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Can Remote Leadership Skills be Learnt?

By Sven Cune and Fredrik Fogelberg

More and more, virtual teams are part of our daily lives. For many, spending all working hours as part of a collocated team is a thing of the past. Although working virtually is considered important, it is still seen as second best to the 'real thing', working together face to face. In this article we explain why virtual teamwork should be seen for its own merits and is much more than the second best alternative to working together in the same place.

Also, we take a close look at what it takes to manage remotely; the challenges remote leaders face when leading virtual teams and how to overcome them. Finally we present an approach to develop remote leadership skills.

> *Less than 30% of virtual teams are seen to be effective and successful. (Caulat, 2006)*

Virtual Teamwork - Here to Stay

Virtual teams have added value over face to face teams in many ways. We can tap into resources that otherwise would not be accessible. Working remotely allows organisations to better access talent, knowledge and local expertise all around the world and give

round the clock service to customers: synchronising people, time and opportunity.

In addition, virtual teamwork saves costs since the need to travel decreases. The argument of sustainability –reducing the carbon footprint- also becomes more and more important for any organisation. Quoting a recent IBM HR study:

> *Tomorrow's leaders must be cultivated to think in terms of a virtually unrestricted global environment . Traditional training and 'osmosis' are not enough. Companies must equip leaders to build the skills necessary to prosper in today's virtual and distributed world.[1]*

From the Individual's Perspective

Contrasting the initial euphoria over virtual working, critics have argued that workers lack social interaction, identification with the organisation and that they risk working too hard which may lead to burnout or work – life imbalance. Surprisingly, the younger generation still opts for the classic working arrangement: a survey shows that 73% of Dutch university graduates prefer a traditional office job to a virtual workplace.[2] This contrasts with this generation's life style: a social life that is largely on line and a heavy dependency on the Internet for both studying and day to day practicalities. Individuals, who do work virtually a large part of their time, seem to appreciate it. They experience the freedom of working virtually every day: no commute to the office, saving time and energy, otherwise spent in traffic or on public transportation. And, as is common practice in our own firm, work hours are flexible as long as business permits. With this freedom, we are likely to work at times when we feel we can deliver the best work. This makes us more productive than traditional employees.

This perspective is consistent with classic research –done long before the Internet was invented- in Industrial & Organisational psychology, stating that workers perform best when the job is characterized by 5 factors:[3]

- Skill variety: can I use different skills at work?
- Task identity: can I recognize my contribution to the product or service?
- Task significance: is the work meaningful?
- Autonomy: am I empowered to make decisions about my own task?
- Feedback: do I hear how I am doing?

The 'autonomy' factor is particularly relevant in the virtual context.

Challenges for Remote Leaders

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[1] IBM Chief HR Officer Study (2010), Working beyond borders.
[2] Van Loon, Nu.nl, 2011.
[3] Hackman and Oldham, 1975.

There are enough challenges we can think of when it comes to managing a virtual team. We have identified six that are listed in the box and described below. We believe however that each one of these challenges can be dealt with and even turned into advantages, provided the team leader deals with them in the right way. In other words: 'geographical distance needs not be a distractor but can become an enabler'.[4]

Remote leadership challenges:

- Communicating virtually
- Managing performance
- Building trust
- Managing across cultures
- Developing the team
- Networking

Leadership Challenge #1: Communicating Virtually

The first challenge is virtual communication. Even though this is something we do more and more in both our private and working lives, most people still do not like the idea of communicating exclusively through virtual tools. One of our virtual training participants responded in an emotional tone and described it as 'dehumanizing' to work with people without ever meeting them face to face. What people like him may overlook is the fact that it is entirely possible to develop a trustful relationship over a long distance. One expert says: *'If you've got a virtual relationship, we're to a point now where you have friends that you like better on-line than you do in person'*.[5]

When it comes to virtual communication, the challenge is not so much to learn how to use the different tools available. It is more important to select the most appropriate way of communicating, given the situation and cultural preferences of team members. There is a dazzling choice of tools available. The leader should trust the tool guru on his team to create an effective virtual work space. The key is not to stick to one form of communication, but to think of what and with whom you need to communicate and then select the appropriate technology. A conflict between employees is not best resolved by e-mail, nor should one ask a colleague for the weekly report by setting up a video conference (see the Technology vs. Task matrix for more insights on when to use what kind of technology).

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[4] Caulat, 2006.
[5] Wilson, in: Managing the mobile workforce: leading, building and sustaining virtual teams.

