



Can Remote Leadership be Learnt?

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Less than 30% of virtual teams are seen to be effective and successful.
(Caulat, 2006)

More and more, virtual teams are a part of our daily lives. For many, spending every working hour as part of a collocated team is a thing of the past.

Although working virtually is considered important, it is still seen as second best to the 'real thing', working together face to face. In this article we explain why virtual teamwork should be seen for its own merits and is much more than the second best alternative to working together in the same place.

Also, we take a closer look at what it takes to manage remotely; the challenges remote leaders face when leading virtual teams and how to overcome them. Finally we present an approach to develop remote leadership skills.

Virtual Teamwork: Here to Stay

Virtual teams have added value over face to face teams in many ways.

We can tap into resources that otherwise would not be accessible. Also, working remotely allows organisations to tap into talent, knowledge and local expertise all around the world and give round the clock service to customers. In addition, virtual teamwork saves costs since the need to travel decreases.

The argument of sustainability - reducing our carbon footprint - also becomes more and more important for any organisation.

As a highly specialized consultancy, we ourselves are spread out over several continents, and cherry pick the right team members for the project at hand. Unlike before, there is no geographical restriction in recruiting the most suitable person for the job.

The Individual's Perspective

In contrast to the initial euphoria over virtual working, critics have argued that workers lack social interaction, identification with the organisation and that they risk working too hard which may lead to burnout or work-life imbalance.

Surprisingly, the younger generation still opts for the classic working arrangement: a survey shows that 73% of Dutch university graduates prefer a traditional office job to a virtual workplace (van Loon, Nu.nl 2011).



If you've got a virtual relationship, we're to a point now where you have friends that you like better on-line than you do in person.

Wilson, 2011

This contrasts with this generation's lifestyle: a social life that is largely on-line and a heavy dependency on the Internet for both studying and day to day practicalities.

Individuals who do work virtually a large part of their time seem to appreciate it: 'you do not have to travel to the office, saving time and energy, otherwise spent in traffic or on public transportation. And, as is common practice in our firm, work hours are flexible as long as business permits. With this freedom, we are likely to work at times when we feel we can deliver the best work. This makes us, as virtual employees, more productive than traditional employees' (Cune).

This perspective is consistent with classic research - done before the Internet was invented - in industrial & organisational psychology, stating that workers perform best when the job is characterized by 5 factors (Hackman and Oldham 1975):

- Skill variety: can I use different skills at work?
- Task identity: can I recognize my contribution to the product or service?
- Task significance: is the work meaningful?
- Autonomy: am I empowered to make decisions about my own task
- Feedback: do I hear how I am doing?

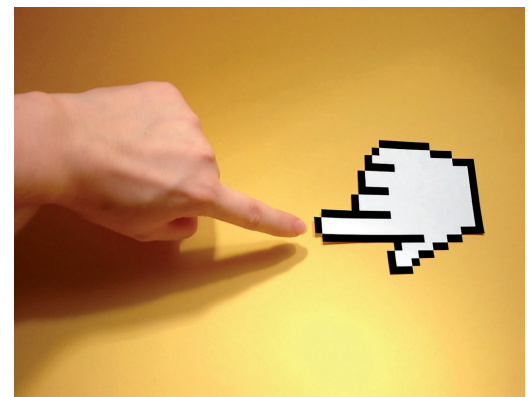
The 'autonomy' factor is particularly relevant in the virtual context.

Challenges for Remote Leaders

There are enough challenges we can think of when it comes to managing a virtual team. However, we believe that each one of these challenges can be dealt with effectively and even turned into advantages, provided the team leader deals with them in the right way.

In other words: 'geographical distance needs not be a distractor but can become an enabler' (Caulat, 2006).

Leadership Challenge # 1: Communicating Virtually



The first challenge is virtual communication. Even though this is something we do more and more in both our private and working lives, most people still do not like the idea of communicating exclusively through virtual tools.

One of our virtual training participants described it as 'dehumanizing' to work with people without ever meeting them face to face. What people like him may overlook is the fact that it is entirely possible to develop a trustful relationship over a long distance.

When it comes to virtual communication, the challenge is not so much to learn how to use the different tools available. It is more important to select the most appropriate way of communicating, given the situation and cultural preferences of team members.

There is a dazzling choice of tools available. The leader should trust the tool guru on his team to create an effective virtual space.



