

Developing Managers to Lead Virtual Teams: A leading Singapore bank's experience

By Cliff Chalon

Situation

The program was based on the needs of managers in the bank's operations and technology division, mainly located in Singapore and Malaysia. The bank was going through some internal restructuring and change in response to external competitive forces and the need to consolidate internal practices. The participants ranged from first line-managers to senior heads of department.

A meeting with the L&D group and the division heads agreed that the key concerns were: -

- Performance management problems
- Cross-cultural communication issues
- Dealing with virtual teams
- Diversity management
- Poor leadership

Action taken

A solution was designed to help participants learn the key skills and frameworks required to lead virtual teams effectively within the bank's division in the two countries. It was critical that the program helped managers to build skills to deal with issues encountered in managing different ethnic groups, variable commitment and performance in a virtual team environment.

Having considered the issue of personal awareness to be vital, the Team Management Profile (TMP) was an obvious choice for providing feedback to participants on their role preferences and hence their communication and leadership behavior. I also explained that the Profile would also help to emphasize valuing of differences (and diversity) in relation to cross-cultural communications. This proved to be a sound decision and very valuable for the participants.

There was considerable anecdotal evidence to show that communication between the department heads and their virtual teams was a big issue. The frustration felt by the 'heads' was largely around the issues of: -

- Performance parameters not understood (this was due in part to poor or no standards)
- 'Cover ups' rather than honest feedback about issues and problems
- Lack of initiative taken by subordinates

Design

The design featured facilitated instruction on setting up for high-performance and leading cross-cultural, virtual teams. The core program was customized from an existing 3-day program on Leading Virtual Teams from a world-class management-training provider.

To actively engage the senior team's support for any future remedies developed by their 'heads of department' who were next to attend, I suggested a 3-day pilot program for senior managers from each department of the division. This included the division head. This strategy allowed us to focus the content and design the subsequent 2-day program from the specific feedback and requirements of this group.

In dealing with the problem set shown above the program featured models and concepts that would help the participants develop frameworks and skills to deal with the issues back at the workplace. Some of these are briefly mentioned below:

1. Performance Management model – an adaptation of the excellent model for performance

developed by Thomas Gilbert¹. This provided a framework to establish performance parameters and to facilitate better tracking, regardless of the virtual team aspect.

2. Situational Leadership provided a practical basis for diagnosing and dealing with subordinate 'readiness' levels. Coupled with understanding of cultural sensitivities this enabled managers to get to grips with what to do with certain followers who were not moving to desired competency.
3. An effective model of communication emphasizing active listening skills underscored the importance of this skill in any team.
4. Given that we were also dealing with team development issues, simple teamwork concepts such as the Tuckman Stages of Team Development, helped to reveal real issues and strategies for dealing with them.
5. Virtual team development – was an issue. The course content used the work of Lipnack and Stamps², particularly their 'space, time, culture paradigm' to highlight the issues faced by most virtual teams.

A number of interactive processes (games) were used to stimulate participation and draw out learning. The pilot group chose particular activities - such as the 'e-mail game' - which was adapted especially for the program, to make the point about 'virtual team' problems in a fun but insightful manner.

I used the TMP as the means to uncover strengths and limitations in dealing with people and to highlight areas of development. This self-search process was instrumental in guiding the participants to particular issues that they experienced with their teams.

As a result we arrived at a 2-day program of very specific content and processes designed to meet the needs above. This program was completed by the remaining heads of department throughout the division.

Delivery

A pre-reading list and a questionnaire were used to engage participants prior to coming on the program and to encourage them to bring their real problems to the table. The use of Team Management Systems (TMS) online profile questionnaires (www.TMSProfiles.com) and timely, efficient processing also contributed to good preparation.

Learning methodology was paced and varied to maintain active participation and interest. Strategies included hands-on activities, such as preparing task standards, e-mail communications and evaluating technologies used in virtual communications.

Virtual teams and cross-border issues

The Lipnack and Stamps model (Individual, Space, Time, and Culture) allowed exploration of each element and the issues that contributed to their problem set.

One of the issues of globalization has clearly been the challenge of harnessing teamwork when the teams are dispersed. Despite the abundance of technologies available, the fundamentals of communication are ever-present and crucial.

I encouraged the groups to think of their virtual team challenges by way of a simple analogy. What if one was to lose their sight? Typically what happens is the other senses compensate and are 'heightened' to cope with the loss. Managing virtual teams is rather the same – the skills are not markedly different, how you apply them is where you must work hard.

You lose 'sight' of your team members and therefore the face-to-face communication so vital in management. You have to work that much smarter and harder to make things happen.