TECHNOLOGY VS TASK MATRIX

Asynchronous communication:

	Routine tasks	Non routine tasks	Building & Maintaining Relationships
E-Mail	🙂 (green)	😣 (red)	😐 (orange)
Bulletin Board	🙂 (green)	😐 (orange)	😐 (orange)
Document Sharing	🙂 (green)	😐 (orange)	😣 (red)

Synchronous communication:

	Routine tasks	Non routine tasks	Building & Maintaining Relationships
Instant Messaging (WhatsApp / BBM)	🙂 (green)	😣 (red)	😐 (light green)
Phone	😐 (light green)	😐 (light green)	😐 (light green)
Skype / Lync / etc.	🙂 (green)	😐 (light green)	😐 (light green)
Phone Conference	😣 (red)	😐 (orange)	🙂 (green)
Video Conference	😣 (red)	😐 (light green)	🙂 (green)
Web meeting Platform	😣 (red)	🙂 (green)	😐 (light green)

So what is the impact of virtual communication on the team's output? Research shows –for example- that brainstorming of virtual teams will lead to more and better ideas than brainstorming of conventional teams[6]. We explain this effect from a cross cultural perspective: team members from cultures where the hierarchy is prominent or communication is indirect (so called 'high context cultures') normally tend to be reluctant to speak up. They tend to do this more easily in a virtual than in a face to face setting. A necessary condition is that the team's working climate is perceived as safe. Otherwise the opposite can happen: only the 'louder' members will speak up. Some experts argue that a face to face environment is actually worse for problem solving than a virtual team environment, even in a mono cultural group.[7]

Leadership Challenge #2: Managing Performance Remotely

A second challenge is the lack of control that a virtual manager might experience. When your direct reports are asleep while you are at work in the office, it's easy to feel you are losing grip on the project. The virtual manager cannot look over the shoulder of her or his team members or see when they check in or out of the office. However it turns out that this feeling of loss of control is not completely justified. Research shows that employees who have the option to work from home work harder. Their productivity increases, because they feel that they have to return the favour for the opportunity they get to work from home.[8]

An impact on team dynamics of less visible control is that one team member may think that he or she is working harder than the others. Also, we expect managers with a high need for

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[6] Parks & Senna, 1999.
[7] Wilson, in: Managing the mobile workforce: leading, building and sustaining virtual teams.
[8] Kelliher & Anderson, 2010.

control to have more problems in leading virtually, than those who have a natural tendency towards delegation.
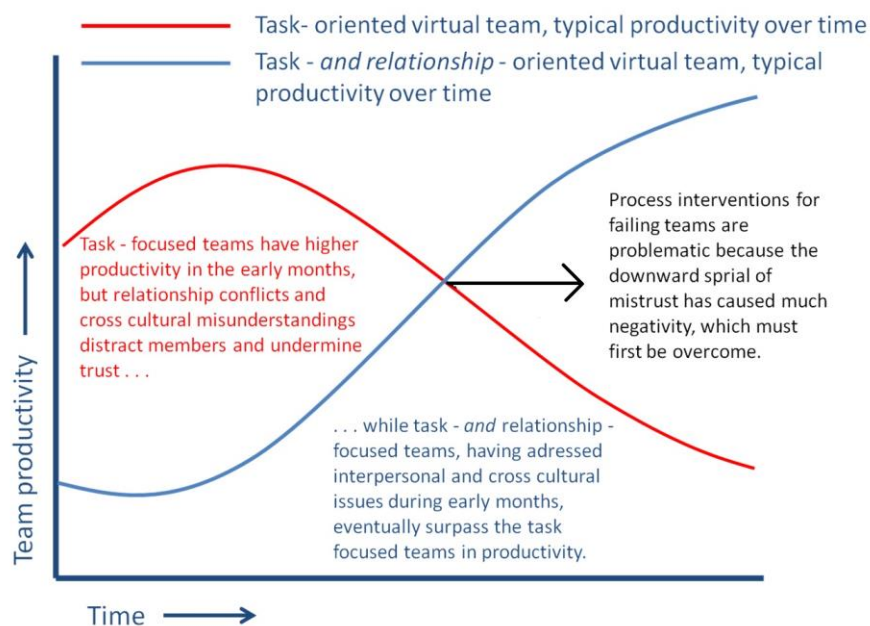
Leadership Challenge #3: Building Trust

Trust is the glue that keeps it all together, and technology is the lubricant that keeps everything spinning. (Clemons & Kroth, 2011)

Trust is by far the most frequently mentioned issue by our virtual training participants. All the other leadership challenges mentioned here are connected to the work climate within a virtual team, and the way to achieve a constructive climate is by building trust. When trust is high, team members tend to freely share their opinions. They trust their fellow team members to do the work they should, and the virtual manager can delegate and give away control and focus on output.

To build and maintain trust in the virtual space, the remote manager must continuously invest in relationships. In a face to face team the relationship building tends to come naturally. A chat in the hallway or over coffee just before the meeting, about the family or how the weekend has been.

