
Remote Management

By Lothar Katz

Search Google for “*Remote Management*”, and you will find more than 25 million resulting links - almost all of which relate to remotely managing *computers*. The analogy is a bit unfair, but many of the managers, project leaders, and others leading or overseeing remote employees seem to wish the underlying principles were the same: once you put proper systems in place, communication becomes a snap and results are predictable.

Naturally, it does not work that way with people. Communicating effectively and getting results requires constant work, especially when leading team members located in other countries who belong to different cultures. Let us look at some of the toughest leadership challenges remote managers in international settings are facing:

Managing Objectives

No matter whether a team is local or remote, it is vital to define clear objectives for and expectations of their work, setting goals and selecting metrics that will be used to determine goal attainment and to assess performance. Managing objectives requires more than these initial steps, though: on an ongoing basis, leader and team need to review their progress, change goals or metrics if needed, agree on corrective actions where appropriate, and so on. In a dynamic competitive environment, this is a continuous process.

This process will not look much different with local or remote employees. When working across cultures and language barriers, there may be a few added complications due to communication challenges, but to the most part, the process remains the same. Cultural differences do not represent big hurdles in this field.

Managing Communication

For remote management, the primary communication purpose is to facilitate team coordination and alignment by creating feedback loops among team leader and members. Inevitably, communicating with people becomes more difficult in remote settings. Traveling for face-to-face meetings costs time and money, phone or video conferencing cuts out most non-verbal communication, and the limitations of e-mail frequently cause misunderstandings. In international teams, two factors further complicate the communication: language barriers and cultural differences.

In a world where English has become the universal language of business and where young people in almost any country seem to speak it well, some may view language issues “a thing of the past”. Make no mistake: they are still the #1 reason for misunderstandings. Studies have repeatedly shown that conversations in English between proficient speakers whose native languages are different, especially when conducted over the phone, regularly reach far less than 50% efficiency: most of the content is lost. Slowing down and speaking in simple, jargon-free terms helps a little. Over-communicating and frequently repeating key messages are important, too.

The cultural difference that usually affects communication the most is the directness or indirectness of a certain culture. In some, such as Germany, the Netherlands, or Israel, people may be overly direct, at least to U.S. standards; others, including many Asians and Latin Americans, may be very diplomatic, making it difficult to determine the mes-

sage they intend to deliver. Effective remote managers carefully listen and watch for subtle messages, ask questions in an open and non-threatening manner, and frequently re-verify whether own and others' messages have been correctly understood.

Managing Relationships

For Americans remotely managing international teams, building and maintaining relationships can be a tough challenge. Two forces conflict:

- The greater the cultural distance, the more important relationship building becomes. This means that people need to get together, ideally on a regular base. Employees in some cultures will perform poorly on international teams unless they are given opportunities to meet and get to know the team's leader and other members. The desire to develop close personal relationships is much stronger in many other countries, in particular in Asia, than it is in the United States.
- The greater the physical distances involved, the harder it gets to spend face time with remote team members. As a consequence, people rarely get to meet in person.

Typical indicators of underdeveloped relationships are low team motivation and commitment, a general lack of trust, and a sense that team members have hidden agendas of their own. These effects may get attributed to other factors. However, smart remote managers know that in many cultures, personal relationships can make or break a team's success.

Lothar Katz is the founder of Leadership Crossroads. He has a wealth of experience in achieving productive cooperation across cultures and driving business success on a global scale.

A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, he regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. These included many parts of Asia, e.g., China, India, and Japan. Originally from Germany, he has lived and worked both in the United States and in Europe.