Personalized leadership key for keeping globally distributed teams on task

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For companies with employees around the globe, the challenges of distance, diversity and technology may threaten team cohesiveness among their long-distance workers. But according to a new study by a University of Illinois business professor, out of sight doesn't necessarily have to mean out of mind for virtual teams.

Ravi S. Gajendran, a professor of business administration at Illinois, says leaders of globally distributed teams can mitigate the isolation of virtual employees by taking a relationship-based approach in the form of a "leader-member exchange" in tandem with frequent communication on a predictable schedule.

In contrast to the traditional top-down, "one-to-many" leadership approach that treats all employees similarly (and often interchangeably), leader-member exchange involves cultivating a personalized relationship characterized by trust, loyalty, developmental feedback and support between team leader and member, Gajendran says.

"Leadership of virtual teams is tough, for very obvious reasons," he said. "You don't have that type of face-to-face interaction as you do with your real-life team members, so you don't know how things are going, nor can you monitor a team member's performance all that easily."

The study, co-written by Aparna Joshi, a professor of management and organization at Pennsylvania State University, says a top-down style of leadership approach doesn't work well in a virtual context.

"The traditional model of leadership is, 'I'm the leader, you're my team members, and I'm going to articulate my vision for how things should be,' " Gajendran said. "What we find is that a personalized leadership strategy characterized by the leader-member exchange has even stronger effects when the workers are globally distributed."

Since spatial distance can translate into psychological distance, high-quality leader-member exchange relationships are effective in creating inclusivity and involvement among team members, so long as they are accompanied by frequent communication.

"The conundrum is, you're bringing together these talented people from around the globe because you hope that something innovative is going to come from their work," Gajendran said. "You explicitly design a team to get the best experts from different parts of the world. But at the same time, you've structured the team in a distributed manner so that it's easy for team members to feel isolated and that they can't give their input. So there's this tension that has to be resolved, which is why leaders have to work hard at re-creating the team in people's minds."

For leaders, ordinary workaday world tasks such as figuring out if someone is energized on a given day is impossible simply because they don't see virtual workers at the office, Gajendran says.

"As a leader, then, you don't know whether you need to motivate them or give them their space," he said. "And team members also are missing out on the social aspects of work: team space, team dinners and team drinks – things like that."

To bridge that gap, a personal touch is required, Gajendran says.

"Even though there is no physical team, leaders need more one-on-one interaction with their virtual team members," he said. "In other words,

leadership needs to be uniquely tailored to the team members rather than dictated from on high. It's about building a relationship with each member, and that requires slightly more effort than in it would in a normal workplace setting."

The other finding of the study is the need for constant, predictable contact to ensure that team members understand that their input matters, Gajendran says.

"Personalized leadership seems to matter much more in distributed working environments," he said. "So instead of treating all of the team members the same, it's better for leaders to target and personalize the relationship with each individual. That's why leader-member exchange training should also emphasize the importance of regular and predictable leader–member communication to maximize the impact of member influence on team decisions."

In addition to building relationships and a regular, predictable communication schedule, a team leader also needs to be an advocate for the work of its members, which can easily go unnoticed.

"That's the big danger in these distributed teams – the lack of visibility of the end-product, as well as the lack of visibility of the team member," Gajendran said. "In high-tech companies like Google and Facebook, a lot of the work being done is on a server. They're often working at different times, so that creates this distance that makes it difficult for people to appreciate their contribution – or to motivate each other or feel part of this one cohesive unit."

Which is why it's incumbent on the leader to make sure that the team's work gets its due, Gajendran says.

"You don't want team members to feel as though they're just sending

their work out into a vacuum," he said. "That's why leaders matter – they have to make those invisible workers visible, and you can do that by creating that sense of involvement and inclusion."

The paper will appear in the *Journal of Applied Psychology*.

More information: The paper, "Innovation in globally distributed teams: The role of LMX, communication frequency, and member influence on team decisions," is available online.

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