

REMOTE LEADERSHIP

Remote leadership is not rocket science - it is more difficult. A leader must possess the passion, wisdom and tenacity to prevail.

KEY CHALLENGES

Remote leadership is the essence of leading teams at multiple locations. When team members are distant, you, as the leader, have little or no power and control over them. You are at a serious disadvantage in producing results which require effective teamwork. The best way to build performance across distance is to foster trust-based relationships among all team members regardless of location. Be aware that every word, every action, every initiative taken by a remote leader influences trust formation for a “virtual” team. If trust issues are ignored, relationship-building and performance will suffer and potential synergies will not be achieved.

Building trust among dispersed teams is difficult because:

- distant team members tend not to know each other well;
- they have fewer opportunities to develop trust in familiar ways...through face-to-face interaction in the same environment;
- they tend to communicate insufficiently and ineffectively across distance; misunderstandings occur more often; conflict goes unnoticed and unresolved;
- teams that work across distance tend not to see themselves as a team; they focus more on local people, issues and priorities than on shared team goals;
- virtual team members and leaders tend to share information unequally or inconsistently among multiple sites;
- virtual teams need clear structures to focus effort and energy across distance;
- geographic separation fosters relationships with those on-site, while inhibiting them with those offsite;

- people in separate locations have different information - equally important, each location has a different context from which they send, receive, interpret information;

- although virtual teams are supposedly united to achieve a common business goal, people often make decisions based on local priorities;

THE BEST WAY TO BUILD PERFORMANCE ACROSS DISTANCE IS TO FOSTER TRUST-BASED RELATIONSHIPS.

- team members may agree with the leader when the leader is on-site but ignore those agreements after the leader leaves - what looks like commitment is really just compliance.

ENEMIES

The “enemies” of leading a virtual team are:

- *geography*: makes individuals see themselves as separate from one another;

- *isolation*: keeps them from knowing one another and seeing what others are doing;

- *history*: creates patterns of behavior and ideas about teams that are ineffective or not relevant to dispersed individuals trying to be a team.

As a leader, you must be on the offensive to defeat these “enemies”:

- to overcome geography, have the team meet periodically face-to-face to get to know one another; develop and nurture a sense of unity;
- to offset isolation, create effective communication processes that keep people informed with the same information at the same time;
- to overcome history, acknowledge the challenges of remote teams; encourage the team to develop new strategies.

KEY ACTIONS

1. SHIFT PARADIGMS

- Shift the paradigm that geography is a barrier. Help the team define new linkages to bridge distances.
- Bring the team together, at least on a quarterly basis, to establish trust, build relationships and experience synergies.
- Use these meetings to help the team create:
 - a clear, compelling intellectual link so every member knows exactly where the team is headed once everyone is back in their location;

WHEN TRUST FLOURISHES,
PEOPLE DO MAGICALLY WONDERFUL
THINGS TOGETHER.

- a clear emotional link so each remote team member feels connected and supported despite distance;
- a daily “anchor” or alignment tool to help each person focus on team objectives and not be distracted by local issues or competing priorities.

- Be creative in seeking tangible, concrete symbols to remind members they are part of a team in the absence of face-to-face interactions and shared physical surroundings. Team names, symbols, and objects related to shared experiences or accomplishments are examples.

2. DEFINE CLEAR GOALS/OBJECTIVES/ MILESTONES

- Take time at the beginning to achieve clarity with respect to the strategic goals of the team. The most important time for clarity is at the first meeting of the team. This means (a) understanding the team goals; (b) agreeing on team strategies; (c) being fully committed to both.
- Identify specific objectives and milestones for each member’s contribution to achieving shared goals. Each member must be able to articulate these goals and their unique individual contribution to them.

3. IDENTIFY INDIVIDUAL ROLES AND ACCOUNTABILITIES

- Define and clarify individual roles and accountabilities. Insist that each member be explicit about his/her expectations of others and what he/she is willing to be accountable for to other team members.
- Hold each team member accountable for living up to the team’s values and for delivering results.
- Revisit expectations and accountabilities on a frequent and regular basis.
- Be open about fulfilling your accountabilities as a member and as a leader.

