Chapter 4

The Virtual Leader: Developing Skills to Lead and Manage Distributed Teams

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ABSTRACT

This chapter offers a working definition of the concepts of virtual, management, leadership, and team, and proposes pragmatic tools and solutions to management and leadership challenges in virtual, distributed team situations. Practical experiences are surveyed, including scenarios of remote team, remote team member, distributed learning, and traveling manager. Descriptions of tools and techniques are offered, along with a set of guiding concepts and principles to apply to any virtual leadership situation.

INTRODUCTION

Creating a functioning team from a group of individuals includes the challenge of navigating personalities while holding the team’s business purpose in sharp focus. Keeping individuals focused on tasks while providing for professional growth and worker satisfaction is only the first barrier; the mark of an experienced and dedicated manager is in developing the sense of teamwork and shared purpose that results in a team producing more than the sum of its parts. The manager loses many social cues and becomes reliant on “face value” for assessing meaning when communicating with individuals when distributed team members are not in the same location. Spread a group too far apart across space, time, and culture and the idea of “team” will become almost too abstract to matter, resulting in management, leadership, and, ultimately, productivity problems.

The concept of “leadership” has as many definitions as there are people to define it, as does the word “management.” While the terms are frequently used interchangeably, as if they were synonyms, this chapter takes the approach that they are separate skills that are symbiotic. One may not be an effective manager without demonstrating some amount of leadership, and one will not be a valued leader if unable to perform general management functions. This chapter’s working definition of leadership is to inspire
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others to do the thing that needs to be done, while the definition of management is to provide structure, framework, tasking guidance, and administrative functions that give members of a team the tools they need to do the tasks that need to be done to meet the team’s goals.

The concept of “virtual” is well-defined elsewhere in this book and has been used in the context of the human experience with computing technology as far back as the early 1990s (Heim, 1993). This chapter will generally consider the term “virtual” to mean “effectively present while physically absent.” The definition of “team” is not considered contentious. This chapter will focus on the concept of team from the perspective of a “sense of team,” where an individual contributor feels like a part of a greater whole with a sense of mutual accountability, and from the external perception of individual contributors making up a coherent unit that functions as a whole. It is proposed that these feelings and perceptions define the concept of team more than a team’s tasking and output does. A team can be considered “who we are” as much as “what we produce,” and that concept is the underlying assumption for this chapter.

This chapter will discuss practical case studies and present specific techniques for cultivating individual contributors and building a sense of common bond in virtual teams, drawing on personal experiences leading a remote technical team, experiences leading physical teams with one or more remote team members, and experiences teaching distance education courses to a world-wide audience for both U.S. and European universities. The baseline assumption is while there are common lessons that may be applied across all scenarios, each situation presents its own challenges and each individual team member will require a slightly different approach from a manager to get the best work, and the best team-work, from virtual, distributed teams.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature regarding virtual technical teams is vast, spanning disciplines of Information Systems, Human Resources, Psychology, Project Management, Business, and Management. This brief literature review includes recent works that specifically impact and support the development of tools for developing leadership in a virtual team environment.

O’Leary, Wilson, & Metiu (2014) explore a concept of “perceived proximity,” where through their research they have exposed differences in how individuals identify with others in relationships that are collocated or distant. An interesting finding of this research is the central aspect of emotions and feelings creating a baseline of closeness that is not dependent on geographic proximity. In fact, a counterintuitive finding in their results is the condition where colleagues would identify a closer relationship with a more distant person than with a physically proximate individual, a result of the richness of communication combined with better focus in the remote relationship compared to the bleed over of negative personal habits and hygiene in a shared office setting being seen as a detraction from a close relationship. The discussion and literature review of the usage of technology tools for communication highlights the ways that technology allows the development and reinforcement of shared identity through “dependability, reliability, accessibility, likability, and informality.” This shared identity performs as a sort of mitigation of distance, allowing a perceived proximity that is notably closer than the actual distance between individuals.

Berry (2011) explores the impact of the asynchronous nature of electronic communications on the nature of teams, changing work patterns and relationships between individuals, and discusses why the skills required in a collocated setting are not entirely sufficient in geographically distributed environments.
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