

The Virtual Project Manager: Seven Best Practices for Effective Communication

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Executive Summary

With the surge in telecommuting practices, the twenty-first century project manager faces increasingly more complex challenges in managing his or her team. One of those crucial challenges is conducting effective communication in a virtual environment. To ensure the ultimate success of a project, the project manager must make sure that the factor of effective communication is addressed as a top priority. Consequently, the project manager should implement several actions, including establishing a clear communication plan, accounting for informal discussions, and mastering the technology used. He or she should also understand how to conduct structured meetings and leverage email as a tool to efficiently communicate with his or her team. This white paper discusses the challenges faced by the virtual project manager and specifies the best practices that should be employed for effective communication.

Over the past decade, organizations have increasingly shifted toward hiring a more mobile workforce. Findings from the 2010 Cisco Connected Technology World Report, which was conducted in thirteen countries, indicate that employees expect greater mobility in their jobs and that over 65% of them rate flexibility as a more important factor than salary.¹ As such, the number of companies adopting a more collaborative virtual workspace is on the rise, and the projections signify an increasing growth rate in that direction.

The benefits of telecommuting are obvious: lower travel costs, access to a more diversified skill set, greater employee satisfaction, and increased productivity. However, one drawback to the surge in telecommuting practices is that it has created additional challenges for virtual teams, and particularly for project managers.

The Challenges of the Virtual Project Manager

Project managers are key stakeholders who are ultimately responsible for a project's success. Traditionally, they have been viewed as leaders of teams that are physically co-located in the same office space. They are usually in close proximity to their team members, which allows for more face-to-face interaction and more frequent in-person meetings.

However, the role of the project manager has shifted based on the recent increase in telecommuting practices and the need for more collaboration among dispersed teams. Today, having a virtual team in nearly every industry and organization is the norm. As such, the virtual project manager faces several challenges in managing his or her team; some of these challenges include leadership, trust, control, and communication. Although such challenges have always existed for traditional project managers, they are amplified

¹ Cisco Systems, *Cisco Connected Technology World Report*, http://news-room.cisco.com/dlls/2010/ts_101910.html

several times over for virtual project managers. For example, in leading offline teams, the hard-line relationship between a manager and his or her subordinates is usually much more defined because of the physical proximity of individuals. The virtual nature of a team, however, tends to dilute the effect of authoritative control by managers due to the lack of a tangible perception of leadership by the team. Moreover, the element of trust, which is inherently difficult to establish in a face-to-face setting, is even harder to establish virtually.

The most critical challenge, however, is the element of communication especially because a project's success often hinges on how effective cross-team communication is conducted. As such, the onus is on the project manager to lead and set the tone for the entire team so that everyone is focused on achieving the project's objectives in the most efficient manner.

Seven Best Practices for Effective Communication

The following are seven best practices that the virtual project manager should implement for more effective communication among members of his or her team:

1. Establish a Clear Communication Plan

Although this might seem obvious, it is perhaps the most overlooked by virtual project managers. A communication plan should define the rules of engagement and the frequency of communication. The plan should also contain a repository of contact information for all team members, as well as a listing of all the status update meetings. Perhaps most importantly, the plan should contain the project manager's preferences in terms of how he or she would like to be contacted. For example, one project manager may want to have all requests documented through email so that messages can be tracked, and be contacted by phone only if something urgent comes up. Another project manager may prefer to use instant messaging software for all minor questions and use email for more detailed requests. By defining upfront what his or her preferences are, the project manager will establish a more efficient communication flow with members of the team.

A good communication plan will also have a clear escalation path so that team members will know who they need to consult with or request permission from when they run into issues, particularly with customer-related tasks. When starting a project staffed by a virtual team, a meeting outlining the communication plan should be set up to share the plan with every member of the team and to clarify any

ambiguities. The communication plan should then be kept in a central repository and updated regularly for everyone to access when needed.

2. Account for Informal Discussions

In a virtual team, the informal conversations that usually occur across cubicle walls in an office or close to the water cooler are missing. Such discussions are crucial to building team rapport and cohesiveness and ultimately building trust and more successful communication within the team; hence, it is important for the virtual project manager to make up for this loss. To do so, informal discussions should be planned ahead of time in online meetings in one of two ways:

- First, regular status meetings should start or end with discussions unrelated to work. Although this sometimes happens naturally, the project manager should make a conscious effort to openly discuss informal and unstructured topics so the team feels encouraged to do so as well.
- Second, informal discussions should be accounted for by planning specific meetings that have the focused objective of socializing with the team. In these meetings, team members can be asked to present informal topics about their social lives or interests so that the other members learn more about their backgrounds.

In all types of informal discussions, the responsibility falls on the virtual project manager to set the tone, because subordinates usually look up to their leaders to gauge what can and cannot be discussed. As such, it is always a good idea for the project manager to lead by example by being the first person to discuss his or her own background.

3. Be a Master of Technology

Given that virtual project managers need to rely mainly on technology to communicate with their dispersed teams, it is imperative that they become experts at using it. Managers should fully understand the features of online collaboration software so that they make sound decisions about effective communication practices. For example, when using Cisco WebEx Meeting Center, the project managers should understand how to share files and applications, pass control to other presenters, use network-based recording, and enable webcam conferencing. They should also become experts at using other scheduling, project management, content management, and document

management software. Most importantly, managers must understand the limitations and degrees of integration across all those software applications, mainly because of overlapping features, which could become redundant and confuse the team.

