



Proximity to the flagpole

Effective leadership in geographically dispersed organizations

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PREFACE

In 2009, I was fortunate to take command of an Air Force Squadron. Approximately half of my squadron was located in the same building with me, one-quarter was located in another facility about five miles away, and another quarter was spread across four operating locations in three different states and up to 245 miles away. Having previously had supervisors (both good and bad) who were geographically separated from me, I was very aware of the challenges of leading those who were not co-located. So, I went into my command tour with high expectations for myself on how to inspire, motivate, and make those not co-located with the rest of the team feel like they were as much a part of the team and contributed to the broader unit mission as those close by. However, even with that awareness and expectation for myself, I found it much more challenging than I expected to give the same attention and focus—and to be as an effective leader to those who were separated.

I consider myself an avid student of leadership, and as I reflected on ways to overcome the challenges of leading from afar for similar positions in the future, I realized I had never read anything or been involved in any discussions during my 20-plus years of leadership education and training related to the unique challenges, opportunities, and effective strategies for leading geographically separated subordinates and teams. As I talked to my peers and even those who led similar organizations in the private sector, as well as leadership educators, I realized my experience was not unique. No one I talked to had any specific training or guidance on leading in dispersed environments. Even my Navy brethren, who arguably have more geographic dispersion than any organization on earth, had not had any formal training related to remote leadership. We invest a great amount of time on leadership training and development in the U.S. military, and rightfully so—it is probably the most important topic and our biggest strength. Yet, we don't even talk about the differences between leading co-located and dispersed personnel. That is the genesis of this paper and why I think it is vital we better prepare our leaders for these unique challenges.

I would like to give special thanks to the faculty and graduate students in the Department of Psychology at Minnesota State University, particularly professor Daniel Sachau and Sarah Welsch. They were instrumental in administering the survey for this research, collecting responses, and crunching the data. I appreciate all their assistance, guidance, and mentorship on this project.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The workplace is changing rapidly, and an increasing number of leaders in government and private industry are required to lead those who are geographically separated. Globalization, economic shifts from manufacturing to information, the need to be closer to customers, and improved technological capabilities have increased the geographic dispersion of many organizations. While these organizations offer many exciting opportunities, they also bring new leadership challenges that are amplified because of the separation between leaders and followers. Although much has been researched and written on leadership in general, relatively little has been focused on the unique leadership challenges and opportunities presented in geographically separated environments. Furthermore, most leaders are not given the right tools and training to overcome the challenges or take advantage of the opportunities when leading in these unique settings.

A survey of leaders within a geographically dispersed military organization confirmed there are distinct differences in how remote and local leaders operate, and most leadership tasks related to leading those who are remote are more difficult than with those who are co-located. The tasks most difficult for remote leaders are related to communicating, mentoring and building personal relationships, fostering teamwork and group identity, and measuring performance. To be effective, leaders must be aware of the challenges they face when leading from afar and be deliberate in their engagement. This paper discusses each of these challenges and offers practical approaches for leaders to employ in order to overcome these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Few things are more important to human activity than leadership. Leadership is a process in which one person influences the thoughts, attitudes, and behaviors of others. It is the ability to get others to do something significant they might not otherwise do on their own, and it energizes people toward a common goal. Effective leadership guides our nation through challenging and perilous times, it makes a business organization successful and prosperous, and it enables a military or government organization to accomplish its mission.

While most people understand the importance of leadership, an increasing number of leaders are being expected to lead those who are geographically separated. While geographically dispersed teams are not new, the spread of today's global markets and improved technological capabilities are creating increased demands for geographic dispersion within organizations while simultaneously reducing the time requirements to deliver results.

Given the importance of leadership within organizations, what happens when leaders are separated in time and space from those they lead? What are the unique challenges faced when leading those who are distanced versus those who are co-located? Can leaders effectively mentor and develop subordinates from afar? Can they have the same impact on their organizations? Should leaders change their leadership style? What strategies, tools, and techniques can they use when leading remote teams?

While much has been researched and written on leadership in general, relatively little has been examined about the unique leadership challenges and opportunities presented in geographically separated environments. Additionally, most leaders are not given the right tools and training to overcome the challenges or take advantage of the opportunities when in these unique settings.

In order to better assess leadership in remote environments, I conducted a survey of personnel within a geographically dispersed military and law enforcement organization. The survey collected information about the respondents' perceptions of the advantages and challenges faced when leading and being led from afar, ways to overcome the challenges faced in these environments, and the preferred methods and frequency of communication.

Not surprisingly, the results indicate there are indeed unique challenges for leading those who are geographically separated. Many often perceive that those near the “flagpole” receive special treatment, have better access, and get more timely and thorough information. Despite these challenges, it is believed that leaders who make a concerted effort to overcome them are effective, and they can have a positive influence on the remote subordinates they lead. This paper will present the results of the survey, discuss the top four challenges faced when leading in geographically dispersed settings, and provide practical ways to overcome these challenges.

CHAPTER 1: SURVEY METHOD

The administered survey contained 10 demographic questions, ratings of difficulty of performing 40 supervisory tasks, ratings of the usefulness of 19 communication techniques, six open-ended response questions, a 13-item adapted leadership styles questionnaire, and six questions related to the frequency of communication between supervisors and subordinates. This survey was sent to approximately 200 personnel within a geographically dispersed military and law enforcement organization. The personnel were from various levels of the organization, including headquarters elements and field units. Responses from 136 members were received, yielding an approximate 68 percent response rate; however, 19 of the respondents were removed from the final data analysis because they did not complete any of the survey beyond the demographic questions. From the remaining group, 117 participants who were currently supervising a direct report were included in the analyses. This final group consisted of 19 enlisted personnel, 35 civilians, and 63 officers.

