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How to Lead Effectively in Virtual Environments

By Frank Kalman

Virtual meetings are common in today's global business world, but leading teams through these channels is no walk in the park. Get your leaders to hone the required skills.

Brad Trask, a consultant at leadership development and strategy execution firm Gagen MacDonald, is still getting accustomed to leading teams in a global environment.



Because the firm's clients, and some of his co-workers, are located across the globe, Trask said it's not unusual for his meetings to be held in a virtual environment. Trask, therefore, is tasked with managing through the social barriers that come with holding meetings over the Web.

It's a situation more people and companies are facing. With the globalization of business, leaders have to learn to lead teams of individuals they may have never met in person. Even as the growth in social media and communication technologies has made life easier for global leaders, guiding teams is not easy when the comfort of normal human interaction is broken.

Such barriers require that managers put extra emphasis on the ability to influence, communicate and plan, Trask said. CLOs can help build these skills through learning modules and simulations that force teams in virtual environments to find a shared sense of purpose even as they lack shared real estate.

"When you're not located together, you have to have disciplined approach to how things are going to be measured in terms of touching base," Trask said. "You still have to clarify a shared sense of purpose for the team."

Because virtual gatherings are disconnected by the traditional human relationships that are formed when people work together daily, the ability to create a sense of unity and purpose for

the team — and for the goals of each meeting or project— is an especially important skill for leaders to acquire, Trask said. Laying out each meeting’s goals and staying on a strict agenda is especially important when leading in a virtual environment, he said, where meeting participants are more likely to multitask or pay attention to other projects.

Beth O’Neill, a senior consultant with workplace learning services firm **Interaction Associates** Inc., whose client list includes Yahoo!, StubHub and eBay, said leaders in virtual environments should learn to pay extra attention to visual cues and tone of voice during virtual meetings.

“It’s incumbent upon a leader to really challenge the process of meetings to make sure that those kinds of things are described or narrated in some way to help fortify the relationship dimension,” O’Neill said. She added that virtual leading requires leaders to actively communicate with participants, more so than during traditional, face-to-face meetings.

The best teaching methods for such scenarios are those that force leaders into the discomfort of a virtual meeting — so they can feel the pace and adjust on the fly.

Trask described his developmental process. Whenever he is preparing to lead a virtual meeting — even when certain team members are centrally located — he has team members stay at their desks and log in to the virtual meeting individually, thus putting everybody in the same position of having to work and communicate virtually.

This practice, he said, creates a sense of equality and unity for all team members — as opposed to singling out the small cohort in a conference room as a different class of team members than the ones located elsewhere.

Interaction Associates, a collaborative workplace learning service provider, offers clients a learning module designed to help teams master online meetings. Barry Rosen, the firm’s founding partner, said the learning program encompasses four three-hour sessions designed to take place over several weeks and focuses on providing leaders with specific “tools and moves.”

“For example, a tool for sharing responsibility is a ‘responsibility metric,’ so the participants would see that in any meeting you have to have someone process managing,” Rosen said, meaning the individual is facilitating the pace and noting vital information shared.

After some initial tools and moves are learned, the module requires students to go into breakout rooms to hold simulated meetings.

Rosen offered advice that could make the daunting task of teaching an entire organization virtual leading skills less of a challenge to learning practitioners.

“[Tell] your leaders, ‘Let’s work for an hour and we’ll show you how to do something, practice, and teach your people,’” Rosen said. “And it’s more likely that kind of process is going to trickle down because people are going to see their leaders trying things.”