

How do I make virtual management work?

Leading industry experts answer your strategic questions

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Our world may be increasingly a "global village," but it can just as easily amplify as reduce the distances between us as a result. Distance in working relationships can be physical (geography, time zone or organizational size), operational (team size, opportunities for communication and face-to-face meetings, balancing multiple requirements), or cultural (shared/different values, prior familiarity, comparative status). The greater each "distance" (and its cumulative number), the greater the effect – trust and job satisfaction decline, and innovative behavior, effectiveness and performance are impaired.

Lonely at the top?

These challenges are all very real for the "distant leader." But while it is lonely at the top, many divisional managers (including HR directors reporting to corporate HR functions in other countries) find the second or third rung just as lonely, especially where their own position or status isolates them from their team. Rarely having extensive peer contact, they may have significant distances – and challenging working styles and behaviors – to cross to form effective relationships with "remote" managers. Remote has two definitions: "operating effectively from a distance" and "distant or unapproachable"; where the latter is more applicable, the onus falls largely

on direct reports to make relationships work for both parties – and the broader organization.

HR's strategic response

First and foremost, HR needs to support virtual managers to ensure that they are effective in managing their own "loneliness," as without effective leaders, the strategy of the business simply cannot be realized.

While behaviors and cultures can be adapted to new circumstances, one aspect of being remote is, by definition, fixed: the potential for isolation and loneliness. A national managing director can easily find themselves facing difficult challenges while caught between a remote boss and a local workforce with whom they cannot share issues and concerns without "scaring the horses." With little opportunity for open conversation with their manager or peers, there is no scope for discussion of either strategic or personal/career development issues.

One answer is to provide an executive coach – someone not just with full professional accreditation, but also with real experience of virtual management. As well as providing a means by which they can share and explore complex strategic issues and challenges and receive helpful, applicable responses or suggestions, a coach can also help them address causes as well as symptoms in their remote working relationships.

Leading the organizational development agenda

A second answer is for HR to lead the organizational development agenda to encourage cultural or behavioral changes to support effective virtual management and working. Working pro-actively, HR can mitigate many of virtual management's potentially damaging or isolating effects, whether through focused interventions or by producing (and policing) guidelines for virtual working. Consider the following points:

- *Take every opportunity for face-to-face contact.* Encourage opportunities for face-to-face meetings to be taken, for the unique advantages they offer. Unadorned text is often ambiguous, and potentially misinterpreted. Speech feels more natural (despite potential language barriers), and face-to-face meetings allow for body language, relationship building and social interaction.
- *Make every word count.* If distance is not to grow, communication needs to be regular, but remind everyone of the difference between "urgent" and "important." In virtual

relationships, time is precious, so encourage staff not to waste it, as this will discourage future interaction. Where nuance matters, use phones over keyboards, but plan calls mindful of time zones and the recipient's convenience.

- *Allow for contributions and counter ignorance.* Just as work does not prosper without relationships, relationships do not grow without work. Encourage a culture where input and feedback on successes, failures, accomplishments and concerns are shared. Remote managers need local support networks. Encourage reports to keep them informed about cultural impact. Make it routine for all team members to review shared understanding after video/audio conference calls. Messages need to be received and understood, not just communicated. Where language is a potential problem, identify preferred channels wherever possible – email, telephone or video conferencing.
- *Everyone has responsibilities.* A boss' remit includes ensuring reports are briefed, informed and equipped to perform their roles. The "out of sight, out of mind"

effect of virtual working can blindside remote leaders from their responsibilities, and a system of periodic checks and timely reminders can both help their reports and prevent more damaging, longer-term organizational blindspots from developing.

None of these issues are exclusive to virtual management – indeed "local" managers can face many of them. But virtual managers, and those they manage, need to work consciously and harder at them to overcome the effects of distance, no matter how we define it.

About the author

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