

Global 'virtual' leaders

The importance of effective leadership in today's virtual work environment



Fundamental to a strong bond between worldwide companies and their customers is effective leadership in the virtual environment – an area about which, until recently, little was known. Yet understanding what team members expect and want from their managers, both virtually and face-to-face, is a crucial requirement for effective leadership in all globally dispersed companies.

A recent study looked at leadership tasks and/or relationship-oriented leadership behaviours among managers and team members in global virtual teams (GVT) within Shell Global Solutions International BV. It has identified several best practices for managers who lead GVTs to help them work effectively in this increasingly common working environment.

The research found that the clarity of written communications was even more important in the virtual environment than in person. Face-to-face communication is still strongly recommended for GVTs in specific situations, for example, when developing new teams or communicating new goals

and strategies or bad news. For both face-to-face and virtual working, managers need to anticipate problems and to provide clear direction and goals to prevent misunderstandings.

While managers should continually be aware of the diversity among team members and should strive to create an inclusive working environment, these considerations are especially true during virtual interactions.

Individual differences (for example, cultural, generational and learning styles) may have an impact on people's preferences for the level of virtual compared with face-to-face interaction.

Information sharing becomes increasingly important as the degree of day-to-day virtual working grows. Advances in technology have profoundly affected the way that information is shared, and managers need to recognise that they are no longer the main channels of communication. They also need to consider the impact of uneven distribution of information, which can inhibit successful task completion. Ultimately,

they need to find the right balance between a flow of sufficient relevant information and overload.

GVT teams have a clear need for goal setting, and task-oriented leadership becomes even more important as the amount of virtual teamwork increases.

But relationship-oriented leadership remains vital, as it is more difficult to build and maintain trust and promote team identification within a GVT. The importance of building and sustaining relationships and making people feel part of the team increases with the level of virtual working. There are many tactical and symbolic steps that managers can take to build a sense of belonging in a GVT. These include articulating the importance of shared goals and values, taking an active interest in team members' concerns, listening attentively and providing feedback through effective coaching.

Interestingly, the study showed that team members' evaluations of their managers' proficiency in leadership behaviour closely mirrored those of the managers themselves. This suggests that GVT managers recognise the important leadership behavioural needs of their team members.

The study author concluded that GVTs are an important component of globally dispersed organisations, as they are often authorised to make or implement decisions with internationally strategic implications. This is typically because GVTs have local knowledge and understanding, such as insights into local governments, cultures and decision-making processes.

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