Of the respondents, 92 percent indicated they currently had, or had at one point, a remote supervisor, and 58 percent of the participants had been a remote supervisor themselves. Thus, the majority of respondents had first-hand experience with dispersed leadership, either leading, being led, or both.

Many of these supervisors had both remote and co-located direct reports. Approximately 90 percent of supervisors had direct reports in their immediate office area. Others had direct reports who were not in the office but in the same building (38 percent), on the same base but not in the same building (20 percent), not on base but in the same time zone (36 percent), in a different time zone (24 percent), and in a different country (9 percent).

Leadership task difficulty

Respondents were asked to rate each item in a list of leadership tasks according to how difficult each was for a remote supervisor versus a local supervisor. The rating scale ranged from one to five, with one corresponding to a task that was “much easier for the remote supervisor than the local supervisor” and five corresponding to a task that was “much more difficult for the remote supervisor.”

TABLE 1
Difficulty of leadership tasks for remote versus local leaders

	Mean	SD
Build a personal relationship with direct reports	4.55	.587
Make it easy for direct reports to communicate informally with the supervisor	4.46	.730
Understands the norms that guide the behaviors of the subordinate's team members	4.44	.569
Understands the morale of subordinate teams	4.44	.552
Know which direct reports do not get along with each other	4.43	.601
Resolve interpersonal conflict among direct reports	4.38	.682
Mentor direct reports on a personal level	4.36	.571
Measure the effectiveness of the direct report and his/her team	4.27	.734
Know who the unofficial leaders are among the direct reports	4.25	.677
Communicate regularly with direct reports	4.25	.705
Create a highly cohesive team	4.22	.555
Identify the slackers among the direct reports	4.21	.727
Understand each direct report's strengths and weaknesses	4.18	.563
Identify the top performers within the direct report's team	4.14	.720
Make it easy for direct reports to initiate communication with the supervisor	4.07	.723
Communicate effectively with direct reports	4.07	.654
Foster teamwork	4.06	.642
Provide opportunities for direct reports to express their ideas to their supervisor	3.98	.658
Provide accurate and timely feedback	3.97	.720
Make it easy for direct reports to get a hold of their supervisor	3.96	.686
Communicate the organization's vision and strategies to direct reports	3.85	.670
Keep direct reports well informed about matters that affect them	3.82	.598
Gain the trust of direct reports	3.81	.708
Provide effective guidance and advice	3.80	.636
Gain the respect of direct reports	3.73	.655
Encourage direct reports to identify with the organization	3.70	.692
Encourage the open exchange of ideas	3.69	.706
Encourage a warrior ethos	3.61	.703
Encourage direct reports to take pride in the organization	3.58	.689
Encourage innovation	3.49	.798
Encourage team members to take pride in doing outstanding work	3.46	.648
Encourage members to find best practices	3.43	.754
Set realistic goals and expectations for direct reports	3.38	.543
Hold direct reports accountable for high quality work	3.35	.715
Help direct report to take initiative	3.15	1.123
Help direct reports think and act on their own	2.92	1.191
Allow direct reports to decide on their own how to go about completing work	2.76	1.074
Avoid micro-managing	2.17	1.032

Note: 1 = Much easier for remote supervisor than local supervisor, 3 = the same for remote and local supervisor, 5 = Much more difficult for the remote supervisor than the local supervisor.

Table one includes the list of leadership tasks in rank order from most difficult for a remote leader than a local leader to least difficult. Although not necessarily an advantage of the remote leader, the least problematic aspects of leadership for the remote leaders are activities related to providing autonomy to remote subordinates and freedom to make their own decisions, as well as avoiding micro-managing. The top 10 tasks that are perceived as most difficult for remote leaders are grouped into the categories listed in table two. These categories will be used to further discuss the challenges of leading geographically dispersed organizations and the potential tools and techniques to mitigate those challenges.

TABLE 2
Categories of most difficult leadership tasks for remote leader

Leadership task category	Associated task(s) from survey
Communication	Communicate regularly with direct reports
Mentorship and personal relationships	Build a personal relationship with direct reports Make it easy for direct reports to communicate informally with supervisor Mentor direct reports on a personal level
Foster teamwork and group identity	Understand the norms, or unwritten rules, that guide the behaviors of the subordinate teams Understand the morale of the subordinate teams Know which direct reports do not get along Resolve interpersonal conflict among direct reports Know who the unofficial leaders are among the direct reports
Performance management	Measure the effectiveness of the direct report and his/her team

CHAPTER 2: COMMUNICATION

Probably the most obvious challenge of leading geographically separated subordinates is communication, and effective and efficient communication is the most important tool for dispersed teams. Most of the other challenges of leading in this environment stem from how effectively the leader and remote subordinates communicate with each other. There are many important aspects of good communication that remote leaders should consider, including the methods used and the frequency of communication.