4. DEVELOP VALUE-ADDED, TIMELY COMMUNICATION PROCESSES

- Develop a total communication system, including a concise format for e-mail, voice mail and other “store and forward” communication. Get the team to agree on formats and standards for response times.
- Determine what types of information to communicate through various mechanisms.

- Never attempt to clarify misunderstandings or conflicts through e-mail or voice mail. These require direct contact.

- Keep communication flowing to counteract the out-of-sight, out-of-mind phenomenon of distributed teams.

- All issues that affect team goals and priorities or impact results must be communicated to all team members completely and at the same time.

- Share information on individual and team accomplishments, ideas and learnings with everyone.

- Find ways to communicate the knowledge, skills and backgrounds of each team member. An electronic “yearbook” that gives each team member’s accomplishments, backgrounds and favorite types of work is one example.

- Establish regular, informal, non-agenda audio-conference meetings to help the team bring problems to the table for others to suggest solutions. The sole purpose of these calls is problem-solving and idea sharing. Resist the temptation to use these audio-conferences for routine announcements or updates. If the leader creates the agendas or does most of the talking, problem-solving and idea sharing will be limited.

5. CHAMPION IDEAS

- Champion ideas from all team members. Use your knowledge of what’s happening in different sites to connect ideas and encourage collaboration.

- Ensure that every idea presented is taken seriously and gets a fair hearing in the eyes of whoever presented it.

- Encourage people who do not know each other well to work together on investigating promising ideas and documenting possible applications.

- A culture based on accountability fosters creativity and “out of the box” thinking.

6. TAP INTO EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

- Tap into the human spirit, appeal to everyone’s need to feel good about work; each other; belonging to a team, and achieving extraordinary results. It is the human dimension that distinguishes extraordinary teams from mediocre teams. It is the human dimension that is most strained by distance.

7. CELEBRATE SUCCESSES

- Provide opportunities to celebrate successes and provide recognition on an ongoing basis.

- Call attention to team and individual activities that demonstrate excellence and team commitment.

- Encourage all team members to take initiative in recognizing accomplishments and contributions of those in other locations.

8. KEEP THE TEAM IN ALIGNMENT

- The leader must keep the team in alignment and headed in one direction.

- Continually revisit strategic objectives and agreed-upon approaches to getting the work done.

- Foster ongoing emotional commitment by acknowledging connections between personal goals, team goals and the overall “value proposition”.

- Create a question people can ask themselves every day that keeps their work aligned with the rest of the organization.

- Help the team create a rallying cry or slogan that touches each individual on a personal level and fosters a sense of team purpose and identity different from other teams.

9. MONITOR YOUR OWN BEHAVIORS AND ACTIONS

- A remote leader must be perceived as scrupulously fair and must provide equal opportunity and recognition to people near and far.

- Take action to demonstrate the importance of members in dispersed sites as well as the value of their contributions to team goals.

- Take action to overcome perceived favoritism toward people and activities located near the leader.

- Make decisions based on facts and weighed against agreed upon goals and priorities.

- Provide opportunities for all team members to display leadership and demonstrate knowledge, skills and commitment.
- Reward/recognize people publicly for contributions.
- Socialize equally with people near and far.
- Visit remote sites frequently, run periodic audio-conference meetings from different sites.
- Rotate locations and logistical responsibilities for periodic face-to-face meetings of the entire team.
- Spend 70-80 percent of your time tending to the needs and relationships of distant team members. Only then will distant members view the split as 50-50.
- Take action. Do not ignore inconsistent or undesirable behaviors that are counter-productive with respect to agreed-upon team goals and priorities. What you do is as important as how you do it.

10. GAIN AND MAINTAIN FULL COMMITMENT

- Commitment is dynamic; therefore, you must continually monitor and assess individual and team commitment.
- Unlike intact teams where a leader starts with team commitment, with remote teams, you must first gain individual commitment.
- Encourage strong individual commitments to the team; solicit team ideas on how to sustain and reinforce individual commitments despite their isolation across distance.
- Think of yourself as a leader of leaders. Treat all members of the team as leaders in their respective sites. Value their ideas, help them feel ownership for the success of the team.

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INTERNATIONAL ORGANIZATIONAL CONSULTING, LTD.

**900 N. KINGSBURY, SUITE 932
CHICAGO, IL 60610
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