

Balancing Act: Project Management in the Telecommuting Environment

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Extract from E-Book Doing Business RemotelyDigg this Telecommuters in leadership positions may struggle to find the proper balance between the contra-positive virtues of control and freedom when tasked with leading a distributed workforce in a group project; because most telecommuters value their relative autonomy, there is a propensity to allow a "loosened reign"; when managing their work, even as the responsibility and standards are no less than in a traditional setting.

If the manager is a telecommuter as well, chances are that even she would choose, in the most ideal circumstance, neither to lead nor be explicitly led—increasing the bias toward non-definitive guidance. Yet, to fulfill the requirements of many projects, individuals are thrust into collaboration and an authoritative "manager" role must be recognized in order to compel some type of order, focus, and harmony into a group effort that might otherwise stagnate or devolve into an incongruous mess.

Directing the work of those whom you cannot see is a new challenge facing managers, as commonplace project management tasks, including:

- monitoring performance - of team members on a group project,
- assisting co-workers - with "on-the-fly" training,
- handling complaints and comments - applying prompt and appropriate solutions
- acknowledging high productivity or strong effort — publicly, or within the team

are more difficult to accomplish via the tools available in telecommunication systems than they are using face-to-face methods. And the standard policies and procedures describing the supervision of in-office employees are not sufficient to meet the unique considerations presented by the use of remote staff.

This is why comprehensive telecommuting and telework personnel policies distinct from the basic operations manual and human resources guidelines should be developed, and the completion of management courses designed specifically for enabling telework programs should be a prerequisite for those leading remote employees. In the event that enrolling supervising staff in specialized classes is not feasible (and this oftentimes will be the case), organizations should carefully consider the implications of managing telecommuters, and create company-specific guidelines and policies in order to codify tele-management practices. This will not only improve communication in the organization—it will also both relieve staff charged with directing others of some of the trials of fabricating "management-at-a-distance" structures, and will provide those being managed with an insight into the processes of their administration.

When developing a tele-management strategy, clearly define the company's expectations of its remote workers, clarifying guidelines for:

- Timekeeping
- Work schedule
- Information security, and
- Work location guidelines (if any)as well as outline the company's agreed obligations to teleworking employees, noting practices regarding compensation and benefits, use of employee leave, and company-owned equipment.

Well-planned, comprehensive policies can be key in helping managers in a telecommuting environment avoid common communication pitfalls which have the potential to be more prevalent in a distributed workforce than in traditional office environments. The result will be a greater appreciation for leadership's authority and an enhanced ability to counterpoise creativity/freedom and conformity/control in project management.