How can federal leaders manage what they can’t see? Six “zones” will prepare them to secure two key components of successful virtual leadership: group cohesion and individual commitment.

Enhancing Telework: A Guide to Virtual Leadership

by Keather Snyder

Telecommuting is an important component of business success and survival. More than one-third of Americans would prefer the opportunity to do it over a pay raise. It is so important that President Obama signed the 2010 Telework Enhancement Act, which requires agencies to create a teleworking strategy. However, even with the realized importance and value of teleworking, only 5.2 percent of the more than 60 percent of federal employees eligible for virtual work arrangements actually telework on a regular basis.

While federal agencies are slower to embrace telecommuting than are private companies, telecommuting is here to stay and will rise in popularity as agencies recognize its full potential. Federal leaders must be prepared to employ innovative approaches to managing and motivating more diverse and disparate employees. Fundamentally, they must ensure they have the skills to lead via virtual communication on tight budgets.

The Virtual Road of Opportunity

The advantages of a virtual workforce are immense. If properly managed, a virtual workforce will positively affect everything from the economy to the environment. In fact, telecommuting actually boosts productivity because home-based workers have lower absentee rates, are more likely to continue to work even when they’re sick, and report lower levels of stress, according to a 2010 Telework Research Network report, “Workshifting Benefits: The Bottom Line.”

Furthermore, a virtual work arrangement is a powerful retention and recruitment tool, as 80 percent of Americans say that they would work from
A virtual work arrangement is a powerful retention and recruitment tool.

However, the less obvious and arguably the most critical benefit is to enable the federal sector to function 24/7. Teleworking provides a means to continue dire operations in worst-case scenarios. In a world fraught with terrorism, unpredictable weather occurrences, and a threat of widespread disease, the ability to protect the federal infrastructure by allowing employees to carry out their missions remotely is critical. Virtual workforces empower progress and advancement, even when employees are confined to their homes.

Obstacles to Virtual Leadership

Despite the benefits of virtual workforces, the misconceptions and fears of many federal leaders hamstring efforts. According to a recent survey from the Office of Personnel Management, management resistance is one of the biggest barriers facing the promotion of virtual workforces. This resistance seems to be fueled by misconceptions such as “work flexibilities offer no advantages to the federal government, they’re just another benefit to the employee,” and “I can’t manage what I can’t see,” as uncovered in On Demand Government: Deploying Flexibilities to Ensure Service Continuity, a 2010 report from the Partnership for Public Service and Booz Allen Hamilton.

These fears can be overcome. By understanding the skills necessary for successful leadership in a technologically connected workplace and adjusting behaviors accordingly, leaders can achieve leadership success.

Six New Zones of Leadership

The world has become more complex and multifaceted, and therefore, the role of its leaders must evolve with it. Research from AchieveGlobal, a workforce consulting firm specializing in leadership training, revealed six zones (or areas) that all federal managers should focus on to be successful virtual leaders. Each zone plays a key role in a federal leader’s ability to successfully manage a virtual workforce:

1. reflection
2. society
3. diversity
4. ingenuity
5. people
6. business.

Reflection

Just as it sounds, during the reflection zone, leaders take time to assess their motives, beliefs, attitudes, and actions. Leaders should examine their own biases toward teleworking and how those harbored feelings may hinder the telework arrangement. For example, a manager who believes that teleworking only benefits employees may overlook opportunities to track the real business impact of teleworking. Even worse, that leader may unintentionally alienate employees by failing to properly engage the employee who works remotely.

Managers of employees working remotely need to check in regularly with those employees and to include them in team meetings and the like. Otherwise the team may feel a disconnect, or remote members may feel undervalued, which could lead to morale and productivity issues. Reflection helps leaders speak frankly with others, seek out honest feedback, and recognize the limits of their own knowledge. Leaders may not start off as perfect virtual managers but control of the reflection zone will ensure that they learn and develop into stronger leaders.

Society

The societal zone focuses on seeing the bigger picture and leading for the greater good. It’s about understanding how decisions affect the workforce, company, and society as a whole. Leaders proficient in this zone are attuned to the economic and environmental conditions in which the organization operates, as well as the impact the organization has on those conditions. Additionally, a focus on society helps managers better measure success because they can develop metrics that examine the impact of teleworking from both an operational and societal impact level.

Diversity

In the diversity zone, leaders value human differences including gender, ethnicity, age, nationality, beliefs, and work styles to drive greater
Four Critical Practices for Managing Virtual Employees

Federal leaders should consider the following practices when managing a virtual workforce:

**Spanning cultural boundaries.** Effective virtual leaders are aware of individual differences in style, problem solving, and communications, and adapt their leadership methods to the needs of their employees.

**Monitoring relationships.** The virtual leader anticipates the need for connectedness by looking for cues indicating communication breakdowns or potential conflicts, and addresses them appropriately.