Methods of communication

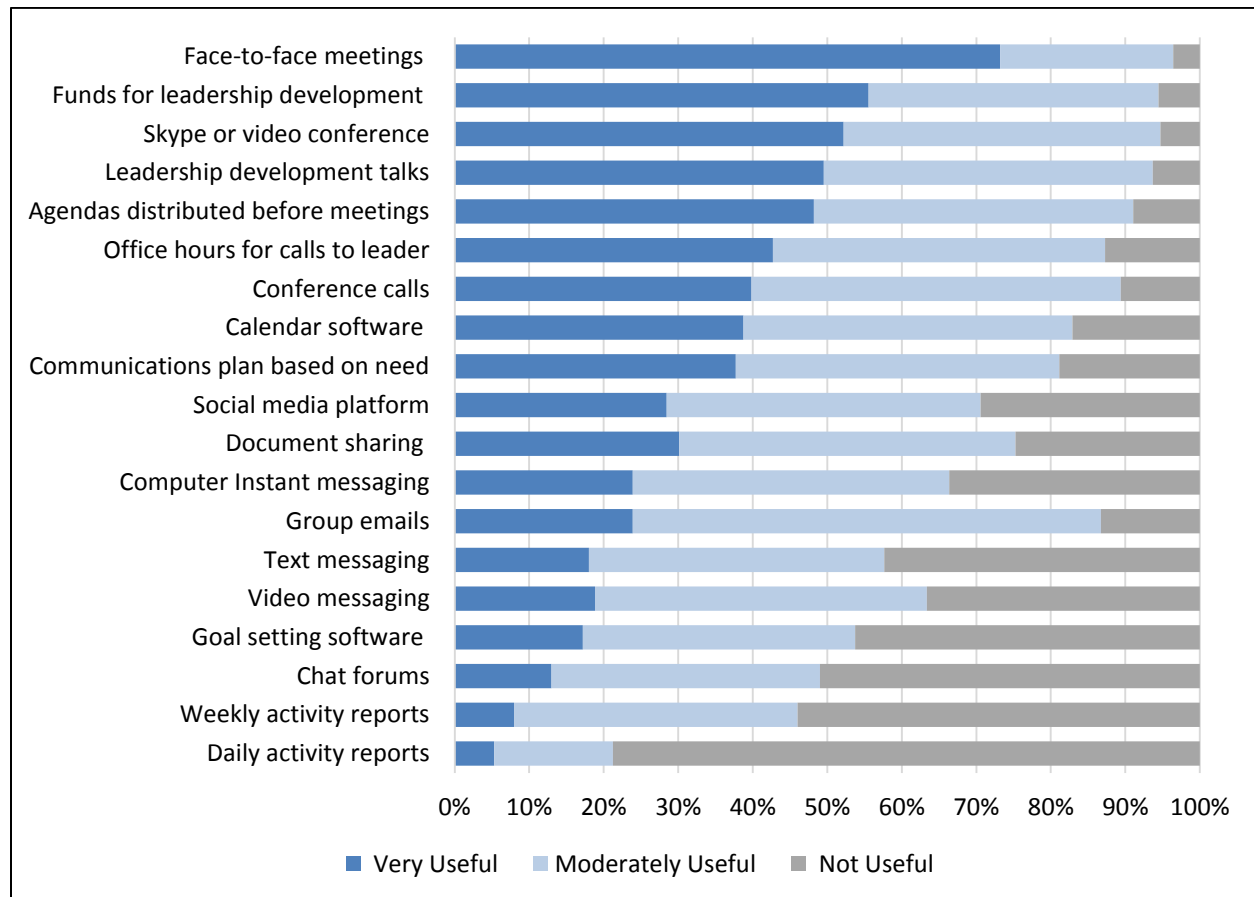
Respondents of the survey were asked to rate the usefulness of the variety of communication techniques or technologies for remote leaders and subordinates on a three-point scale, where one correlated to not useful, two was moderately useful, and three was very useful. Table three lists the techniques or technologies organized from most useful to least useful.

Not surprisingly, the most useful methods of communication were those that allowed for visual contact between the remote leader and direct reports, either through face-to-face meetings or video teleconferencing tools such as Skype. A majority of respondents reported the least useful strategies to be daily and weekly activity reports and chat forums. One survey respondent said, “Leaders cannot substitute daily interaction with daily SITREPs or staff calls. This causes the remote subordinate to focus more on ‘feeding the boss’ than executing the mission.”

Although the nature of geographically dispersed teams does not allow for routine or frequent face-to-face contact, this form of communication, even occasionally, is still critical for effective leadership in these environments. Face-to-face contact offers the richest form of communication. According to a study by Albert Mehrabian and Susan Ferris,¹ in face-to-face discussions a message is conveyed 55 percent by body language, 38 percent by tone of voice, and only 7 percent by actual words. Nonverbal cues play a significant role in understanding a verbal message. Other types of communication (e.g. telephone, text, and email) are missing one or more cues, such as voice, facial expression, body language, visuals, and presence. Poor communication among a team can result in many negative consequences, including: misunderstanding

and or confusion among team members; lack of clarity on what is expected of the team members; and decreased productivity and motivation.

TABLE 3
Perceived usefulness of communication methods



It is important for leaders of dispersed teams to meet in person with subordinates whenever possible. The most critical time for face-to-face contact is at the beginning of a work relationship, so that expectations can be relayed and personal rapport can be developed. Leaders should seek additional opportunities to meet with distant subordinates, either by visiting their location or by finding occasions for them to travel to the leader’s location. When asked during the survey how often remote leaders should meet in person with their direct reports, an overwhelming number of respondents (72 percent) indicated the optimal frequency of in-person meetings is several times per year. Budget constraints within the government have made it more difficult to meet face-to-face, but leaders should seek opportunities to do so whenever possible.

Although face-to-face contact is important, remote leaders must use technological media to overcome the inability to meet in-person due to geographic distance and limited resources. Therefore, it is important to choose the appropriate technology for the given task based on the need for the richness of the communication. The availability of so many communication options today also offers challenges for the leader to pick the right method. For example, email is acceptable for basic information sharing, particularly when sending information to more than one person, but video teleconferencing is best for ambiguous topics or where increased collaboration is needed.²

In geographically dispersed settings, it is easy to get complacent and rely on less rich media, such as email, even though a richer medium, such as the telephone or video teleconference, would be more appropriate. For example, evaluations, recognition, and conflicts should never be handled via email. Many find it easier to send an email or post to a website than to actually pick up a phone or organize a face-to-face meeting, but they are much less effective methods. Leaders need to be cognizant of this tendency and resist taking the path of least resistance.

