

**Leading the Virtual Team**  
*Overcoming Time and Space Through*  
*E-Mail and Emoticons*  
Dr. David Gould

Teamwork has been around since before our ancestors gathered up their spears and learned how to work together to gang up on mastodons and saber-toothed tigers. Many experts agree that teams are the primary unit of performance in any organization. Today there is a new kind of team – a “virtual” team made up of people who communicate electronically. Its members may hardly ever see each other in person. In fact, they may never meet at all, except in cyberspace.

To some people, working alone at home is a terrific option. They like the idea of sitting at their terminals in robe and slippers, the cat curled at their feet. Others find the idea a little lonely and somehow disconcerting. They worry that they’d pine for the chatty atmosphere around the water cooler. However you feel about virtual teams, there are more and more of them, and they offer some definite benefits.

For one thing, there’s no need for office or parking space. For another, more people can be included in the labor pool. Air pollution and congestion are reduced when people don’t commute. Virtual teaming offers more flexibility for workers and organizations alike.

Software designed just for virtual teams, called “groupware,” is growing increasingly sophisticated. (Lotus Notes and Exchange are two popular programs.) Videoconference programs are also available, but so far they are unwieldy and expensive, requiring too much bandwidth to be practical. The work of virtual teams can also be enhanced by use of a Web site. It’s a handy place to store and distribute graphic materials, schedules, flowcharts, reference materials, and more.

Virtual teaming isn't something anyone planned. It happened because the technology was there. But how well are these teams really working and what can be done to make them more effective? What are some of the benefits of the virtual team? What are the pitfalls? Do unsupervised employees take advantage of the situation? What leadership skills are needed to make the virtual team work well?

For the answers to these questions, I did a research study based on in-depth interviews and one case study. I studied people in virtual teams of up to 100 people. They were doing all kinds of work: planning a conference, editing a text book, developing software, even starting a company. Most of the virtual teams relied on telephones and e-mail. A few of them used telephone conferencing. Most of the teams were brought together for one project, then disbanded. Most of the team members worked on the team's tasks full time, but some were volunteers working after hours. A lot of the teams would never have been formed without today's technology. The expense and logistical problems would have been insurmountable.

### **Characteristics of Virtual Teams**

Here's what the data reveal about the virtual team phenomenon.

**Virtual teams get the job done.** Most of the teams I studied achieved the goals set for them. In only one instance did a team fail to attain its goals, and this failure could not be connected to the fact that the team was a virtual team.

**People can be trusted.** The question many managers ask is, "Can you trust people you can't see to do their work?" For the teams in my study, the answer was clearly yes. Tasks wouldn't have been accomplished if the work hadn't been done. While participants acknowledged that this was a potential problem ("Your manager doesn't see you. Out of sight, out of mind," one of them said), it didn't seem to have been an actual problem.

**Few virtual teams are 100 percent virtual.** Virtual teams tend to have some face-to-face meetings. In the study, face-to-face contact was fairly unimportant in teams with relatively independent team members engaged in individual work projects. However, it was important in teams with interdependent members. As one team member commented, “Face-to-face is very important. You yell at the woman [from the phone company] when your phone bill is messed up, not because she is responsible but because you don’t know her face. Once you’ve met, you have more compassion and understanding for your fellow team members.”

**Virtual teams take on the same basic structure as “real” teams.** The teams I studied showed the same dynamics that researchers have discovered in “real” teams. The early stages are characterized by a certain amount of randomness, chaos, and ad hoc decision-making. As the team matures, processes are put into place and the team becomes more efficient.

### **Leading Virtual Teams**

I was particularly interested in learning about effective leadership techniques for virtual teams. Virtual team leaders are operating within a different framework. Some of the behaviors considered good management practices were changed, or even eliminated, because the team was physically separated.

Individual recognition, for instance, was infrequent and when it occurred, it was via e-mail or a telephone call. An e-mail message like this was typical: “Now that the conference has come and gone, I just wanted to send a note of thanks to all of you who submitted ... I appreciated all of your hard work in creating materials and getting them to me on time throughout the process.” Some people felt online recognition was helpful; others were uncomfortable with it. They felt somehow communication should be done in person. One team leader arranged a voice conference call to make her praise public and to ensure that everyone heard it at once.

