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Leading from a Distance

Overview

In 2010, we will spend 25% of our time working with others across different locations—today it is only 15%. Right now, 100 million people do NOT work within the traditional office environment. These changes mean that our leaders need to be skillful in leading those with whom they are not face-to-face. In this article, we will review some of the key challenges to leading remotely and how to effectively support your employees.

Much has been written on the topic of leading and managing a remote workforce. In reviewing articles, books, best practices and personal experience it is clear that the role of a leader has become increasingly more complex. The practice of having remote employees appears to be a trend that is likely to stay. If this is going to become part of the leadership routine then what do leaders need to know in terms of being capable? In her book, "How to Lead from a Distance" Debra Dinnocenzo makes the comment: "Key leadership competencies, such as communication, goal setting, coaching, team building and

performance management don't change as your team becomes more dispersed. However, the way in which you apply these leadership skills changes as more teams become virtual and more people work remotely... Become a bridge builder and lead the way into a virtual workplace".

Okay, so it sounds like leaders are still responsible for pretty much the same as before. Then what is different? According to Joyce A. Thompsen, Ph. D., "the first challenge is that any difficulties in the traditional work environment can be significantly magnified in a virtual or remote situation. Challenges with communicating; working together and producing high-quality, on-time results will be intensified by distance. Leaders need to quickly diagnose such issues and take strategic actions to keep relationships, productivity and results on track. There is even more emphasis on using the appropriate communications skills to match the needs of the people and the situation."

Finding the Right Employees

What is also interesting is that many writers on the topic also point out that it's important to find employees who are suited to operating in a virtual team environment as well. Again Thompsen suggest that organizations should look for individuals who demonstrate key competencies:

- Capable of performing the core tasks for their role
- Have self-discipline
- Are goal-directed
- Demonstrate flexibility
- Collaborative by nature
- Open to and willing to share information
- Receptive to feedback, change individual and cultural differences, and thinking styles
- Committed and connected to the business
- Able to use the technology that is required in their roles

What Leaders Do

If we assume that we have done a good job in selecting the right people not only for the job, but also for the work environment then what does a leader do? Cynthia C. Froggatt, author of "Work Naked: Eight Essential Principles for Peak Performance in Virtual Workplace" recommends that good "distance leaders" have to change the way they work by:

- Using geographical distribution to its greatest advantage
- Minimize perceived distance between people
- Make strategic use of face-to-face interaction
- Reward results, not face time.

Froggatt advises that a cultural change is required and must be driven by leaders who role model the required changes in order to embed them in the organization. An example she gives is seeing geographical distribution as an advantage. As the result of negative past experiences many leaders see having a

remote workforce as a challenge and obstacle more than a benefit. If leaders reframe their thinking and embrace remote leadership as an opportunity they will recognize that it allows them to:

- Stay close to customers and emerging markets
- Use time zone differences to accomplish more in 24 hours
- Improve chances for disaster recovery/business continuity
- Gain access to a larger, more diverse talent pool
- Tap into the growing population of partial retirees, who live remotely
- Emphasize self-management skills
- Maintain lower operating costs

Ms. Froggatt also believes it is the leader's role to look for new ways to take advantage of geographic distribution while continuously monitoring the pros and cons.

Core Leadership Competencies

When looking at what core leadership competencies are critical in leading remotely there are a variety of views, which align around the need to:

- Build trusting relationships
- Conduct regular communications
- Clarify roles, responsibilities and expectations
- Being a role model

Building Trusting Relationships: The center for Creative Leadership recommends in a recent pod cast "...dispersed teams often struggle to build and maintain trust. Not only do they lack the physical proximity that encourages feelings of cohesiveness, but also often members are unsure how to address cultural differences. To invest in trust, focus on the long-term rather than expecting overnight cohesion of the team. Periodically hold face-to-face meetings and gathering to build rapport. As a leader, be sure to keep the team informed of long-term organizational changes and ask for team input on critical organizational issues?"

On this same line of thinking Debra Dinnocenzo in "*How to Lead from a Distance*" also sees trust as a critical element. She lists three key trust builders: *reliability, integrity and familiarity*.

