

## Tips for Virtual Management: Maximize Learning Effectiveness

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Online learning has taken on a slightly different dimension for the global business community. It is no longer merely a convenient and effective way to train. Now online or virtual environments are often the only way to reach colleagues in far-flung locales. The necessity of this outlet to provide learning for colleagues and peers around the globe has brought with it a companion need for virtual management skills. After all, being online doesn't mean you don't have to connect, interact and perhaps even bond with your learners. In fact, to bring lessons to life and ensure that what's taught sticks and is applied on the job, you may have to make more of an effort to connect by engaging in small talk, considering employee satisfaction and establishing trust with consistent, thoughtful and purposeful communication.

"Part of it clearly is being a good leader in any setting, but you almost have to be that much better when you never see (your employees) because they can't read your mind, and you can't see any of their cues, so you're really stretched," said Stephen Parker, senior vice president, Blessing White Inc. "With small talk you have to allow yourself to be known and go about that in a more purposeful fashion than if your team were around you because they see things. They get to know a little bit about you by osmosis, by seeing you jump into your car with a gym bag slung over your shoulder at lunchtime. It's silly things like that that are often missing from a relationship when it's virtual. Say, 'How can I let my team into my life?' by including them in conversations. If you go first, it's easier to ask them questions."

Parker said that even well-trained managers can hit a wall engaging in virtual small talk because they've learned to ask really good questions about the lives of the people who work for them, but not to reciprocate or be the first to share information. "You have to be willing to talk about some of those incidentals going on in your life, and over time you'll get some of that from them. The key is to remember a lot of it so that you're aware, and you can establish that personal contact. You don't have to remember it—make notes."

A second technique to maximize the virtual learning experience involves learner satisfaction. It's not all about the work. "It's hard to do online learning effectively, so you go with the low-hanging fruit, which is you teach facts, skills and knowledge. It's hard, and it's hard to measure the output, but there's a huge opportunity for engagement, development and satisfaction," Parker said. "Whether it's formal online learning or some virtual gathering that has those things as topics, there's a lot of opportunity to build a learning community virtually that's not as formal. In the old days, they were probably called 'brown bag lunches' where you turned up and there were engaging topics, and it was voluntary. It shouldn't just be about product launches, product details and system approaches."

Virtual learning also involves career development and coaching, and Parker recommends managers look for opportunities to engage in these types of activities while pursuing knowledge acquisition and other learning goals. Guide learners toward different tools, such as online learning libraries, course catalogs and content offerings, as well as subject-matter experts. "If it's just you on the phone all the time, that can get pretty dry pretty quickly," Parker said. "If there are other ways they can

connect with the organization, that's important. One of the roles of a learning organization can be to set up some of those opportunities so that managers can guide their staff appropriately."

Perhaps most important, and most difficult to manage in a virtual environment, is the trust factor. The rewards for efforts spent gaining trust are readily notable in a higher level of discretionary effort, but all efforts aside, trust is tough to earn and easy to destroy. Therefore, despite the ease of virtual communications, some old-fashioned methods should be included in your online learning programs. "I think most people come prepared to give you the benefit of the doubt," Parker said. "Even people who have had managers and bosses and peers they've not trusted. Be aware that it's a precious thing and that you've got to be purposeful and go out of your way to do things that will enhance the building of trust. It's very easy virtually to destroy it because we have so many ways of communicating that can be misread. An e-mail can be read a thousand ways, and before you know it, trust can go out of the window. You've got to recognize the power of words and the power of language. I always encourage people to have as much live voice interaction as possible. At least then you've got intonation, and most of us can express so much more with our voices than with the written word. Then, use e-mail and online settings to back up and reaffirm things, whether it's documents, processes, outputs or decisions made. You want to feel like you're having a conversation, not a one-way broadcast. Give them the context for some of their own work."

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