¹ Gilbert, T. F., (1978), Human Competence: Engineering Worthy Performance, New York: McGraw-Hill.

² Lipnack, J., Stamps, J., (1997), Virtual Teams: Reaching Across Space, Time, and Organizations With Technology, John Wiley & Sons.

So we resort to technology. E-mail, the Internet and video-conferencing among others have given a great boost to dispersed teams, prompting companies to embrace technology in increasing levels of sophistication. But technology does not guarantee effective communication. The best practice companies operating with virtual teams have realized that face-to-face communication cannot be ignored. So they ensure that at some point these virtual team members meet, particularly in the early stages of the team's existence, to start working on the relationship issues so important to high-performance in teams.

Teams can be dispersed around the country or around the world, encompassing people with different languages, cultures, and philosophies. Some argue that dispersed teams are hard work and that the benefits are greatly outweighed by the disadvantages. This is only true if the 'set-up' and the management of the teams are poor.

Inconsistent leader behavior, lack of trust and loss of identity along with a sense of 'us and them' were found to be the source of many problems in this group, caused by the virtual team dynamic. However the problems were also found to be exacerbated by poor management practices and skills. Put simply, they were not clear about the demands of managing virtual teams. Current practices were not superior and needed to be improved.

The Team Management Profiles and communication activities helped participants to determine why their communication was not effective. Participants were also encouraged to diagnose their team member's role preferences and the subtle Pacing required in achieving effective communication, keeping in mind cultural differences. It was also important to realize that sometimes it pays to get on an airplane and get face-to-face.

All participants were asked to appreciate that the concept of 'valuing differences' was fundamental to good relationships, and the case study activities and subsequent discussions were found to be very useful in driving this point home.

Transfer of this learning to their own situations, considering distance communication and cross-cultural issues, proved very valuable and insightful. Many left the course committed to being more aware of their own behavior and responsive to their subordinates' needs.

Outcomes

A total of 77 staff in the pilot and 4 other groups went through this program over a period of 4 weeks. The key learning achieved was in the appreciation of differences and valuing these in leading people in a cross-cultural context.

This was largely a reflective and analytical group of learners who resoundingly applauded the TMP for its accuracy and insight. The usual comments I've come to experience in most situations appeared here, such as "...*this is pretty scary*" and "*Did you ask my spouse?*" and "*I didn't know this about myself*" and "*Is it always this accurate?*" While the comments are genuine, the key point is that they value the information.

The Team Management Profiles were useful in showing the range of preferences for this group. In this case there was 'consistency' in the IPAS preference, which corroborates the TMS data for SE Asia³ and the findings in the case study 'Team Management in the Asian Banking Industry'⁴. More than 32 of this group scored in this role preference with another 22 showing Thruster-Organizer preference and Concluder-Producer related role. The Wheel diagram in Figure 1 shows the group's preferences.

This group only had one each respectively, of Creator-Innovator and Reporter-Adviser roles. An issue for anyone scoring in the 'southern sector' of the Wheel and holding a management position is the tendency to hold on to their comfort zones, namely, the technical work. This point was obvious to the group and left all participants with food for thought and most importantly, action-plans.

It would appear that relationships (particularly cross-border) would also be under the microscope, as managers agreed they were too quick to 'point the finger' rather than review their own behaviors which were contributing to poor communication, poor leader behavior and performance and lack of commitment in their teams.

³ Team Management Systems, (2003), Team Management Systems Research Manual: Third Edition, Team Management Systems Australia, USA & UK.

⁴ Davies, R.V., & Mead, N., Team Management Systems in the Asian Banking Industry, www.tms.com.au

Figure 1. Major role preferences for 77 staff in the pilot



Conclusion

The division sought to remedy a situation that was not getting better even though other profiles and other leadership and team training had been delivered. The customized design and delivery focused on real needs. The TMP in tandem with other tools and techniques provided powerful learning and skills development.

I would recommend the use of the TMP unreservedly for the benefit of both participants and trainers as it allows issues to surface as a result of self-awareness, insight and in a non-threatening manner. It worked especially well for this group of people and their issues.

In this case it proved to be most beneficial in drawing out issues that constrain the performance and development of a virtual team. Within the context of the virtual team model mentioned above, the TMP helped to highlight the key concerns and add value in developing solutions to the problems being faced.

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Cliff possesses exceptional skills as a facilitator. He is a Certified Workplace Trainer and Assessor (Aust), Certified Trainer for American Management Association (AMA) training programs, and an Accredited Facilitator in Team Management Systems (TMS). Cliff's engaging delivery style and practical focus draw on years of practice and hard-earned experience. He travels regularly to assignments with international organizations within the region.

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