



# Answers to Common Distance Manager Questions

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## Free Resources

### TARGET

### AUDIENCE—

People who want to learn answers to ten common questions our clients ask us about being a Distance Manager.

### RECOMMENDED TRAINING

The Distance Manager

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We've worked with about one quarter of the Fortune 100 to help them improve leadership. Here are some quick responses to questions we frequently hear regarding distance management:

### **Question: What is virtual team management?**

Answer: The most obvious example of a virtual team is a team distributed across multiple locations (e.g., a team with people in London, New York, Tokyo, and Paris). But a team is also virtual if members aren't normally in the same location at the same time (e.g., factory, call center, or IT help desk shift workers who share a common location at different times, or telecommuters, sales reps, consultants, or auditors who only sometimes share a location with other team members). If anyone on a team you lead normally works different hours or locations from you or any other team members, then you manage a virtual team. If contemporary trends continue (such as global business, outsourcing, cost reduction pressures, and improved communication technologies that allow workers to untether themselves from a brick and mortar workplace), within the next five years the vast majority of managers will be managing virtual teams at least some of the time.

### **Q: What are the major challenges?**

A: Virtual teams don't have the normal advantages of a collocated team. They can't run into each other in the hallways, lunchrooms, and parking lots to communicate informally. The manager can't easily pop over to a team member's cubicle to check on something whenever the need arises. Team members often feel isolated. Communications are normally done using methods that are inferior to face-to-face interactions. It is difficult to motivate, align, and manage performance from a distance.

### **Q: What changes must leaders make?**

A: Both the assumptions and techniques of traditional management usually require revision in order to be effective on virtual teams. Normal command and control techniques, such as requirements for management authorizations and frequent progress updates, often break down over distance because they



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encourage over-dependence on the distant manager and waste time. The last thing you want in a virtual team is people waiting around for you to tell them what to do.

Instead, give remote employees wide decision-making powers that encourage thoughtful autonomy and self initiative. Have progress updates posted on the Intranet so that everyone on the team benefits from communication efforts. Training in specific distance management techniques like these can be useful.

***Q: How do we help employees feel connected?***

A: Communication and more communication. Most effective virtual teams have a weekly teleconference or Web conference to review project status, goals, coordinate assignments, and ask questions. Good teams also have regular one-on-one time for each team member with the manager to get performance feedback, support, and address concerns (usually monthly). It's also a good idea to have a team Website or shared drive, to serve as a virtual team room. This allows people to have a virtual space for posting important information and sharing concerns. Quarterly face-to-face meetings provide opportunities for higher quality decision-making, team-building, and group problem-solving.

***Q: How do we communicate effectively?***

A: We recommend you develop communication protocols as part of your operating guidelines. These protocols would answer questions like "How often should we check e-mails?" or "When is it preferable to use the phone?" or "How frequently will we have Web conferences?" or "When is it not OK to IM and when is it best to IM?" Your team already knows a lot about what works and what doesn't work when it comes to communication. It's important to get them together to agree how they will actually improve it.

***Q: How do we maintain relationships?***

A: Relationships improve as a function of positive interaction over time. It's very important to celebrate team successes. Helping team members develop skills such as giving and receiving feedback, resolving conflict, and effective decision-making and problem solving will also help.

***Q: What are common mistakes team leaders make and how do we avoid them?***

A: One of the best ways to avoid common virtual team mistakes, such as isolation, misalignment and poor communication, is to have a good virtual team start-up. During this face-to-face activity you can do some teambuilding, set expectations, share the goals and assignments, and help everyone know how you will work together. A couple of very useful tools for this meeting are the team charter (a statement of purpose), and operating guidelines (a set of agreements about how the team will operate). These two tools will help you avoid about 80% of the typical mistakes made by virtual teams. And don't be discouraged if your team has already started. You can use these same techniques to give the team a fresh start and a chance to refocus.

***Q: How do we motivate virtual team members?***

A: Motivation requires task clarity, ongoing feedback and a good performance management and reward system. Don't be tricked into believing that the only tool you have is pay. Virtual team managers who put all their effort into that one bucket almost always fail to motivate virtual team members effectively. Remember, virtual team members don't get the kind of positive feedback and human contact they would on-site that can make them feel like a contributing team member. A thank you e-mail that copies in senior management, or dinner certificates popped into the mail at the completion of a project milestone can be simple but powerful ways to let team members know that you appreciate them and recognize their efforts even if they are not seen every day.

***Q: How do we manage across different cultures?***

A: Global teams, especially, must learn how to work with people from a variety of cultures. But our experience suggests that even local virtual teams have cultural divisions that come from things such as differing educational backgrounds and life experiences. Two things are very helpful for bridging cultural distances. One is to

become aware of your own cultural biases. Remember that your way of doing things isn't the only way to get good results. And what may seem rude or ineffective to you may be preferable to someone else. The second recommendation is to use the operating guidelines tool mentioned above. It can help workers shape a team culture that will supersede other cultural distinctions that may otherwise become divisive.

***Q: How do we measure productivity?***

Productivity measures are tricky across distance. Don't measure means (since you can't really observe or control them from afar) as much as ends. Be less concerned, for example, about how many hours are put in, or whether people get to work on time, as you are with whether customer commitments are met, or projects are completed on schedule.

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