

LEADING TELEWORK TEAMS

Overview

Great leadership, leadership with the implicit goal of making telework work, is indeed about teamwork. Volumes have been written about teamwork. The notion of teams itself has achieved almost iconic status in the management world. What we discovered during the course of our research was that telework teams did not contribute to telework success as much as poor telework team behaviors almost invariably led to failure. This may sound cynical, but it is a realistic and sometimes unfortunate picture painted by the leaders who experienced success and failure in the virtual world.

Teamwork Revisited

Interviewing a vice president a while back, we thought we were pressing close to the limits of pessimism. The vice president was ready to throw the team out with the bathwater.

He started eloquently. "Teams . . . what a crock!"

"Be careful," we warned. "You are dancing on hallowed ground here. Teams are sacred in today's world. There's not an organization we know that doesn't value teamwork."

We were surprised at how fast he seized the opportunity, and we were even more surprised at how deeply he challenged us and turned the tables. "C'mon. Give me a break, guys. Tell me how teams work. No, tell me *really* how teams work. I know you know, but let's see if you've got the courage to swim against the huge corporate tide of team love. *Teamwork* is the most overused and abused word in all management-speak."

Strong words. We looked at each other and knew, precisely at that moment, that we were dealing with a deranged executive. One of us was about to ask for Security, but he stopped us, and what he said was compelling—and probably more accurate than what we all care to admit.

"It's all cut and paste. You know it, too. I'm convinced that our managers learn it during their MBA. This stuff about synergy and two plus two equals five is one giant organizational lie. A myth. A sad lie."

"Keep going." We started to see the strange light that he was striking.

"Especially in virtual teams or what the world calls *telework*. That's where it's the worst. What really happens on this so-called *team* is that one person does her part, another does his part, another jumps in to add her two cents, and in the end you have all of these individual contributions that are stitched together. All just cut and pasted. That's the teamwork I see every day. No real collaboration. No real deep development. Just one person's work added to an assembly line of others'. Tell me how that's a team. Tell me."

Almost in a funeral procession type of way, we got up and left. We were silent, but there was some implicit agreement felt between us. This guy was on to something. This seasoned executive may have been crazy, but that notwithstanding, he was right.

Too much of so-called teamwork is just cut and paste. Too much of what is labeled "teamwork" is nothing more than individual efforts cobbled together. That's independence—and that isn't teamwork. As described earlier, telework, and teamwork, is about interdependence. The immediate challenge—the one staring us all in the face—is to commit to building great teams, not compilations of individuals. It is to commit to moving beyond cut and paste to something better—effective interdependence. Then and only then does the "team" moniker truly apply.

Note

Truly great leaders, those that make telework work, create effective interdependence—the real gauge for teamwork.

Balance the Team Members

Effective teams are usually well balanced between task-driven and relationship-oriented people. For virtual teams, this relationship orientation is critically important, but it is often forgotten for the very reason that this seasoned teleworker brought up—teleworking is a task and goal-oriented type of work where day-to-day processes can't be touched, felt, or seen, so leaders tend to rely on outcomes to judge and assess teleworkers. While that, in and of itself, is not a fatal flaw, not including relationship-oriented people is.

The very best teleworking leaders intuitively grasp this subtle but powerful concept. The absence of physical interaction coupled with a heavy outcome and task focus can make telework boring, stale, and dry. There's no inspiration or cohesion in these types of teams. High turnover and lower performance characterize these types of teams. That's why leaders who make telework work purposefully place relationship-oriented people on teams. These are the types who pick up the phone and call another teammate. These are the ones who Instant Message and create water cooler talk in a virtual world. These are the ones who provide the social glue for more task-oriented members, transforming the team from one of independence to one of interdependence. A team made up purely of task-oriented members creates a working atmosphere that is all work and no play. Again, especially in a virtual teamwork environment, it's the relationship builder—not the tasker—who establishes the bonds on which to build a great team. The long-term teleworker we talked with closed with a warning that all leaders of teleworkers and teleteams should heed:

"If all team communication is done by e-mail, you've got a team of only taskers. And the leader is in trouble. And the team is staring failure in the face. On the other hand, if you've got some phone calls being made . . . where people actually pick up the phone just to talk,

then the leader can breathe. There's some relationship builders on that team. And that team will be okay."

