# Book The Distance Manager

## A Hands-On Guide to Managing Off-Site Employees and Virtual Teams

Mareen Duncan Fisher and Kimball Fisher
McGraw-Hill, 2001

## Recommendation

Kimball Fisher and Mareen Duncan Fisher document the special skills needed for the new but increasingly common task of managing far-flung work groups. The approaches that they examine are becoming increasingly essential for all managers. Although they explore relevant technologies carefully, their human relations advice is probably more important. The Fishers emphasize the interpersonal and leadership skills that a manager needs to head a virtual team. If you read this book cover to cover, it can seem repetitive, since many of the rules and tips offered in one area overlap with those in other areas. However, the book is designed to allow you to review specific management challenges and technologies, and to ignore areas that are irrelevant to your situation. *BooksInShort* recommends this clear, practical work to anyone who leads virtual teams and to the telecommuters and freelance workers who report to them.

## Take-Aways

- Distance management - managing teams of people who do not work in the same place at the same time - presents a difficult management challenge.
- Good distance managers aren't traditional supervisors; they work 'on' the system, not 'in' the system.
- The distance manager's primary job is providing consistent, visionary leadership.
- Instead of commanding their workers, distance managers should lead by example.
- Occasional face-to-face meetings, including a kick-off meeting, are critical.
- Distance managers should develop clear missions for their team and establish rules and boundaries for group interaction.
- Home employees need technological competence and strong interpersonal skills.
- Give your team e-mail, cell phones and pagers, but establish clear protocols and boundaries for their use.
- Used properly, Web teleconferencing and videoconferencing can help team members share what they learn.
- To build teams and share information, distance managers should facilitate the social and informal side of team interactions.

# Summary

## Managing a Far-flung Team

More and more managers today are distance managers, asked to lead people who usually do not work in the same place at the same time. The advantages of these virtual teams come packaged with enormous managerial challenges. Technologies - such as e-mail, teleconferencing and file sharing - can help a distance manager communicate, coordinate and coach more effectively. But technology alone is not enough. Some tasks can only be done effectively in face-to-face meetings. Clearly, to succeed as a distance manager, you'll need new competencies and some additional tools for managing people who aren't close at hand.

## Distance Managing: Foundation Principles

Distance managers aren't supervisors; it's impossible to supervise a far-flung group. Instead, they are boundary managers. They focus on the ways their work group interacts with its environment. They teach their team members the skills they need to turn information from their individual environments into the output the company expects. Instead of managing that process, distance managers focus on interfacing with other teams, interacting with customers and vendors, and assessing competitors and market opportunities. The boundary manager helps manage these elements in the team's environment. A successful distance manager must master seven critical competencies to succeed. These roles are:

1. Leader - Unleash energy and enthusiasm by inspiring and motivating others with vision.
2. Results catalyst - Focus people on getting good results. Help boost performance without being authoritarian, manage by principle not policy and use boundaries not directives.
3. Facilitator - Assemble necessary tools, data and resources, and facilitate group efforts.
4. Barrier buster - Challenge the status quo, run interference for the team, open doors and break down artificial barriers that block the team's performance.
5. Business analyst - Grasp the big picture, translate changes in the business environment into opportunities and act as a customer advocate.
6. Coach - Teach others, help them develop and ensure their accountability.
7. Living example - Serve as a role model by demonstrating the behaviors you want team members to practice. This gives you moral authority.

**Five things can cripple your performance as a distance manager:**

1. Never be an autocrat or an abdicator - Develop your moral authority and find a balance between autocracy and abdication.
2. Never allow a poor start-up - A good start-up requires team building, developing goals and measurements, and clarifying roles and responsibilities.
3. Avoid unclear roles and responsibilities - Lack of clarity in this realm is confusing. You may need to renegotiate roles twice a year.
4. Never starve your team - Discuss how to allocate scarce resources.
5. Don't rely on traditional hierarchies - Create a social and a technical infrastructure.

> "Good distance managers tell us that even the perception of autocracy can torpedo your effectiveness."

As a distance manager, you can't exercise control over workers. Instead, you need to coordinate them. Stay well connected and accessible, but don't impose too many policies. Give them information, but don't overload them. Show them that you're concerned for their development. Provide feedback in person, when possible.

> "Team members don't want intrusive supervision, but they don't want you to be among the missing, either."

Treat your team members fairly and avoid even the appearance of favoritism. Be honest. Don't try to manipulate them. Respect them, and don't be paternalistic or condescending. Help team members overcome their sense of isolation by building a sense of community. Teams that work in the same space can communicate by bulletin boards and posted charts, and use shift overlap for face-to-face meetings. A virtual team must find another way.

The types of virtual teams are defined by several variables, including whether team members work at the same time, work in the same space or share the same work culture. For instance, a team whose members work at different times, in difference places and amid different cultures must become skillful with asynchronous technologies like e-mail and voice mail, and must use teleconferencing for meetings.

> "Your work should dictate your tools rather than your tools dictating your work."

By contrast, team members who work at the same time can connect easily by phone and teleconference, and can meet often. Teams whose members work in the same culture, but share neither time (work hours) nor space (work places) are the most difficult to lead. Face to face meetings are essential.

> "Those who use teleconferences regularly and successfully will testify that these meetings require greater amounts of preparation than a face-to-face session."

Try to carve out some kind of virtual shared space for your team, starting with a team Web site. Use a Web page to share and distribute knowledge. Organize the page in a way that makes sense to users, and encourage and reward employee contributions.

