

A leader, a juggler

by Julie Gemin, C.P.P.

Eric Lesser, an associate partner of IBM's Institute of Business Value recently stated, "Companies are heading towards a perfect storm when it comes to leadership." IBM's *Global Human Capital Study* shows only 14 percent of the companies surveyed believed their workforce are capable of adapting to change. Leadership is a necessity for managing staff, projects and workload. "Leading virtually" demands adapting to change. How does leading a team from a remote location actually work? What are the challenges and opportunities for the organization as a whole?

I am the Associate Director of Procurement at the University of British Columbia (UBC). I have responsibility for staff at the Okanagan and Vancouver Campuses of UBC. I live and work in the Okanagan. Lying between my Vancouver colleagues and myself are the Coast Mountains – an imposing physical barrier.

Initially I made the trip to Vancouver three days per week for over four months. It soon became apparent that this was not sustainable in the long-term for the UBC business operations. Now, thanks to technology, I go to Vancouver once per month, using that time to have one-on-one meetings with staff, meet with faculty, and/or the vendor community.

Technology supports my communications with staff and allows me to manage projects effectively. The procurement offices at both locations have video conferencing capabilities in addition to email and phone. The introduction of budget-priced video conferencing on our personal computers, complementing our meeting rooms, allows for quick and easy face-to-face discussions – and much more personal. The use of video-conferencing for regular staff meetings, steering committee meetings, and focus groups gives everyone a valuable structure. It gives me opportunities to exercise my leadership role, virtually.

Technology aside, we know that the traditional manager/team style flounders from time to time, and distance can add challenges. I believe a virtual manager or team can make things work through a solid foundation built on communications, ownership, review, trust, and structure.

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Communications

The old adage that “you can never communicate too much” has been proved wrong by email. How much is truly needed or functional to our work? Be selective, brief and clear about any communications you disseminate. Focus on the audience and ensure it’s relevant.

In a traditional office environment the manager and team members generally have constant contact and interactions with each other. Communications are generally more transparent. Discussions can occur at the proverbial water cooler, over the office coffee pot, or at the photocopier. The virtual manager does not have this convenience, so communicate effectively and encourage the team to reciprocate.

Ownership

Taking ownership sounds basic enough, but it can be difficult if people don’t take ownership of a delegated task or outcome. Set up your teams with the aim of them being successful. Set clear milestones with achievable goals. Monitor and support the team member(s) as needed. When errors or gaps are identified, use this as a tool to learn, review and adjust accordingly.

Review

Review a project upon completion. Was the goal reached, what were the roadblocks, what were the successes, and how can we improve in future? There is little gained if you don’t look back and analyze the overall success or failure of decisions. Build on successes and review the failures to ensure they are not repeated.

A constructive review includes:

- ensuring all the players are involved;
- not judging the success or failure initially;
- providing an accurate story of events;
- focusing directly on the tasks and goals;
- encouraging all team members to present solutions or improvements;
- keeping it unbiased – avoid personal attacks;
- discussing the important learning outcomes; and
- thanking the participants for their efforts, and encourage them to do better on future projects.

Trust

Mutual trust and respect is important to the success of any team. Without trust you cannot comfortably delegate, communicate or reach operational goals. Trust has to be built over the whole organization, overcoming any local “silos.” Trust comes from respect and respect comes from clear, open, and honest communications. For an effective team a virtual leader needs to have an open door policy. Team members must feel they can approach a manager without censure or reproach.

Structure

As in most aspects of business you need structured reporting relationships to foster responsibility. Without structure projects may go in different directions, gaps quickly become apparent, and the project may fail or flounder. Most people find comfort in knowing where they are going and how they fit in.

A leader, whether operating in a traditional or virtual manner, focuses a team through:

- desired outcomes;
- milestone achievements;
- tools and resources required;
- timelines for completion; and
- assigning team member(s) with roles and responsibilities.

It's not easy working remotely from your staff. It can be challenging to maintain the clear authority promoted by your organization. While working on projects, emergent leaders (unofficial leaders) may rise to lead a project. It's crucial however, that emergent leaders understand they do not lead the group, but lead the process or project. Virtual leaders can overcome this by focusing on the team goals and project milestones.

Being an effective virtual manager means working outside the box. Travel time is lost time, so I have joined the ranks of the flying geeks sitting in airports glued to BlackberriesTM. Surveying the airport departure lounge, I often wonder how many other virtual managers are juggling priorities and making just one more call before strapping on the seat belt, ready for yet another flight.

But when all is said and done, being a virtual manager is incredible fun, even with the juggling!

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