

Leading from a Distance

The Four Qualities of Good Distance Leaders

Most workers today lead, manage, or collaborate with people they do not see on a regular basis. There are many good business reasons for the ever-increasing geographic distribution of organizations: the desire to be close to customers and emerging markets, outsourcing/off-shoring, mergers and acquisitions, business continuity/disaster recovery, the need to access top talent from around the world, and more. Even though it is a reality of the business world, many see physical distance as a significant obstacle to good communication. They have typically grasped onto travel and technology to help bridge the gap, but neither one provides all the answers.

Distributed operations and virtual teams have been with us for a while, but until 2001, traveling frequently for in-person meetings allowed most teams to side-step problems caused by geographical distance. When business travel was reduced for budgetary reasons and then on a voluntary basis after 9/11, difficulties started to become more apparent to leaders. Travel restrictions related to SARS brought more attention to the need to know how to work together even when team members are far apart.

Yes, instant messaging, e-mail, audio or video-conference calls, cell phones, and web-based collaboration tools have made it much easier to communicate with colleagues around the world. But the fact is that many organizations still experience missed deadlines, misunderstandings, or other performance problems that get blamed on geographical dispersion.

To truly master distance and thrive in the distributed workplace, we need to change the way we work on a daily basis so that we are not just good leaders, but good *distance leaders* who:

- **Use geographical distribution to its greatest advantage**
- **Minimize perceived distance between people**
- **Make strategic use of face-to-face interaction**
- **Reward results, not face-time**

This requires cultural change that starts at the top of the organization with different attitudes and actions

that, eventually, become embedded throughout the organization. The intervention does not need to be time-consuming or costly, but it must be comprehensive -- the pay-offs of a high-performance distributed workforce are too important to ignore. Let's explore each of the four qualities in more detail.

1) Use geographical distribution to its greatest advantage

Of all the functions in a typical company, the sales department is considered the one that should be most comfortable with geographical distribution and adept at remote management. Problem is, in too many businesses, there is an unwritten rule that when you are not out with clients, you should be back in the office schmoozing with managers who could determine your career path within the company. This is the most basic case of geographical distribution NOT being used to its greatest advantage. Consider how much more effective a sales person would be if they were equipped and encouraged to work from anywhere before or after client meetings.

In the mid-1990s, IBM and American Express gave customer-facing employees the tools they needed to provide good client service and the management support they needed to avoid unnecessary travel to the office. The results were compelling. In response to IBM's Mobility Initiative, sales teams spent more time with clients (some saw a 50 percent increase), customer satisfaction levels went up, revenue per employee increased, and morale and commitment to stay at IBM improved.¹ By embracing the virtual workplace, American Express' salespeople went from spending 40-50 percent of their time with customers and prospects to spending 75-85 percent of their workweek with them.² Profitability increased by 10 percent and productivity went up 15 to 40 percent. Customer satisfaction improved by 28 percent and employee satisfaction by 25 percent.

At IBM, managers spent more time communicating with employees via technology tools. At American Express, managers spent more time in the field with their sales representatives rather than back in the office waiting for employees to stop by between calls. How much more profitable would your business be if salespeople could spend more time with clients while still maintaining a strong

connection to colleagues and management? Many leaders today are finding that a high performing distributed workforce is a significant competitive advantage.

Is your company thriving or just getting by in the distributed workplace? If you see distance as an obstacle rather than as an opportunity to be leveraged, there is definitely untapped potential for you to explore. Once the salesforce has mastered distance, you are ready to explore other areas in the company. Many organizations find themselves with a highly distributed staff because of acquisitions, mergers, and the need for specialized talent. Often, consolidation into fewer sites would not be advisable because: a) some talented people may not want to relocate themselves and/or their family members; b) some existing locations may offer favorable operating and labor costs.

Typically, the product development function is one of the more widely dispersed groups. Unfortunately, all the benefits of the diversity and talent of this labor force are not leveraged because there is usually a strong bias toward assigning work to co-located teams and little effort to collaborate across distances. If there has been some experimentation with “virtual teams,” people have struggled to make it work. It is not uncommon for a virtual team to be comprised of a core team (5 or 6 people who are assigned to one site) that is supplemented by 3 or 4 remote workers who offer special expertise. In this arrangement, the core team members usually complain that they are doing all the work and the remote workers feel out of the loop. Another frustration stems from the fact that low priority assignments are often given to distributed teams when a company is testing out this new form of teamwork. Because these are not the highest priority assignments, these projects rarely receive the attention or resources they really need. When the timing or quality goals are not met, distance is blamed for the failure.

