Challenges of Managing a Virtual Team with an Ocean in Between

By Pilar Plazas

Abstract

The way we complete projects has been changing at a very fast pace, especially in the last two decades. Now, we operate in a totally global environment. Project teams are not exclusively located in the same building or even in the same city. It is not unusual to manage teams with a wide range of skills, knowledge, experience, perceptions and even cultural backgrounds dispersed across multiple geographical locations. One of the strengths of virtual teams is the real richness that comes from diversity. Likewise, these teams present numerous challenges for the Project Manager (PM). Despite diversity’s aggregated value and challenges, the Project Manager’s goal is still to deliver the project within budget and on time according to the Project Management Plan. It is a challenging task even more so with this type of teams and much of the learning curve is still ahead of us. However, using some basic principles make it possible for the Project Manager to successfully lead the global team. Managers who micro-manage and do not trust employees will not be able to successfully manage virtual teams. Today’s Project Manager must thrive in the virtual environment, trust team members, and manage for results rather than for input. The PM needs to adapt, learn more, and enjoy the process while communicating a positive message to the team. After all, global teams are becoming more common than collocated teams as Project Management moves forward.

Project Managers (PMs) responsible for virtual or global teams face multiple challenges. A virtual team can work across space, time, and organizational boundaries using technological resources. Projects are constantly becoming more complex. Teams working on those projects have also increased complexity and new management challenges. To really influence virtual teams, PMs must be able to recognize the new challenges and develop new skills and approaches.

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It is only appropriate to discuss the challenges of managing virtual teams after acknowledging the advantages they offer to all organizations in today’s marketplace. Businesses recognize that these teams lower infrastructure, office supply and relocation costs. They make it possible to reach a highly and specialized workforce only required for the life of the project. In addition, they present fewer issues due to interpersonal communication when compared to face to face (F2F) team interaction. They have a lot of potential making it possible to gain new insights useful for brainstorming when working towards a common solution. Technological tools help the organization establishing virtual teams and profit from their advantages.

Many aspects related to managing virtual teams and remote projects are within the control of the Project Manager. Application of everyday tools makes team management a more pleasant function that leads to growth of both the PM and the team while completing the project at hand. This article focuses on ten challenges the Project Manager faces when working with virtual teams and basic ways to overcome them.

1. **Misunderstanding that derives from use of electronic team interactions.**

When talking about communication in this article, I use it purest and most basic approach defining it as the proper transfer of information between two parties. Good communication consists of 3 basic elements, each one with its own weight. While words only account for 7%, body language and tone of voice account for 55% and 38% respectively to help ensuring successful transfer of information. Based on these percentages it is easy to see how misunderstandings easily happen in virtual teams.

Members of the team do not have the possibility of reading the body language of their PM and peers unless a videoconference takes place. They also have limited access to hearing the tone of voice when email, text and Instant Messaging are the main ways of communication. In other words, the wrong emotions and messages can be easily allocated when there is no face behind the words. To overcome this challenge, the PM needs to ensure that all written communication be clear and precise. The recommended language is simple to consider all team members whose first language is different.

Likewise the use of regional words and slang is not encouraged. It is difficult to inspire and brainstorm through written communication. The PM must realize that technology remains a way to overcome the challenges that come from having members in multiple geographical locations. In this case, videoconference and the use of whiteboards are more appropriate options. Videoconferences allow the team to connect with each other
and to see the real people working on the project while discussing processes and deliverables. However, it is the PM’s responsibility to learn when the videoconferences should take place, considering multiple time zones as a way to show respect to all team members.

2. **Difficulties contributing to the overall team.**

Levels of engagement and visibility within the team depend on multiple factors, including cultural upbringing and personality. It is very difficult for the PM to engage in a video conference those team members who are less outspoken. Written communication may also be a challenge with them if their communication is too soft or not direct. In this case, it is important for the PM to reach out and address the team member at a more individual level. For this reason 1:1 meetings are important. They are a channel to track individual progress before concerns become issues and also to hear out team members who would not speak out otherwise. These meetings need to be a two-way street of open communication. A successful PM recognizes that everyone’s input is necessary for the success of the project and makes attempts to include all of his team members on a regular basis.

3. **Seeing the progress made by other team members.**

PMs need to shift from focus on attendance to focus on output\(^1\). In today’s world, it is not possible to verify and ensure that all team members start and finish work at the same time. It is not even a realistic expectation; after all, they are subject to different time zones. Virtual PMs need to abstain from applying outdated performance measures and ideas around management. Furthermore, PMs unable to delegate and empower members find it challenging to work with virtual teams. A successful PM will have to put in practice a principle of trust that steers away from the old assumption that employees with minimal direct supervision cannot be trusted\(^2\). Consequently, the Project Manager has to do an exceptional job at the beginning of the project explaining deliverables, responsibilities and expectations to avoid any issues later on. The Project Manager needs to also document them in a written form and post them in a SharePoint.

