



Chapter V

Long Distance Leadership: Communicative Strategies for Leading Virtual Teams

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Abstract

Because virtual teams are becoming more common in global organizations, research that explicates issues related to this emergent organizational phenomenon is necessary. One major topic is the leadership of virtual teams. Drawing on data from a series of in-depth interviews with project leaders, senior managers, and executives of six global organizations, in this chapter, what virtual team leaders perceive to be effective communicative tactics in virtual settings will be illustrated. Specifically, tactics related to two leadership challenges commonly cited in the academic and popular

press are explored: (a) overcoming virtual team members' feelings of isolation—feelings of disconnectedness, lack of cohesiveness, and limited identification with the virtual team leader and the organization; and (b) building and maintaining trust. Also presented in the chapter are some strategies for managing cross-cultural communication issues, and tips are offered on the use of communication technologies in distanced settings.

Introduction

The globalization of business as well as recent patterns in corporate restructuring demand that more organizations utilize geographically dispersed work groups and use advanced technologies to communicate with them (Benson-Armer & Hsieh, 1997; Hymowitz, 1999; Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998; Van Aken, Hop, & Post, 1998). Organizations such as IBM, Hewlett-Packard, GE, AT&T, and Proctor & Gamble, for instance, incorporated various degrees of virtuality into their operations (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998). Some firms employ “telecommuting,” in which members may work at home, on the road, or at the office (Hymowitz, 1999). Other companies enjoy operations that are globally dispersed. Leaders in organizations that have adopted this extreme form of “operational virtuality” (Van Aken, Hop, & Post, 1998) face the complex task of leading people who are often thousands of miles away from their home organizations. A manager in Austin, Texas, for example, may be responsible for coordinating employees in Ireland, Malaysia, and Brazil. In this chapter, we use the term “long-distance leadership” to refer to leadership in globally dispersed organizations.

Popular press writers caution long-distance leaders against assuming that geographically dispersed operations foster the same level of coordination among, and productivity from, individuals as among members who are geographically proximate (see Handy, 1995; Upton & McAfee, 1996). This emergent brand of leadership is, in fact, not easy. In a recent survey of 500 virtual managers, 90% believed that managing over distance was more difficult than managing face to face, and 40% held that individuals produced less when they were geographically distant from their managers (Hymowitz, 1999).

In this chapter, we review what is known about the challenges inherent in long-distance leadership and offer practical recommendations for meeting these challenges. To do so, we first illuminate tactics for dealing with two specific leadership challenges: virtual team members' feelings of isolation—perceptions of disconnectedness, lack of cohesiveness, and limited identification with the virtual team leader and the organization; and building and maintaining trust

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