Celebrations of team accomplishments pretty much went by the board in the teams I studied. The team leaders rarely if ever

initiated celebrations. Comments from team members ranged from the barely festive, “Should we find ourselves in the same town at the same time, we would meet and celebrate past performance,” to the rather plaintive, “There were no celebrations of any sort – sounds drab, doesn’t it?” Some teams met to celebrate in person at the completion of the project, but for many, geography and expense made this impossible. So far, no one seems to have discovered a technique for successful virtual partying.

Team leaders did, however, occasionally offer support and coaching to team members. One team leader, who provided verbal support in the editing of a textbook by a far-flung group of scholars around the world, put it this way: “Challenge, encouragement, and coaching are at the very nature of the editing and authoring process.”

### **Dealing With Communications Problems**

While most virtual team members had a positive experience overall, the biggest area of complaint involved communications problems. These complaints fell into several categories. The first was lack of project visibility. Team members knew what they were doing on an individual basis, but they weren’t always sure where their pieces fit into the whole puzzle. Second, there were sometimes problems in actually getting ahold of people. One team member said: “[It’s frustrating] not being able to get a response from people as soon as you like. Weeks can slip by and we are all doing other jobs. You send out a question and in some cases an answer never comes back. You don’t know how to interpret it. They don’t want to answer or what?” Occasionally, there were constraints from the technology. “Communication in a virtual environment has its own set of challenges,” said one team member. “It’s sometimes difficult to derive the meaning from text-based messages, especially if the person is attempting to be sarcastic or facetious. Guidelines on how to let others know the intention of your message, whether it’s through the use of emoticons or whatnot, are important.”

For the uninitiated, “emoticons” are those expressive little faces made out of parentheses, pound keys, percent signs, and so forth.

Human ingenuity seems to have triumphed once again, finding a way to add nuance and feeling to electronic text.

Here are a some tips on alleviating communication problems:

- **Include face-to-face time if at all possible.** Have an initial meeting for the team members to get together, meet each other, and socialize. Meet face-to-face periodically throughout the life of the project. These meetings will help to establish ties and relationships among team members. It's especially important in creating an effective working environment where the team members are interdependent.
- **Give team members a sense of how the overall project is going.** Send team members copies of the updated project schedule or provide an electronic view of the project schedule on line using the Internet. Project management schedule charts can be published on the Internet using the team's Web site. The primary idea here is to improve the quality and type of communications with all team members. They need to know where they fit in the big picture.
- **Establish a code of conduct to avoid delays.** The code could include a principle of acknowledging a request for information within 24 or 48 hours. A complete response to a request might require more time, but at least the person requesting the information would know that the request will be addressed. No one likes to feel that his or her request has dropped off the edge of the earth.
- **Don't let team members vanish.** Use the Internet or workgroup calendaring software to store team members' calendars. While this could be difficult to maintain on a daily basis, it should not be difficult to keep up with scheduled out-of-town absences such as vacations or business travel. Another approach is to agree that team members will let everyone know when they'll be going out

of town. Electronic mail with a distribution list is both an effective and efficient way to avoid MIAs.

- **Augment text-only communication.** The Internet is a good place to store charts, pictures, or diagrams so everyone can have a look. The fax machine, once a modern marvel but now surprisingly old-fashioned, can help here too.
- **Develop trust.** Charles Handy, an author and management consultant, addresses this issue quite clearly. "If we are to enjoy the efficiencies and other benefits of the virtual organization, we will have to rediscover how to run organizations based more on trust than on control. Virtuality requires trust to make it work: Technology on its own is not enough."

The issue of trust is at the center of successful virtual team management. The fact is that old-style command and control management, based on constant scrutiny, is simply impossible in a virtual environment. "Whips and chains are no longer an alternative," says Warren Bennis, professor of business at the University of Southern California. "Leaders must learn how to change the nature of power and how it's employed. ... If they don't, technology will. ... Virtual leadership is about keeping everyone focused as old structures, including old hierarchies, crumble." It's an idea echoed by Raymond Smith, CEO of Atlantic Bell, a company obviously interested in the future of electronic communication. "Leadership on [virtual] teams will likely be determined by who's most expert on the matter at hand – not by corporate hierarchy."

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