When looking at “people, process, and technology,” in a virtual setting, the technology used usually defines the process; therefore, deciding on which technology to use and how to integrate the different software applications are key pre-requisites before setting the proper communication process and flow.

4. Conduct Structured Meetings

One issue, which can be attributed to wasting a lot of time in virtual teams, is a lack of structure in meetings. It is counterproductive when an entire team attends a meeting that lacks a solid objective or sense of facilitation. Ideally, the perfect virtual meeting has four attributes:

- First, the meeting should have a specific agenda, which should be communicated to the team ahead of time. The agenda should specify the objective of the meeting and what needs to be accomplished at the end of it. Sending the agenda to the invitees early on will give them a chance to think through the discussion topics and be better prepared for the discussion.
- Second, the meeting should be facilitated by the project manager who makes sure that the team remains on the topic. It is the project manager's job to ensure that any off-agenda discussions be postponed to a different meeting. This ensures that the time spent by the team is focused and not lost because of tangential conversations.
- Third, the project manager should capture any risks, issues, and action items that come up during the meeting, and assign owners to each one of them. The project manager should be as explicit as possible to avoid any misinterpretation. During the meeting, the project manager should also include several clarification checkpoints to make sure that everyone understands the points being communicated and to allow everyone to ask any questions.
- Fourth, and perhaps the most essential step, is for the project manager to follow up on the meeting with an email that summarizes the meeting's decisions. Although it might not be necessary to include detailed meeting minutes after every meeting, the

email should at least include the agreed-on action items and their assigned owners. This ensures that the project manager will keep a written audit trail of who is working on what.

5. Leverage Video When Needed

In face-to-face meetings, project managers have the advantage of projecting and reading the facial expressions and body language of their audience; however, in online meetings, such non-verbal cues are obviously missing, which leaves the project manager at a disadvantage in sensing the team's feedback. In sensitive meetings, when tensions are elevated, the project manager should request the use of webcam conferencing to help in mitigating the negative effects of non-visual communication. This is particularly important in high stakes meetings, such as scoping and negotiating discussions with new customers. In such scenarios, the project manager may consider using more sophisticated video conferencing technologies to conduct those meetings.

6. Determine a Range for Time-Zone Differences

When working together in different countries, it is quite common for different team members to reside in different time zones. This creates a challenge for the project manager, who usually needs to include the majority of the team in important meetings. Of course, it is not always feasible for every team member to make it to every meeting, but sometimes it is necessary to have those “all-hands” discussions when issues come up. The communication plan should define a prime time range for meetings. If the project manager, for example, is based on the east coast of the United States, and several team members live on the west coast, then starting meetings no earlier than 11:00 a.m. as a lower limit makes sense. Moreover, if other team members are based in India, then scheduling meetings after 3:00 p.m. might be too late, which means that the prime time range of 11:00 a.m. to 3:00 p.m. would be ideal for meetings. Documenting this range in a project schedule helps the project manager effectively schedule meetings when every team member needs to be included in an important discussion.

7. Use Email Effectively

Email is a double-edged sword. Using it inefficiently as a tool to manage virtual teams can be inundating and confusing, but applying it effectively helps facilitate the team's communication flow. Although the tips and

strategies for using email for effective communication could easily fill a book, there are generally four main rules that need to be followed:

- First, email messages need to be as succinct and concise as possible. People rarely read emails these days—they just scan them. Typing out very lengthy emails and expecting team members to read through every line is not very pragmatic, and a project manager would be better off gaining the attention of the team by breaking out a long email into two or three separate messages.
- Second, if the email contains several action items for the team, these items should not be buried in the message's paragraphs, which will make them hard and confusing to find. Instead, actions should be highlighted as separate, bulleted points or numbered items in a list so that they stand out for the recipients.
- Third, a different subject line should be used for each new email topic. It is quite annoying to see a reply to an old email that contains a thread with multiple historical messages that are unrelated to the new topic. Moreover, virtual team members typically need to search for previous emails in their inboxes to recall a decision or action item and having a descriptive subject line makes it much easier to retrieve them.
- Fourth, "Reply-All" and "CC" should be used sparingly. When someone does not need to be included on an email chain or a reply, then including him or her anyway ends up being highly counterproductive.

To help facilitate communication through email, it is also a good idea for the project manager to create mailing

lists that the team can use to discuss team-wide topics. This is particularly helpful for large teams, where using mailing lists that include a predetermined list of individuals decreases the chance of mistakenly leaving someone out of a discussion and eventually helps save time.

Conclusion

The virtual project manager faces many challenges in the workplace, particularly in ensuring effective communication with his or her team. Project managers are ultimately responsible for setting the tone and leading the team to the most effective approach for collaboration. To mitigate the risks of project failure, and to reduce any ambiguities among the team members, the virtual project manager should implement specific measures to improve and enhance cross-team communication on a consistent basis. Ultimately, these measures will save time and increase productivity for the entire team in the long run.

About the Author

Hassan Osman is a senior program manager at Cisco Systems, where his responsibilities include leading the formation, planning, execution, and transition of large and complex projects for customers. Prior to working at Cisco Systems, Hassan was a manager at Ernst & Young, where he helped Fortune 500 clients assess and implement solutions in the areas of independent program reviews and strategic project management. Hassan is the author of *"Securing Your Information in an Insecure World,"* and holds a master's of science degree in information security policy & management from Carnegie Mellon University. He is a certified PMP® and frequently blogs about virtual project management at www.thecouchmanager.com