Regardless of their location, people want to ultimately succeed at what they do and at their projects. Teams want to succeed and to do so, their members need to feel valued, appreciated, and respected\(^5\). Tracking and sharing progress in a transparent way ensures that team members do not begin to lose confidence in their peers. Based on what has been communicated to the team, their performance will be ultimately evaluated based on outputs and results. In other words, these teams require a shift to
manage the future and the long-term project vision\(^3\) rather than the daily office presence. In brief, transferring information properly among team members will translate into appropriate performance.

In other words, the knowledge area of Communication Management plays an equally important role for virtual teams giving direction to meet stakeholders’ expectations. It is crucial that the Project Manager stays focused on the Project Management Plan and maintains clear and open communication with the team members. Teleconferences should be open rooms for questions. In addition, meeting minutes should promptly follow after the teleconference to further clarify discussions in a written form.

4. **Building trust and workaholism.**

Trust has been mentioned briefly up to this point but it is a challenge in itself. Disputes are commonly seen around the value placed on face-to-face communication and the fear of new technology\(^2\). All of them derive from a lack of trust on the team members and technological capabilities. More frequent interaction among team members is related to stronger trust. Informal conversations, respectful curiosity for each other’s culture, and finding commonalities and encouragement to share one’s ideas are ways for the PM to promote conversations that bring the team together and strengthen their trust. This is one of the key ingredients in creating teamwork because team productivity is directly proportional to trust to express opinions, questions, and concerns.

In addition, an assessment of workaholism is absolutely necessary, especially for western managers whose teams may include members from cultures that use time to build on relationships. Gone are the days when results were considered proportional to the amount of time spent in the office attempting to accomplish tasks. In recent years, there has been a shift that places emphasis on the belief of joy\(^2\). This means that a team member who is satisfied and joyful in his role is more likely to be highly productive and to generate quality output when compared to someone who spends endless hours sitting in the office.

5. **Resisting change.**

It is normal for people to resist what they do not understand, dread change, and fear diversity. The Project Manager needs to take initiative to learn about the different cultures and backgrounds that members bring to the team. If fully understood, diversity can be a strength for the team rather than a threat. It is the PM’s responsibility to ensure
everyone is equally valued within the team as a way to bring out their peak performance and contribute to their professional growth.

6. **Inspiring and motivating people over great distances.**

One of the most important jobs of the Project Manager is that one of inspiring the team to both reach project goals and grow professionally. Inspiring people is an exceedingly personal task, and to do it well a PM must use different approaches depending on the person due to the diverse cultural backgrounds. Once again, technology plays an important role within the virtual team. As the leader of a virtual team, the PM must ensure access to teleconference calls and videoconferences. While teleconferences are good vehicles for bringing everyone together, videoconferences add an important layer to the communication.

As mentioned before, they allow for visual interactions that make team members closer to one another and make it possible for the PM to get a better feel for the team. Technologies such as whiteboards allow teams to do group work and are better for people to integrate and expand on each others’ ideas putting their minds in one common place. In other words, technology can drive engagement and turn it into motivation. However, technology alone will not inspire and motivate the team. The PM needs to remember that members of the team have a warm side as well, so a connection is necessary to tap into their full potential. That is the reason why the PM needs to be thoughtful, approachable, and a good listener.

The PM must foster a safe environment where everyone (as a team or individually) can bring forward ideas, questions, and concerns knowing that the PM will respectfully listen to them and take them seriously. Do not fall into the trap of being the only one who speaks just because you are the PM, otherwise you will be the only one hearing your voice and the project will not succeed.

7. **Multiple time zones and different levels of technology familiarity.**

These challenges are more pronounced in Baby Boomer PMs than PMs from Generations X and Y. The former have to deal with new technologies that are not set up to micromanage and worship workaholism while the latter are acquainted with performance measured by deliverables. PMs need to face the challenge realizing that having members in different time zones allows for longer support for customers and project work around the clock. Hiring the best employees found around the globe leads to diversity and growth opportunities for all team members. In that sense, this challenge
can be easily turned into an opportunity. On the other hand, the PM needs to be the first one to embrace new technologies so he can support the team members who are intimidated or hesitant to use it. To help the team with new technologies, the PM can promote the use of Sharepoints, and screen sharing sessions. New systems are better introduced at the beginning of a project along with their support sources. The PM has to take ownership for learning and applying new technologies, ultimately passing them along to the team.

8. **Building a team culture when people are spread across the globe.**

Team culture is adopted because a group of people is led to behave within a certain set of parameters. On a virtual team there is not enough interaction to easily transfer culture from the PM to all members. When the team is made up of people who have worked for the organization for a long time, instilling company culture is not too difficult. Otherwise, colliding beliefs about what is acceptable can be a big issue. The virtual PM needs to accelerate sharing of ideas to stimulate excellence. Timely and ongoing communication should be used to integrate new perspectives to achieve project goals. It is important to make innovation, cooperation, and growth vital to the team. This translates into a proactive rather than reactive team.

