

Managing Remote Teams

Out of Sight Does Not Have to Drive You Out of Your Mind

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"The future will be filled with virtual offices, as work becomes a thing you do, not a place you go to. People will become untethered from both the traditional corporate office and the requirement of a set daily schedule."

Yeah, you've heard the predictions before, but what you are starting to realize is that Project Management as a discipline is already undergoing drastic changes as parts of this prediction becomes real.

Several scenarios are becoming all too commonplace in today's IT industry – all of which challenge you to manage projects with teams that are geographically dispersed, sometimes even across numerous time zones. Many times, basic profitability goals and the requirement to quickly form, norm and deliver are promoting the emergence of projects with dispersed teams. Today's typical project scenarios often involve interactions with:

- ❑ Offshore or offsite development teams
- ❑ Satellite business offices
- ❑ Independent developers working from home
- ❑ Development partners at other companies
- ❑ Remote clients
- ❑ Road warriors
- ❑ Teams working from virtual offices

The current IT market's focus on profitability and agility are promoting the use of remote teams. Our country's current safety concerns are also making several companies rethink their use of corporate air travel budgets.

As a Project Manager, you are tasked to deliver quality results on time and within budget. Delivery entails bringing the best of out each team member. But, as any Project Manager knows, it is difficult enough to keep your teams motivated, engaged and challenged when they work outside your office, let alone when they are working in different buildings, different cities or even different time zones.

So how does a Project Manager cope with this new environment filled with geographically dispersed teams?

As a corporate sponsor of the Virtual Office concept, we at Fairhaven Solutions have found the use of the following 3-step program will greatly increase your probability of a successful project delivery in this new environment.

Step 1 – Awareness

As the Project Manager, you have to first realize that the current scenario is drastically different than the traditional corporate environment. Most significantly, you may sense a loss of control as you attempt to manage teams that are out of sight. The loss of visual feedback after issuing new tasking, your ability to walk the halls and “inspect the troops” or to round-up the team for a quick impromptu meeting can be devastating to an inexperienced manager. The sense of a loss of control is real, but properly managed, remote teams do offer numerous financial and strategic benefits.

Not only do you need to rethink your management style and strategies but also, more importantly, you need to be aware of classic mistakes that thrive like weeds in this new environment.

These common pitfalls include:

Unmotivated, uncontrolled team members. The human tendency towards “out of sight, out of mind” plays a significant role when interacting with remote team members. This loss of touch with the project leader may negatively impact your ability to control the team. Without control of the team, you will never be a successful project manager. Control demands dedication. Dedication demands both trust and loyalty. Without trust, no team member will listen to your advice, suggestions or “orders”. Without loyalty, they will not care even if they happen to listen. It is imperative that you keep the trust of the teams reporting to you. Trust is a funny thing, once lost it can never be found.

Heroics. Just in time heroics can often save a failing project, but sustained heroics will ultimately result in the loss of the hero. Geographically dispersed teams often hide the fact that team members are becoming full-time heroes and also hide the fact that the project is becoming reliant upon a hero.

Friction between team members and clients. I am sure most of you have experience the scenario where one of your most valued team members, from a technical perspective, is also one of your most “personality challenged” team members as well. Often times, the value of their technical ability is greatly diminished by their continual ability to disrespect the client. Traditional solutions to this may involve “shadowing” the team member during communications with the client, which may be impossible to manage with a remote team member interacting with the client through phone or email.

Politics over substance. One of the benefits of virtual offices and remote teams is that politics seem to be less of an issue. Separation of team members and removal of talks by the corporate water cooler usually promotes a focus on the work at hand and minimizes gossip and office politics. However, as a Project Manager, you should realize that although the office politics may be minimized, it may be replaced by a team member’s feeling of being “out of touch” with the rest of the team and may as well result in defensiveness or paranoia about the visibility of one’s value to the project.

Insufficient risk management. Lack of attention paid to risk management is usually one of the easiest mistakes to make. Having remote teams may promote the idea that “no news is good news” and that every thing is under control. This false

sense of security must be eliminated and replaced with proactive risk identification and mitigation strategies.

Informal management controls. Having a team close at hand usually results in the perception that informal management controls and communications are sufficient and actually provide greater flexibility as requirements or the working environment changes. It is critical to become aware that the management of geographically dispersed teams requires a more formal and visible approach.

Now that you are aware of the common pitfalls of managing remote teams, let's move on to the next two steps focused on communication and motivation strategies.

Step 2 – Communication

With geographically dispersed partners, clients or team members, communication plays a vital role. The following strategies have proved to increase project efficiency and success in this environment.

Clarify goals, schedule and ownership. All too often, especially when faced with dynamic business objectives, it is easy to lose sight of the basic project goals. For instance, what is the relative merit of either quality, timeliness or cost goals for your project? If you don't know, you can be sure that your team doesn't know either.

Clarification of goals, schedule and ownership should be specified in your project documentation. However, realizing that many team members may not take the time to read a 50 page Vision Document or Project Plan, we have found it useful to highlight the goals, schedule and ownership through other avenues as well.

Taking the initiative, through either a project management tool or something as simple as a spreadsheet, to link the project's requirements back to project goals can drastically improve your chance of success. That way, every time the requirements are evaluated, examined or modified, it also promotes awareness of the underlying goals of the project.

