



Managing Virtually

Four ways to overcome the challenges of long-distance leadership.

By Merge Gupta-Sunderji

“First there was virtual memory, then virtual reality, but virtual management? Aren’t we taking this virtual thing too far?” asked a client of mine who is a manager in a mid-sized company. “Face-to-face leadership is often tough enough, but managing remote employees adds a whole new level of complexity,” he said.

And he’s right. When dealing with off-site employees, not only is it harder to keep up with what they’re doing, but motivating them becomes more of a leadership challenge.

The reality is that remote workers are becoming the norm. Driven primarily by the technology that makes it possible, more and more Canadians are choosing to telework — whether one day a month, one day a week, or even full time. In fact, the Gartner Group estimated in 2005 that more than one million Canadian employees telework at least one day a week. Factor in employees who are geographically remote from their bosses and those who are mobile (such as salespeople), and the number of off-site employees climbs rapidly, making virtual leadership a necessity.

Virtual management is possible if you’re willing to fine-tune your leadership approach. A good place to start in determining what adjustments to make is to look at the biggest drawbacks to being off-site. Employees’ number one complaint is that they feel out of the loop. “I never know what’s going on” and “I’m not included in the decision-making” are the most common criticisms I hear. Here are four keys to managing remote employees.

1. Focus on the End, Not the Means

One of the most common fears expressed by managers whose employees work off-site is “how will I know they’re working?” The simple answer is you won’t. But keep in mind that realistically, you can’t be sure they’re working every time you see them in the office, either. In other words, don’t confuse activity with achievement.

The key to effective leadership is to set clear priorities, establish strategic direction, and hold your employees accountable to action. Focus on developing specific, measurable, and attainable goals with your employees. For example, targets could include the number of outbound calls made per week, the number of support issues resolved in a month, a completed checklist of month-end activities and reports, or other appropriate measures of job productivity. Make sure the goals go beyond productivity;

set objectives for communication and professional development. For example, goals-related reporting, contact frequency, and training should also be included. Ensure you develop the goals and delivery timetable with your employees so everyone is on the same page, and the goals and expectations are realistic.

2. Establish Communication Patterns

One of the biggest challenges in a remote relationship is the strain it places on communication. It’s critical that you work hard to overcome this potential pitfall. Establish the primary method of communication upfront — whether it be phone, e-mail, or text messaging — and the frequency. This may differ from employee to employee to fit individual preferences and work responsibilities. Outline what kind of progress reports you expect and how often as well.

On the other side of the coin, a common complaint of on-site employees is that they can’t reach their off-site colleagues when they need to. This problem can be avoided by clearly setting expectations about work hours and creating a schedule for checking and responding to voice mail and e-mail.

Frequency of communication is also critical. In my consulting experience, every leader who is successfully managing people long distance has, at minimum, a weekly teleconference with the team. On-site employees should be included in this meeting.

Finally, don’t let your off-site employees’ efforts to communicate fall into the great abyss. I recall one remote employee making this telling statement: “I sent the boss this great idea on how to change our reporting process and I’m still waiting to hear back. That was six weeks ago.” In a face-to-face environment, employees can corner you at the watercooler and ask for an update. Off-site employees don’t have that opportunity, and your lack of response will contribute to their feeling of isolation. Make it a point to respond to their comments or suggestions with either a “yes” (be sure to give them credit), a “no” (tell them why), or a “not right now, but maybe later.”

3. Provide Support and Feedback

Make yourself accessible to your employees. One of the best ways to accomplish this is to set office hours — periods of time when

(continued on page 35)

you will be next to the phone and available to talk. Some leaders I know set a fixed time each workday, others block off Monday and Friday afternoons. Pick times, let your employees know, and then stick to the schedule.

Another basic leadership technique that often falls by the wayside in long-distance management is giving employees ongoing feedback. Most leaders offer feedback and praise in a very informal way, and usually it comes to mind when they see the employee in the office. Because remote workers don't have the opportunity to bump into you, you have to put in some extra effort — a brief voice mail or e-mail works wonders.

Finally, just as you would for any other employee, schedule regular performance reviews. Face-to-face meetings are always more effective, but chatting by phone is better than nothing at all.

4. Make Them Feel Like Part of the Team

There are a variety of things you can do to make sure remote employees are connected and still feel like part of the gang at the office. In addition to regular teleconferences and defined communication schedules, be sure to route informal memos and notes to remote workers, and, whenever possible, include them in impromptu lunches and social events. Keep in mind that meetings don't always have to be face to face for them to be effective team builders. By using a combination of teleconferencing, video conferencing, groupware, and Web conferencing, your remote workers can participate in meetings and attend presentations in real time and feel like they're (almost) in the office.

Having said that, it's important to bring your remote employees into a central location for an in-person meeting at least twice a year. If you have on-site employees, make sure you schedule enough time for the two groups to socialize. It will strengthen the relationships between off-site employees and office staff, and help smooth over the long-distance conflicts that can inevitably rise.

At an individual level, you should talk to your remote employee by phone at least once a week. Even just a short conversation to check in will make them feel like part of the team.

More than anything else, off-site employees need to know they're not alone — that you're behind them, you support them, and

you understand their challenges. With these four points in mind, you're well on your way to being a first-class virtual leader! ■

Merge Gupta-Sunderji, MBA, CGA, helps turn managers into leaders. Through engaging keynotes and workshops, articles, books, radio commentary, and her training consultancy, she gives people specific and practical tools to help them achieve leadership and communication success. Contact her at www.mergespeaks.com or 403 605-4756.