Leading a Virtual Team: For Best Results You Should be Both Facilitator and Manager*by Garry J. DeRose, PhD, and Lora L. Snow*

One of the most challenging assignments in dispersed organizations today is leading a team that operates across global distances and typically includes members who differ by culture and language as well as time zones.

As a leader, your mission is to overcome distance and diversity and build a smoothly functioning team based on mutual trust and coordinated pursuit of team goals. Operating as a facilitator, you work to build consensus on efficient operating procedures and develop shared responsibility for achieving objectives.

Those goals are important but people issues are only half the challenge. To achieve effective team performance you must also function as a manager, by putting in place systematic processes for gathering and reporting data on progress against goals and by keeping the team on track and on schedule.

Develop Trust As noted above, your critical first step in launching such a team is to develop mutual trust among its members, especially since many may never have met you or other team members. It means taking an even-handed, consistent approach that solicits input from all team members and includes one-on-one contact between you and each member.

You want all team members to fully participate in virtual meetings, so you should take steps to prevent apathy and make sure everyone knows he or she is expected to help move the project forward. If your team is multicultural, keep their differences in mind when dealing with members reluctant to participate or those who tend to dominate discussion. Make sure every team member has action steps to take between meetings.

Take Systematic Steps Practical research, based on a long-running

learning intervention at a major corporation, shows that you will achieve best results in meeting team goals by incorporating a series of systematic steps into the meeting process.

First, list specific data needed from team members and dates when due. Next, establish clear definitions of the content and format of reports. To ensure accurate, timely data from members, acknowledge reports that are correct and on time and prompt those who are responsible for any that are not.

Some decisions, such as setting meeting dates, may be reached by consensus. However, as manager, you should make sure all steps are in place when the team is launched.

Before your team even begins working, members should become thoroughly familiar with the communications technology used in meetings, including specialized software such NetMeeting. Have the team train together on the technology, set protocols for document exchange and storage, and provide for members' hardware and software needs.

As reports come in, your team will assess progress against its goals and timeline. Your meetings then must deal with variances from the plan and actions required to correct shortfalls and adjust to other surprises.

Virtual meetings are far more likely to be successful if you keep the content solid and the purpose clear. Basic elements of meeting agendas will include confirming the plan, reviewing progress to date, taking needed corrective action, and keeping people informed.

Processes Plus People Virtual teams present real challenges for a project leader. These challenges can be overcome through careful attention to both people issues and systematic processes for accomplishing team goals efficiently. Therefore, the team leader should act both as a facilitator, leading the group to consensus on important issues, and as a manager, insisting on adherence to process steps that will lead to efficient, timely results.

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