

Möstl Bernhard

Leading Across Boundaries



Effektives Projektmanagement gehört zu den wichtigsten Fähigkeiten, die Fachkräfte gekonnt einsetzen. Auch die Führung von Menschen rangiert weit oben auf der Liste der wichtigsten Talente im Geschäftsleben. Führungskräfte in allen Industrien sind verstärkt mit der Herausforderung konfrontiert, unterschiedlichste Mitarbeiter in einem zunehmend virtuellen Projektumfeld zu managen. Dieser Artikel sucht daher nach Antworten, wie man international aufgestellte Projektteams zum Erfolg führt. Dazu wird auf bekannte Konzepte und Ideen aus der Managementliteratur gebaut, die sich für eine große Bandbreite von Projekten im internationalen Kontext als nützlich erwiesen hat. Der erste Teil des Artikels beschäftigt sich mit generellen Hürden im Zusammenhang mit virtuellen Teams und schlägt konkrete Lösungsansätze vor. Der zweite Abschnitt konzentriert sich auf spezielle Führungsmerkmale und -eigenschaften, die das Potential haben, zur persönlichen Entwicklung von Studierenden, Berufseinsteigern, Fachkräften und Managern beizutragen und so inspirierende Karrierewege zu unterstützen.

MANAGING VIRTUAL TEAMS

If sustainable profit is the ultimate purpose of business, then growth is the way to deliver it. In the 21st century, even the most local companies forge alliances with foreign companies, produce, buy, or sell outside their home market. Furthermore, they hire workers with diverse backgrounds. In most cases, the international growth of a business will lead to interaction between people who not only contribute different skills, but who also come from different cultural backgrounds. Moreover, leading a culturally diverse team for a long period of time from overseas can become a challenging task for any manager. However, virtual team work abroad has the capacity to outperform collocated team work if managed correctly. Leading across global boundaries is relevant to business because companies can draw competitive advantage from effectively deploying international teams. Thus, the following section will concentrate on the question: What makes a virtual team successful?

Research in the field of virtual teams agrees on two main elements affecting the results of collaboration abroad, namely task-related and socio-emotional processes (Siebdrat et al, 2009). Project management training is very much concer-

ned with the first issue. It provides useful tools and guidelines how to best organize, plan, procure, control, and steer time, cost and quality. Universities and learning institutions have done tremendously well in teaching the best techniques for a wide range of situations. In acknowledging these achievements, light is shed on the socio-emotional processes that sometimes create hurdles for even well-structured teams. Digging deeper, one would discover three core elements related to dynamics of virtual teams: (1) diversity, (2) communication and (3) trust. All of which is discussed below in more detail.

1 DIVERSITY

Diversity is the representation of different demographic groups. A heterogeneous team in terms of gender, age, experience, fields of knowledge, and cultural and ethnic background has, on average, higher success rates than homogeneous groups. Heterogeneity enhances breadth of perspective and problem-solving capacity, whereas homogeneity may lead to biased thinking and fewer good ideas. However, the flipside of the coin is that diverse teams are more exposed to mistrust, stereotyping, and interpersonal stress compared to teams with more or less similar team members, who promote integration, trust, and ease

of communication. In addressing this issue, a manager should not insist on over-regulating every piece of interaction, but rather use common sense when clarifying some basic rules at the beginning of the virtual, diversified teamwork.

Diversity can be measured along several indicators; some of which are the cultural values, languages, outward physical behavior (i.e. eye contact, punctuality, conversation style, interruption patterns), and cognition (i.e. knowledge about foreign countries). Regarding the dimensions of national culture, the concepts of Hofstede (2001) offer a framework to compare different nationalities along five dimensions: individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity, and long-term orientation. Managers using this approach are likely to identify potential sources of conflicts and misunderstandings, and may hence mitigate adverse impacts on the overall team performance. Likewise, tools like the Myers Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), the bio-structure analysis (BSA), and the DISC assessment (another type-based indicator) help to understand personality preferences of individual team members. In short, diversity is key in developing potentially high-performing teams. Accordingly, there are some useful tools to consider for managers of virtual teams.

Before conducting deep analysis, however, professionals should ask themselves which general behavior could be helpful to overcome differences. Bishop (2008), quoting a senior manager of a multinational company who works with highly diverse teams, recommends that in order to integrate different cultures one should 'assume good intentions in all situations, be intentional about understanding others and being understood, and respect cultural differences'. Research has also shown how to overcome challenges associated with virtual teams. The project leader must closely monitor team processes, manage along several cultural dimensions, tolerate ambiguity, and, above all, actively support bridge builders. In addition, look for those who naturally accept a leading role within the team and reinforce themselves as ambassadors who connect people abroad. Finally, **become a bridge builder yourself.**

2 COMMUNICATION

Countless books have been written on communication and the roles of content and context. In many cases the difference that makes a difference is not what is said (or not said), but how we express ourselves and react to statements of others. In other words, the 'What', usually dominated by technical terms, becomes the second priority. The "How" often determines how people feel about certain aspects of their daily work, in particular when contributing to a larger project target compared to their own individual goals. Balancing both objectives is therefore crucial for the manager's success in uniting individuals, especially if they are located around the globe.