**Personalizing technology.** Effective virtual leaders make it a priority to stay connected to ensure their teams have the training and technology necessary to contribute to agency objectives.

**Focusing on goals.** Effective leaders set goals to keep employees informed of their roles and to inspire personal achievement.

One of the pinnacles of success for a virtual workforce is fostering collaboration among the team to keep everyone engaged.

success for the organization. Leading a virtual workforce is not a “one-size-fits-all” leadership approach. Leaders skilled in the diversity zone understand how to encourage collaboration among people in different groups and with different work arrangements. They are keen to the unique needs and qualities of individuals, and they know how to leverage and synthesize unique talents across a team to achieve goals and objectives, even when the employee works from home or outside the office building. One of the pinnacles of success for a virtual workforce is fostering collaboration among the team to keep everyone engaged. Managers of virtual teams who are strong in the diversity zone know how to fuel this collaboration.

**Ingenuity**
The ingenuity zone is focused on fostering an environment in which innovation can thrive. In many cases, the autonomy and flexibility created by teleworking can promote innovation. Leaders should demand creative thinking and innovations from teleworking employees, who can play music, work outdoors, travel, or do whatever inspires them. Leaders using best practices in the ingenuity zone develop themselves and their workforces with the goal of improving overall group capabilities. They find ways to promote communications with speed, flexibility, and creative problem solving. For example, holding satellite video meetings and leveraging tools such as Skype, instant messengers, and Adobe Connect can help ensure virtual communications and collaboration are just as effective as face-to-face dialogue.

**People**
The people zone places an emphasis on connecting with others to earn commitment, inspire effort, and improve communications. Leaders strong in this area make a daily effort to inspire employee trust and secure employee commitment. Leadership in part is about getting work done through others. Leaders strong in this zone know how to communicate effectively even from miles away. They know how to tap into the internal motivation and unique talents of individuals and encourage dedication to achieving the agency’s goals.

**Business**
The business zone is often where private leaders are most comfortable because it focuses on developing and executing strategies to drive bottom-line results. Public-sector leaders also must have business capabilities to set realistic goals and objectives and use an organized approach to communicate expectations. With telework, they also must follow up in new ways to ensure the work gets done. In this age of technology, managers must structure the work week and reporting system differently so they can still
measure the performance and development of their employees. They can conduct regular virtual meetings and training sessions using video and chat functionalities—which foster greater collaboration and accountability among co-workers.

Leaders realize the gains in productivity and efficiencies that can result from teleworking; they leverage this added productivity to boost the bottom line. At the U.S. Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO) for example, leaders were able to boost productivity and expand the workforce because the agency saved significant money on office space when 2,700 employees began working remotely. As a result of the remote working arrangement, the USPTO also experienced less sick leave and annual leave usage. This is just one tactic a manager with a command of the business zone can successfully leverage.

While each zone plays a vital role in a manager’s ability to successfully lead virtually, managing people and bottom-line results is paramount in the federal sector, where employees are closely tied to their agency’s mission. Balancing the people zone with the business zone ensures that leaders are leveraging the talents and work styles of their employees in a meaningful way to drive measurable results that align with business objectives.

Managers can better measure success because they develop metrics that examine the impact of teleworking from both an operational and societal impact level.

Federal leaders must link the team to the bigger picture, identify and communicate norms for interactions, and leverage technology to foster the most proficient and motivating communications.

Cohesion and Commitment Are Keys to Virtual Leadership
Understanding the zones prepares federal leaders to achieve the two key components of successful virtual leadership: group cohesion and individual commitment. Federal managers need to establish ongoing, consistent methods and structure networks for engaging team members to work together on meaningful project assignments and cross-functional initiatives. For example, when an employee asks the manager a question, the manager would refer that employee to another team member who has that expertise instead of answering the question; in doing so, the manager encourages employees to see their co-workers as resources and team members, ultimately building group cohesion.

Motivational Drivers
For more than 30 years, University of Rochester Psychology Professor Edward Deci has informed managers about the innate drivers of employee motivation. The role of the leader is to create the conditions that encourage three drivers:

1. Competence—Feeling valued as knowledgeable, skilled, and experienced
2. Relatedness—Having the opportunity to collaborate with trusted colleagues and co-workers
3. Autonomy—Having the freedom to manage oneself according to guidelines to achieve business goals.

Federal leaders who operate in all six of the leadership zones and foster all three of Deci’s motivating conditions can begin to realize the true potential of the virtual workforce. These leaders are much more likely to create an environment that promotes group cohesion and individual commitment, and to inspire the self-motivation, productivity, resilience, and innovation that make up a successful virtual workforce.

Keather Snyder is director of the Federal Market at AchieveGlobal. Her team develops and sustains long-term performance improvement efforts within the federal government for civilian agencies and the Department of Defense. Contact her at Keather.Snyder@achieveglobal.com.

For more information
www.telework.gov
www.teleworkexchange.com/townhallmeeting