These negative experiences can be avoided when geographical distribution is viewed as an advantage rather than an inconvenience. Sun Microsystem’s iWork program, which supports an employee’s ability to work anywhere, anytime, on any device, gives leaders the flexibility to assign people to project teams regardless of location. Being truly “geo-agnostic” helps an organization use their

resources more effectively and can result in getting higher quality products to market faster.

This is just one example of how an organization can thrive in the distributed workplace. A good distance leader understands that using geographic distribution to its greatest advantage can allow a company to:

- Stay close to customers and emerging markets
- Use time zone differences to accomplish more in 24 hours (passing work from one part of the world to the other)
- Improve chances for disaster recovery/business continuity
- Gain access to a larger, more diverse talent pool
- Tap into the growing population of partial-retirees who spend winters in warmer parts of the country
- Emphasize self-management skills
- Maintain lower operating costs

It is incumbent upon leaders to explore new ways to exploit the advantages of geographic distribution while constantly monitoring whether the advantages outweigh the disadvantages.

2) Minimize perceived distance between people

Perceived distance is far more damaging to work relationships than actual distance.³ It is commonplace for members newly assigned to distributed teams to agree at a kick-off meeting to “communicate frequently.” Surely, this is a very good goal to set. Problems arise, though, when people have not defined what the words “communicate” or “frequently” mean to them. One person thinks communicating frequently means calling once a week to discuss work-related as well as personal issues. Another thinks it means sending an e-mail at the beginning of each day giving a status update of work-related issues only. That’s a big difference. Typically, one will complain that they feel “out of the loop” when another feels micromanaged. One will sense there are too many interruptions and another will be mistrustful because they don’t know enough about a colleague’s background or personal life.

There are no right or wrong answers here. The goal should be to communicate *appropriately* -- to minimize the difference between desired and

received communication.⁴ Leaders and individual contributors need to be willing to communicate with each other about how they are going to communicate. You need to have a conversation about availability, preferred mode of communication, frequency of contact, and the type of information they want to exchange. There must be room for differences. For instance, it must be acceptable that some people are willing to post a lot of professional and personal information (including photo) about themselves in a team directory and others may not.

Some distributed groups fall into the trap that face-to-face interaction is the most robust, preferred form of communication and that technology tools such as conference calls, e-mail, instant messaging, and videoconferencing are just a cheap substitute. It is less important to have the most advanced technology than to have everybody using the same technology in a sophisticated way. For instance, it is much more effective to have an entire team use a web conferencing tool [such as Microsoft Office Live Meeting (formerly PlaceWare) or WebEx] for a meeting than to have some members of the team connected via videoconferencing while others are participating via speaker phone and looking at a printed version of the slides being shown. Web conferencing offers an important advantage over face-to-face meetings: polling slides can be used to gather quick feedback on how participants feel about an issue. While the same could be accomplished with a “show of hands” vote in a conference room, some may not feel comfortable voicing their opinions in that type of forum. Technology can level the playing field from a communications standpoint when it is used effectively.

A good distance leader understands when a situation demands synchronous (real-time) communication as opposed to asynchronous (voicemail, e-mail, etc.). They know that regardless of the delivery mechanism, it is important to convey both positive and negative news on a regular basis and to create a forum for dialogue rather than one-way communication. IBM has successfully used their intranet (known internally as “w3” and externally as “On Demand Workplace”) to keep their nearly 320,000 employees informed and in touch with each other. The majority of IBMers designate w3 as the most credible, useful, preferred source of information about the company. In other

organizations, the “grapevine” typically receives this coveted designation and rumors replace truth.

The most effective way to avoid miscommunication in a distributed workplace is to hone your listening skills. Most important, you need to make yourself available to listen others. Sadly, in many organizations it is a sign of importance to be unavailable. There are gatekeepers who screen e-mail, phone calls, and requests for meetings. Then leaders wonder why a problem doesn’t come to their attention until it has reached a crisis point. Being unavailable creates more difficulties when team members are far apart. Some leaders avoid these problems by being more accessible on a regular basis, by keeping a less structured calendar so that people have a better chance of reaching them on an impromptu basis. Others find it works better to set up regularly scheduled one-on-one and group conversations. Still others make a commitment to read and respond to e-mail messages within 48 hours, for instance. In general, it is helpful for everyone to agree on how to differentiate between urgent messages and ones that can wait so that communication is streamlined as much as possible.

