

Leading Internationally

How to lead in a global, remote and virtual environment

In today's globalized world, who has not had that urgent telephone conference where people from different countries call in for a certain key project? Who has not heard from their geographically spread out team that you are not physically present enough? Who has not had trouble getting travel approval to see their team at least once a year? Let's take a guess: many of you are quite familiar with the challenges of leading in an international environment.

by Susanna Frech and Birgitta Gregor

When we talk about remote teams we should have a closer look at what the different constellations are (see illustration). Regardless of the constellation, the list of challenges that need to be taken into account when leading internationally, seems hard to tackle, mainly being:

- How do I establish contact with my people and make an impact?
- How do I clarify roles and responsibilities?
- How do I set goals and monitor their performance?
- How do I make sure they collaborate and act as a team?
- And most importantly, how do I make them feel like equally valuable team members despite being at different locations and not under direct influence?

Let's look at pragmatic approaches

First, we must disappoint you straight away: there is no miraculous solution in place; there is no sure-fire recipe to make it happen. But – and this is the good news – all the tools and skills a manager has at hand will help make remote and virtual teams work effectively. It is the special focus along with the continuity of applying some clear principles that will make the difference. There are five elements where close attention will help:

1. Relationships, roles and responsibilities

It all starts with a clear set-up of roles and responsibilities as well as agreed interfaces among all team members. You should value diversity in skills and culture even more than usual, as different backgrounds can be a real resource for extended learning and enriching expertise. In any case, decision-making processes need to be fully transparent to your team.

2. Performance

Establish clear goals that all fit into an agreed, joint objective for the team and point out any interdependencies by establishing a »common cause« for the team. A tight management system for measuring performance needs to be in place, in order to get timely feedback on any deviation from the goals set. Also, look at other means of getting feedback, for instance by openly asking the team members how things are going or by understanding and gathering more indirect proof of performance, e. g. from clients or peers.

3. Communication

Consciously choose the communication channels and make them equally accessible. Listen carefully, explain thoroughly and use simple wording for virtual meetings, especially when some of the team members might not be fluent in the working language.

4. Enablement

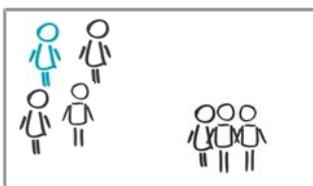
Each and every team member needs to have the same ease of working; the same technology and access methods to systems, the same applications and information, including the same ease-of-use. The clearer the structure and processes are defined, the better. Any amendments need to be distributed and shared with all team members. When scheduling, time zones need to be taken into consideration, as it is only fair to alternate which region has to stay up late or wake up early for a phone conference.

5. Trust

The whole team has to have all relevant information at the same time and including the same content. Teamwork will improve if you schedule some time for »virtual socializing« – e. g. have a virtual coffee together, or organize virtual recognition or milestone celebrations. Foster a sense of »connectedness« reaching out to remote employees as often as desired and making them feel like a valued member of the team.

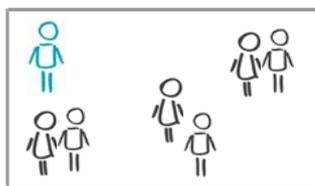
And last but not least: challenge any system or travel/budget freeze and find any good reason and possible business justification to get in personal contact with your people, as this still is the best way of connecting and establishing an effective team. ●

Various constellations



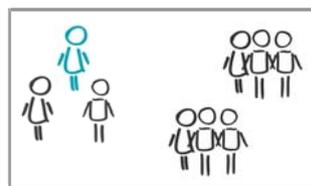
One manager with some people locally, another team remote

Main challenges
Local team: closer, better visibility, more control
Remote team: less visible, own subteam



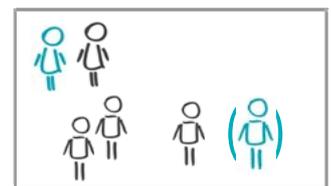
One manager on his own, team very much spread out

Main challenges
Timely communication, collaboration effort, measuring performance, establishing team spirit



One manager with some people locally, two or more teams remote

Main challenges
Local team versus remote teams, subteam building, alliances 2 versus 1, clarity on responsibilities split



One project manager with people locally and remote, all with local managers

Main challenges
Establishing authority as a project manager, agreeing on resources and priorities, aligning conflicting interests