



## TenStep Supplemental Paper

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### Remote Control

*Getting better at virtual communication*

#### **Key Learnings:**

- With the number of employees working from their homes increasing, managing them is becoming a challenging task
- The key to effective virtual management lies in a manager's ability to communicate well

As increasing number of employees choose to work from their homes, professionals have a new challenge at hand - virtual management. Virtual management is the art of dealing with employees whom managers cannot meet and do not know personally.

Just as working from home is different than working from an office, there is a huge difference between managing 'remote employees' or 'telecommuters' and those in offices. However, as organizations spread their operations globally and more people telecommunicate, professionals will increasingly find themselves dealing with virtual employees.

This change from the real world to the virtual has brought in the need for managers to learn the best practices of virtual management. We shall now try to establish the difference between these two forms of management and describe the most important aspect of virtual-management communication.

#### **Different peas, same pod!**

There is a fine line of difference between real world management and virtual management. Let's begin with the advantages that virtual management has over the other forms of management.

Most managers rely heavily on artificial clues in forming opinions about employees' ability and character. So strong is this dependence that employees are readily stereotyped based on age, clothing, appearance, mannerisms and body language. The chances of forming such incorrect impressions are almost eliminated when managers cannot or do not meet their employees.

Managers' impressions about their remote employees, in the absence of any physical contact, are based on conversation over the telephone, communication through e-mail and letters, or work delivered. According to experts, since virtual managers are not affected by what an employee is wearing or how he looks, they can better judge employees' character!

#### **Familiarity and still no contempt!**

Most communication in virtual workplaces takes place on a need basis; therefore, it is limited as well as controlled. Such impersonal communication helps maintain



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professional relationships. Also, when the mediums used are telephones and e-mail, conversations are usually limited to professional matters alone. Moreover, as a manager knows little about a virtual employee's personal life, he has to restrict his conversations to work-related matters.

Another advantage of communicating via e-mails is that the sender can censor and rework his message until it is free of words that could create misunderstandings, cause anger or hurt emotions.

### **Out of sight, not out of mind!**

Virtual management is a comfortable way to supervise introverted or shy employees. As is necessary in some face-to-face situations, a manager cannot respond immediately to an employee's concern or query. While teleconferencing or e-mailing he can think more precisely about what he wants to convey and review his message before communicating.

As helpful as this form of management is for shy employees, reticent managers benefit as well. Organizations can employ their quiet and thoughtful employees as virtual managers. Given the edge virtual management has over real world management, organizations that hire remote employees should have it easy.

### **Falling short**

While the advantages might outweigh the shortcomings, virtual management does have a fair share of limitations. To begin with, a manager has little personal knowledge of the employee. Thus, he has a tough time determining what challenges, motivates or frustrates an employee. The absence of adequate personal knowledge also makes him a poor judge of how well an employee has understood the assignments and can perform the job.

Moreover, a manager might find it arduous to earn employee support and trust in the absence of any physical presence or contact. These reasons aside, the biggest hurdle that a virtual manager faces is communication.

### **All about communication**

"The two pieces of a remote relationship are communication and trust," says a leading consultant. "Communication can either build the trust or erode it. Following through on expectations is what builds the trust and one of the places where it often falls through is that people have not communicated about expectations."

In real world management, a manager communicates his expectations not merely verbally, but through a combination of body language, facial expressions and context. In the virtual world, words stand alone. So the chances of being misunderstood are high. The following example illustrates this point.

A telecommuter tells his manager that he will give her an update on a regular basis. If even after a week the manager does not hear from the employee, he forms a poor impression of him. The telecommuter on the other hand considers a week between check-ins as good.



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In such a situation, the manager concludes that her employee cannot meet expectations and loses trust in him. The employee too comes to believe that the manager is incapable of giving clear directions and he too loses trust in her. Virtual managers can avoid such misunderstandings by honing their communication skills.

### **Real vs. virtual**

In an office setting, the managers and employees have the advantage of frequent physical contact. They have continuous and adequate opportunities for clarifying and defining work expectations. However, when employees are positioned in remote locations, a manager, as one expert recommends, must do two things: "Make sure the expected deliverable is much more clearly defined at the outset and build in some structure of voice or e-mail contact to do progress checking and get mid-course correction."

### **Few other virtual communication guidelines include:**

#### *Adding context:*

Using visual clues or acronyms such as little smiley faces or LOL (laughing out loud) is a common way to add context to e-mails and message boards. However, such visual clues would be inappropriate in business communication. Instead, a manager should measure each word or the entire message carefully.

Since words are read alone without any visual clues, they must be read several times to ensure that the actual meaning is conveyed. Experts recommend a thoughtful and straightforward approach.

#### *Being in touch:*

It is important for a manager to be in constant contact with the employees he manages. In the absence of any physical contact, virtual employees are more prone to feeling left out and forgotten, which in turn affects their morale and productivity. However, checking in on remote employees periodically at least once a week makes them feel important.

Even when there are no work instructions to pass on, a manager can always inquire about the employee's progress or express appreciation for the work done. Such casual conversations make a remote employee feel a part of the organization.

Virtual management is made much easier when a manager learns to communicate well. As in other forms of management, the virtual world depends heavily on good communication for its success.

Today's managers must consciously work towards this end with the distance mode becoming the current trend.