Leading Virtual Teams with NO LIMITS
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There is little difference in outcomes when comparing virtual project teams to co-located. Both follow a similar project lifecycle to create a product or service to successfully satisfy the needs of the customer. Additionally, the role of the project manager remains the same - leader, manager, facilitator and mentor/coach. In both, much of the project's success relies on the leadership abilities of the project manager.

However, there are special challenges in executing a project through a virtual team. Differences include organizing the project plan, team communications using Information and Communication Technologies, and leading a team that is spread around the globe.

This article addresses these challenges in leading the virtual team and suggests ways to be successful on virtual projects. Leading projects virtually requires the *NO LIMITS* approach to effectively manage the virtual project and properly lead the team.

The *NO LIMITS* Approach

<u>*N*urturing</u> the project team to bring the members up to speed and encouraging excellence. The difference between virtual versus the traditional team is mainly in the interaction of the project manager with their team members. The lack of face-to-face contact makes interpersonal relationships, building trust and team cohesiveness more problematic. Since a virtual team is spread across time and space, the project manager will spend more time building relational capital to harness the knowledge diversity of their virtual teams. This may involve going beyond the immediate project and affect the culture of the whole organization. The upper management of the organization will need to understand the challenges and opportunities of a virtual environment and support it accordingly.

<u>*O*ut of Sight, Out of Mind</u> syndrome requires keeping team members well engaged. Motivating any team requires developing a positive environment, properly recognizing and rewarding teammates, fostering trust and teamwork, and open communications. However, virtual teams contend with the phenomenon of an "ON-OFF Switch"; one deft click of a mouse button and the virtual world can be ignored. In order to address this syndrome, the project manager and team need to jointly build a team code of conduct addressing goal setting, task structures, and reward systems. Regular and structured project status meetings and team member performance reviews help solidify team engagement and morale.

<u>*L*eadership</u> appropriate to share responsibility while keeping control. The project manager, to lead effectively in a virtual project team environment, needs to build in early "wins" into the project plan, be self-aware, and empower team members. Effective leadership overrides the constraints of no face-to-face communication and virtual information processing. A project manager who is ethical, charismatic and demonstrates effective leadership will yield solid goal setting, task interdependence and ultimately higher quality project deliverables.

Empowering virtual team members may be a substitute for having face-to-face meetings. Delegating leadership helps with covering work while the project manager is absent, recognizes the abilities of team members, helps to avoid ego-bruising of team members, and may help team

members mentor others. Such member empowerment leads to improvement in team flexibility and satisfaction. Building a history of trust between members of virtual teams is a sure way of ensuring virtual project success.

Interests of team members need to be understood by the project manager to properly align their expertise with the project. Building community and understanding team member's interests assist in project success. Running a virtual project adds new dimensions to a project manager's skill set. The project manager needs to expand her/his use of communication technologies as well as be able to work with team members from different cultures (both the professional as well as the regional culture) and languages.

Mind Reading, which requires laying out everything ahead of time. The project manager needs to put themselves into their team member's shoes to understand their virtual work environment. Understanding what information needs to be supplied up front for the virtual project to move forward is critical. This requires the project manager to ensure that all documents and artifacts are ready and available at the start of the project. Access to virtual software to assist in sharing and versioning project documents is essential. Checklists specific to virtual teams are helpful to make sure startup procedures are covered.

The project manager and team must be able to adapt to changing conditions during the project's execution. Virtual teams must be as agile as the project market conditions that they face are dynamic. Learning while doing by integrating new knowledge in real time.

Individualized Attention and Recognition of team members, paying close attention to team members on a timely basis. The project manager who hones their communication skills can build trust and team member satisfaction within a virtual environment. Team member recognition is normally transmitted via email in virtual settings. The project manager must use appropriate email etiquette when electronically communicating.

Tools including Internet and Intranet sites, enterprise and commercial tools on a free/low cost basis. There are many ICT tools available in the marketplace to support a virtual team project; such as a dedicated team website, instant messaging, asynchronous discussion areas, video conferencing, and knowledge repository. The success of a virtual project depends on the communication channels established between the project team and the client; best to set up and implement early and then use continuously throughout.

Subject Matter Experts (SME) requires understanding their role and their value. Using subject matter experts (SME) can help fill gaps in the project manager's and team's knowledge and skill sets. SMEs can be accessible through a 'yellow pages' on the groupware website, and/or open discussion forums.

Conclusion
Leading the virtual team is daunting yet doable. There is a considerable amount of change and adaptation to make the virtual project work. The critical success factors to virtual teams are information/knowledge sharing, participatory culture, acceptance of change, and training. The savvy project manager will use the NO LIMITS approach to empower their virtual team as they lead, surfing on the edge of chaos, into an unknown, exciting new future.