With so many communication options available today, it is helpful to establish ground rules for how remote teams should communicate.³ For example, Dow Chemical offers virtual etiquette classes during which they set parameters for such things as the methods of communication based on the situation (e.g. “all phone messages shall be returned within four hours”). It’s also important for employees to have the right access to the communication media and be competent with its use. For instance, the company RocketDyne provides training on all new technology and how to use it.⁴

Some organizations create a communications charter to serve as a roadmap for broad team communication. Results of the survey in this research indicates 76 percent of respondents thought it would be useful to establish a communications plan between the remote supervisor and direct reports based on their preference and perceived need. Establishing a communications plan will help build consistency and predictability among team members, which is important in geographically dispersed organizations. The establishment of broad communication guidelines and norms should be done as a group to build agreement and buy-in.⁵ A communications charter might include such items as:

- Video teleconference meetings will be held twice per month to discuss collaboration among team members.
- Emails should be limited to no more than one page in length.

- Email attachments should be limited, but when necessary, a brief, executive summary should be included in the email itself.
- Include a “code” at the beginning of all email subject lines that indicate the expectation for the receiver of the email, such as INFO, ACTION, DECISION, or SUSPENSE.

Most effective leaders in one study used at least two different media for any important message. For example, phone calls quickly came after emails to ensure clear understanding, or emails summarizing conversations came after important phone calls.⁶ One survey respondent said his most effective remote leader “sent frequent emails to subordinates, hosted a [video teleconference] every month, and also called subordinates when engaging on issues.” Additionally, even with broad team communication guidelines, effective leaders make adjustments in their leadership style or communication techniques based upon the preferences of the follower. Creating individual communication plans or expectations with each subordinate is a useful tool for remote leaders.

Frequency of communication

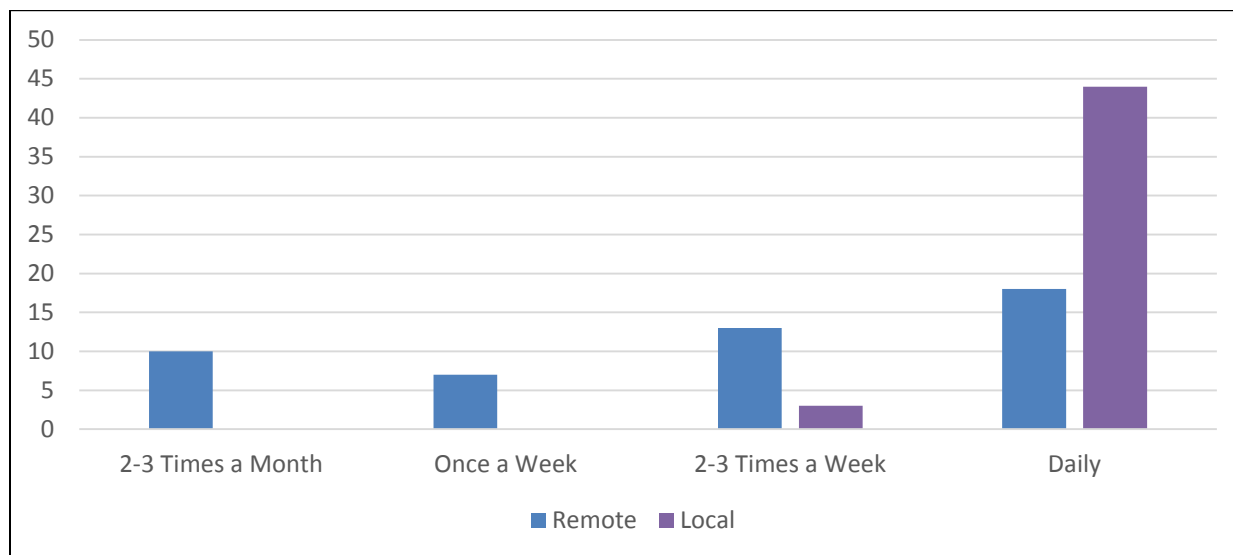
While the media used to communicate is important in geographically dispersed organizations, the frequency of communication between leaders and direct reports is probably the most critical factor in effective communication. The challenge of communicating from afar is obvious when we consider the advantages of physical proximity. Studies have shown that when people work in close proximity, the frequency of communications that can build relationships, trust, and commitment increases. When situated further apart, communication understandably decreases. This may seem obvious, but the distances that have an effect on communications might be surprising. Individuals who sit five meters apart engage in approximately 300 percent more communication than those 20 meters apart. Moreover, the frequency of communication drops dramatically when individuals are located in another wing or another floor of the same building.⁷

According to one study, a mere 50 meter separation between people essentially results in near elimination of regular communication.⁸ You can imagine what happens when a coworker or subordinate is located in another building, in a different time zone, or in another country.

The results of the survey conducted for this research confirms that leaders who are geographically separated from their subordinates communicate significantly less than

those who are co-located. Figure one depicts the frequency of communication distribution reported by remote and local leaders. Almost all of the leaders report daily communication with subordinates who are co-located, while leaders communicate from daily to two or three times per month with those who are separated.

FIGURE 1
Supervisor communication frequency with direct report



For respondents who indicated they were direct reports, they were asked how often they communicated with their supervisor. Figure two reveals the frequency of communication distribution reported by direct reports. Once again, this confirms that the communication frequency between those who are separated is far less than those who are co-located. Eighty-three percent of subordinates with co-located supervisors reported at least two to three times per week communication with them, while 86 percent of subordinates with remote leaders reported once a week or less communication with those leaders.