Note

Don't succumb to the temptation to stack the virtual team with task-first people. Make sure to include some relationship-oriented members to build cohesion within the team.

Coordinate Team Activities

o use an analogy, many of the best leaders of virtual teams could have been world-class travel agents. Like good travel agents, they knew the needs, desires, and wants of the people they served. More to the point, though, they were also great schedulers who were aware of time zones and differences. Time and again, we found that many virtual team leaders took their scheduling duties very seriously. Chances are a virtual team will have team members in several time zones. Scheduling across these time zones is difficult, especially if the goal is to minimize hardship for the team members. This requires leaders who can coordinate and schedule wisely.

Note

The very best leaders of virtual teams were also skilled schedulers and coordinators.

Nothing makes a virtual team member more upset than meetings that aren't run well. Imagine getting up in Stockholm at 6:00 a.m. for a weekly meeting via conference call where all the other members are in the United States. The meeting goes on and on for almost two hours and at the end there's nothing to show for it. That isn't respectful or fair to the team member in Stockholm. Or to any team member, for that matter.

Note

As a leader, you have the responsibility and duty to run meetings well. Don't waste your team's time.

Leaders grasp the importance of running effective and efficient meetings. What we observed in cases of making telework work were leaders who did the following:

- Established a clear agenda for each meeting.
- Kept to solid but flexible time guidelines for each agenda item.
- Canceled a meeting if there was nothing to discuss; there was never a case of having a meeting just to have one.
- Ensured that a dominant person never commandeered or hijacked the meeting.
- Made decisions based on the meeting—old items were hardly ever rehashed from meeting to meeting; decisions were made and the team moved on.
- Tended to discuss only important and relevant team priorities and action items.

- Sent or posted minutes or summaries within twenty-four hours of the completion of the meeting.

Develop a Sixth Sense for Conflict

Do you have a sixth sense? Great teleworking leaders do.

In classic clairvoyant style, leaders of virtual teams detect the seeds of conflict when few others could. We can't overstate the importance of this gift or skill; the hallmark of any great leader is to be able to manage team conflict. Without exception, conflict management is much harder in a virtual environment than in a traditional team mode. This is one reason why leading teleworkers can be more difficult than leading traditional in-house employees.

Consider the force of body language. Some researchers suggest that body language alone constitutes upwards of 60 percent of a given message. Smiles, frowns, groans, or winks all attach meaning to words. Often telework leaders aren't afforded the benefit of seeing—only hearing and reading. For those reasons, we found that the very best teleworking leaders possess highly tuned antennae directed at the moods, attitudes, and communication patterns of their employees.

Stop and think about it for a moment. This sensitivity involves real detective work. By no means is it easy, but it is necessary.

One of the better teleworking leaders that we talked with said that he looks for changes in e-mail patterns. For example, one of his teleworkers would write long e-mails with embedded cartoons and an inspirational quote at the bottom. One day, all the e-mails from this teleworker were short, without the cartoon and the inspirational quote. The perceptive leader saw this as a change in virtual behavior and picked up the phone, learning that the teleworker's fourteen-year-old cat had passed away the day before. On another occasion, the leader noticed that one of his teleworkers stopped using the first name of one of the team members in e-mail correspondence. She wouldn't address e-mails to this particular colleague by first name, but she would for everybody else. Again, he grabbed the phone and found out that this one employee was miffed that the colleague had failed to deliver on two deadlines and, because of that, caused her to miss a deadline. Another employee started to cc all on some e-mail traffic. The e-mail thread started to extend beyond five messages. Sensing some escalation, he set up a conference call between himself and the two employees. In each case, the leader's sensitivity made it possible to reinforce ties with team members.

