when we are not in close proximity with others. It is important to foster

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A MANAGER'S GUIDE TO VIRTUAL TEAMS

YAEL ZOFI
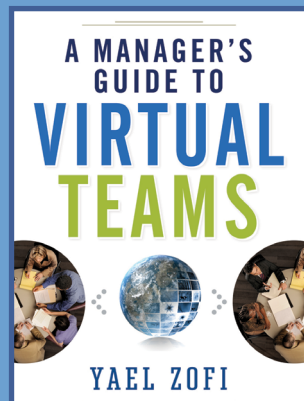
the human connection in the virtual world because when team members share a bond they work more productively, which directly impacts their work product.

As the team's leader, you must forge these relationships without the benefit of environmental cues, or context, which are eroded in the virtual environment. Here's a quick example of how the lack of context communication makes it harder to create connections:

You are preparing for an important meeting the next day and need input from the department's expert on SQL reporting standards, who sits one cubicle away. Although she left for an outside meeting (you saw her put on her coat and join several co-workers) you knew she would be available after regular work hours to answer you by email. Note: she leaves the office promptly at 4:45 to pick up her twin sons from day care (she passes your office every day at that time on the way out, usually in a big hurry!). Consider, however, if this same co-worker were located elsewhere, and you didn't know her personal schedule. You might take valuable time away from final preparations and needlessly seek help from elsewhere because you didn't know that she could be counted on to resume work during the evening.

What do I mean by context communication? As you can see by the extra layers of observable cues that are a given when you are co-located, context communication is the framework within which we connect the dots so that they make sense. Working in the same office as colleagues allows us to observe behaviors, actions and surroundings, creating background information from which we infer a heightened understanding of their situation, and the dots connect themselves. Without this shared understanding to help us understand each other, the task at hand and the overall work situation, it's necessary to compensate for the challenge of diminished cues.

There are three ways to achieve context communication: (1) through environmental cues, such as visual, audio and physical information that provide insight into your physical surroundings, your schedule and workload; (2) the medium or format used for communication, such as e-mail, voice, or face-to-face, which determines the richness of information that is communicated and lastly, (3) relationships, which produce knowledge of teammates/personalities, career goals, friendships, and alliances, thereby providing cues about work behaviors.

Here are some practices utilized by successful virtual teams to achieve context communication:

• Colleagues email the team if an unexpected situation makes them unavailable.

• Phone conferences begin with a round-robin where everyone briefly comments on what is going on in their world. Giving colleagues an opportunity to talk about their issues is one way to create a habit of communicating context.

• Before conference calls are concluded participants are debriefed; everyone is asked whether or not they found the meeting valuable. Did it match the stated agenda and meet the intended outcomes?

• Availability standards are developed and shared. Team members state their working hours and inform others how often they check their voice mail, e-mail; a standard is established for how quickly to respond to each mode of communication.

• Interactions are created that replicate on-site office environments (opportunities to chat near the coffee machine, celebrate birthdays and have water-cooler conversations). Some ways

to do this are: set up a 'get to know everyone' virtual gathering and discuss business challenges; set up a team website that gives your team an identity and includes members' photos, bios and personal information – think of it as a proprietary Facebook.

• Leaders model the behavior that they want to see in others. They share their own context, and encourage others to do the same.

These are just a few ways to overcome the challenges of working across space and time. All teams, virtual or not, fall into routines. These routines can lead to a comfortable operating rhythm, which can form the pulse of a high performing unit. It is up to the team's leader to develop this rhythm by pushing for regular communications, helping every stakeholder find the connection that drives success.

I conclude this article with a thoughtful quote from a sales executive for a retail company who I interviewed while researching my book on virtual teams. He summed up the challenge of those charged with creating the conditions for true communication in a virtual environment. He said,

"I want to be 100 percent accessible and help my team members grow closer, because they can easily hide behind computers and not establish relationships. I take it upon myself to reach out to everyone and bring them along, learn from them, and incorporate their ideas. Each day we have the end-of-day conference call to connect, refine ideas and plan for the next day's events."

The role of the leader takes on an added dimension of difficulty in the virtual world, but with careful planning and practicing active communication, a diverse team offers uncommon potential for attaining superior results in our hyper-connected world.

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