How to
Succeed
Leading a Virtual Team

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YOUR SKILL AREAS OF FOCUS:
- Introduction 1
- Technical Learning 13
- Organizing 19
- Directing Others 25
- Managing Through Systems 31
- Sizing Up People 38
- Building Effective Teams 46
- Managing Vision and Purpose 54
- And on a cautionary note... Overmanaging 62
- Closing Thoughts 69
- Additional Resources 72

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Introduction

When you hear the word “team,” what image pops into your head? A group of athletes taking their positions under the watchful eye of their coach? A kitchen full of chefs and servers gracefully managing the busy dinner hour at your favorite restaurant? Or do you see an office full of employees hunched over their computers, all hurrying to complete an important project as their boss roams the halls making sure everything proceeds according to plan?

A team is a group of people who come together for a common purpose. It is natural to assume that the “coming together” is literal. That is, everyone occupies the same space. A soccer team would be the world’s worst if the strikers played in Seattle while the defenders stayed in Manchester. A restaurant wouldn’t survive long if half the chefs did their cooking at home and most of the wait staff used their laptops to take customers’ orders by e-mail.

In many workplaces, however, the reality is often quite different. More and more organizations are using virtual teams to do everything from cost accounting to cutting-edge design. An increasing number of employees are expected to collaborate on a daily basis with colleagues in distant cities and sometimes in different countries. This has significant implications for leadership. A growing number of leaders cannot bring all their people together in a room and hammer out solutions around the same conference table. Likewise, virtual leaders have few opportunities to mentor, motivate, and direct employees through casual conversations in the hallway.

While virtual teams are certainly more common than they were even 10 years ago, it’s important to note that “virtual” work—in one form or another—has always existed in certain professions. Ancient military campaigns relied on scouts and spies who worked at great distances from the main army. Sales representatives have long worked on their own, travelling their territories on the hunt for new customers. Journalists have always submitted stories from distant places to beat the competition to press.
Today, however, we see virtual teamwork adding benefit to a far wider range of organizations. Tight-knit teams sitting together in the same office are, in many places, supported by teams that are spread out across a wide geography. There is also an increasing array of working arrangements—people who work at home, people who work unconventional hours, people who divide their time between different office locations, etc. For many people, a typical 8-to-5 workday spent laboring alongside colleagues in similar cubicles is no longer the reality.

So what’s changed? Why are team members choosing to work remotely? Why are companies supporting and even encouraging this? Why does it sometimes go wrong? What makes it work effectively? How do you, as the leader of a virtual team, need to adapt? How can you really help your team members excel when you don’t have the benefit of proximity? Let’s take a look.

THE RISE OF VIRTUAL TEAMS
Like with many other changes in our society, technology has played an essential role in the rapid growth of virtual teams. Tasks that used to require ongoing face-to-face interaction can now be completed by people working remotely from their colleagues. Think of the discovery of new medications. In the past, scientists would gather at a single university to discuss their hypotheses and conduct research—perhaps sharing their findings through annual conferences. The Internet and other telecommunications tools have enabled instant data-sharing across any conceivable distance.

Technology has facilitated fundamental shifts in how organizations operate. In essence, it has created an environment in which distance counts for much less than it used to. Need to provide technical support to customers in India? Nowadays, this can often be done over the Internet by a professional sitting in Paris or Peoria. Need to discuss how to win a promising new customer with the field salesforce? A teleconference can make this happen almost instantaneously.
Directing Others

Clarity of direction is essential in an effective virtual team. In ordinary co-located work environments, anyone who is confused by your instructions can easily track you down and ask questions for clarification. This is far more difficult in a virtual team. You will need to lay out your expectations in a very clear way so that everyone can manage themselves. Just as importantly, you will need to ensure open channels of communication so that people can get quick answers if there is anything they are uncertain about.

Managing others effectively and efficiently is a known technology. We know from our research that strength in Directing Others is not particularly common among managers or executives, but it is an easier competency to develop. There are a number of research and experience verified techniques and practices that lead to groups performing well under a particular manager. There are also some personal styles and temperaments that work better than others.

A VIRTUAL TEAM LEADER SKILLED AT DIRECTING OTHERS:
- Is good at establishing clear directions
- Sets stretching objectives
- Distributes the workload appropriately
- Lays out work in a well-planned and organized manner
- Maintains two-way dialogue with others on work and results
- Brings out the best in people
- Is a clear communicator

DIRECTING OTHERS CAN BE DIFFICULT IF YOU ARE:
- Impatient
- Applying an inappropriate style or temperament
- Inexperienced; unskilled in managing
- Disinterested in managing
- Facing a major change in direction and mission
- Responsible for new members on the team
- Struggling with time management, too busy to manage
REALITY CHECK

Before you move forward on a path to develop your skill at Directing Others, it is helpful to acknowledge some of the potential obstacles in your way. This adds a useful dose of self-awareness and also helps focus your development efforts. Below are some prompts that may strike a chord of familiarity with your mind-set, followed by a recommendation of some specific remedies that may best address your needs.