After determining how often subordinates report communication with their remote leaders, the frequency of communication that subordinates would *prefer* with those leaders was assessed. Figure three indicates the differences between the current and desired frequencies of communication by subordinates with remote leaders. The results indicate direct reports would prefer more frequent communication with their remote leaders. A paired sample t-test revealed a significant difference between the communication frequency direct reports practice and what they actually prefer, $t(73) = -2.90, p = 0.005$.

FIGURE 2
Direct report communication frequency with supervisor

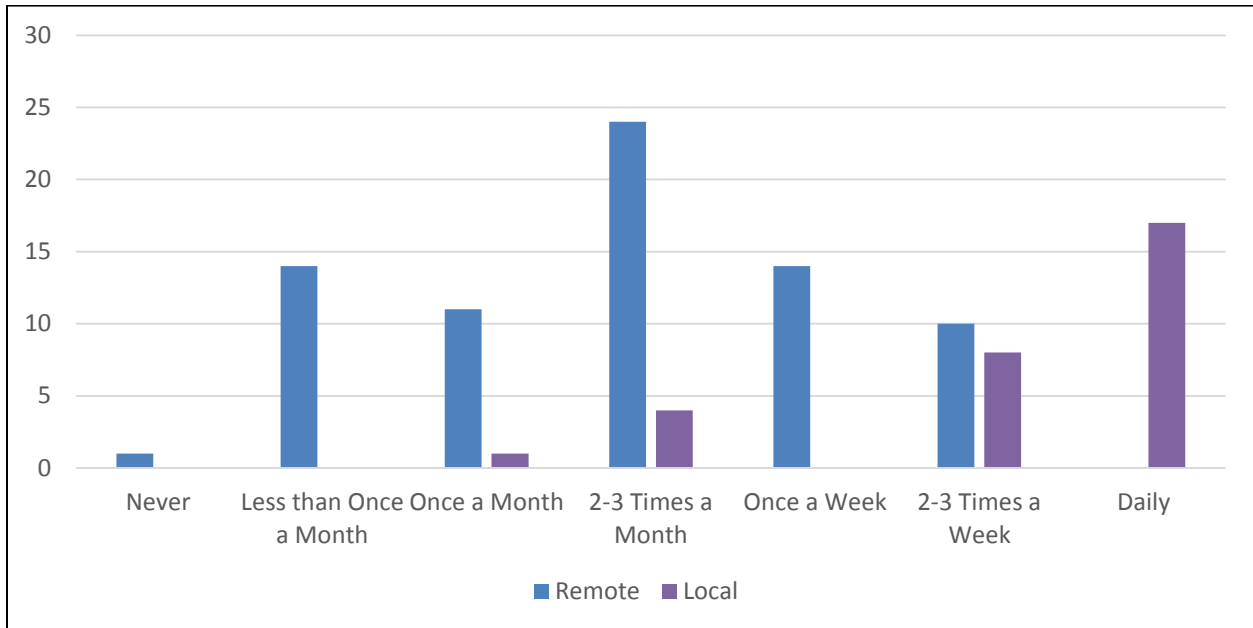
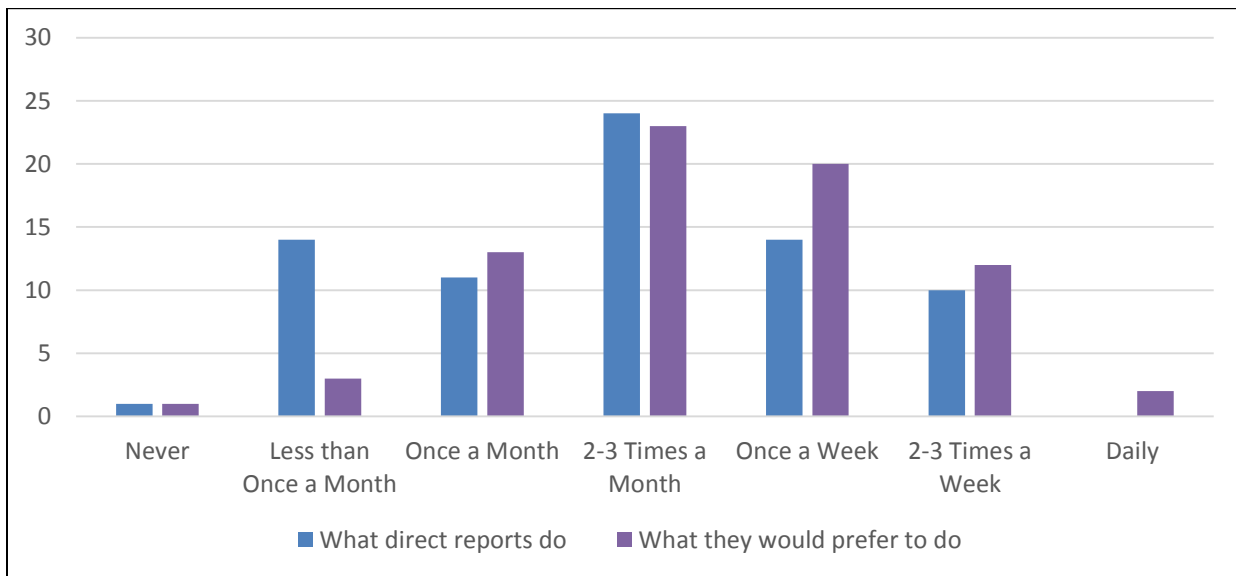


FIGURE 3
Direct report communication frequency w/remote supervisor: Current versus preferred



When separated, it is easy for remote leaders to under-communicate and neglect those that are in distant locations, especially when they also have local subordinates who tend to get more attention. Leaders in these situations need to be very conscious of this natural tendency and make a concerted effort to communicate frequently and consistently with those remote. Studies have indicated the most effective leaders over-

communicate with their distanced employees.⁹ Distant leaders need to be much more disciplined and deliberate about communication, such as scheduling routine phone calls, consistently responding to emails in a timely manner (even if just to indicate the message was received), holding and managing regular video conferences, and following up on suspenses. When asked during the survey how often remote leaders should conduct a video teleconference call with direct reports, 47 percent indicated the optimal frequency is once a month, while another 33 percent felt a conference call should be conducted two to three times per month or more.