The key is not to stick to one form of communication, but to think of what and with whom you need to communicate and then select the appropriate technology. For example, a conflict between employees is not best resolved by e-mail, nor should one ask a colleague for the weekly report by setting up a video conference.

So what is the impact of virtual communication on the team's output? Research shows that brainstorming of virtual teams will lead to more and better ideas than brainstorming of conventional teams (Parks & Senna).

We explain this effect from a cross-cultural perspective: team members from cultures where the hierarchy is prominent or communication is indirect (so called 'high context cultures') normally tend to be reluctant to speak up. They tend to do this more easily in a virtual than in a face to face setting. A necessary condition is that the team's working climate is perceived as safe. Otherwise the opposite can happen: only the 'louder' members will speak up.

Some experts argue that a face to face environment is actually worse for problem solving than a virtual team environment, even in a mono-cultural group. (Wilson, 2011).

Leadership Challenge # 2: Managing Performance Remotely

A second challenge is the lack of control that a virtual manager might experience. When your direct reports are asleep while you are at work in the office, it's easy to feel you are

losing grip on the project. The virtual manager cannot look over the shoulder of her or his team members or see when they check in or out of the office.

The effect of this on productivity is positive: employees who work virtually, out of sight of their superiors, have the tendency to work harder. They do not want their boss to think they are working less hard from home as they would from the office.

An impact on team dynamics of less visible control is that one team member may think that he or she is working harder than the others. Also, we expect managers with a high need for control to have more problems in leading virtually, than those who have a natural tendency towards delegation.

There are tools available such as Results Only Work Environment systems (ROWE) (Thompson and Ressler, 2008), that help remote leaders make the shift from monitoring when employees are 'in their seats' to monitoring results, and supporting the members to reach their goals.





Leadership Challenge # 3: Building Trust

Trust is by far the most frequently mentioned issue by our virtual training participants. All of the other leadership challenges mentioned here are connected to the work climate within a virtual team, and the way to achieve a constructive climate is by building trust.

When trust is high, team members tend to freely share their opinions. They trust their fellow team members to do the work they should, and the virtual manager can delegate and give away control and focus on output.

To build and maintain trust in the virtual space, the remote manager must continuously invest in relationships. In a face to face team the relationship building tends to come naturally. A chat in the hallway or over coffee just before the meeting, about the family or how the weekend has been.

We have observed that when a team meets virtually, for example in a telephone conference, it will get right down to business. Virtual teams tend to be much more task focussed than co-located team.

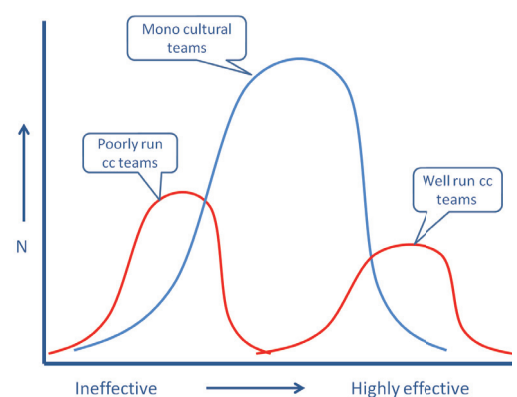
Research shows that task focussed teams are more effective in the short run, but are not as effective as teams that are both task and relationship focussed in the long run. Especially in a virtual team, investing the time get to know each other will pay off in a dramatic way.

As Caulat puts it: 'Not spending time on relationships in a virtual team is pre-programmed failure' (2009).

Leadership Challenge # 4: Managing Across Cultures

Besides creating an environment in which team members trust each other, the remote leader needs to manage the diversity within the team. Virtual teams generally are more culturally diverse and the leadership challenge is to make the differences work in favour of the team and its output, rather than against.

Experience in dealing with people from different cultures and understanding the specific cultural backgrounds of the team members is essential. The graph below shows that poorly run cross cultural teams perform worse than poorly run mono cultural teams, and the opposite is true: effectively run cross cultural teams outperform well run mono cultural teams, as is shown in the graph below.



The psychological effect at play here is referred to as 'minority dissent', a phenomenon where a deviating opinion within a team on how to tackle a problem will lead to a more thorough discussion among team members, leading to better decision making. The end result is a superior team performance.



Minority dissent can be described as the opposite of groupthink, where an inferior decision is made, because there is no deviating opinion in the team.