If you are not comfortable telling others what to do...
...then consider that virtual teams thrive or fail due to the quality of communication between all members. Don’t think of it as issuing orders, think of it as giving direction. People look to their leader for clear messages about what is important. This is particularly true in virtual groups since team members cannot just casually observe which issues you are pulling your hair out over. Communicating directly is essential to mutual understanding in a virtual team. Remedies 1, 8, and 9 will offer you some important guidance.

If you struggle to drive action in a way that both ensures clarity and builds motivation...
...then consider that balanced management is usually the best management. Letting people know what must be accomplished is a necessary first step, but it is also vital to keep people excited about their work. This need becomes even more acute in virtual teams since the lack of regular face-to-face contact can limit the amount of spontaneous motivation that arises when people are close together and capable of casual interactions. It will be helpful for you to give close attention to remedies 2, 3, 5, and 7.

If you are quick to take most of the work upon your own shoulders...
...then consider that this habit might leave team members in the dark. You might struggle to let work go, particularly if people are far away and you cannot see them handling their tasks. But if you do not give others the chance to handle some major assignments and big responsibilities, you will be stuck with too much on your plate while your virtual team starves. Recognize that virtual teams are like any team—people learn by being challenged and are often motivated by the opportunity to make new contributions. Remedies 4, 6, and 10 provide helpful suggestions for you.
Of course, if you didn’t see anything that strongly resonated with you in the above prompts, that doesn’t mean there isn’t a remedy that fits your situation. Go ahead and scan the list below to find the solution that will best get you started on developing this all-important leadership skill.

**Some Strategies for Developing Directing Others**

Consider these remedies as a practical means of jump-starting your development on this competency:

1. **DO YOU KNOW YOURSELF? ASSESS YOUR PERSONAL STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES.**
   Get some input from others. Ask your people what they appreciate about you as a person and as a manager and what they would prefer you change. What do you do well and what don’t you do well personally and as a manager of others? Ask for help from the Human Resources function to get a list of the competencies most often related to managing others well. End up with a list of the good news and the bad news. Devise a development plan for the important things on your bad list.

2. **WHAT’S YOUR APPROACH? ASSESS YOUR MANAGEMENT PRACTICES.**
   Do an inventory of the common management techniques and practices you do well and those that you do not do so well or often enough. You can get a list of those techniques from any introductory text on management, from a course for first-time managers, or from the Human Resources function. Ask your people for input on those you do well and those you need to work on. Create a management practices skill-building plan for yourself.

3. **ARE YOU A GOOD COMMUNICATOR? CHECK YOUR COMMUNICATION SKILLS.**
   Many times the breakdown in effectively managing others is related to poor, inadequate, or inconsistent communication. Your communication skills are even more important leading a team that includes team members working remotely. How well do you inform? Listen? Explain? Get back to people? Give feedback?
4. **DO YOU DELEGATE ENOUGH? EMPOWER PEOPLE.**

Another common break-down is in neither delegating nor empowering. Do you give the people under you the authority to do their work? Do you over- or undermanage? Periodically, ask your people to give you a list of the things they think you are doing yourself that they believe they could do a good job on; delegate some of the things on everybody’s list. You might feel a little more reluctant to delegate things to people who are working remotely from you. But for the same reason this is important for people’s development in a regular “same location” team, you need to be prepared to let go of things that will help make virtual team members feel empowered and valued.

5. **DOES YOUR STYLE CHILL OR TURN OFF OTHERS? TAKE STOCK OF YOUR MANAGEMENT STYLE.**

Common styles that don’t work well with others are impatience, devaluing others, public criticism, playing favorites, prejudice toward a class of people, disorganized, emotional, etc. Are you a poor time manager? Is there enough time left in the day to spend with your people? Identify the elements of your approach that are most likely to frustrate others, and work consciously to eliminate them.

6. **ARE YOU ORGANIZED AND PLANFUL? GET ORGANIZED AND BE CLEAR.**

Can people follow what you want? Do you lay out work and tasks to be done clearly? Do you set clear goals and objectives that can guide their work?

7. **DO YOU SHARE THE CREDIT? CELEBRATE PEOPLE’S SUCCESS.**

Do you use “we” more often than “I”? Do you celebrate successes with others? Do people want to work with you again? Remember how isolated the members of a virtual team can feel and make sure you don’t overlook giving credit where it’s due. Out of sight must most definitely NOT be out of mind.

