LEADING A DISTRIBUTED TEAM

3M Meeting Network

So your company has just launched a cross-organizational, cross-functional project and your teammates are in different time zones, on different continents and even in different hemispheres. Welcome to the global economy! While the challenges are great, the opportunities are, too. But the question remains: How do you lead a distributed team?

Leading teams across distance, time and culture requires good team leadership skills. Audioconferencing and videoconferencing, online document sharing, email, voice-mail and fax technologies have been developed to assist teams that can't meet face-to-face. But the technology doesn't supplant the need for skilled leadership.

What do you do? Start by making three commitments:

1. Know the principles that build empowered teams and follow them.
2. Zealously battle obstacles arising from time, distance and cultural diversity.
3. Match the technology you choose to your communication and information needs.

Principles of empowered teams.

The challenges of working on a distributed team include all of the challenges of building a team that works together at one location, plus the added variables of distance, time and culture. If you have never demonstrated successful team leadership on a project where people were co-located, you may want to consider practicing some basic skills before attempting to lead a distributed team. Why? Many a project manager who has been accustomed to completing projects through close control and micro-management of various tasks has failed miserably when managing a distributed team. The reason: It's virtually impossible to engage in high-control management and micro-management of numerous groups and individuals who are located in different places, time zones and cultures. It just doesn't work.

To successfully build an empowered team — whether local or remote — you must accomplish the following:

•   *Create a shared sense of purpose.* When everyone shares the big picture about why the team exists, what it must do, when it will be done and how results will

fit into the fabric of the various organizations, people can fit their individual contributions into the whole of the project.

• *Develop shared decision-making.* Everyone on the team needs to experience that his or her thoughts and actions are important to the team's success. All participants need to know that the leader and other team members value their contributions. When decision-making is shared, high levels of commitment result. And when high commitment permeates a team, people routinely pitch in to help each other if one falls behind or gets into trouble.

• *Build expected norms for behavior.* Team members must understand explicitly what they can expect from each other in terms of communication, support and respect. They must know what they will and won't tolerate from each other. When norms are clear, people can work together rapidly and correct mistakes rapidly because they trust each other.

In her book, *Knights of the Tele-Round Table*, Jaclyn Kostner uses the legend of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table as an analogy for skillful distributed team management. A provocative blend of old myth with new challenges! Kostner says that since each of the knights commanded a portion of the kingdom many days' ride from King Arthur's castle, the king couldn't watch (micromanage) them from afar. So the king created a common purpose, built on each knight's power to rule his own sector. "Might for Right" honored each knight's independent contribution to the rule and success of the whole kingdom. Then to balance their individual power and provide a joint venue, Arthur created the "round table" to which the knights traveled every few months from all parts of the kingdom to share their problems and solutions with each other. Finally, to ensure that the team truly shared a common identity and bond, Arthur developed the Code of Conduct for the collective, thereby building a norm against which each member could measure his own and others' behavior for trustworthiness and honor.

Zealously battle obstacles arising from time, distance and cultural diversity.
Difficulties in communication are the chief obstacles caused by time, distance and cultural diversity. What you try to accomplish with communication technology is critical. Obviously, when your team is spread across the globe, you'll employ technology to assist you in communication. But you're also just as likely to use it with cross-functional teams working within the same company in different parts of one country. Using the technology well can be a challenge in all kinds of "remote" environments.

Occupational groups have defined work "cultures," just as distinct in many ways as cultures separated by geographical borders and languages. Accepted ways of expressing preferences, views and values vary just as much between engineering groups and marketing, between accounting and research and design groups, between software programmers, interface designers and computer artists. You know the rough places in your particular company and industry, probably by heart. Don't ignore them, accommodate them in your communication planning.

First, investigate what forms of communication team members have available to them and how skilled they are with them. Second — and more importantly — learn everything you can about your

teammates' work cultures. Find out how projects typically develop in their "worlds": how they plan, how they communicate, what words like *plan, communicate, team, review, report, project, budget* and *complete* mean to them. What are their normal production horizons? Years, like in basic research or weeks, like in many sales positions? What are their primary languages? If these are not primary for you, how much can you learn? Can you find interpreters? Can you find applied social scientists to assist you in understanding how differences in your teammates' cultures compare to your native understanding?

