Virtual Coaching: Development at a Distance

BY LINDY WILLIAMS AND BEVERLY KAYE

Effective coaching can happen virtually if managers maintain a development focus and work to create a continuous connection.

Virtual work environments are becoming increasingly common. Employees may no longer sit down the aisle, across the hall or even in the same country. Managers find themselves in reporting relationships that cross time zones and country or continent borders. Team members’ 6 a.m. alarms may ring hours before or after the manager grabs that first cup of coffee.

Regardless of location, career development continues to be one of the most important factors in the employee engagement equation. Engaging geographically dispersed direct reports in development dialogue is essential to ongoing professional growth and maximizing performance.

So, can a manager simply shift those solid, face-to-face time-tested coaching skills to virtual environments and be done with it? Yes and no. Virtual employees need the same openness, candid feedback, future focus, flexible perspective and action orientation from a manager as employees in traditional settings. But how they get those things has changed.

The Development Partnership
A partnership between the employee, the manager and the organization is fundamental to any successful development relationship. Each partner has an important role. Employees own the decisions and direction, managers guide and coach, and organizations provide resources and tools. The virtual workplace, however, requires some shifts in how these roles are managed.

Employees still own their career decisions, which are determined by their aspirations, needs and drive. But virtual assignments require greater levels of initiative from employees. Employees must assume more responsibility for connecting to local and regional
IN PRACTICE FIVE WAYS TO MAKE A SENSATIONAL VIRTUAL PRESENTATION

Face it, most virtual presentations are so boring people in the audience wish they had brought a pillow. Others aren’t paying attention at all — they’re trying to squeeze out a couple of emails before their next meeting. Some may even be texting their spouse about dinner plans. But leaders can make their virtual presentations more compelling with the following tweaks.

Make it all about the audience. Cover topics attendees are interested in, subjects that are close to their hearts. Addressing these kinds of concerns make it more likely the presenter will foster a personal connection. For instance, when leading a meeting about a new computer system that is replacing a notoriously disliked old one, focus on the problems that will be eliminated — not how much money the replacement is saving the company in write-offs.

Keep it short and sweet. Reduce presentation length as much as possible. Keep it to a minimum to maximize audience members’ attention. Sixty to 90 minutes is tops for a virtual presentation, and only if it is essential to go on that long. If so, the presentation should be visual, include multiple presenters and offer a great deal of interaction. People today have markedly shortened attention spans, so keep presentations brief and precise.

Maintain a brisk pace. Nobody likes to listen to someone droning on, so presenters should speak at a quickened yet unhurried-sounding pace. This is tough to carry out, but it can make a huge difference in attendees’ enjoyment. Audience members will arrive with different abilities and levels of knowledge related to the topic, and some people are simply quicker than others. Try to gauge the speed that is comfortable for the average audience member and then pick it up just a notch to keep participants tuned in, but not frustrated or lost.

Select a great producer/moderator. In some cases, the virtual presentation presenter is responsible for everything.

Except for the most ad hoc and casual presentations, this is often a mistake. For important virtual presentations, consider using a producer/moderator to help with some of the technical aspects and to help liven up the proceedings. A solid producer/moderator should be able to load and troubleshoot a presentation and support materials, set up breakout rooms, guide participants in how to use the virtual meeting tools and record the session. In addition to these duties, the producer/moderator also functions as an announcer, introducing the presenters, and clarifying and enforcing the ground rules of the presentation, such as respect in chats. A great producer/moderator is also a valued sidekick. Think Johnny Carson and Ed McMahon, or Gracie Allen and George Burns. Be sure to select a producer/moderator who complements the presenter’s style, and they should rehearse together to perfect their delivery and rhythm.

Don’t be dull. The presenter should be an interesting person with a compelling message. A line of business leader, for example, will have a lot to offer, and likely will have enough expertise to connect with the audience without sounding too formal or detached. Speak in a conversational tone, and allow excitement with or passion for the subject matter to filter into tone and phrasing. Use creative metaphors and tell funny stories to get points across. Above all, do not simply read a presentation.

Virtual presentations don’t have to be boring. They can be as dynamic, interactive and compelling as face-to-face presentations and then some with a little foresight and planning to ensure audiences find the information offered useful, interesting and exciting. GLE

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professional networks — networks the manager may not be familiar with.

The casual, informal updates that occur when an employee sees the manager in the hallway or lobby don’t exist for the virtual employee, so ensuring regular and frequent connections is important. Virtual employees run an even greater risk of dropping out of sight if they fail to pursue the development coaching they need. Employees need to reach out to the manager informally as well as during formal conversations. A quick email or instant message to pass along a comment or ask a question can help to build a virtual connection.

The good news is the pool of potential coaches has expanded. In addition to the manager, employees can — and should — get valuable coaching, guidance and feedback from colleagues, clients and customers. Employees today are not only “on” LinkedIn, they “are” linked in to every possible source of information about industry trends, emerging technology and the business climate. Employees should be encouraged to take advantage of those sources.