Notes

¹ Albert Mehrabian and Susan R. Ferris, "Inference Of Attitudes From Nonverbal Communication In Two Channels," *Journal of Consulting Psychology* (1967): 248-52.

² Deborah L. Duarte and Nancy Tennant Snyder, *Mastering Virtual Teams Strategies, Tools, and Techniques That Succeed, Revised and Expanded*, 3, Auflage ed. (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 2006).

³ Stacey L. Connaughton and John A. Daly, "Identification with Leader: A Comparison of Perceptions of Identification among Geographically Dispersed and Co-located Teams," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 9, no. 2 (2004): 89-103.

⁴ Benson Rosen, Stacie Furst, and Richard Blackburn, "Training for Virtual Teams: An Investigation of Current Practices and Future Needs," *Human Resource Management* 45, no. 2 (2006): 229-47.

⁵ Connaughton and Daly.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Jackson A. Nickerson, *Leading Change from the Middle: A Practical Guide to Building Extraordinary Capabilities* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2014).

⁸ Thomas J. Allen, and Gu Henn, *The Organization and Architecture of Innovation: Managing the Flow of Technology* (Amsterdam: Elsevier, 2007).

⁹ Connaughton and Daly.

CHAPTER 3: MENTORSHIP AND PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS

Closely related to the frequency and richness of communication is the challenge of building personal relationships and mentoring when geographically separated from direct reports. Leadership is, to a great extent, a social activity, and the most effective leaders are able to relate to their subordinates on a personal and sometimes informal level. Building relationships inspires personnel to achieve success because it touches one of the deepest human desires: to be valued. Leadership influence is based on the assumption that leaders have close, sustained, and personalized contact with team members. Due to the nature of geographically-dispersed teams, these assumptions are challenged by factors such as technology-mediated conversations, difficulties in creating team identification, and motivating members to achieve team goals.¹

Informal communication

Being in close proximity to others provides many opportunities for informal communication to take place naturally, such as running into each other in the hallways, at the “water cooler,” and before and after meetings. This is often where ideas are generated, teamwork is fostered, and leaders can learn about their people. These informal communications are often taken for granted when co-located but are essential to building personal relationships and establishing and maintaining trust, which are fundamental to leadership. There are few, if any, similar opportunities when geographically separated, and the limited time to talk is usually spent trying to be as productive as possible. In one study, remote leaders said that trying to be productive or “making the most of their [communication] time” should not mean avoiding informal or personalized interactions, as these are critical to building and maintaining relationships.²

In a study of virtual teams in an international educational setting, T. R. Kayworth and D. E. Leidner observed that leaders rated as “effective” by their subordinates demonstrated a “mentoring” quality characterized by understanding, empathy, and concern for team members.³ In other words, effective remote leaders are skilled at building and maintaining relationships with those they lead. It takes a concerted effort for leaders to build those personal relationships from afar or it won’t happen.

Leaders must continually seek out or create opportunities (i.e. “touch points”) for informal communication. For example, leaders may want to incorporate small talk into such communication methods as video teleconferences. One distanced manager in a recent study reported successfully using “free-flow chatter” at the beginning of his monthly video teleconference meetings with employees at remote locations.⁴ Another manager held regular “virtual happy hour” sessions where employees connected via videoconference to share personal information. Laura Huang recommends dispersed organizations create a virtual space where team members can post interesting tidbits about themselves (e.g. photos, hobbies, vacations, etc.) once or twice a week to assist in increased communication and foster personal relationships.⁵

Another important way for leaders to connect with subordinates is through one-on-one telephone or video chat calls just to check in, with no agenda, and not only when there is a need, tasking, or crisis. Leaders need to schedule time to routinely have meaningful conversations and get to know their people well, not just their work but personal interests and goals. One survey respondent stated, “Leaders that occasionally called just to see how things were going, or to provide positive feedback about something the team was doing, were able to establish trust and effective communication much more readily.” Another respondent said one of his most effective leaders encouraged “open dialogue about work, personal life, professional development, and challenges,” and it “helps build trust [when] you are not just getting calls when something is wrong.”

Accessibility

It is also extremely important for leaders to show that they are available and responsive. Leaders who successfully shape the perception that they are accessible can overcome many of the challenges of distanced leadership.⁶ Leaders must also be aware of and fight perceptions of bias towards those who are co-located with the leader over those who are remote. In the military, those who are co-located with the senior leader of the organization are said to sit close to the “flagpole.” Many often perceive that those near the “flagpole” receive special treatment, have better access, and get more timely and thorough information.

