

Managing virtual teams requires devolving leadership



Moving entire offices to work from home has presented organisations with many and often unexpected challenges. Technology alone is not the solution; different approaches to leadership, communications and corporate policy are required to maintain productivity and staff wellbeing. For affected staff, balancing work with varied and escalating personal demands is a substantial ongoing dilemma.

My research to understand how members of virtual teams in large projects communicate revealed a number of factors that can be readily applied to working from home. These approaches can help understand and ease the situation in which many individuals and businesses are currently finding themselves. Navigating this new *work from home* world, businesses need to adopt novel, diverse and flexible approaches to workplace communications; change how they approach workforce trust, and; supplement traditional leadership styles with flexible, contemporary skills. I believe that considering these insights during the current work from home conditions may make the experience easier for everyone.

Trust is central to success

Critical to the success of any virtual team is a trusting relationship between its members. Trust is created and maintained through reliable delivery of work, open and honest communications and mutual respect. It takes time to establish and can be broken easily.

For staff moving from a traditional office setting to working from home, how trust is formed and sustained over the time spent working from home will change. Colleagues who could previously discuss and coordinate work on the run in their offices now find themselves relying on often unfamiliar forms of electronic communication to share the status of their work. This shift requires us all to consciously discuss progress, as well as share both good and bad news equally and openly. For some, moving from an almost unconscious coordination of work in a common workplace to consciously sharing work status can be a significant challenge. The new work from home situation needs more frequent, organic electronic communications to ensure everyone stays up to date and can accommodate any changes of status from others.

Working from home requires flexibility

Effective virtual teams value the flexibility they get from staff working in different locations and conditions. They recognise that as long as work gets done and deadlines met, it doesn't matter whether tasks are completed at unusual hours.

As we have all discovered, working from home means balancing work alongside family, as well as managing the mental challenges of isolation. Businesses must, wherever possible, permit personnel to adjust their workday to accommodate home-based demands. Meetings and communications need to be structured and scheduled to enable staff working from home to participate, without compromising other pressures on their time, letting them adjust other tasks to suit their situation.

Being flexible with meeting times and schedules may be inconvenient for some organisations, however, adopting this dynamic approach will help mitigate the stress many staff are experiencing balancing their work and personal demands.

Alternative communication

Successful virtual teams adapt their communications to ensure everyone stays on the same page, making communications more considered and more fluid. Using the right tools for each message has proven critically beneficial.

Some communications when working from home are more complex than those of conventional virtual teams. Each team member is now isolated from all their colleagues rather than working in co-located groups. Meaningful communications cannot be sustained by turning previously face-to-face meetings into video calls. Internal business communications must become more organic and responsive, choosing the appropriate medium for each activity. Many formal and informal discussions should move from calendared meetings to frequent and responsive shorter calls.

Communications tools have also changed with working from home. Use of desktop video has become ubiquitous but is not the best solution for every discussion; phone and email often prove more efficient, particularly for quick one-on-one discussions or group messaging. Staff working from home need the latitude to employ the best tools for their individual circumstances.

Leadership of remote workers is different

Virtual teams have shown traditional leadership skills, developed to lead co-located teams are not enough when the members of those teams are dispersed. Effective virtual team leaders have learned to accept higher levels of ambiguity, adopting more devolved leadership styles, empowering decisions to be taken at lower levels within their teams. Effective leaders of these distributed teams have also realised they cannot be everywhere at once and, consequently, are unable to make informed decisions, instead leaving decisions to those closest to the action with the best understanding of the situation but with appropriate reference to the overall aims of the organisation or project.

In the current work from home situation, adopting the approach of effective virtual team leaders means giving home-based workers greater autonomy over how they perform their work and the decisions they make. As long as they coordinate their collective work and schedules, staff should be provided the freedom to structure tasks to suit their teams' targets. Leaders should also review reporting structures, allocating authority to junior personnel who can inform them of progress and highlight issues should they arise. This releases leaders to begin strategising on future plans for their organisations when businesses move out of the current phase.

Beware of marginalisation and isolation

Effective virtual teams recognise the need to keep everyone in the loop. They actively ensure everyone who needs to be is engaged in every discussion and decision, keeping work aligned, avoiding staff becoming isolated, and supporting a genuinely trusting working environment.

Marginalisation and organisational isolation is a major risk to monitor when working from home. As teams become dispersed, it is easy to omit people from calls, or discuss additional topics and make decisions without the appropriate team-member present. Staff should be invited to relevant meetings, and participate using the same media, whether that be via phone or video, and every agenda item discussed with those present.

During the next months, working from home will doubtless introduce a raft of novel and difficult experiences for businesses and staff. Insights from the practices of successful virtual teams may help to smooth some bumps along the way.



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