

## **Managing a true A-Team of far-flung experts requires special leadership tactics**

Let's say you could assemble a true A-Team to tackle a problem in your business. Go around the world, plucking the top experts, the most talented people in their field. They could come from different cultures and different organizations. Self-starters all, renowned in their field. A team of superstars. And none of them wanted to travel.

How would you get them to work together, efficiently and productively?

[Arvind Malhotra](#), the Thomas V. and Janet R. Lewis Scholar and associate professor of strategy and entrepreneurship at UNC Kenan-Flagler, has been studying such virtual teams for nearly 15 years, ever since businesses grudgingly acknowledged that business travel involves a noticeable loss of productive time. Companies began using business travel more judiciously, a trend that escalated after the Sept. 11 terrorist acts.

"The bad economy was the final momentum-builder," Malhotra said. "Virtual teams are here to stay."

Virtual teams, also called far-flung teams, are composed of top talent, often from different corporations, who are geographically distributed. Rather than meeting physically in a conference room to share ideas and feedback, they stay in their separate geographic locations, and meet virtually.

"Global companies have problems that need universal solutions, which can be developed by leveraging global expertise," Malhotra said. "Those solutions can only come about by taking a global perspective. That requires a new leadership philosophy, one that manages democratic processes with very few traditional cues."

While having all that brainpower and creativity focused on a problem has the potential for astounding results, the reality is that, lacking the hierarchical structure of traditional organizations, the team is only as strong as its leadership.

"A virtual team is the flattest form of organization," Malhotra said, "because it's a group of experts, and it's very democratic. But democratic processes are inherently hard to manage. They have a chaotic nature to them."

Managing a virtual team requires a different form of leadership than the command-and-control method that would work with people working in a shared location. Leaders of virtual teams will be more successful with a connect-to-collaborate style in which leaders connect the globally distributed expertise in a way that spurs creativity. Rather than being an information gateway or hub, far-flung leaders have to make sure they create platforms and mechanisms to allow the diverse expertise and information to connect directly.

Team members often are world-class experts. They're intrinsically motivated and are willing to put up with the difficulties of being on a virtual team because they want to learn from their peers, other experts of their own caliber.

"You can't just command them into doing what they have to do," Malhotra said. "How you motivate them is not with 'I'll give you a million bucks.' There is a different level of motivation at play."

Cognitive diversity -- some members are more visual, others express ideas better in writing; some are inspired by interacting with co-workers, others work better in solitude -- enriches any collaboration. On top of a variety of cognitive styles, people from different parts of the world, and even from different corporations, bring behavioral diversity -- different work styles and processes to the team. Asians, for example, tend to think things through and then present their thoughts well-formed. Westerners, on the other hand, prefer to collectively brainstorm and see what ideas emerge. The leader of a virtual team must come up with a universal process for sharing ideas, giving feedback, documenting contributions, selecting the best ideas to build on, then moving forward to the next challenge.

Malhotra's research revealed that successful leaders of virtual teams strive to identify potential team members with the best T-shaped knowledge. Each team member has the depth of expertise in a certain area (the stem of the T), as well as a broad understanding of the organizational process from start to finish (the bar of the T). Team members can see how their expertise fits into the whole process and can contribute their insights into other aspects of the process to help create a better product.

"With T-shaped knowledge, you'll be able to preserve diversity, as well as understand other people's perspective," Malhotra said.

One of the difficulties of managing virtual teams is that team members have no face-to-face meetings.

"Imagine if you had no visual interaction with team members in a meeting," Malhotra said. "You can't see people smirking or shaking their heads or rolling their eyes. Leaders have to learn to pick up cues that they otherwise would not."

Monitoring each team member's contributions can be easier in a virtual team, but the team leader must create explicit methods for measuring contributions, Malhotra said. For instance, the leader may require that each team member contribute an idea in writing and circulate it electronically among the rest of the team, and each team member must annotate each document with feedback.

"With virtual teams, you have better flexibility in monitoring contributions," Malhotra said. "You can look at how many documents each member has posted and how much commenting they've done. You can monitor an audio conference session to hear who's engaged and who is not."

Such monitoring also reassures local bosses. If a team member has been authorized to spend 50 percent of his time on projects with the virtual team, the local boss can see what the employee has accomplished

Virtual team leaders and team members must switch from social-cues-based trust to expertise-based trust by ensuring they deliver on everything they've promised, and by making expertise and work contributions highly visible. Team members need to know that their co-workers and leader are their equals or better in terms of capability and the amount of effort they put into the team's goals. The leader must make sure all team members are aware of each member's particular strengths.

Productivity increases with a balance of convergence and divergence. In face-to-face collaborations, people tend to wait until a meeting to get things done, performing the work while everyone is together. This is not always the most productive method. As one team leader told Malhotra: "Try sketching a new concept with someone looking over your shoulder with a stopwatch in their hand."

People from diverse backgrounds likely have a different pace of generating their own ideas and evaluating those of others. The virtual team may “meet” on a regular schedule -- convergence -- but 80 percent of the team’s work is done independently between meetings -- divergence. Successful leaders will enable this asynchronous collaboration rhythm.

“What that does,” Malhotra said, “is give people a pace and rhythm to digest and contribute the way they like to. Everyone has circulated feedback between meetings, and we converge during meetings to resolve the real conflict points.

Ultimately, a successful virtual team will reduce the workload of the leader. After building trust among members and working to ensure that all members buy into the project, the leader will intrude on the process less. A group of talented, self-motivated individuals, enabled with the right technologies and processes, can take off.

“The floodgates of ideas open, and it becomes an information management problem,” Malhotra said.