We have observed that when a team meets virtually, for example in a telephone conference, it will get right down to business. Virtual teams tend to be much more task focussed than co-located team. Research shows that task focussed teams are more effective in the short run, but are not as effective as teams that are both task *and* relationship focussed in the long run. Especially in a virtual team, investing the time to get to know each other will pay off in a dramatic way, as shown in this graph. As Caulat (2006) puts it: '*not spending time on relationships in a virtual team is pre programmed failure'.*

Leadership Challenge #4: Managing Across Cultures

Besides creating an environment in which team members trust each other, the remote leader needs to manage the diversity within the team. Virtual teams generally are more culturally diverse and the leadership challenge is to make the differences work in favour of the team and its output, rather than against. Experience in dealing with people from different cultures and understanding the specific cultural backgrounds of the team members is essential.

The graph below shows that poorly run cross cultural teams perform worse than poorly run mono cultural teams, and the opposite is true: effectively run cross cultural teams outperform well run mono cultural teams, as is shown in the graph.
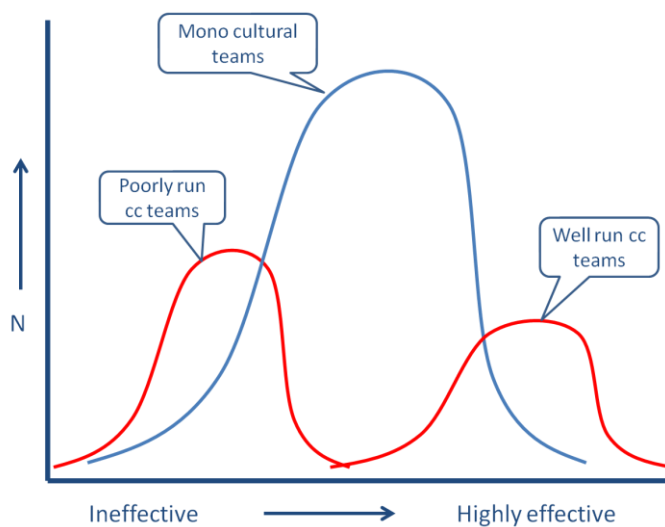
The psychological effect at play here is referred to as 'minority dissent', a phenomenon where a deviating opinion within a team on how to tackle a problem will lead to a more thorough discussion among team members, leading to better decision making. The end result is a superior team performance. Minority dissent can also be described as the opposite of groupthink, where an inferior decision is made, because there is no deviating opinion in the team.

Leadership Challenge # 5: Developing the Team

How do you create a high performing team out of a group of individuals who are not in the same place? Using the notion of a container, we can say that 'the container provides a space for people to focus group attention, holding human energy so it can be productive rather than destructive'.[9]

In a co-located team, the container is literally, the building itself, or a floor of an office building with its own desks, coffee corners, meeting rooms, cafeteria and smoker's corner.

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[9] Senge, 2004.
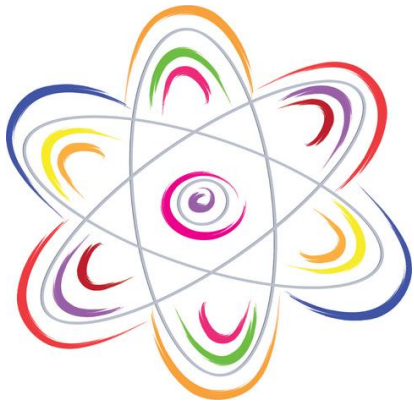
The container for a virtual team looks very different. It may be something abstract, like this atom. 'Here, there is no physical shell to constrain where people interact. In fact, distance has no impact on relationships at all. Instead, like the atom, other natural forces keep energy contained and powerfully focused. Like the atom, when forces are out of balance, destructive results can occur. Like the atom, possibilities for interaction and new combinations within a virtual team are endless. It's symbolic that it's the electric charge of the atom and the technology of the virtual team that helps keep each together'.[10]

On a practical level, what the remote leader can do to develop the team is to:

- Start the norming process early on: how do we communicate and collaborate? What tools and in what frequency? What processes do we use, how do we run meetings? How is conflict resolved?

- Make everyone feel included and welcome. It is easy to feel isolated when the rest of the team is far away.

- Acknowledge and manage team members' loyalty to their other teams. Team members' attention is easily diverted to co-located projects.

- Constantly communicate with the team members, using a variety of ways. For example, leaving the chat or instant messaging function open all day for on the spur, informal communication.

Leadership Challenge # 6: Networking

Given the complexity of the environment in which virtual teams operate, effective networking is a critical competency for the remote leader. 'A remote leader's credibility is often perceived to be directly related to the extensiveness of his or her network and his ability to obtain resources across traditional organisational lines'.[11] In addition to the complexity of managing a group of people that is globally dispersed and is likely to have multiple team memberships, the remote leader has to influence a variety of stakeholders such as senior managers, suppliers, customers and regulators. The network has to be broad and strong enough to withstand competing priorities and changing requirements, to obtain needed resources and to instil a sense of trust in the team and its work.

