



Leading Virtual Project Teams

Dos and Don'ts

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ABSTRACT

A project professional of today lives in an increasingly virtual world, resulting in the need to lead virtual projects. The dynamics of a remote team require project managers to communicate with their teams differently. In this paper, we introduce the current situation and share best practices and practical strategies. These will help a project leader bridge the culture, time and language barriers and help to eliminate the distance across virtual teams, both teams within an organization and those including freelancers and partners from different organizations.

Keywords: virtual teams, virtual leadership

INTRODUCTION

Virtual project teams are those where at least one member of the team is remote from the others. Due to a combination of globalization, outsourcing, the use of the most talented people wherever they are based, flexible working and more, virtual projects are on the rise. Today's project manager needs to be able to deliver projects virtually and this paper aims to help them to do so.

THE SURVEY

First we consider the results of Dr Pullan's survey of professionals from around the world, gaining a deeper insight into what makes virtual working a challenge for many today. Then, based on the results, we present our combined suggestions for best practices and practical strategies that today's project leader can apply to make their virtual projects work.

So, let's dive in. Penny ran a webinar on virtual leadership with 205 project professionals in July 2015 (Pullan, 2015) and gained answers to her initial questions on this topic. She then opened up a survey asking more detailed questions, which ran from July 2015 to February 2016 with 168 participants. These came from 24 countries, predominantly the United Kingdom, where Penny is based with 66%. Other countries represented included the USA (10%), followed by Belgium, Italy, Germany, Australia, Switzerland and Finland, all around 2%. The majority of participants work for multinational companies (60%), many for large organisations with more than 250 employees (46%) although there were also people responding who were from micro-companies with ten or fewer employees (18%). Just over half were members of virtual teams and just under half lead virtual working.

Participants were asked to mark all the challenges of virtual working that they found applied to their situation and to comment on what they personally found difficult when working virtually. ‘Engaging Remote Participants’ stood out as the main challenge, ticked by 76% of the survey takers.

Next on the list as challenge were a group of comments, all rated similarly:

- Missing out on dynamics and nuances of conversation (58%);
- Working across time zones (56%);
- Working across different cultures (56%);
- Building trust (55%).

These are key issues for project leaders especially when dealing with the ‘nitty-gritty’ aspects of projects.

The next grouping included:

- Monitoring work done (47%);
- Different understanding of the same term or word (44%);
- Detecting and dealing with conflict (42%);
- I don't get to spend much time with remote people and so I don't know them as well as local team members (42%);
- Working across different languages (41%);
- Using technology (41%).

The survey then asked what were the things that made virtual teams work together more productively. Answers were free form and the most popular answer by far was meeting up face-to-face, either once at the start of the project, once a year or more regularly. Other common suggestions included:

- regular, clear communications, without lengthy gaps in between;
- clear roles and responsibilities;
- the use of meeting agendas;
- being clear about how the team will work together in meetings, and overall;

- shared vision, outcomes and sense of purpose;
- an open team culture, with each person listened to and able to ask for help from the others;
- time to get to know each other and build rapport and trust;
- understanding each team member’s perspectives and how they prefer to work;
- technology should be easy to use and up to the challenge;
- the use of video over audio alone;
- widespread use of screen sharing technology;
- the use of a common repository that everyone can access easily.

Interestingly, while some people preferred to use the telephone others preferred to use instant messenger. Perhaps these people were from different generations? Other than on this point, the feedback was very consistent.

STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

As we’ve seen, successful teams are those where members are engaged, and they collaborate and trust one another, working together effectively to achieve their team’s vision and outcomes.

Virtual teams allow organizations to use the best people, with the appropriate skills and talents, wherever they might be located in the world.

Many virtual teams include employees of outsourced partner companies and freelancers (EFIP, 2013)(FUED, 2014). However, building trust and developing collaboration remotely and across borders of culture, language, organization, time zones and generations can be quite a challenge!

Certainly, our 21st century technology can help. E-mail, instant messenger, telephone and video

conferencing, the ability to share screens with one another, and collaboration software that supports communication and provides information repositories, are really helpful. However, even with all this technology, communication is tough compared to an effective face-to-face team, who can catch up with one another by walking over to each other's desks. Too often, feedback from colleagues is slow and communication is difficult. Without instant feedback of body language, people are more likely to misinterpret information, which can lead to misunderstandings in a virtual environment.