There are several things leaders of dispersed organizations can do to be more accessible and responsive and to counter perceptions of bias towards those co-located. Leaders should provide a means for remote direct reports to get ahold of them without filtering through a staff. Leaders should also schedule and publicize open time on their calendars so remote subordinates know when they can contact them more easily. One organizational leader made it clear to the entire organization that any remote

subordinate leader had priority for getting in touch with him over anyone on his co-located staff, and he followed through on that expectation. Successful leaders created an environment in which headquarters staff knew they existed to support remote teams, not the other way around. Another remote manager made an effort to inform distant team members about important issues affecting the entire organization before informing local team members.⁷

Notes

¹ Aparna Joshi, Mila B. Lazarova, and Hui Liao, "Getting Everyone On Board: The Role Of Inspirational Leadership In Geographically Dispersed Teams," *Organization Science* 20, no. 1 (2009): 240-52.

² Stacey L. Connaughton and John A. Daly, "Identification with Leader: A Comparison of Perceptions of Identification among Geographically Dispersed and Co-located Teams," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 9, no. 2 (2004).

³ Kayworth, T.R., Leidner, D.E. "Leadership Effectiveness in Global Virtual Teams." *Journal of Management Information Systems* 18 (2002): 7-40.

⁴ Connaughton and Daly, 50.

⁵ Laura Huang, "Mitigating the Negative Effects of Geographically Dispersed Teams," University of California Irvine, Paul Merage School of Business, Center for Global Leadership, 2012, http://merage.uci.edu/ResearchAndCenters/CLTD/Resources/Documents/Huang_Laura_Mitigating%20the%20Negative%20Effects%20of%20Geographically%20Dispersed%20Teams_2012.pdf, accessed January 15, 2015.

⁶ Connaughton and Daly.

⁷ Ibid.

CHAPTER 4: TEAMWORK AND GROUP IDENTITY

In dispersed teams, it is difficult for members to develop a sense of identification with their leaders and the broader organization, which can often create negative competition with other teams within the organization. Past studies have investigated the benefits of identification with organization, including: individuals are more committed to the organization (Sass & Canary, 1991); individuals are less likely to leave the organization (Mael & Ashforth, 1995); and individuals are more likely to behave in ways that are aligned with the organizational identity, interests, beliefs, and goals (Cheney, 1983).¹ Conversely, according to Connaughton and Daly, a lack of identification with organization can lead to many negative effects, including a lack of trust between individuals and leaders, less productivity, and less achievement of desired outcomes. Geographic separation often creates issues of isolation and negatively impacts trust, which, in turn, challenges a member's sense of identification with the organization and the leader. People want to be part of something bigger. They join groups to build identity and a sense of belonging. Leaders need to continually foster that, even when team members are dispersed.

Trust is essential for team members working in different geographic locations, for it keeps physical distance from leading to psychological distance.² Normally, teams are able to build trust and social ties through face-to-face interactions and seeing progress of team members. With geographically dispersed teams that do not get to meet regularly in-person, this trust needs to be built through other, more deliberate ways. Constant messaging by the leader can be beneficial in creating a sense of identity and team. For example, sending routine, short video messages of varying themes to all team members can be effective. Also, there are technologies that allow remote leaders to hold virtual town hall meetings with all personnel within an organization. Smartphone applications are available to display live video and presentation material, along with interactive, real-time engagement and questions from the audience.

It is also more challenging for leaders to get an accurate perception of the interpersonal atmosphere within the organization when their people are geographically dispersed. There is sometimes a concern with remote subordinates "going native," when they relate more closely to the identity of the local environment rather than the broader

organization. It is often more difficult for the leader to understand the “ground truth” or monitor the climate and morale of the distant team. One survey respondent stated, “Remote leaders do not understand what the subordinates are going through (e.g. challenges, climate, etc.) and thus, it is difficult for them to have empathy [and] real support of their subordinates. Remote leaders base decisions on suppositions [and] assumptions versus understanding the reality themselves.” Leaders need to find more creative ways to assess the environment of the overall organization. The concept of presence is critical to leadership. A leader’s “social presence” may be more difficult to achieve when remote.³ A survey respondent stated one of the biggest challenges for remote leaders is the “inability to sustain frequency/depth of contact to establish personal relationships and trust that provide access and influence.” Another survey respondent said, “A successful remote leader should ask more questions before making decisions affecting a geographically separated unit to ensure he/she has a solid understanding of the situation.”

Like in the other areas, there are things leaders can do to overcome these challenges, but it takes a deliberate and concerted effort to do so. For example, to better understand the climate of the organization, there are assessment tools and surveys available to anonymously gauge the morale of distant teams. Additionally, leaders must encourage participation by distanced team members in the information exchange process. They should solicit employee opinions and get them involved. For example, an organization might consider establishing virtual feedback or suggestion “boxes” to allow members from throughout the organization to discuss issues and/or offer up innovative ideas.

Senior leaders should also make every effort, based on available resources, to visit remote teams on a regular basis to better understand the unique challenges and environmental factors impacting the teams. In the survey for this paper, 91 percent of respondents felt remote leaders should meet with their subordinates in person several times a year or more. To demonstrate presence, leaders need to spend in-person time with subordinates outside of formal presentations and official functions. It is inevitable that when the “boss comes to town” there is some formality and a façade that the team will put up in order to impress the boss. And while it will give some insights, that will not allow the leader to fully assess or understand the climate of the team. Leaders must be persistent and dedicate enough time to get to know people. With enough time, leaders can get past the formalities of the visit because people can only maintain a façade for so long before opening up. Due to time constraints, senior leaders should also consider sending staff personnel to visit remote teams to maximize contact between the different

levels and locations of the organizations as well as to get independent assessments of the remote teams.

Notes

¹ Stacey L. Connaughton and John A. Daly, "Identification with Leader: A Comparison of Perceptions of Identification among Geographically Dispersed and Co-located Teams," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 9, no. 2 (2004).

² S. L. Jarvenpaa and D. E. Leidner, "Communication and Trust in Global Virtual Teams," *Organization Science* 10, no. 6 (1999): 791-815.