When you have achieved the right level of accessibility, you need to listen to the message being conveyed (I mean *really* listen). One of the most frustrating experiences with e-mail correspondence is when the message receiver responds to some, but not all of the questions raised by the message sender. A significant advantage of e-mail over real-time interaction – the ability to re-read the message several times and to take the time needed to respond in a thoughtful way -- has been unrealized. The result is high levels of perceived distance.

Good distance leaders create an atmosphere where people are confident that they have the technology tools they need to connect with others and those tools are used in the most effective way for high performance collaboration.

3) Make strategic use of face-to-face interaction

One of the saddest cell phone calls I overhear in an airport or a hotel lobby is a parent calling home to say goodnight to a child. Judgmentally, I think to myself, “The meeting you are going to better be

really important.” Don’t get me wrong, I’m not anti-travel and I don’t believe everyone should be working from home offices on a full-time basis. But I am keenly aware of the scarcity of the resource (face-to-face interaction), the expense of it, and the trade-offs involved.

Even when long-distance travel is not involved, choosing to spend more time with customers, for instance, means less time for collaboration with colleagues or managers. Attending meetings with fellow employees over meetings with suppliers or industry peers has repercussions as well. We have a limited amount of time in a day to interact with others; face-to-face interaction consumes more time than other modes of communication. Distance leaders understand that mastering distance is not about eliminating face-to-face interaction, it is about using it more effectively and making conscious choices about how to use this valuable tool.

Distance leaders learn quickly that “fly-by meetings” should be avoided. The time and money it takes to fly round trip from, say, New York to Chicago for a two-hour meeting could be spent on other activities. In some companies, business travel will not be approved unless the traveler stays at the destination, working side-by-side with colleagues for two or more days. This ensures that there will be sufficient time for work-related activities as well as social interaction over lunch or just informal conversation in the halls.

Social interaction is an important component of non-company gatherings as well. I’m surprised at the number of people who go to industry conferences and then spend half their time on a cell phone talking to colleagues back at the office. Conferences are high-bandwidth opportunities to learn new information and network with peers. Why waste time on lengthy cell phone conversations when you could be building or strengthening relationships through in-person interaction with other attendees? If that many emergencies arise back at the office, then maybe the conference is not the best place to be. Or, if networking with peers is not valuable, consider learning new information through web seminars that deliver good information without the travel or expense of conferences. As someone who gives a lot of presentations at conferences, I insist on the opportunity to arrive

before and/or stay after the speaking engagement so I can get to know the other participants. A situation that involves flying in, speaking at the audience, and then flying on to the next conference holds no value for me and, I would argue, is not satisfying for the listeners either. It would be more effective to deliver the content via web conferencing or asynchronously using audio, video, or written educational materials.

Most businesspeople would argue strenuously that all distributed teamwork should be launched with an in-person meeting. One problem with setting this type of strict guideline is that some distributed teams are departments or divisions, not project teams with a clear start and finish. A leader cannot plan face-to-face meetings every time new employees are added or re-organizations change the composition of the group. Even with project teams that have a specific goal and time-frame, it is often not wise to count on face-to-face launch meetings as the way to build strong teams. Few projects begin with all the team members designated on the first day; people are added and phased out during the course of the assignment.

Good distance leaders know that the goal is to build and maintain trust among team members. They take the time up front to communicate about how they are going to communicate (see number 2 above) and re-visit this written communication plan periodically to make sure all new team members are aware of it and buy into it. They also know that trust is high when people believe that they can count on others to do what they say they are going to do so they give out assignments that allow people to demonstrate their reliability quickly. It is great to complement electronic connections with face-to-face interaction, but don’t delay the start of project until everyone can get together in the same room. That practice contributes to the erroneous perception that all distributed teams take longer to accomplish their work than co-located teams.

Consider the negative impact of holding onto these other outdated notions about activities that **must** be conducted in person:

- Giving negative feedback;
- Delivering annual performance reviews;
- Brainstorming new ideas;
- Making complex decisions;
- Interviewing potential new employees;

- Selecting consultants, vendors, or other service providers.

In each case, waiting until a face-to-face meeting can be scheduled could cause delays in the project or weaken the impact of the message. Positive and negative feedback must be delivered in a timely way to be effective. If employees learn that their manager always delivers negative information in person, for instance, news of a visit will not be welcome and may cause unnecessary stress.