Managers have primary accountability for coaching and guiding employee development. They are responsible for development planning discussions, which are typically held at least once a year. Many employee surveys, however, report if these discussions occur at all, they are often vague and not particularly helpful. For remote employees, skipping these discussions or executing them poorly can be particularly frustrating. For these discussions to be meaningful, managers need to prepare. This doesn’t mean having all the answers or a carefully laid out career path to share. It means being able to guide the conversations to learn how they can
help employees create effective development plans and identify beneficial learning opportunities.

The organization’s role is to provide resources: structure, processes and tools. Access is key in the virtual workplace. If employees at headquarters have top of the line learning experiences while remote workers are left with the occasional podcast or webinar, it’s clear which group is valued and which is not. The learning arsenals for the two groups don’t need to be identical, but they must be equivalent in terms of the opportunity for professional growth.

How the organization perceives virtual roles also impacts the success of virtual employees. Leaders at all levels must understand the complexity of virtual roles and, through their communication and actions, demonstrate that they recognize that contributions from remote workers are as significant as those from employees in traditional settings, and in some ways more difficult.

It’s All About the Connection

Technology enables organizations to build globally dispersed teams, but it also can create barriers and limit equal access to resources. Something as simple as a form that does not translate easily, or as complex and deep as deciphering cultural norms that frown on or prevent social networking, can create confusion and dissatisfaction. Communicating the expectations of each role throughout the organization provides a common understanding and conveys a commitment to build an inclusive, development-focused workplace.

Internal and external infrastructure and policy concerns aside, trust is often the bottom line when building an effective, mutually beneficial virtual coaching relationship. As The Work Design Collaborative LLC describes it in the white paper “Managing a Remote Workforce: Proven Practices from Successful Leaders,” “As trite as it may sound, the most critical skill in a distributed work environment is the ability to establish trust.” In a career coaching relationship where personal aspirations and hopes are shared, the absence of trust ensures failure. Managers who shift from defining employees’ jobs in terms of hours worked, schedules and tasks to a mindset where employees’ roles are about the work that needs to get done and the results realized build confidence and send a message that they trust employees to be accountable.

Structure is essential to the virtual development conversation. A straightforward process that answers the following five questions can provide the framework managers and direct reports need to stay on track:

1. What are the roles of the manager and the employee?
2. How often will formal development conversations take place and who will initiate them?
3. How will interim, informal development conversations happen?
4. What technology will be used to connect?
5. How will progress be tracked?

This agreement goes beyond a contractual exchange. Charlene Li, author of Open Leadership, describes the agreements between employees and managers as covenants rather than contracts to emphasize the importance of commitment.

Achieving a high level of personal presence in a virtual relationship is fundamental to create a powerful connection. Personal presence without the usual visual cues depends on both individuals using high levels of listening skills and attending to pace and tone of voice during conversations. Too often skill building preparation for managers and their virtual direct reports focuses solely on technology. Investments in learning options that will strengthen communication skills—including active listening and how to ask powerful questions in a virtual world—will realize more effective and engaging long-term relationships.

Of course, tools are important—groupware for Internet and intranet collabo-
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The Manager’s Role

Development-minded managers are curious. They ask questions, and not only do they listen to what their employees say in response, they listen to the meaning behind the answers. Managers who learn as much as possible about the virtual employee’s environment, cultural norms, physical space and colleagues are better prepared to relate to the employee’s developmental needs.

Managers should be open about the employee’s professional reputation in the organization at home and abroad, being honest about development that may be necessary to correct weaknesses or to promote strengths. The lack of informal, unplanned interactions makes clear, candid, formal and informal feedback even more important to maximize performance.

Virtual employees also need a lens for the future of the organization and industry and how that future can impact their career decisions. The virtual workplace has made it difficult for managers to be fully aware of available growth opportunities in multiple regions or sites despite efforts to tap into their own networks of connections. Remote employees should be encouraged to create their own regional networks and find mentors to support their growth.

That does not mean virtual employees should be left to their own devices. Recall the tenets of the development partnership; each party has a role to play, as does the organization. Managers should actively provide links to the resources, experiences and people that will result in meaningful development. Development-minded managers don’t let employees — traditional or virtual — become disconnected. They spend time identifying or designing learning experiences specific to each employee’s goals. Then they prepare their employees for those experiences, debriefing them or identifying feedback providers who work in closer proximity to reinforce the partnership trust and facilitate progress against the development plan.

Organizations that are committed to creating a development culture ensure learning occurs at all levels from bottom to top in all locations. Whether sitting on the 50th floor of headquarters in Chicago or a home office in Beijing, employees have talent to offer and capabilities to share. Successful organizations find ways to tap into and develop virtual talent pools across time, distance and cultural boundaries.

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