



Virtual Leaders: Born or Made?

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By: Mary Key

Distance matters. An effective leader who has regular face-to-face contact with employees might not be as effective in cyberspace. Good conventional leadership skills are necessary but not sufficient to lead others at a distance. Therefore, it's alarming how few organizations offer any special development for virtual leaders.

Perhaps the assumption is that good leaders should just know how to transfer their skills to a virtual environment - as if they were "born" rather than "made." For example, a Society for Human Resource Management study focused on the development of virtual leaders and reported that 80% of the respondents stated that special training was "not at all" a priority for virtual leaders. Over 60% of the respondents went on to say that their organizations provided no specific training for either the virtual team leader or virtual team members (Rosen, Furst, & Blackburn, 2006).

A similar finding occurred in a large survey conducted by HRI, the forerunner to i4cp, and commissioned by the American Management Association. It asked respondents to allocate 100 points to various characteristics that support strategy execution. The highest-ranked characteristic was "openness to change" and the lowest was "virtual management" (AMA/HRI, 2005).

So, the good news is that leading virtually is on the radar screen; the bad news is that it isn't a priority.

This could turn out to be major problem. After all, other i4cp research clearly shows that the ability to foster innovation is one of the top characteristics of leaders, both today and, especially, in the future. Yet, there is mounting evidence that innovation and working virtually stand at odds with each other. A recent study on "virtual distance" and innovation as applied to virtual teams at 17 organizations indicates that virtual distance has a significant and negative relationship to innovation (Lojeski, Reilly, & Dominick, 2006).

"Virtual distance" in this study was defined as both perceived and physical distance, highlighting the point that leading virtually is often a blend of virtual and face-to-face interactions. What seems to matter here is the *perception* of distance between leaders and those who are supposed to be following them.

Perceived distance can lead to a higher level of distrust, and trust is among the core building blocks for high-performance leadership (Reina & Reina, 2006). In the absence of familiar visual cues, conversations become harder to decode and trust-building becomes a tougher challenge. A lack of trust can also result in communication problems, which are often compounded by differences in language backgrounds among global teams (Manning, 2003).

Avoiding these problems often requires special skills and tactics. For one thing, virtual leaders need to be able to use available technologies well. Technologies are, after all, a double-edged sword. Video conferences, online chats, instant messages, polling, e-mail, the use of avatars and other forms of communication can be powerful tools. However, integrating these forms of communication to enhance effectiveness isn't easy, especially if you consider differences in communication styles among the virtual team members.

Developing top-notch virtual leaders often requires good planning as well as developmental support and practice. Leadership development programs should include segments on how any given leadership skill or



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practice can be applied virtually. However, given that many organizations don't have formal programs of this sort, leaders may also need to find other ways to hone their skills in this area.

They can start by developing a communications plan, one that reflects the results they expect from their team, and ideas on how they expect team members to treat each other. One tactic is to bring team members together for a team-building session after they've begun to work together so they have a context for the training (Zigurs, 2003). And since ongoing feedback can be more difficult in a virtual environment, it makes sense to develop a calendar for regular coaching and performance feedback.

Another tactic is to build trust by setting up times to interview each team member one on one to get to know them and their motivations. When it's time to recognize a job well done, the leader will be able to personalize the recognition. Also, virtual leaders can build trust the tried-and-true way: by showing consistency and doing what they promise they'll do.

Because team members within the same culture and across cultures have different communication styles and needs, virtual leaders might also want to use a communication style assessment that gives the team members feedback on how they like to communicate and how they like to be communicated with. Effective virtual leaders make themselves available across time zones and plan regular virtual team meetings for progress reports, updates, milestones, recognition and brainstorming (Mullich, 2005).

Being able to spur innovation is especially important for such leaders. To build innovation into the process, they can designate a specific time to focus on innovation during meetings and then implement new ideas in real time. This can be an effective way to show an openness to ideas and approaches. When appropriate, innovation can be reinforced by illustrating the impact it's had on the work at hand.

It's difficult to "perfect" virtual leadership because today's technological and market environment is changing rapidly. But employers can rest assured that working virtually is on the upswing. So, helping leaders apply best practices in this area will help separate the best organizations from the rest.

Documents referenced in this *TrendWatcher* include the following:

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