



## MANAGING PEOPLE

# LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS

Overseeing a virtual team is likely to become an ever more common role for managers in the future: but what are the key steps to doing so successfully?

**Liz Timoney-White** provides some useful guidance.



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Pressure to cut costs, headcount and management layers, plus shrinking desk space and a growing trend towards outsourcing, mean that the number of virtual teams operating 'out there' is growing.

Yet, when people are in a different country – and, probably, time zone – they can have differing cultural expectations and language challenges. And they possibly don't even report to you directly anyway.

So what is the secret to leading such a team successfully, in the time available, and getting the recognition you both deserve?



The best approach is a three-pronged one, in which you must do the following:

1. Create the right environment.
2. Build strong relationships.
3. Flex your style.

#### **1. CREATE THE RIGHT ENVIRONMENT**

There are two main elements in getting the environment right:

- technology; and
- process.

So consider the following steps.

**Technology** – find yourself a geeky friend and offer to swap information at childlike levels of simplicity about what you both do. They will love you for demystifying finance (they may even start talking to you before they budget, you never know).

In return you will be amazed at the things you can do to build your new virtual team community. For example you can use a web cam (£20 a throw, for any laptop) plus IM (instant messenger) so you can see and chat to your team people more informally. This means problems get flagged – and solved – faster.

**Process** – make sure systems and logistics are as streamlined as possible. One manager was dismayed to find he had to log in and authorise expenses on several different systems in order to do a fairly trivial administrative ‘sign off’ job. Multiply this effect with other systems and you would render the lumbered person completely ineffective.

#### **2. BUILD STRONG RELATIONSHIPS**

Problems arising within virtual team relationships are most commonly caused by issues of:

- trust; and
- communication.

And both of these are exacerbated by distance. So consider the steps below.

**Trust** – meet team members face to face as soon as you can. The cues to building trust and rapport work better when you can see body language.

Be aware of the impression you give. Each team member will have a video that runs in their head of their interactions with you and that is ‘who you are’ for them. If you have been caustic or uninterested, that is how you are always remembered. Sadly, the positive bits of this video whizz past a lot faster than the negative ones, so you will have to be friendly and interested many more times in order to ‘cancel out’ a given negative impression.

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**Communication** – have a really strong vision for what your team does and communicate this. Your virtual team members will hear it less often and therefore will be more influenced by local initiatives, unless they share with you a total clarity of purpose. Can you summarise in 28 or fewer words, of no more than seven letters, what you do as a team, or what task you want someone to perform? If not, go back and make your message clearer.

### 3. FLEX YOUR STYLE

There are two main theories to get your head around here:

- leadership style; and
- cultural style.

Fortunately they are simple to comprehend. Sadly, like any people skills, they are less easy to practice.

**Leadership style** – here, the concept of ‘Situational leadership’ (Hersey & Blanchard) is useful in explaining the range of different leadership styles that may be needed. Specifically, these are:

- direct – where someone is new and needs to be told step by step how to do something;
- coach – where they can work out their own path given the start and end states;
- support – where you only need to frame the conversation for them to identify the start and end

- states as well as the path; and, finally
- delegate – where you can give them the authority and responsibility to ‘get on with it’.

A top tip here to save you time and stress, while keeping you informed, is to ask team members to come up with ideas for what they will report on to you, in response to which triggers, as well as how and when they would like to gain feedback from you around their work and career progression etc. This means you spend less time chasing them, while they feel more trusted.

**Cultural style** – In terms of cultural models, think about the power structure inherent in the culture. For example:

- ‘status’ cultures are all about your job title – so you do not talk business until your host does (prevalent in Southern Europe, South America, the Middle East);
- ‘autonomy’ cultures are about your reputation – trying to influence by job title will just get compliance, not co-operation (common in the UK, US, Canada, Australia, Northern Europe); and
- ‘consensus’ cultures are about the team (seen in China, parts of Asia, Japan – indeed, a Japanese worker was recently fired for too obviously outperforming his fellow sales people!).

## FIVE TOP TIPS FOR HAPPY VIRTUAL TEAMS

### 1. Build trust

- Be consistent, fair, respectful and a good role model.
- Promote successes of every team member – it will increase your recognition.

### 2. Communicate on purpose

- Be consistent, clear and simple in your words and actions.
- Be inclusive, available and open to discussing mistakes without blame.

### 3. Collaborate

- Find a friendly in-house geek and use technology to ‘shrink the distance’.
- Track the team’s progress against deadlines and publish it.

### 4. Be culturally aware

- Meet face to face as soon as possible and use web cams if possible.
- Learn about other cultures, and inspire others to do the same.

### 5. Remember what works already

- Network with other virtual team leaders and ask them to share what works and does not – or attend a course and do the same.
- Never underestimate the value of saying ‘thank you’ – not only when things go well but especially in difficult times. People can easily feel isolated and ignored.

## CONCLUSION

Successfully managing a virtual team is not rocket science, it just takes a little more effort and insight.

As you will infer from the above, it is a good idea to check out websites to become familiar with the local ‘norms’ of the places from which team members operate, so as to avoid causing offence. Try [www.international-business-center.com](http://www.international-business-center.com) for quick tips on what to do/not do and say in various commercial centres around the world. Also, see the box (left) ‘Five top tips for happy virtual teams’.

And finally – enjoy it: virtual working is here to stay!