## Staying Connected and Coordinated

To create peak performance as a distance manager, you need to develop long-distance coaching skills, including establishing clear goals and measurements, encouraging good communication and getting employees involved. Coach proactively through each of a project's stages. Setting specific, measurable, realistic and challenging goals with shared accountability systems will empower your team. That requires setting clear responsibilities with metrics that gauge progress and success. Step in when needed to help, but also establish regular, one-on-one coaching sessions with each employee. This builds rapport and creates an expectation that your discussions with team members are meant to help them succeed.

To build your team, start with a charter that defines a mission. Your team should develop and agree upon operating guidelines that will govern its interactions. Pay special attention to the team's social structure. Teach and show ways to give and receive feedback and to deal with conflict, since conflict, managed well, can generate strength and creativity. Listen with empathy, paying special attention to the emotion in what you hear. Help the team develop good decision-making processes and help it integrate new members smoothly.

> "If you are a leader, you can no longer avoid distance management. You can only choose to do it well or do it poorly."

These tips might sound simple, but they are very powerful: To build trust at a distance, start by giving trust. Establish strong business ethics and stand by them. Your team will be more productive if you do. Keep your commitments; make your actions visible. Keep your interactions with the team predictable and consistent, since they set the tone for future interactions. Keep confidences and watch your language. Create 'cyber cafes' where virtual employees can talk informally. Encourage them to find opportunities to meet.

> "Ironically, the best control of the off-site office is the control imposed from within (self-control) rather than from outside (manager-imposed)."

Even among virtual teams, some face-to-face meetings are vital. Besides strong kick-off meetings, milepost and wrap-up meetings are important. Take the time to celebrate accomplishments along the way, even if you must celebrate at a distance. Hold an annual or semi-annual meeting to review the goals you've achieved. Observe personal milestones like birthdays, new babies and weddings. Ask your team members how they'd like to celebrate and respect their personal preferences. Set aside social time for the team.

Employees in satellite offices need technological competence and good judgment. Good interpersonal skills are even more critical for satellite workers, because an inability to work well with others can be magnified over a distance. Help distance workers overcome the isolation of a home or satellite office by training them to work outside the central office. Home office workers should delineate their core work hours and have a clearly defined office space with a door they can close when they are working. Make sure they get the right technologies for their work.

> "If a leader can't use position power, he or she can still influence through moral authority."

As a distance manager, you'll have to manage people who do not report to you in the traditional sense. Learn to use persuasion and

influence instead of commands. Respect the expertise of your team. Find ways to get them involved. To be effective, maintain your conscientiousness and integrity. The personal example you set is crucial.

## The Distance Technology Handbook

Distance workers need to accomplish five basic tasks:

1. Create effective virtual teams.
2. Get the information they need.
3. Share what they've learned with each other.
4. Facilitate technology transfer.
5. Cut down production cycle time.

> "Constructive feedback is more likely to be helpful in person than virtually."

The key to meeting team goals isn't the technologies distance workers use, but how the workers use them. Choose the software you need first, and then get the hardware to run it. Get the whole team on PCs and standardized software versions. Make sure everyone uses the same e-mail program. When you can, use teamware, which is designed to allow multiple team members to work on the same project.

Examine the way technological components fit into your entire system, not only how they work as stand-alone components. You'll need a computer network, plus a reliable phone system with voice mail, good teleconferencing and sufficient capacity for all of your team members to be on the phone together. Provide your staffers with tools that help them get out into the field, including pagers, cell phones and satellite phones. However, when you issue these tools, establish agreements setting boundaries about usage and cost.

> "Ideal team members are not only technically but socially competent."

As a distance manager, you need to use the phone carefully and courteously. Pay attention, watch your volume, minimize interruptions and, if you call unannounced, ask if this is a good time to talk. Respect time zone differences and avoid routinely scheduling calls at times that require people to come in early or stay late. Don't address performance issues on the phone. These telephone rules also apply to Web teleconferencing, which requires extra advance planning. Assign roles for the teleconference. Use people's names. Be careful about background noise. Electronic whiteboards can add a nice visual dimension to these meetings.

> "As difficult as it is to master technology (the so-called hard stuff of business), mastering interpersonal relationships (the so-called soft stuff of business) is even harder - especially from a distance."

If you use video-conferencing, consult an expert to get the most appropriate technology. You can chose between an internal conference-room system and a desktop PC-based system. Either way, understand your system's limits. A teleconference should be no longer than two hours, but remember that you're on camera all the time. Don't do anything you wouldn't do on live television. Respect your team's privacy.

E-mail is one of the most popular technologies for virtual teams. Limit messages to one page. Avoid group replies and keep your mailing lists current. Check e-mail regularly. Keep your in-box small and use e-mail filters to sort incoming messages. Remember that e-mail isn't private and shouldn't be used for sensitive information. Don't use e-mail for performance evaluation, interpersonal issues or emotional content.

Overall, the most important thing a distance manager can give a team is consistent leadership. Teams need effective, stable leadership. Technology is a useful tool but there is no substitute for a visionary, committed leader.

# About the Authors

**Kimball Fisher and Mareen Duncan Fisher** , co-founders of The Fisher Group, have worked with many *Fortune* 100 companies to implement high-performance management systems and to train managers. Their consulting clients include Amoco, Apple Computer, PepsiCo, NBC, Weyerhauser and Motorola. They are popular speakers about teams, leadership and organization

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