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[10] Clemons & Kroth, 2010.
[11] Duarte & Snyder, 2003.

In Summary

None of the leadership challenges mentioned above are new. They are as essential in co located teams as in the virtual space.

The big difference however, is that it is harder to put this into practice in a virtual team and that the consequences of mismanagement are bigger when it comes to virtual teams. We saw that there are many challenges to face when leading virtual teams, but we saw that all challenges can be turned into advantages. An incompetent leader might get away with his lack in skills in the conventional, face to face work environment, but not in the virtual environment. In other words, we can say 'that distance amplifies management abilities'.[12] A competent leader who knows how to tap into all the advantages a virtual team has to offer can excel, more so than in the face to face environment.

Can Remote Leadership be Learnt?

All people can learn and grow in ways that make them more effective in the various leadership roles and processes they take on.[13] Some aspects of leadership are of course more hard wired into our character (inner circles), and others can be learnt more easily (outer circles). We use the onion model[14] to distinguish between these aspects.
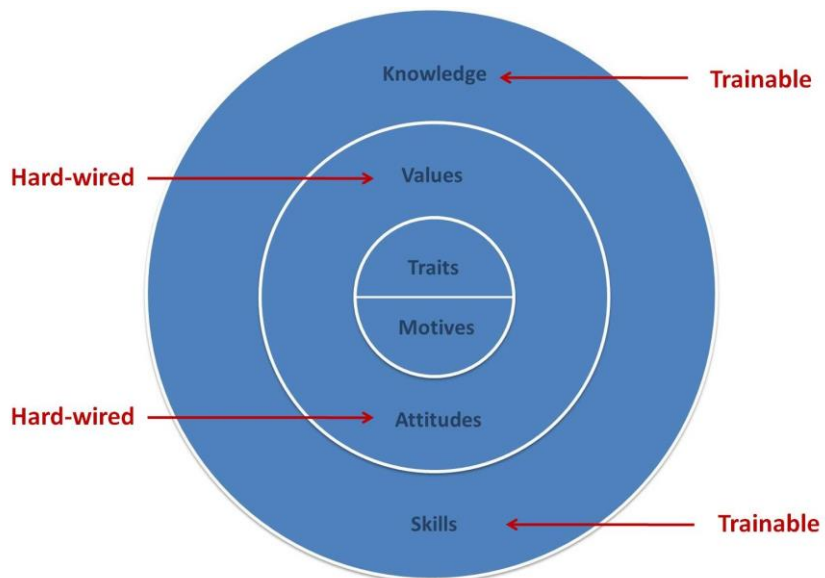
Applying the onion ring to the list of competencies for remote leadership, we can categorize them as follows:
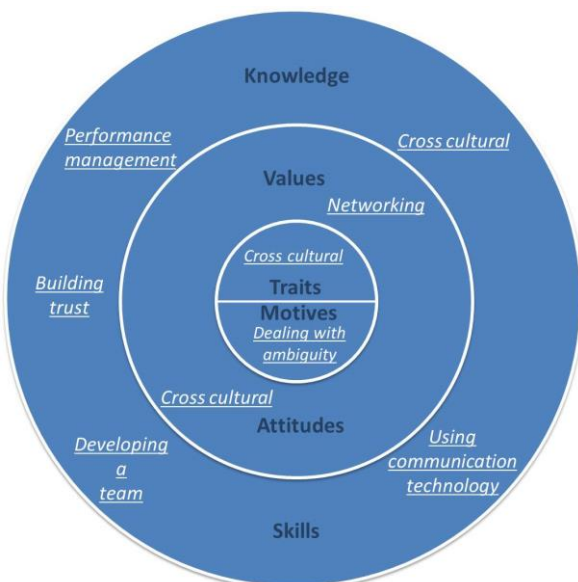
Skills and knowledge (the outer circles) can be trained most effectively by experiential learning methods in the virtual classroom. Traits, motives and attitudes (inner circles) are addressed by increasing leaders' self awareness through methods such as feedback, psychometric assessment, virtual

coaching, on-line peer review and self-reflection.

We recommend training remote leadership by distance learning. For instance, in a virtual classroom using Webinar technology, participants learn virtual skills in the same environment as where they work. Our experience is that this double loop learning accelerates the learning compared to a traditional face to face training room.

Literature

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Nomadic IBP trains globally dispersed teams and their leaders in how to achieve high performance. They also train trainers in virtual facilitation. Based in the Netherlands, the team itself is 'Nomadic' with members across Europe, Asia and the Americas.
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