There are no hard and fast rules for how and when to use face-to-face interaction. Good distance leaders evaluate whether the advantages of seeing non-verbal cues in a face-to-face conversation outweigh the disadvantages (possible time delays and expenses). They make the best choices based on the specific individuals and type of work involved in each situation.

4) Reward results, not face-time

The toughest hurdle for most organizations to overcome is the embedded cultural norms that reinforce visibility rather than performance as the route to raises and promotions. Review the following three checklist items from “Obstacles to Peak Performance in the Virtual Workplace.”⁵ Are these true or false in your organization?

- If you look busy, even frantic, you must be very productive.
- Getting to work early in the morning shows you are a very hard worker.
- If you are having fun and look well-rested and physically fit, you must not have enough work to do.

If even one of these is true for your organization, you are relying too much on appearances to evaluate productivity and will not be able to thrive in the distributed workplace. True, most Human Resources departments have equipped their leaders with results-based performance measurement systems. Unbeknownst to most leaders, though, other information sneaks into their preconceptions about “dedicated workers” and is reflected in the way hiring, compensation, and promotion decisions are made.

To be fair, individual contributors spend just as much time fretting over how their work will be evaluated as their managers spend worrying about how they will know whether their employees are

working or goofing off. As work becomes increasingly more distributed, everyone involved needs to be clearer about goals, milestones, and deliverables. Measures need to be both qualitative and quantitative at the team and individual level. If effort is to be taken into account (viewing mistakes or failures as valuable learning experiences), team leaders/managers and individual contributors need to agree on how effort will be communicated and judged.

While it is important to rate distance leadership skills as part of the formal review process, the more informal feedback and recognition processes need to be refined to acknowledge the contribution a person has made in a very specific way on a very regular basis. People want to know that their contribution is useful; leaders at all levels should be encouraged to explain how a person’s performance affected the team or company’s performance and furthered the mission of the organization. Presence alone is not useful to the leader or the individual contributor or the customer.

Like IBM and American Express, AT&T has been testing the limits of the virtual workplace for more than a decade. Internal studies now indicate that Virtual Office Managers are more likely to get promoted than their counterparts who work from an AT&T site everyday. For this company, it is more important to have strong relationships with a wide network of people around the world than to be highly visible to people with whom one is co-located. This type of cultural shift requires hard work, but good distance leaders are willing to invest energy in the change process when they believe that advantages outweigh the disadvantages of geographical distribution.

The Change Process

I am often asked if there are people who will simply never be good distance leaders. My answer is “no.” These are skills that can be learned and that must be learned to survive in today’s global economy.

People need to be good leaders before they can be good distance leaders. In **The Leadership Challenge**,⁶ Kouzes and Posner highlight these five qualities of exemplary leadership:

- Leaders model the way
- Leaders inspire a shared vision
- Leaders challenge the process

- Leaders enable others to act
- Leaders encourage the heart

I agree with Kouzes and Posner -- people can express these leadership qualities at all levels of an organization, in work-for-pay as well as voluntary roles.

Even good leaders need to challenge their mindsets and learn more about distance leadership in order to excel in the distributed workplace. Some need more education than others. Everyone should be given the opportunity and education to master these competencies:

- Distance Leaders use geographical distribution to its greatest advantage
- Distance Leaders minimize perceived distance between people
- Distance Leaders make strategic use of face-to-face interaction
- Distance Leaders reward results, not face-time

These qualities make it possible for individuals, teams, and entire organizations to thrive in the distributed workplace.

References

- 1- Froggatt, C. **Work Naked: Eight Essential Principles for Peak Performance in the Virtual Workplace** (Jossey-Bass, 2001), page 68.
- 2-Ibid., page 185.
- 3-Raghuram, S., Garud, R., and Wiesenfeld, B.M. "Telework: Managing Distances in a Connected World." *Strategy and Business*, First Quarter, 1998.
- 4-Ibid.
- 5- Froggatt, C. **Work Naked: Eight Essential Principles for Peak Performance in the Virtual Workplace** (Jossey-Bass, 2001), page 16.
- 6- Kouzes, J. and Posner, B. **The Leadership Challenge: How to Keep Getting Extraordinary Things Done in Organizations** (Jossey-Bass, 3rd Edition, 2002).

Case Studies

For information on how to get copies of case studies detailing how companies such as IBM, Sun Microsystems, Deloitte & Touche, AT&T, and JetBlue exemplify the four qualities of good distance leadership, please go to www.leadingfromadistance.com.



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