

The Invisible Workforce

by Eileen Toogood

How do you lead a team you cannot see?

Many of us are familiar with the H.G. Wells character known as *The Invisible Man*. A twist of science rendered him invisible—real but unseen. He could make his presence known, speak, even move objects, but it was unnerving to us because we never knew exactly where he was or what he was doing.

So it is with the invisible workforce—those employees we rarely, if ever, see—who work away from us each day, sometimes in countries we've never experienced first-hand. For more and more leaders, this describes their work groups—teams of unseen people dispersed among different sites. And although the virtual team is united by common business goals and facilitated by technology, in interviews with virtual leaders, a frequent theme emerges: "The issue of mistrust—'How do I know they're working?' is huge and not easily overcome."¹

The Talk About Leading Virtually

Working from a distance is becoming one of the great challenges of 21st century leadership. Consider these statistics:

- Intel Corporation conducted a study that revealed approximately two-thirds of their employees collaborated with team members located at different sites and in different regions.²
- McKinsey and Company estimate that 40 percent of the work getting done in the west happens through interactive communication rather than through physical production. Working side-by-side or face-to-face is less important

than it was even 10 years ago when people had to go to an office to log into their desktop.³

- Ninety-seven percent of respondents to an AON Consulting Benefits and Talents Survey reported that their organizations either planned to increase virtual work and telework options or to keep them at the same level.⁴
- According to a recent survey by Training, AMA and i4cp, 63.5 percent of respondents said that managing virtual teams will be an important future competency, but only 36.5 percent believed their managers have mastered it.⁵

Virtual leadership implies boundaries that can be demographic, geographic, cultural, hierarchical, or across functions and expertise. Several years ago, Yip and Ernst introduced the term "boundary spanning leadership." To support its importance, they surveyed 128 senior executives.

- 86 percent of senior executives believe it is "extremely important" for them to work effectively across boundaries in their current leadership roles, yet, only 7 percent of these executives believe they are currently "very effective" at doing so.
- 91 percent cite working across boundaries as important at the middle management level, but only 19 percent agree that middle managers were effective at it.
- 43 percent say spanning boundaries is important for the entry level manager, but only 8 percent feel that these managers effectively do so.



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About the Author

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For over 20 years, Eileen has contributed to the development of AchieveGlobal's sales, service, and leadership products, and delivered these programs at all organizational levels. Eileen holds a B.A. in History and Education, and a Master's Degree in Counseling and Personnel Services from the University of Maryland.



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The results indicate a clear gap between perceived importance and effectiveness in “breaking boundaries” at all levels of the organization.⁶

Challenges From the Virtual World

Today’s workforce has gone well beyond select employees working from home a few days each week. It is now commonplace for work groups to be comprised of dispersed individuals. And while co-located team members in remote locations are not invisible to each other, these groups, to the leader, often seem out of reach—an unpredictable unknown.

However, the leaders of distance-based teams are charged with achieving the same results as a co-located workforce.

Research from MIT confirms the capacity for results, as well as the leadership challenge. A study of 80 software development teams from 28 labs worldwide showed virtual teams offer tremendous opportunities despite greater managerial challenges. The research also showed that even small levels of dispersion (people working at different sites) can substantially affect team performance.⁷

In April 2011, as AchieveGlobal conducted interviews with leaders of virtual teams worldwide, common concerns were evident:

“You have to be able to trust your virtual employees – that they’re doing what they’re supposed to be doing. But sometimes it’s hard to tell.”

“When you’re not physically looking at someone, it’s hard to make sure that you’re communicating effectively. You don’t have a sense of their facial expressions and posture. You have a sense of disconnecting.”

“A lot of work is done because of relationships. And it’s much more difficult to build relationships virtually.”

“My direct report is seven hours ahead of me, so I have a finite window of opportunity to communicate with him on a daily basis.”

“When I talk with my remote team members over the phone, I’m not sure if I’m feeling the emotion. I’m not always sure they’re getting the message—or buying in.”

In addition to the difficulties of collaborating from a distance, we also heard that some leaders feel handcuffed by cultural differences, unschooled in drawing upon

diverse capabilities and insights. Others saw face-to-face communication—and the travel associated with it—as a luxury by organizations focused on cost-cutting.

Moving Beyond Technology

Dispersed teams “can outperform their collocated counterparts when they are set up and managed in the right way”.⁸ But what is “the right way”?

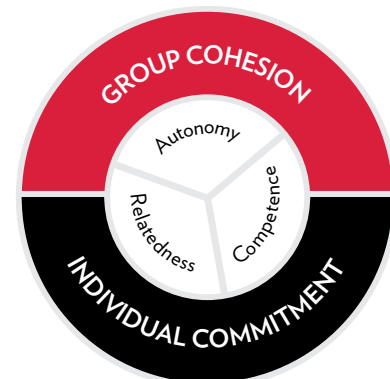
Most agree it is important for leaders of virtual teams to master traditional leadership skills that provide feedback, give verbal recognition, foster development, and manage performance against business objectives. And while having the know-how and confidence to use a variety of technical tools and platforms is helpful, leading virtually also requires a broader skill set to productively span demographic and geographic boundaries.

Effective virtual leadership relies on individual contributions and team effort. Current research reveals that breakdowns in a dispersed team often stem from lack of planning—or from communication that fails to encourage dialogue. So while traditional leadership skills are required, a traditional approach is not enough. It’s time to revamp and retool.

