Chapter IV

It’s the Exception, Not the Norm

Much of the early literature on managing a successful virtual team or on how to successfully implement a telecommuting program made the assumption that most team members were co-located, and the remote user was the exception. The goal for the virtual team, therefore, was to make sure that these one or two remote individuals were able to work within the team on a best-effort basis rather than one encouraging all team members to act virtually. A good example of where this situation might exist is in programs where telecommuting is positioned as a perk, as opposed to a business benefit.

In this chapter, we will discuss Myth #7 and Myth #8.

- Myth #7: We need to focus on helping those few people who will be remote.
- Myth #8: Virtual teams are about working at home (it’s only about telecommuting).
Myth #7: “We Need to Focus on Helping Those Few People Who Will Be Remote”

In our experience, the “distributed-members-are-the-exception” viewpoint is fraught with dangers for successful virtual teaming. First, it is very difficult for a single remote member ever to feel truly integrated into a predominately co-located team. This environment is typically characterized by team behaviors (often unintentional) that reinforce the co-located paradigms.

Second, the “distributed-members-are-the-exception” mindset often leads to the awful “meeting-room-with-a-single-dial-in” syndrome, where a group of co-located people gather in a conference room with a single speaker phone (probably the oldest and poorest quality unit in the corporation) and a single dial-in user joins the meeting. Inevitably, the poor dial-in user not only can’t identify who is speaking at any given moment, but usually can barely hear, anyway. In our early virtual team experiences, the authors of this book have been on the receiving end of the “single-speaker-phone” treatment—no one likes this experience. Remote dial-in participants lose the visual queues that everyone else in the meeting room enjoys (nodding heads, bored looks, someone leaving the room, etc.) as well as the typical banter that occurs among the face-to-face participants. The remote team members have only a second-class experience here.

Our view is that there is no such thing as a partially co-located, partially remote team. If a single member is remote, you have a geographically distributed virtual team, and it should be managed as such. And if you have a virtual team, most meetings (almost by definition) should be virtual, using dataconferencing, audioconferencing, and the myriad other electronic collaboration tools that support virtual meetings.

One of the most successful ways to avoid the “second-class-citizen effect” for the remote members of a virtual team is for all team members to dial into the same audioconference bridge, rather than co-located team members gathering together in a room and conferencing in the remote members. Everyone on the team needs to get used to the virtual team protocols, such as saying your name before you speak, calling out slide numbers during slide presentations, and so forth. Note that we’ve been on conference calls with 30 or more people on the line, and some participants still will use only their first name when speaking or asking questions—not a best practice for virtual teams.