Let's explore some best practices that will help project managers to become effective virtual leaders:

BEST PRACTICES

Run Effective Virtual Meetings from the Start

Virtual team meetings are the core of great virtual teams and poor meetings really affect productivity. In the survey, the key challenge for project managers was engaging remote participants. Regular contact between remote colleagues will help them to feel part of the team, but effective, engaging meetings need more.

Clear ways of working agreed at the start of the meeting will help everyone to know how to work together effectively. Typically, these include stating your name when you contribute and making sure that people mute if they are in a noisy environment, so that everyone attending can hear well.

Another useful strategy for virtual meetings is to poll people. Polling means asking participants in turn for their comments. Penny does this a couple of times in her one-hour conference calls, often at around twenty minutes and forty minutes

into the call. It really helps to agree your own participants at the start of your virtual meeting that you'll do this, as then people are far less likely to mentally check out and do other things.

Slow down to speed up

While it is tempting to race ahead, slowing down gives project managers the time to understand what's needed, what makes each team member tick, how things work and what may help the team to operate seamlessly. It is really helpful to take time upfront to build a team charter as a group and agree how the team will operate together, thereby avoiding many pitfalls ahead. A common vision and objectives, with shared goals and a strong purpose, will help each team member to find their place and to work together with their virtual colleagues.

By slowing down upfront like this in a virtual environment, the team leader has set the foundations for the team ultimately to move on to more effective and speedy project delivery.

Communicate to Engage Your Team

Project managers are already familiar with the use of communications plans for stakeholders on their projects. It makes sense to take as much care in planning communications within their virtual teams. Based on the individual needs and preferences of each team member, this plan should also consider how team members interact during the course of project. It should cover technology too, both for virtual meetings and collaboration tools for sharing information and storing documents. Ensure that the technology meets the requirements of the team and is easy to use. Helpful options include the ability to make recordings so that people can catch up if they miss meetings. Remember to gain input from your team and to update your plan as your project develops.

Within your virtual work, it helps to use multiple strategies to engage people. Use stories, visuals and pictures of team members' faces to help people to stay engaged.

Build individual connections with your team

Part of your communications with your team will include one-to-one interaction with members of the team. Take time to listen to people's concerns and help them to overcome problems that they face. This will help people to engage with your project and prioritise it amongst the many tasks they need to complete. It helps to build trust, both ways! Sometimes a personal touch such as a handwritten card to say 'Thank you' can be very powerful at making people feel appreciated and part of your team.

Use Video

A key challenge for people in Penny's survey was 'Missing out on dynamics and nuances of conversation'. One way to engage people and to gain as much of the body language and nuances of conversation as you can is to use face-to-face meetings where possible. These don't have to be co-located but can be achieved through video. This helps people to see what you mean and helps you to pick up as much of the communication as you can.

Keep your eyes and ears open for conflict

Conflict seems to be more likely in virtual teams than co-located teams, often due to a wider multi-cultural mix and geographical separation (Lui et al., 2008) (Mortensen and Hinds, 2001). In co-located teams, it is easier to see a conflict emerging and to have a chat with the individuals involved to resolve the issues. In a remote team, unless the project manager is alert to conflict, it is likely to grow unnoticed and cause problems! While it can be tempting to ignore conflict and pretend it isn't happening, virtual conflict needs

prompt attention, without which it will grow out of control.

Know what you want when recruiting virtual team members both within and outside of your organization

Virtual project managers may be able to recruit team members from around the world, bringing in outsiders as well as internal resources. To be able to select the right person for the role, project managers or their HR colleagues need to have a good grasp of the knowledge, experience, and personal characteristics needed for their team, as well as the specific skills that are needed. Look out for people who will be able to communicate well across cultures and will be flexible to work across time zones if you need this. It can be a good idea to have some reserves available too to cover risks ahead.

Remember to develop your team members

For successful projects, it makes sense to help your team members to develop their skills for the future as well as for your own project. Know their current skills and their potential and seek to help them to realise and apply their talents.

IN SUMMARY

In this paper, you have heard the views of large numbers of project managers and our ideas of practical strategies for the dos and don'ts for virtual teams. We wish you all the best for the future, which will contain an increasing number of virtual teams. We hope that you will be able to put our ideas into practice to help you gain the right people in your virtual teams and to work effectively together.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS



Penny Pullan PMP PhD, director of Making Projects Work Ltd, helps people across industries, who are grappling with tricky projects (risky, ambiguous requirements, virtual teams and disengaged stakeholders). Penny's book on Virtual Leadership comes out this year. Other books focus on facilitating risk, business analysis and leadership. Her congress sessions are challenging and fun, and she hopes that a little of that comes across to readers of this paper.



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