The project goals are defined by the Scope of Work (SOW), but the team needs to have its own goals which must be clear to everyone. In order to better achieve this, it is important for the PM to consider everyone’s needs, roles, and cultures so they feel genuinely represented in the goals, buy into them, and work towards reaching them. These considerations will make it possible for the PM to ultimately improve the team competencies, interaction, and environment to ensure performance.

9. **Multiple Languages and Cultural Diversity.**

As mentioned before, team goals need to consider cultures so no one feels excluded. Culture is defined as the dominant set of behaviors, values, beliefs and thinking patterns one learns as he grows and develops in social groups. Therefore, it determines how one views himself and others, how he behaves, and how perceives the world around him. Understanding how one’s culture impacts his views, behaviors and perceptions of the world is defined as Cultural Intelligence. In order to avoid mistakenly applying stereotypes, successful Project Managers must never leave their cultural intelligence unattended or dormant. The Project Manager is not only responsible for exercising cultural intelligence but also of promoting it in all members of the team and their routine interactions.\(^6\)
When interacting with multiple cultures, the PM should expect cultures to differ. He must value people for what they contribute rather than labeling them based on stereotypes, remembering that even within a national culture, there are variances. The key is to look at the similarities, emphasize them, and minimize the differences. Everyone must realize that there are differences and learn from each other to work together and built rapport. In other words, the team must work together towards expanding its cultural intelligence and the PM must lead by example of respect.

10. Overcoming feelings of isolation.

High performing teams possess meaningful connections between its members. They need to be included and feel close. The higher the perceived distance (physical, operational, professional), the greater negative consequences for the project. The PM needs to fight the temptation to leave team members unattended just because they are not in the same geographical location. When the team starts feeling isolated or with no sense of belonging, its members tend to derail and neglect their responsibilities. It is the PM’s role to make sure that everyone stays engaged and feels part of the team. One of the ways to defeat possible isolation issues is to ask for feedback, active participation, and brainstorming. For example, Lessons Learned sessions need to be conducted also in virtual teams. They lead to discussions with an open, honest and transparent thinking which translate into meaningful learning opportunities. By sustaining transparency and a genuine interest in taking proactive steps to solve problems and reconcile failure, the virtual PM leverages significant opportunities for success and also fosters an environment of self-reflective behavior.

In addition to the participation in developing Lessons Learned, the PM needs to highlight achievements during team meetings and congratulate the team or particular members on significant milestones.

Summary

Virtual teams are here to stay. Despite their challenges, they also offer multiple advantages. Virtual teams allow for higher efficiency that derives from more engaged members exposed to fewer interruptions. People are allowed to work at their peak hours and become more productive. Virtual teams allow for the project to move forward around the clock with asynchronous activities that are not limited by night hours. Everyone is focused on the project and its success rather than the politics around the office that add unnecessary stress. Teams are more stable since people are more
satisfied and there is less absenteeism, which in turn ensures project continuity. Virtual teams allow for grouping based on skills and capabilities without the limitation of their lack of proximity.

Management of virtual teams begins with a focus on people, continues with extensive use of technology and ends with successful transfer of ideas among team members. In other words, the bridge between virtual teams and their goals, rely 100% on the ability of people to align with technology and understand each other. To overcome the difficulties that virtual teams face, the PM must actively seek ways to clearly transfer team goals to the team, fully utilize the skills and abilities of team members through the use of technology and develop trust among all team members\(^6\). There are multiple challenges that come from working with virtual teams. They all require adaptive behaviors from Project Managers in collaborative, socialization and communication skills\(^4\).

Virtual teams require **Trust** because they have to rely on each other to complete tasks and significant amounts of work regardless of their location. **Technology** offers multiple secured tools that empower team members to virtually collaborate when sharing their input, ideas, concerns, and questions. **Transfer of ideas** and information is the cornerstone to successfully complete any project.

In brief, the advantages of virtual teams become substantial when its members and the Project Manager focus on commonalities rather than differences. There is no point in fighting the trend. Instead, a successful Project Manager needs to become familiar and use all available tools to benefit the project and all members. The PM needs to stay on top of trends, clearly define responsibilities, and pair effective management techniques with the new ways of doing business. The future for virtual teams and projects is bright, properly applying existing tools and techniques can only make that future brighter.
REFERENCES:


About the Author

Pilar Plazas is a Colombian Microbiologist graduated from Los Andes University. Through a partnership between Los Andes and Harvard Universities, she obtained her certification in Molecular Biology and started working in the research of synthetic vaccines including malaria. Later, she attended Drury University, where she obtained her MBA and quickly went onto gaining experience in both Non-profit and private sectors. Then, she attended TUI University where she received with Summa Cum Laude honors her Master of Science in Clinical Research Administration. During the past six years, Pilar has worked with Quintiles in multiple roles including Project Coordinator, Global Project Manager and Program Lead. She is considered highly skilled in communicating with multi-cultural project teams, clients and senior management while maintaining project momentum and a commitment to project success. Pilar is an active member of the Project Management Institute (PMI), and holds a current PMP Certification. Most recently she has been appointed Senior Global Project Manager and Global Account Manager; she has also obtained her Scrum Master Certification. She can be contacted at pplazas14@gmail.com