8. **DO YOU CONFRONT PROBLEMS QUICKLY OR LET THINGS FESTER? ADDRESS PROBLEMS QUICKLY.**

The rest of the team suffers when a manager doesn’t step up to problems quickly.
9. WOULD YOU RATHER BE ON YOUR OWN? ASSESS YOUR DESIRE TO MANAGE OTHERS.

Are you interested in getting work done through others or would you rather do it all yourself? Maybe management isn’t for you. Maybe you would be better off being a senior personal contributor. If you’re feeling uncomfortable with the expectations of your role, think carefully about what the reason may be before you make any hasty decisions. Take time to understand what you’re not happy with. What’s the cause? Has the transition to leading a virtual team been a very steep learning curve for you? What further help and guidance would help? Whom can you learn from?

10. WHOM COULD YOU LEARN FROM? STUDY MODELS.

Seek out one or two people around you whom others consider to be good managers. Managers who lead virtual teams will likely be the best role models for you. Study them. What do they do that you don’t? What do you do that they don’t? Or, put your last 10 managers on a piece of paper. Create two lists: the five best and the five worst. What characteristics do the best share? The worst? How does that compare to you? How would the characteristics of the best managers need to change or be adjusted in order to make sense for a virtual team? How would the behaviors of your worst managers affect a virtual team?

THINGS YOU CAN DO RIGHT NOW

You don’t have to have a formal role as a manager to exercise your skill at Directing Others. Seek out situations such as the ones described below to get more practice and build your skills in advance. Don’t limit yourself to the workplace. Look for opportunities in your life outside of work to utilize and develop this competency.

- Assign a project with a tight deadline to a group.
- Manage a group of resistant people with low morale through an unpopular change or project.
- Manage a group that includes former peers to accomplish a task.
- Manage a group of people where you are a towering expert and the people in the group are not.
- Manage a group of people involved in tackling a fix-it or turnaround project.
SUGGESTED READINGS
These readings can add to your understanding of Directing Others and provide additional ideas for development.


*Look over your shoulder now and then to be sure someone’s following you.*

HENRY GILMER
GILMER’S LAW OF POLITICAL LEADERSHIP
How to Succeed leading a Virtual team

Virtual Teams in a Virtual World: How to Succeed Leading a Multi-National Virtual Team delivers relevant, research-based guidance to help you understand the intricacies of leading a team whose members are based in different countries. It provides guidance that can help you navigate both the cultural and physical distances between people.

Virtual Teams in a Virtual World: How to Succeed As a Member of a Virtual Team delivers relevant, research-based guidance to help you operate effectively as a member of a virtual team, both in terms of your achievements and also building great relationships with your colleagues based in different locations.

HOW TO SUCCEED LEADING A MULTI-NATIONAL VIRTUAL TEAM IS FOR:

- Managers who find themselves leading a team of remote workers based in more than one country. It’s for those who are seeking advice on navigating the complexities of different nationalities and cultures being represented in the same team.
- HR professionals who need to be able to help leaders increase their effectiveness in leading a multi-national virtual team.
- Managers with individuals reporting to them who lead people based in different countries and who need to be coached to increase their virtual leadership effectiveness.

HOW TO SUCCEED AS A MEMBER OF A VIRTUAL TEAM IS FOR:

- Virtual team members looking to grow and develop.
- HR professionals who support virtual team workers and their managers and need to help them be as successful as they can possibly be.
- Managers who have virtual workers in their team and want to better understand the challenges they face in operating effectively.
SUPPLEMENTAL RESOURCES
The most effective learners seek insight from multiple sources. In addition to all the material provided in How to Succeed Leading a Virtual Team, you can access the useful supplemental resources listed below. Investigate these resources to help you gain additional insight, increase your self-awareness, and enhance your success on your job and in your career. All resources listed below are available at http://store.lominger.com.

FYI® for Insight: 21 Leadership Characteristics for Success and the 5 That Get You Fired starts individuals on a path toward improvement by building self-awareness. FYI® for Insight is used to help individuals gain awareness, get to acceptance, and take action to improve performance. In addition, take a FREE online self-awareness assessment at http://insight.lominger.com.

FYI® For Your Improvement 5th Edition provides a deeper dive into developmental remedies for competencies that comprise the leadership characteristics. It is also an easy-to-use development and coaching tool for learners, managers, mentors, coaches, and feedback givers.

Career Architect® Development Planner 5th Edition was created to help with deeper and more expert development initiatives. Each chapter provides the same development content as FYI® For Your Improvement with four additional learning sections that focus on long-term experiential development.

Voices® Multi-Rater 360° Feedback System is a Web-enabled, competency-based, and research-validated 360° feedback tool that provides learners with a powerful tool for development and improvement.
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