Next, develop visual displays that convey meaning across cultures. Such graphic images can include timelines and flowcharts, but are not limited to these. They also include team identity and other symbols that might stand for a vision (clouds and sky), strategy (roadways or arrows), agreement (hands shaking) and so forth. Wherever possible, design communication around such shared visual displays.

> *Helpful tip: Create and produce a high-quality four-color map that includes all of the sites where people are working on your project. In appropriate languages, include team members' names and roles, other personal information, contact information and pictures. Send or deliver maps to all sites.*

Last, develop an information and communication plan that ensures that every member always receives all information and distributions promptly. Ensure that all sites have appropriate support and alternatives appropriate for their communication technology. Ensure that staff who distribute meeting agendas and materials have multiple methods of getting the information to recipients. When you're the remote member attending a meeting by videoconference and everyone but you has had the materials in advance, no matter what the excuse, you can easily feel left out and less important. Don't let this happen to anyone on the team!

Match the technology you choose to communication and information needs.
Airplanes are wonderful tools to deliver one or more persons to a face-to-face meeting. But not all meetings require the depth of communication provided by face-to-face dialogue. Email is an easy and rapid tool to deliver a message to a distribution list. But email may also obscure relationship content and emotional tone because it is at once both informal and written. Videoconferencing technology provides helpful visual and auditory clues to relationship and emotional message content. It's also useful for simultaneous viewing of pictures or sketches. But videoconferencing facilities are not always available and may be impractical for simple or routine communications.

The rule of thumb is to carefully examine the communication need and match the need to the technology. The watchword is "keep it simple." Here are some guidelines:

*   *When to fly.* Fly to build or repair trust. Fairly early in the project, soon after orienting to the purpose and schedules, use a travel budget to get everyone to the same location for a meeting of a few days in duration. Build social time and content into the agenda. Plan some team-building activities along with project management activities. If people come from different cultures, provide activities through which the group can learn about each culture and each group.

- *When to fax or use overnight delivery services.* To distribute monochrome graphics rapidly. For rapid coordination. When all members can't handle common formats through email attachments.

- *When to email.* To distribute important information and news in a one-to-one or one-to-many frame of reference. To distribute documents as attachments when members use compatible software and can handle common document embedding formats.

- *When to use electronic bulletin boards and discussion databases.* To encourage discussion and flush out diversity of opinion in a group discussion format. Electronic discussion, like face-to-face discussion, provides a medium for the development of nuance and reality-testing from diverse perspectives.

- *When to videoconference.* Videoconference when you need to see each other's faces and expressions. That is always important during the early phases of a project, when you're building relationships. And, again, when working on critical decisions and/or contentious issues. Videoconferencing is also quite helpful when you need to collaborate on shared images that participants at one site are sketching or correcting.

- *When to use dataconferencing.* When people in different locations are working with common documents, presentations, sketches and models. This technology allows distributed groups to share and annotate images in real time. Coupled with a conference call, dataconferencing facilitates any collaborative remote working meeting.

Finally, as the leader of a distributed workgroup, remember that all sites need to develop relationships with each other in addition to remaining in communication with you. Look for opportunities for team members other than you to travel to communicate face-to-face with each other. Think of it as your opportunity to foster a global round table!

Make the meeting.

Related Reading

Virtual Teams: Reaching Across Space, Time, and Organizations with Technology; Jessica Lipnack & Jeffrey Stamps; John Wiley & Sons; 1997.

GlobalWork: Bridging Distance, Culture & Time; Mary O'Hara-Devereaux & Robert Johansen; Jossey-Bass; 1994.

Helpful Hints

Don't underestimate the importance of face-to-face interaction and team building, especially during the early phases of a project.

The effectiveness of a distributed team is highly sensitive to the amount and quality of communication between all of its members, and at all levels of the organization. Decide how frequently you should be talking to various remote team members and create a chart or checklist so you can track how often you actually are talking to them.

Remote meetings require more forethought. When holding distributed meetings, make sure the people at remote locations have copies of all the materials well in advance of the meeting.

1-800-952-4059

www.3M.com/meetings

3M

3M Visual Systems Division
Building A145-5N-01
6801 River Place Blvd.
Austin, TX 78726-9000

Recycled paper,
40% pre-consumer,
10% post-consumer