If it isn't reading between the lines, it is reading lips. The most effective leaders of virtual teams become skilled at detecting tone of voice. People often ask us, "Is that it? Is that all leaders have to go with?" The answer is largely yes. Listening for tone of voice and reading text are the two detection tools you've got to gauge individual and team mood. It takes practice and patience. Often, the best thing you can do is check and verify. Be up-front and

ask if you think you're sensing or feeling something. The guesswork needs to end early in leading telework to make it work. Take the time to ask the employee if your hunch is right.

Note

Listen and watch carefully for clues for conflict. Read between the lines. Handle problems early and swiftly before the virtual world takes over.

Teleworking leaders don't have the luxury of reading body language. Instead, they rely on knowing the communication patterns of employees and a general sense of when things may go awry.

Great teleworking leaders are all cut from the same cloth. Not only do they sense when conflict is brewing, they initiate action plans to address the conflict. Again, the importance of conflict resolution is amplified in a virtual world. For starters, conflict can seethe and grow toxic more easily in virtual environments where detection is harder. Second, imagination comes into play to make toxicity worse. Whereas people sharing physical workspaces can verify and align words with body language to confirm meaning, that can't be done virtually. As a result, too many people read meaning into e-mails and mentally create something that may not even be there. Also, it is much harder to detect sarcasm or even a joke when no smile or laugh accompanies the words. The virtual world is a launching pad for miscommunication. Now, you might be thinking, "What's the big deal about a little miscommunication?" On the surface and by itself, it may not seem like a big deal. But consider the fact that resolution can be difficult. In live and traditional offices, employees can walk over and verify and confirm almost immediately. That's harder to do when thousands of miles and five time zones separate them. Teleworking leaders at the top of their game grasp the importance of early detection and open communication in making telework work.

Make it Personal

The ultimate litmus test of a teleworking leader is quite simple: Can the leader make the impersonal virtual world personal? When that feat is accomplished, the leader is barreling down the path to truly making telework work.

There's no easy solution here. Yet we've seen leaders employ creativity and empathy toward making it personal. As one of the more successful virtual team leaders we spoke with told us:

This is going to sound so like high school. But one of the more substantive things I did as a leader was to give our team a name. On Friday, we were just another virtual team. Just a collection of teleworkers. Over the weekend, I watched the Jack Nicholson movie about the "Jackal." On Monday morning, I asked for a team name. Online, we listed a bunch of virtual names and I put down "The Jackals." And it won. And forevermore and to this day

that virtual team still identify themselves as Jackal 1, Jackal 6. It gave an identity to a faceless team. I miss the Jackals.

And Keri, another virtual team leader with no physical interaction with any of her six teleworkers, found another way to make it personal. She sent virtual greeting cards when one of her team members performed well. Just as they would if they received a regular Hallmark card, her employees appreciated the gesture.

These are some remarkable but simple examples. Rooted in each case, though, is the use of a good-natured sense of humor. The e-cards were funny and reinforcing at the same time.

Another virtual team leader took a series of steps designed to make it personal prior to assuming her leadership role. Upon finding out that she was to be the new team leader, she spent the weekend creating virtual chat rooms for her team members. She also created online bulletin boards for people to post different thoughts and ideas—both personal and professional. She even went so far as to create a playroom in one of her team's newly created virtual rooms with online games and puzzles. Many would think this ridiculous. By all accounts, however, this leader earned the highest evaluations from her employees of any virtual team leader in the organization while placing in the top 5 percent for team performance metrics.

Note

Make it personal. Build a socially strong virtual team.

How did she do it? She did it by creating a team. She did it by creating an atmosphere of fun. She did it by creating a social feel along with the virtual touch of telework. More than anything, she did it by taking the virtual and impersonal and making it social and personal. She took it personally.