Ownership of deliverables needs to be explicitly communicated with remote teams. Not only should each team or individual be aware of items that they own, but every other team member and project stakeholder should be aware of it as well. It is amazing the clarity and motivation that results when a team member sees his name "up in lights" as the owner of a deliverable on a document that is delivered to all the project stakeholders.

Common language. Having remote team members decreases your ability to sense, through visual cues, that they actually understand what is being communicated to them. For this reason, it is especially critical to have a common "project language" readily available to every team member. A common language can be quickly imparted through (1) acceptance of an industry standard development process, such as the Rational Unified Process, (2) acceptance of a common way to design a solution, such as employing the Unified Modeling Language and (3) creating and distributing a glossary of project-based terms.

Avoid turning the project management into a project. Even on the most aggressive and demanding projects, I have seen junior project managers turn the management of the project into a project itself. If you are spending more time

correcting Gantt charts than you are speaking with your team leaders, then you may be falling prey to this fatality as well. Especially when managing remote teams, the key words are "simple" and "current".

We recommend using a sophisticated project management tool at the start of a project to lay out the work breakdown structure, task list with dependencies, and individual milestones. This information and the associated analysis should be the foundation of the Project Plan and updated on a weekly or bi-weekly basis. To guide your everyday tasks, we recommend following a Task List, a Risk List, and Weekly Status Reports.

The Task List should be kept simple - usually just a prioritized list of 20 or so tasks associated with the project that should be addressed during the week. Each task should be assigned an owner that has the responsibility for addressing the task. The tasks should be prioritized since rarely will you have the time to address 20 items each day.

The Risk List can be used to keep you abreast of each risk to the project, as well as to "soften" expectations that have been set by making other executives aware that this project is not a "walk in the park", and it can be used to highlight risks to team members, especially when a team member has the power to mitigate the risk. The Risk List is a simple list of the Top 10 risks to the project. If there are more than 10 serious potential risks - you might as well admit defeat now. Each risk should be quantified in terms of the relative impact to the project in the event that the risk is not avoided. This impact multiplied by the probability of occurrence, provides the "risk exposure" number, which serves as the relative priority of each risk. Each risk in the list should also be assigned an owner, with a plan of mitigation. Compiling the Risk List, communicating it to the team, and updating it frequently will mitigate many of the risks to your project early, ensuring a successful project completion.

Weekly Status Reports are often the bane of Project Management, serving as just more input into the "political jungle". However, if you keep the reports pure from politics and abide by a simple format, these reports can be a great time management tool for your project. By keeping the focus on "what has been accomplished", "what is to be accomplished", and the current "issues" (or risks from your Risk List), this report can help maintain your focus on the critical project items.

By keeping your Task List, Risk List, and Weekly Status Reports simple and current, while updating the overall project plan on a less frequent basis, you will stay focused, keep from turning the project plan into a project, and have more time for communicating with your remote teams - something that can radically affect project success.

Communicate frequently. Your team members are making decisions constantly that affect your chance of a successful project completion. Each decision is based on their knowledge of the project and inherent assumptions. Frequent communication will ensure that each member of the team has the most up-to-date information. Even if you only have partial information, do not hesitate to share it with the team. Many times partial information is magnitudes better than no information or the wrong information. Also, frequent communications displays that you value their work on the project, which in turns helps to build trust and loyalty.

Step 3 – Motivation

Aside from the normal motivational strategies, such as rewarding in public, punishing in private and rapidly removing of problem employees, there are other key strategies to employ when faced with geographically dispersed teams.

Enhance familiarity. Strive to find a way to rotate through central or remote sites for face-to-face visits. Even if the visits are unstructured, they provide a wealth of insight. Not only will everyone be able to “place a face with the name” thereby increasing the personalization of project success, but also you will gain valuable insight into the working environment of the remote teams. By acknowledging the unique situations at the remote sites, you will be able to factor these into your operational and management procedures.

Collaborate on ideas. Do not expect, that as “owner” of the project, that every great idea or solution will originate with you. In fact, most of the best project leaders encourage collaboration from the teams when attempting to solve problems or avoid risks. Often the perspective gained from others will be the key to unlocking previously “unsolvable” risks.

Promote innovation. Another aspect of collaboration is innovation. Publicly desiring and accepting other team member’s solutions will spawn their thinking about the project. Instantly you may have turned a shortsighted developer into a developer that is also brainstorming at night on ways to increase the team’s chance of success on the project. By doing this, you have evolved from a single processor (your brain) attempting to solve the project dilemmas to a multi-tasking, multi-processor (your brain combined with the team’s brains) capable of mitigating the most horrendous project risks.

These 3 steps will assist you as you are faced with the challenges of managing remote teams. However, as with traditional projects, never let your guard down. You are the owner of the project. You must stay vigilant against risks to the project success. The reality is most projects fail. Yours is not protected simply because you are “smarter than all other project managers”. I have seen project managers go from heroes one day to being fired the next day. Do not misinterpret a successful delivery on a traditional project as an inherent ability to be successful with management of remote teams. The game is the same, but the rules are very different and constantly evolving. Sure, celebrate each success with your team, but keep vigilant.

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