³ Connaughton and Daly.

CHAPTER 5: PERFORMANCE MANAGEMENT

Expectations

Developing and communicating a senior leader's vision, goals, and priorities is essential to effective leadership in any environment. The benefits include enhanced motivation, improved performance, and raised satisfaction.¹ When geographically separated, however, team members have less opportunity to understand what the remote leader may really want, and unity of effort and direction is more difficult to establish. Therefore, clearly articulating expectations is even more critical in geographically dispersed environments. Leaders must be very explicit when articulating their expectations, and they must continually and consistently communicate, both orally and written, those expectations at every opportunity.

One survey respondent explained that the advantages of geographic dispersion include empowerment of direct reports, "assuming a clear vision and expectations are provided." Another respondent said decentralized execution of the mission is beneficial as long as the leader states an end goal, provides parameters, and allows the subordinate to get the job done without too much oversight.

Measurement

Distant leaders also need to be more aggressive in creating structures and routines for measuring performance. The old adage of "measure what you want done" holds true. Working in the same location allows people to easily garner information and assess progress toward meeting established objectives, but remote leaders often only see progress of subordinates if a subordinate makes the information available. Even then, some members may be selective in the information that is provided to the supervisor. One survey respondent said, "Limited face-to-face contact causes direct reports to filter communication. For example, if you only see your direct supervisor once per year ... then you're probably less likely to provide any negative feedback in that one meeting. Words that likely will never be said are: 'Sir, I know we only have 30 minutes for our feedback session, but I'd like to tell you all the thing that are going wrong in the [organization] right now.'"

Therefore, it is essential that objectives or goals meet the SMART criteria (Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Time-bound). In dispersed environments, the most important element is measurability, since the remote leader will not have the ability to monitor daily progress or assess subjective criteria. Measurements should be focused on deliverables (i.e. outputs), not activities (i.e. inputs). Successful remote teams also develop and diligently maintain sophisticated knowledge management tools to store relevant information for easy retrieval by those within the organization.²

Feedback

Finally, the last element of effective performance management is providing frequent, honest, and timely feedback to distanced employees and teams. When asked about the biggest challenges subordinates face from remote leaders, an overwhelming number of respondents indicated lack of feedback. Feedback can be very personal, so the richness of the communication method used to relay the feedback is critical. Feedback can be easily misinterpreted without the right cues. Therefore, face-to-face feedback is the optimum, but when that is not possible leaders should seek to use technology that allows interactive dialogue and a free flow of information, such as video chat, video conferencing, or telephone. Feedback should never be conducted via email.

Feedback also includes recognition for accomplishments, and leaders should not only look for opportunities to reward those that are remote but also to come up with creative ways to publicize those accomplishments to the entire organization. As with the challenge of perceptions of favoritism for those nearest the “flagpole,” leaders need to ensure rewards are made on an equal basis. A survey respondent stated one of the biggest challenges of being a subordinate of remote a leader is “difficulty competing for recognition and awards with those that are closer to the flagpole.” Leaders of both co-located and distant teams sometimes have a tendency to reward those who are co-located purely because they have more interactions with them, and this tendency needs to be counteracted.

Notes

¹ Robert Rodgers, John E. Hunter, and Deborah L. Rogers, "Influence of Top Management Commitment on Management Program Success," *Journal of Applied Psychology* (1991): 151-55.

² Stacey L. Connaughton and John A. Daly, "Identification with Leader: A Comparison of Perceptions of Identification among Geographically Dispersed and Co-located Teams," *Corporate Communications: An International Journal* 9, no. 2 (2004).

CONCLUSION

While geographically dispersed organizations offer many exciting opportunities, they also bring new leadership challenges which are amplified because of the separation between leaders and followers. Just as some leadership strategies are appropriate in co-located settings, other strategies may need to be employed to compensate for the lack of routine face-to-face contact and interaction. To be effective, leaders must be aware of the challenges they face when leading others from afar and be deliberate in their engagement.

There are several implications that can be drawn from the research study. The overwhelming majority of survey respondents confirmed distinct differences in how remote and local leaders operate, and most leadership tasks related to leading those who are remote are more difficult than for those who are co-located. The tasks most difficult for remote leaders to master are related to communicating, mentoring and building personal relationships, fostering teamwork and group identity, and measuring performance. The tasks that are easier for remote leaders are those related to giving subordinates autonomy and freedom to make their own decisions.

The most beneficial communication methods for remote leaders are those providing visual contact between parties, either through face-to-face meetings or video conferencing, whereas the least useful strategies are daily or weekly activity reports, along with chat rooms. However, effective leadership in this environment goes well beyond the employment of a particular communication strategy; rather, it is more about the frequency and purpose of the communication. Survey respondents also indicated remote leaders communicate significantly less with subordinates who are geographically separated than those who are co-located. Additionally, subordinates who are geographically separated indicated they would, in general, prefer more frequent communication with their remote leader. Therefore, remote leaders should make a concerted effort to communicate more frequently with their distanced subordinates in order to be more effective.

Although there are unique leadership challenges in geographically dispersed environments, most current leadership literature and training is developed on work in face-to-face settings. Important issues to explore in future research include identifying specific curriculum requirements for leaders in remote environments and comparing and

contrasting the perceptions and preferences of leading from afar among different generations, cultures, and both military and civilian organizations. Leading geographically dispersed organizations is not a new concept; however, technological advances over the last decade have provided leaders with greater ability to be more influential and involved with distant teams than ever before. This advancement has given leaders not only the opportunity to be successful in a moment of time but ensures continued success by enhancing the way they build dispersed organizations and grow future leaders from afar.

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