English has advanced to the number one business language worldwide. Proficiency in both written and oral communication is therefore a must for any team member. However, some simple rules make life easier for everyone, such as not exploiting language advantages (native speakers), short and compact messages,

the avoidance of jargon, careful use of humor (if any at all), using illustrative examples, repeating important messages, and frequently offering opportunities to ask questions and provide feedback. Taken together, the project manager shall strive to reduce power asymmetry due language and identify and reduce barriers in communication within the team.

Hurdles can also arise from excessive use of technology. Tele- and web-based meetings, telephone calls, email exchange, server applications, etc. offer solutions to communicate around the world in real time. Applied appropriately, these tools facilitate effective team work but can turn into a nightmare if used without a code of conduct. Such rules may vary according to the project need but should at least clarify expectations regarding regular information sharing. Most importantly, in the absence of value-adding information there is no use for sophisticated message conveying tools. In many cases a simple phone call will do to clarify things. The real challenge, however, is time-zone differences that limit the time slot to hold conference meetings with all members. This requires a high degree of discipline and preparation in advance to use the given communication tool in the most efficient way. Preparing for both a tele- and web conference not only shows respect, but is also a prerequisite to contributing especially in large rounds. Clearly, leaders of virtual teams need to continuously strive to overcome the communications gap.

Although a wide-spread truth, it cannot be stressed enough that good communicators are good listeners. Therefore, try to mentally read between the lines of what is said, link the observed communication patterns to types of personality, then try to adjust your communication tactics. Once you know how to trigger and motivate people you can unlock their potential by relating the team achievements to their personal success story. Praise in public if things went well, but reprimand in private if things went

badly. Always assume accountability for the team result; if successful, fully attribute the achievement to your team. Do not forget to honor individual performance and emphasize his or her merits in front of major clients and management boards. But first and foremost, start by learning to **become an excellent listener.**

3 TRUST

If diversity and communication form the skeleton of social-emotional processes of virtual teams, then trust is the life force that makes it all work. Trust is something you earn by showing qualities of a role model. Covey (2006) identified the certain behaviors to build trust in your relationships (in private as well in professional teams):

- > Talk straight: Say what you mean, mean what you say.
- > Keep commitments: Say what you are going to do and then do it.
- > Clarify expectations and write them down.
- > Deliver results, not excuses.
- > Create transparency and correct wrongs.
- > Practice accountability and stop any tendency to blame others.
- > Confront reality by not softening true facts to make them look better.
- > Be respectful by knowing the names of people you interact with including those who cannot help you get what you want.
- > Build a rich picture of your environment: View others as multi-dimensional by finding out about people's backgrounds, biographies and families.
- > Improve yourself.

Indeed, such a list might be intimidating. Keep in mind that nobody is perfect. However, a leader should strive to adhere to those qualities listed above. Similarly, hold your team members accountable and share the principles of what trust means within your project team. And since you know how challenging it can be to always deliver world-class results,

forgive mistakes because they are a vital source for learning and look for those who grow in crises. They are your future leaders and might become successors. To summarize, **try hard to establish and constantly renew trust** within your team.

LEADERSHIP TRAITS

We have already started to explore the role of leadership in relation to the third component of managing virtual teams. In order to further elaborate its relevance for leading across boundaries, one will have to look back in history. Leadership is one of the world's most admired, but also hated phenomena. Therefore, "good" and "bad"

leadership needs to be distinguished. A clear line has to be drawn between those serving others and those abusing leadership by disguising followers for the greater good of the leader himself. Even though the numerous qualities of a leader are hard to achieve, the following paragraphs highlight the prerequisites and development goals of a responsible leader.

Abraham Lincoln, considered to be one of the greatest leaders of all times, dedicated his professional life to a whole nation by putting his duty first and subordinating everything else. Phillips (1992) mentions, amongst many more, two main reasons for Lincoln's great success. First, he shared responsibility for

other's mistakes, which in turn earned loyalty. Second, he was talented in building strong alliances that allowed him to recharge his batteries, even in the midst of severe challenges. Indeed, something that all great leaders have in common is their resilience in crises. In other words, they remain calm under fire. In general, tough times seem to be favored by exceptional people. This peculiarity also supports the theory that true leaders are needed and molded only during depressions. It is especially in those times that a strong character – excluding attributes like vanity, but rather balanced emotional competences – is required the most.