Understand Team Member Roles

While it may be a stretch to compare virtual teammates to actors on a stage, that's exactly the sense we got when we examined the most successful virtual teams. In these teams, the leaders proved exceptional at clearly identifying, assigning, and evaluating different roles for specific players. Again, the tension between generalists and specialists surfaces. Certain team members may fulfill general roles such as facilitator, tasker, or relationship builder. Still other roles may be more specific, such as timekeeper, reviewer, financial and cost controller, or recorder. As leaders contemplate the roles that they assign to their telework team members, they may wish to consult the work of Dr. Meredith Belbin, an expert in effective team behavior. In *Team Roles at Work*, she contends that the very best of teams are well balanced among the following roles: implementer, completer/finisher, monitor/evaluator, coordinator, investigator, and researcher. Wise leaders take stock and find out if these roles exist currently within their teleworking teams. If any are currently

unfilled, they should be assigned to existing team members if possible—and if not, new team members who can fulfill these roles should be added.

Many leaders cement the importance of roles and role assignment through an initial performance counseling. In a sense, there's a communication element to it all. In the best teleworking teams, the members know their roles and the expectations that coincide with fulfilling those roles.

But it doesn't stop there when it comes to leadership greatness in a virtual team world. Not only was the leader good at communicating roles to the assigned individuals, these leaders were even better at telling the team members what role each of the others would play. From this, effective interdependence arises— when the members each know their virtual role and the role of every team member around them. What this builds is a collective team mind—an understanding of the bigger picture. Predictably, when this transformation takes place, goal understanding and goal fulfillment move from the individual to the team level. This isn't cut and paste. This is a team with all members rowing in the same direction, all with a clear understanding of the destination. Above all else, it is about effective interdependence.

Note

Great leaders are skilled at assigning and communicating roles to the individual and to the whole team. They create a collective mind and a collective understanding.

Hard Decisions

This conversation reflects an implicit understanding of leading virtual teams and making telework work. Team effectiveness is built on trust, reliability, and momentum. When a team member doesn't deliver, it can impair all three of these forces. Leaders must create and enforce a culture of responsibility and must be willing to hold team members accountable. As Lindsey noted, forcing a virtual team member to act can be difficult. There's no physical presence, no evil eye, no stopping by the cubicle to directly or indirectly spur action. For these reasons, leaders of virtual teams must build commitment and hold team members to a norm of commitment. Let us be clear about this last point—it's the leader who is responsible for creating and enforcing team norms. If the norm is availability, then it is the leader's duty to reward and enforce norms that reinforce the individual and team toward availability.

Note

Leaders who make telework work do two things particularly well—they make hard decisions, and they create and enforce productive team norms.

Profile of High Performing Teams

Profile of High-Performing Teams

Not sure what an effective team looks like? The first thing we noticed in talking with many leaders and team members was that people were having fun; the team was happy. Leaders play a causal role in creating this happiness. As mentioned earlier, they can make the impersonal virtual world somehow personal. Obviously, this attitude is not confined to virtual teams. Effective virtual teams demonstrate some of the same habits as traditional teams. They can be creative, collaborative, and supportive. More important, they have tons of communication. Effective virtual teams and the leaders responsible for them communicate freely and often.

For the truly great teleworking teams, you'll find that the team members are absolutely clear why they exist, what their mission is, and what their shared goals are. The best virtual teams share this collective mind. They all know what the important stuff is, and they all tend to row in exactly that same direction. They have agreed-upon guidelines and procedures for making important decisions. As with Lindsey's team and its charter of availability, we found that the top-performing virtual teams all agreed on some basic ground rules and processes of how to operate. Of course, the leader has much to do with making that happen.

Note

Top-performing virtual teams love to communicate—and they know how to do it.

Lastly, the team members will tell you that they feel part of the team. They will tell you that they feel appreciated by both the leader and their colleagues. Any team member who doesn't feel appreciated promptly begins looking for a way out. Leaders know this; they want their team members to stay in—to be part of the team. A great way to do this is to just say "thanks" or "good job" and make the team members feel appreciated.