(Core Leadership Skills Competencies continued)

Managers build trust using *reliability* when they:

- Keep a written list of the commitments and stick to them
- Ask their people for feedback and then do what they tell them
- Make themselves available to their team members

Managers build trust using *integrity* when they:

- Are honest, truthful and forthright
- Avoid sarcasm, joking and teasing — especially when using voice mail or email
- Maintain employee confidences
- Handle sensitive material appropriately

Managers build trust using *familiarity* when they:

- Meet face to face as often as possible
- Speak regularly with their employees by phone
- Use their face and phone time well,
- Attend employee social events — even if it has to be “virtually” by teleconference or video conference
- Acknowledge milestones — service anniversaries, specific accomplishments, employee birthdays, weddings, birth of children, etc
- Learn about employees as people — their families, hobbies and interests and
- Use all available technology — telephone conversations, teleconferences, videoconferences, email, voicemail, instant messaging and fax — to stay in touch with the people they lead

Conduct Regular Communications: In addition to scheduling regular times to communicate, it is also necessary to pay careful attention to how we present ideas and thoughts, involve others in the process, and demonstrate our understanding of their points of view and choosing the right technology for the message. The essence of communication is that it should be timely, appropriate, sensitive and clear. Cynthia Froggatt suggests that an effective leader “understands when a situation demands synchronous (real-time) communication as opposed to asynchronous (voicemail, email, etc). They know that regardless of the delivery mechanism, it is important to convey both positive and negative news on a regular basis and to create a forum for dialogue rather than one-way communication.”

Joyce A. Thompsen, also recommends leaders demonstrate behaviors for communicating effectively with any virtual team such as:

- Modeling the organization's values and members' ground rules in all communications
- Communicating in a way that meets the needs of members as well as a situation
- Applying communication technology that best fits the situation, and helps all members apply available technology for communication with confidence
- Formulating specific objectives and an organized delivery plan for communication

(Core Leadership Competencies continued)

- Linking messages to the members' shared purpose and goals, and link performance contributions to results
- Encouraging all members in a conversation to participate fully
- Listening proactively
- Verifying their understanding of the message and expectations for action
- Guiding communications to achieve positive and constructive outcomes
- Coaching and offer feedback with respect and support

Clarify Roles, Responsibilities and Expectations

The Center for Creative Leadership podcast on "Leading from a Distance" stated that: "If you are starting a new team, be clear from the beginning about the purpose and team member requirements. If you have inherited a team or are struggling with your existing team, go back to defining the team's purpose and vision. What is the task it is expected to complete? Is there a clear direction for completing the task?"

"Team members may not be sure why they have been chosen or how they are expected to interact with others in the team. Discuss why each member was named to the team, what each member's skill set is and the role that each member is expected to play."

In addition, Joyce C. Thompsen of Achieve Global notes that it is essential for leaders to clearly define roles and responsibilities and take the initiative to ensure all team members are involved in creating and understanding the purpose and vision of the group or a specific project. Team members have to have a sufficient opportunity to voice their respective opinions.

This full involvement in creating a shared purpose or common vision serves as a foundation for a unified team commitment. When coupled with clear expectations for contributions and measurable performance, this combination of elements can be an

effective driving force for self-discipline and motivation. Coupled with a sense of community, there can be a reduced need for continuous monitoring and control mechanisms in order to achieve team goals.

Leaders should:

- Share information about the organization's mission, vision, strategies and goals
- Clarify the rationale and intent of strategies and goals
- Provide clear expectations for contributions and measurable results
- Ensure members are involved in decisions that affect their work
- Seek ideas and opinions from all members
- Ensure consideration of customer needs when planning work
- Use the organization's core values to guide the members' planning, decisions and actions
- Promote creativity and innovation in undertaking new goals or opportunities
- Help members develop positive approaches to the needs of the organization
- Challenge assumptions that may inhibit progress
- Demonstrate flexibility in adapting to changes in goals and expectations.

Be a Role Model

At the heart of effective distance leadership is the ability to be the employee you want your team members to be. True this is hard work and at the same time you can't expect your people to do something that you yourself have difficulty doing. When working with a remote team it is important that the leader take the time to make visible the many "out-of-sight" actions they take. By making these actions more visible, team members start to understand how their roles and actions directly contribute to achieving team and organizational goals. This openness encourages team members to be more transparent in their actions as well.

Can we Change

Can all leaders change to be more effective managing a remote workforce or virtual team? My sense is that it is possible to make the change as long as they know what and how to change. Our success to date has been based on our ability to see the need for change and adapt to it.

Hopefully we have been able to help you see what it means to lead from a distance. For more information on How to Lead from a Distance, please contact us at www.ppsinternational.net

References

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