Making Virtual Teams Effective

Globalization is a fact of life today. Companies are becoming broader geographically and culturally at an increasing rate. For many managers, especially in the U.S, this represents a challenge for which they have limited experience.

Managing a virtual team is a different realm than having your team all together in the conference room for a meeting. When that team is located in different cities in the same country (or working from home), the challenges feel more manageable and the communication technology is constantly improving. But when the team is in several different international locations, representing several different cultures and business practices, the management of that team becomes a demanding challenge for the manager.

Of course, the best antidote to the problems of managing a team whose members are miles apart, both physically and culturally, is experience. Each time the manager is tasked with team cohesion and compatibility, he/she is on a steep learning curve. The most effective managers are the ones who involve the whole team in meeting those challenges.

Perhaps, surprisingly, many of the best practices that leaders have discovered and employed take us back to the basics. If we get all the way down to the fundamental DNA of what makes any team effective, the answer is communication. What once was available to a team member when a teammate was in the next office, cubicle or desk has to feel as available among the members of a virtual team.

One major obstacle in the free flow of communication among virtual team members is technology. All of us have sat, frustrated and annoyed, as the technology we hoped would connect us did not work effectively. More companies are realizing that spending the money and expertise to maximize the performance of their virtual team technology is money well spent. Each time the team needs to connect from multiple sites, people need to pretest the connection prior to the meeting, at least until they feel certain that the technology will work efficiently every time.

We have seen managers who have posted a photo of each team member in their office along with the time differences in that member's zone, as well as individual phone numbers. If the team members have each other on speed dial, are aware of the time differences, and have a team behavioral norm to call each other often, the relationships among members improves.

The awareness of time zone differences is an important component in managing virtual teams. While it may be later in a normal business day for the team members in the U.S., when the team is international, it may be the middle of the night for some members. Our experience is that diligent team members will tolerate those inconveniences for the team to meet, but considerate managers will vary team meeting times to share the inconveniences among the team members.

Despite all of the logistical challenges of managing virtual teams like time zones and technology, perhaps the greatest factor in the success of the

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team is derived from treating the members as people, rather than locations. When the team spans significant cultures, it is imperative that the manager acknowledge and encourage those cultural differences.

We have seen managers use those cultural or national variations within the team as an opportunity for team building. The beginning of each team meeting features one or more of the members who is given the time to explain and educate the team about his/her world. Again, posting pictures and cultural reminders about the members of the team keeps the focus on people and encourages communication.

One manager we know has team members who are all in the U.S. but are in 11 different cities. The team looks forward to staff meetings because each meeting starts with one or more members explaining a regional term or expression that captures or epitomizes that part of the country for them. The laughter and "I didn't know that"

reactions help to connect the team members. As often as possible, their meetings are via video, so the members can see each other. Hearing a voice is one viable channel of communication, but seeing the face behind the voice is a much broader and effective means of being understood. This simple meeting starter was not created by the manager. It evolved as a team behavior and the members decided how the assignments would be handled for each meeting.

Perhaps the real lesson for us as we deal with the challenges of leading virtual teams is embedded in the example above. We have seen the best results when the manager allows, encourages participation and insists that the team members take responsibility for the success of the team. After all, it will be their work that makes the difference and determines their reputation for working on a virtual team, so letting them problem solve and create practices that work to overcome obstacles is a solid pathway to success.