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Leading virtual teams

“In a virtual work environment, time and space have different meanings”

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Six software developers in Bangalore, one Project Manager in New York, one business analyst in Caracas, one sponsor in Miami, hundreds of users throughout Latin America, four languages, several time zones. Can they all come together as a team with the mission of implementing a support system for the business? But, of course! If you haven't experienced leading at a distance yet, welcome to the world of virtual teams.

As companies intensify the use of virtual working teams (where team members work in different cities) more and more, managers face the challenge of leading at a distance. This is not a small task and everything that is effective when leading face to face is also helpful when dealing with different languages, cultures and time zones.

Although some of the challenges are similar to leading teams in one place (establishing priorities, achieving goals, adapting to change, etc...) we face additional challenges when leading at a distance. To deal with a geographically dispersed team, the two biggest challenges the leader has to overcome are:

Distance

Being thousands of miles away complicates the day to day activities. Not only is the chance for face to face communication eliminated, but also a sensation of isolation for those who are far from the boss or “action” is generated. There is a negative impact from dealing with different time zones, as these invisible limits extend the working hours to longer than expected. Not to mention the costs involved for travel, teleconferencing and other special logistics.

Cultural Differences

Throughout our lives we have accumulated a set of cultural stereotypes: Latins are more “open”; Anglo-

Saxons more “reserved”; Asians are more “formal” than South Americans, etc... What does this mean? Not much, they are only stereotypes and judgments of people who think, act and speak differently than we do. The lack of a common language and the inability to communicate in a foreign language is also a major barrier.

Let's focus on some ideas to find a “common language” and to bridge the distances so that we can effectively lead our virtual teams:

1. Establish a clear and concrete goal

Define, communicate and be sure that each team member clearly understands:

The MISSION: Why does the team exist?

The VALUES: What are our beliefs and behaviors?

The VISION: What do we want to be?

The STRATEGY: What is our plan?

The GOALS: Where do we want to go?

The Balanced Score Card: How are we going to monitor?

When every team member is able to answer these six questions, we have a sign of alignment.

2. Take advantage of every possible way to communicate.

With virtual teams, the challenge is that the intended message be understood as clearly in Bangalore, as in Miami, Caracas or Madrid. Therefore, one way of communicating the message is not enough. Use different media. Chances are, most of you are already thinking about using **e-mail**. Careful! The beauty of this medium is its speed and low cost, but tone and body language will not be transmitted.

Whenever possible, use the phone. A **phone call** is better than a cold e-mail, since it carries a real tone (not the one imagined by the receiver) and will minimize miscommunication. There are also several ways of **video-conferencing**, for all needs and tastes, from the more traditional to the more dynamic, and they can be adapted and personalized depending on the size of the audience.



More than the medium, what is really important is that people know when and why they should attend a call, what their **responsibility** is, and that they actively participate. Regardless of the medium, the **agenda** is critical. It ensures that everybody is focused on the topics to be discussed, within the allotted time.

To help people to always find the needed information, without ambiguity, create a **visual focus**, an easily accessible document (with monitored reproduction and editing) to avoid excuses like “But, I thought that...”

One way to involve people is to rotate the person in charge of updating this focus. This document should include local holidays for each country/city involved, as well as the time difference. Use one reference city for all times in the document, for instance if the boss is in New York, use EST; if in London, use GMT.

3. Support team performance

Establishing a goal and communicating it is not enough. You also need to be a skillful **coach** and provide **feedback**. At a distance, these two tasks become of paramount importance. People should not feel isolated. Quite the opposite! They should feel a sense of belonging, that their work counts and is valued, and that there is a purpose in everything they do. People need to feel that they are developing. So what is the best way to do this? In addition to believing in its benefits, **use the golden rule**: Coaching is about asking intelligent questions so that the coachees can find their own answers. Providing advice is something else, not coaching. Feedback is about observed facts and their impact on performance. Anything else is gossip.

Don't use distance as an excuse. You don't need to be face-to-face to do it, but goals should be clear, achievements (or lack of them) should be evident, communication should flow freely and in a timely manner. **Block time in your agenda to do it.** Lack of Coaching and feedback are two ingredients that

mixed with multitasking and lack of attention will provoke a serious intoxication....in the other person.

4. Shorten the distances

There are other concrete actions which help shorten the distance. For example, visit your teams as frequently as your budget allows, communicate with them unexpectedly, and use job rotation (tasks and geography), even if it is only for short periods of time.

Finally, remember that people need more than work. Your team, although at a distance, also needs to socialize. In spite of the change we've seen, some things never change. For instance, people continue to have birthdays. Use these episodes as an excuse to get your team together.

Sharing Best Practices

"Active Communication. In my experience, the important thing is to achieve constant and effective communication, where the message about expectations and objectives gets through in a clear and timely manner, to all team members. Due to their different nature, different people prefer different media, i.e., written, phone and/or face-to-face. I have noticed that my teams started to perform better when I was able to identify these differences and adjust to their personal preferences. In my opinion, the manager should make the ultimate effort in this direction. Underestimating the possibility of misunderstandings can be costly.

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See you next month. Suggestions are welcome.

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