Out of Sight, Out of Mind

Conventional wisdom often cites that individuals cannot advance their career without putting in daily face-to-face time with their managers; thus, members of virtual teams are inevitably less successful at career development than their co-located colleagues. Virtual team members lose out on the informal interactions that typically occur in the lunchroom, in the hallway, at the water cooler, and on the golf course; therefore, they are essentially out of sight, out of mind. Furthermore, conventional wisdom postulates, it is impossible to get the attention of upper management without these interactions, and people believe that if you want to advance, you will move to the companies selected “center of the universe” where the largest concentration of employees reside.

This chapter will discuss the potential drivers behind the following myths that focus on this potential out-of-sight, out-of-mind dynamic, and will document some of the techniques that we’ve observed that help reduce the potential impact of the reduced face-to-face time that is inevitable with the implementation of virtual teams within an organization.

- Myth #4: You can’t climb the corporate ladder unless you’re physically there—you need to sit near the boss and be seen.
- Myth #5: Virtual communities are ineffective—they can’t simulate water-cooler” conversations.
- Myth #6: There is a center of the universe, and everything must revolve around it.
Myth #4: “You Can’t Climb the Corporate Ladder Unless You’re Physically There”

Myth #6: “There is a Center of the Universe, and Everything Must Revolve Around It”

First, one key point to remember is that while the out-of-sight, out-of-mind dynamic might exist within teams where there is a very large central presence and only one or two team members working remotely, we believe that the impact diminishes greatly as virtual teams become more and more geographically distributed. In a mostly virtual, geographically distributed organization (which we will discuss in Chapter 10), it is entirely possible that very few (or even no) team members will actually be co-located with their direct managers or supervisors. Upper level management may be similarly distributed as well.

The authors’ prior organization (within HP’s Information Technology organization) had employees around the world, including Palo Alto, California; Atlanta, Georgia; Fort Collins, Colorado; Grenoble, France; Singapore; the United Kingdom; Corvallis, Oregon; Roseville, California; and Boise, Idaho. Roughly 60% of the organization’s employees worked outside the corporate headquarters, with first and second level managers represented in multiple locations. As we write this book, two of the authors work for an organization that has employees in multiple locations including Palo Alto, California; Houston, Texas; Boise, Idaho; Atlanta, Georgia; Dornach, Germany; and the United Kingdom. When working on teams with this level of geographic dispersion, it becomes increasingly hard to calculate where the center of team interactions actually resides.

Corporations are also moving more towards results-oriented human resources processes that are clearly focused on rewarding those who meet goals and objectives, which also assists in ameliorating the out-of-sight, out-of-mind dynamic. Working in a results-based environment with clearly articulated objectives and measures also helps virtual team members. If you can illustrate at the end of every review period (quarterly, semi-annually, annually, etc.) that