Leadership Challenge # 5: Developing the Team



How do you create a high performing team out of a group of individuals who are not in the same place? Using the notion of a container, we can say that 'the container provides a space for people to focus group attention, holding human energy so it can be productive rather than destructive' (Peter Senge, 2004).

In a co-located team, the container is literally the building itself, or a floor of an office building with its own desks, coffee corners, meeting rooms, cafeteria and smoker's corner. The container for a virtual team looks very different. It may be something abstract, like this atom. 'Here, there is no physical shell to constrain where people interact. In fact, distance has no impact on relationships at all.

Instead, like the atom, other natural forces keep energy contained and powerfully focused. Like the atom, when forces are out of balance, destructive results can occur.

Like the atom, possibilities for interaction and new combinations within a virtual team are endless. It's symbolic that it's the electric charge of the atom and the technology of the virtual team that helps keep each together' (Clemons, Kroth, 2011).

On a very practical level, what the remote leader can do to develop the team is to:

- Start the norming process early on: how do we communicate and collaborate? What tools and in what frequency? What processes do we use, how do we run meetings? How is conflict resolved?
- Make everyone feel included and welcome. It is easy to feel isolated when the rest of the team is far away.
- Acknowledge and manage team members' loyalty to their other teams. Team members' attention is easily diverted to co-located projects.
- Constantly communicate with the team members, using a variety of ways. For example, leaving the chat or instant messaging function open all day for on the spur, informal communication.

Leadership Challenge # 6: Networking

Given the complexity of the environment in which virtual teams operate, effective networking is a critical competency for the remote leader.

'A remote leader's credibility is often perceived to be directly related to the extensiveness of his or her network and his ability to obtain resources across traditional organisational lines' (Duarte & Snyder, 2003).



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In addition to the complexity of managing a group of people that is globally dispersed and is likely to have multiple team memberships, the remote leader has to influence a variety of stakeholders such as senior managers, suppliers, customers and regulators. The network has to be broad and strong enough to withstand competing priorities and changing requirements, to obtain needed resources and to instil a sense of trust in the team and its work.

In Summary

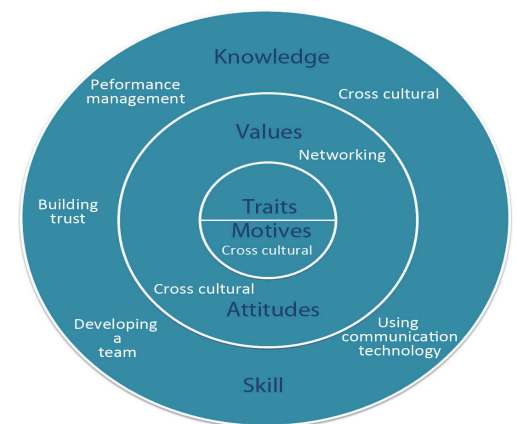
None of the leadership challenges mentioned above are new. They are as essential in co located teams as in the virtual space. The big difference however, is that it is harder to put this into practice in a virtual team and that the consequences of mismanagement are bigger when it comes to virtual teams.

We saw that there are many advantages to virtual teams, and that challenges can be turned into advantages. An incompetent leader might get away with his lack in skills in the conventional, face to face work environment, but not in the virtual environment. In other words, we can say 'that distance amplifies management abilities' (Gandhi, 2010). A competent leader who knows how to tap into all the advantages a virtual team has to offer can excel, more so than in the face to face environment.

Can Remote Leadership Be Learnt?

All people can learn to become more effective in the various leadership roles they take on (van Velsor, Center for Creative Leadership 2004).

Some aspects of leadership are of course more hard wired into our character (inner circles), and others can be learnt more easily (outer circles). We use the onion model (Ewington, 2010) to distinguish between these aspects. Applying the onion ring to remote leadership competencies, we can categorize them as follows:



Skills and knowledge (the outer circles) can be trained most effectively by experiential learning methods in the virtual classroom. Traits, motives and attitudes (inner circles) are best addressed by increasing leaders' self-awareness through methods such as feedback, psychometric assessment, virtual coaching, on-line peer review and self-reflection.

We recommend training remote leadership by distance learning. For instance, in a virtual classroom using Webinar technology, participants learn virtual skills in the same environment as where they work. Our experience is that this double loop learning accelerates the learning compared to a traditional face to face training room.

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