



Surviving in a Virtual World

Robin Robbins

The clock struck the hour. The time was 9.00 am on a bright and sunny Monday morning and the smell of freshly brewed coffee filled the room. The aroma became stronger as more and more people marched into the conference room with their mugs of coffee in hand.

As they entered the room one could hear some of them talking and exchanging notes about their weekends, some had a great time outdoors whilst others remained at home with family and kids. It was fascinating to observe the team as they entered the room. Some looked happy and cheerful after the weekend; they walked with a light step. Others looked serious and walked with a determined step. A few were nervous and shaky perhaps in anticipation of what was to come.

The chatter gradually eased as people slipped into shiny leather seats gearing themselves for another Monday morning meeting. This was a typical “Monday Morning Meeting” - discussing the week gone by and plans for the week ahead.

Whatever happened to the typical “Monday Morning Meeting”? These days, there might be one person physically in the conference room and eight others in virtual attendance – at other offices, at home, in airports waiting to catch the next flight ...!

Looking back one contemplates on what has changed, often for the better, but what does one miss?

What do I miss? Perhaps, to begin with the power and control of chairing a face-to-face meeting, observing people as they come into the room, the strong aroma of coffee, the social dynamics and easy familiarity of proceedings.

What has changed our personal and work lives so dramatically?

There are several factors that have contributed to this:

- Increased internationalisation of trade and corporate activity
- Rapidly evolving workplace technologies
- Greater workforce diversity and mobility
- More intense competition which drives leaner workforces

Changes in the global economy, technology, and environment have put increased pressures and demands on the way we work and how we manage the people we work with. There has been an evolution from a co-located face-to-face workforce to one that is separated not only physically but often by differences of culture, language and business practice.

As a result of these challenges, virtual teams and groups have started to emerge and play an important role in organizations. Many organizations are still learning how to manage and work effectively with virtual teams.

Instead of *Line Manager* I think that I may now be given the designation of *Virtual Manager*. I may not be very sure what it means to me or the impact it will have on me and others I work with. Am I no longer flesh and blood?

Many of us are familiar with what team work is all about. Let us take a few moments to pause, reflect, and evaluate how effectively we are able to lead and manage teams we work with.

What is a team?

One definition is:

A team is a small number of people with complementary skills who are committed to a common purpose, performance goals, and approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable.

– “The Wisdom of Teams”, published by Harvard Business School Press (1993)

A team benefits from the diversity of its membership by drawing on the variety of skills, knowledge, experience and perspectives that all members bring to the team. The special contribution that a team makes to an organization is the pooling of the collective talent of its members. For this to happen there further needs to be a climate of trust, openness and effective communication.

What is a virtual team?

A *Virtual Team* also known as a *Geographically Dispersed Team* or a *Distance Team* - is a group of individuals who work across time, space, and organizational boundaries with links strengthened by webs of information and communication technology.

Virtual teams in today's organizations consist of employees both working at home and small 'groups' in the office but based in different geographic locations.

Why has there been an emergence of virtual teams over the last few years?

The reasons are many.....

- Geographically dispersed teams allow organizations to hire, and retain and value from the best people regardless of location.
- Virtual teams offer more flexibility for employees and organizations (without the challenges of relocation)
- Changes in the expectations of employees
- A flexible organization can be more competitive and responsive to customers
- Productivity can be enhanced with less commuting/ travel time

Having said this there are several challenges that these teams face.

Challenges facing virtual teams

- The team needs to be aware of cross cultural behavioural differences
- There is a need for high levels of trust and collaboration, without the aid of face to face socialisation
- Team members have to adopt and adapt to new technologies and to ensure that technology enables and not disables the functioning of the team
- Members must be more adaptive – “resilient” to a changing variety of assignments and tasks during the life of any particular team
- Roles are more dynamic because virtual teams are more flexible regarding organizational responses to market needs
- Virtual teams are expected to flexibly change team membership without losing productivity
- The team ‘never sleeps’ - it works 24 / 7 works across geographies and time zones

Given the challenges of virtual teams we need to have a closer look at what the *Distance Manager* needs to do to lead and manage:

Leading and Managing Virtual Teams

Leader of such teams face numerous challenges, many of which they are little prepared for.

- Building strong working relationships among team members who may never actually meet in person
- Enhancing and facilitating team working skills across cultural, behavioural, legal and organizational borders
- Keeping the team connected to the evolving business direction – mission, vision, values and vital business issues of the organization
- Review reward and recognition processes to ensure that they are appropriate for all team members, regardless of their location.
- Ensure that members who are not co-located with the leader are made to feel an equal part of the team
- The team leader must be able to identify early signals of team differences or conflict and take corrective action.

There are several approaches leaders could take to manage their teams more effectively. Increasing number of organizations use psychometric instruments like the MBTI ® Instrument and the FIRO-B ® Instrument to enable leaders and team members to improve understanding of differences and develop more productive interpersonal relationships.

I would like to conclude by leaving readers with some thoughts to ponder on:

- Do teams develop the same way at a distance as they do face-to-face?
- What are the best ways to train *Virtual Managers* leading such teams?
- Do *Virtual Managers* in Asia have the same challenges and require the same skills and competencies as those in the US or Europe?
- Is experience working at a distance necessary for being a successful *Virtual Manager*?

Article contributed by:

Robin F. Robbins

Principal Consultant

- **Hemisphere Consulting Pte Ltd**
- **Hemisphere Consulting [Malaysia] Sdn Bhd**
- **Asianic Psychologists Press Singapore**

Not to be reprinted or used without permission