A Framework for Virtual Leadership

The productive virtual team works as a cohesive unit to meet goals in support of the organization’s objectives. At the same time, team members feel valued as unique individuals. They are committed to do their best work, and even to perform beyond expectations.

AchieveGlobal’s framework for virtual leadership is focused on two key elements—group cohesion and individual commitment. To achieve cohesion and commitment, it is important that the leader recognize and support three psychological needs.



Three Psychological Needs

More than 30 years of research conducted by Dr. Edward Deci and others—collectively called “Self-Determination Theory” (SDT)—confirms that people share three fundamental psychological needs, regardless of culture: competence, relatedness, and autonomy. Satisfaction of these needs optimizes employee motivation and raises productivity. When these needs are thwarted, healthy functioning plummets.

- **Competence** – Feeling valued as knowledgeable, skilled, and experienced
- **Relatedness** – Collaborating with trusted colleagues and co-workers
- **Autonomy** – Exercising self-control, within guidelines, to achieve business goals

The role of the leader is to create the conditions that allow team members to satisfy these needs.^{9,10}

How does this apply to the invisible workforce?

In many respects, creating the conditions to meet each team member’s needs is more difficult with a dispersed workforce. Recognizing this, implementing strategies and tactics to build cohesion and commitment becomes a critical success factor for the virtual leader. These include:

Group Cohesion – *Provide the structure required to get the work done.*

- Build a shared picture of success to positively impact virtual team productivity.
- Make it personal. Help team members at a distance recognize how the work matters—that it leads to meaningful outcomes.
- Communicate clear direction and a consistent message. Set expectations that encourage inclusion and responsibility.

Individual Commitment – *Engage virtual team members and support their efforts.*

- Provide opportunities for success.
- Take the initiative to communicate often and encourage team members to do the same.
- Empower the group and individuals. Encourage self-leadership. Resist the temptation to micro-manage virtual employees.

In essence, make the invisible workforce tangible to the leader and to each other.

Consider the Possibilities

Current trends suggest that virtual teams—and the dispersed workforce—are here to stay and will continue to grow. Organizations are counting on them to provide a level of expertise, diversity, and flexibility not always attainable in co-located teams.

Consider the possibilities: One study found that virtual workers are “16 percent more productive than tethered counterparts.”¹¹ Yet other research concluded, “In general, team performance tends to drop with increasing member dispersion.”¹²

Which of these describes your virtual team?

We know effective virtual leadership requires working across boundaries, however firsthand accounts and research indicate a clear gap in the importance of virtual leadership skills and the competencies currently demonstrated by leaders of the virtual workforce.

Leading the invisible workforce is no easy task, but virtual leaders can begin to provide the structure and engagement that has a positive effect. Building group cohesion and individual commitment helps team members work productively from a distance and achieve business goals. It can diffuse mistrust of people we cannot see and, ultimately, answer the leader’s question: ‘How do I know they’re working?’

¹ Kate Lister & Tom Harnish, *The State of Telework in the U.S.*, June 2011

² *Principles for Effective Virtual Teamwork*, Jay F. Numamaker Jr., University of Arizona, Tucson; Bruce A. Reimig San Diego State University; Robert O. Briggs, University of Nebraska at Omaha. *Communications of the ACM Magazine*, vol. 52 no. 4, April 2009.

³ *Closing the Gap, Leadership in the virtual environment, Commentary with Richard Harris & Kate Cowie*, Emerald Group Publishing, Nov. 2009

⁴ *Managing Virtual Teams*, Bill Leonard, *HR Magazine, Society of Human Resource Management*, Vol. 56 No. 6, June 2011

⁵ *Developing Successful Global Leaders*, Training Magazine, May/June 2011

⁶ Yip, Jeffrey, Ernst, Chris, and Campbell, Michael. *Boundary Spanning Leadership. Mission Critical Perspectives from the Executive Suite*. Center for Creative Leadership Organizational Leadership White Paper Series, 2009.

⁷ Siebdrat, Frank, Hoegl, Martin, and Ernst, Holger. *How to Manage Virtual Teams*, MIT Sloan Management Review, 2009.

⁸ Siebdrat, Frank, Hoegl, Martin, and Ernst, Holger. *How to Manage Virtual Teams*, MIT Sloan Management Review, 2009.

⁹ Edward L. Deci, “Why We Do What We Do” 1995.

¹⁰ Christopher P. Niemiec, *Optimizing Employee Motivation through Support for Basic Psychological Needs: An Approach to Organizational Coaching for Front-Line Supervisors*, University of Rochester

¹¹ *Virtual Workplace Dos and Don’ts*, How to reap the benefits of encouraging employees to work from outside the office and avoid developing a disconnected workforce by Rachael King; *Business Week’s CEO Guide to the Virtual Workplace*, 2007

¹² Siebdrat, Frank, Hoegl, Martin, and Ernst, Holger. *How to Manage Virtual Teams*, MIT Sloan Management Review, 2009.

About AchieveGlobal

In the 21st century, the level of human skills will determine organization success. AchieveGlobal provides exceptional development in interpersonal business skills, giving companies the workforce they need for business results. Located in over 40 countries, we offer multi-language, learning-based solutions—globally, regionally, and locally.

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