Managing and Leading Virtual Teams

By now you probably have a pretty good idea of what it takes to participate on or interact with a virtual team. This section will focus more clearly on the virtual team leader and manager.
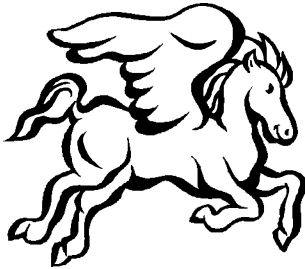
Virtual Team Leadership Myths

There are several myths about virtual team leadership. Here are a few to ponder:

- Virtual team members can be left alone because they're self-directed.
- Virtual team members (especially teleworkers) can't be trusted.
- I can't manage, coach, or mentor what I can't see.
- The complexity of the technology used by virtual teams is greatly exaggerated.
- I'll never be able to learn all of that technology.
- Building trust is relatively unimportant in a virtual environment.
- Good virtual team leaders are well traveled and probably know at least three different languages.
- I'll never see the people who work for me.

Team Leader Skills

Now let's take a look at the skills necessary to lead in a virtual environment:

- Ability to facilitate meetings (face-to-face, on-line, video, audio) – ESPECIALLY able to set positive tone initially through electronic communication.
- Ability to coach and mentor team members (face-to-face, on-line, video, audio); gives specific feedback regarding performance vs. generalized comments like "good job!"
- Ability to align team initiatives with organizational needs; tie in virtual team's contributions to important organizational values and objectives.
- Technical proficiency with all virtual communication vehicles.
- Ability to access, analyze, and manage data.
- Project and program management; avoid over-committing team members.
- Ability to transition team members in a way which positively affects their career.
- Ability to manage by commitment; focus on results, schedules, and budgets.
- Spend 70-80% of time with team members who are NOT co-located with you.
- Understand and facilitate virtual team development stages and dynamics.
- Models behaviors such as working across boundaries and cultures; optimizes cultural differences.
- Networks; gains support of customers and other stakeholders.
- Ooozes integrity, competence, and benevolence.
- Strives for continuous improvement of their leadership skills.
- **And, most important:**
  - Can identify early signs of team dsyfunction and take corrective action.

> See *OD Tools* tab for specific information on virtual interventions.

Other Leadership "hints"…

- Ensure that members who are not co-located with the leader are made to feel a part of the team.
- Provide timely and specific feedback to all team members.
- Make sure that team processes do not favor members who are co-located with the leader (such as sign-off procedures for expense vouchers, etc.).
- Review reward and recognition processes to ensure that they are consistent for all team members, regardless of location. Reward and recognition for remote team members may need to be more explicit and kept positive, e.g., "Good job!" versus "Not bad."
- Establish personal contact with the team members early on through face-to-face meetings.
- Arrange calendar to participate regularly in team calls and meetings.
- Recommend a review of the process for completing work on team to ensure adequate collaboration/review is provided due to time differences and in the absence of impromptu face-to-face meetings.
- Review update/status process for validating progress on deliverables/milestones to ensure adequate checkpoints are set up and agreed upon.

Leadership Competencies rated against the 7 types of virtual teams

The following table lists the seven different types of virtual teams and then rates seven leadership competencies required for that type of team as Low (L), Medium (M), or High (H). This tool will assist leaders in their personal development plans. (Adapted from *Mastering Virtual Teams*, Duarte and Snyder, 1999.)

Type of Team	Performance Management and Coaching	Appropriate Use of Technology	Cross-Cultural Management	Career Development and Transition of Team Members	Building Trust	Networking	Developing and Adapting Team Processes
Network	M	H	L-M-H	L	H	H	H
Parallel	M	H	L-M-H	M	H	M	H
Project or Product	H	H	L-M-H	M-H	H	M	H
Work or Production	H	M-H	L-M-H	M-H	H	M-H	M-H
Action	M-H	M-H	L-M-H	L-M	H	M-H	M-H
Service	H	M-H	L-M-H	M-H	H	L-M	M-H
Management	M	M	L-M-H	M	H	H	M

How did you score?

NOTE: A "fun" read is a business novel entitled: Virtual Leadership, Secrets from the round table for the multi-site manager by Jaclyn Kostner, Ph.D. (1994) In this novel, the most legendary multi-site leader of all time, King Arthur of Camelot, shows Jim Smith – a business leader – how to bridge the geographic distance that separates his knights. Entertaining and full of virtual pearls.