Goleman (1998) identified five different

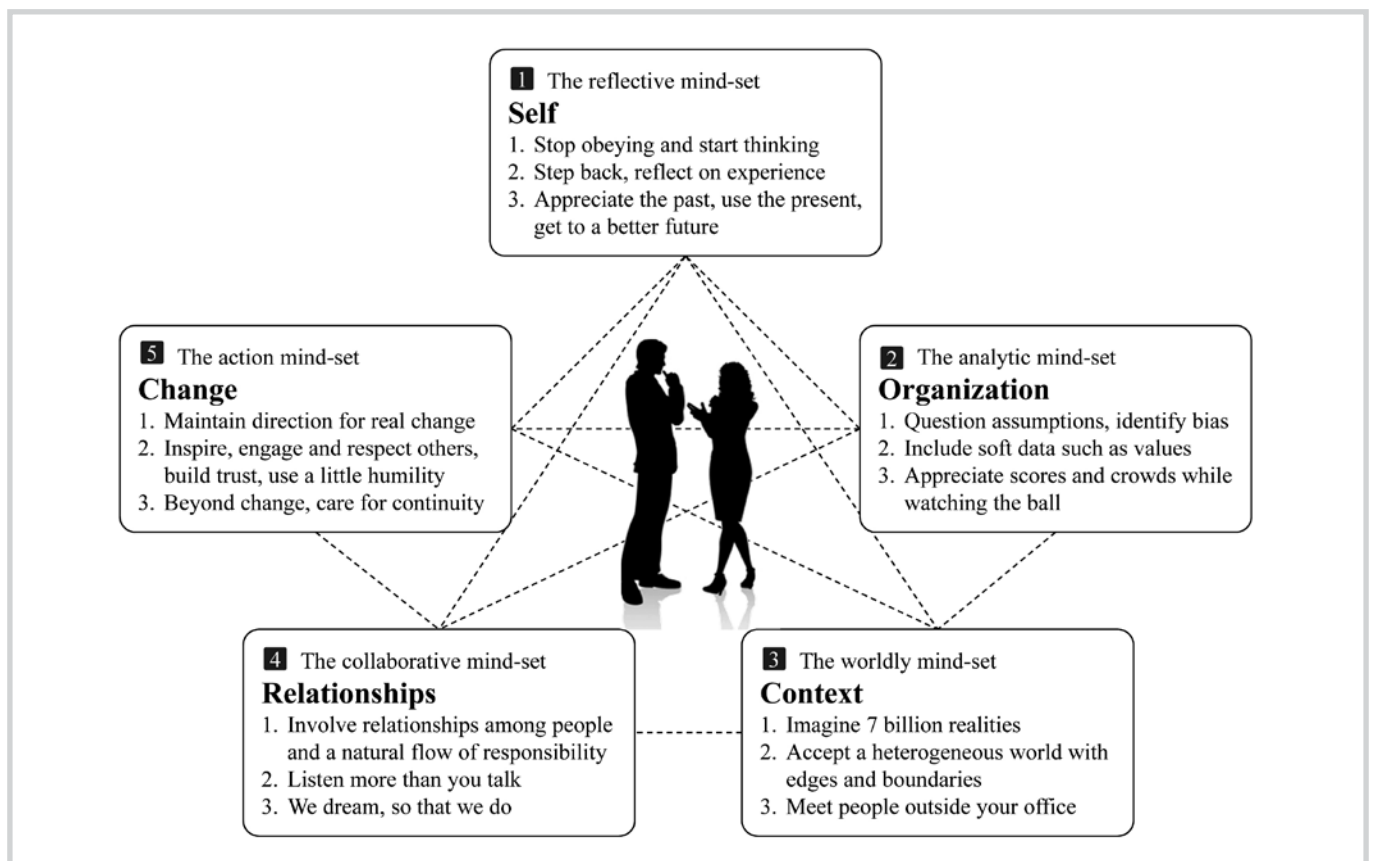


Abb. 1: Mind-sets for global leadership



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clusters of emotional intelligence capabilities: self-awareness, self-regulation, motivation, empathy, and social skills. From these categories, empathy, defined as knowing and managing emotions in others, is the key to success. Leading is not about an individual, leading is about others. Therefore, invest a substantial amount of time in expanding your skills by listening to your gut feeling and participate in the life of others. By knowing their followers, leaders do not only develop interest in the tasks of subordinates but also recognize them as individuals. In short, a responsible leader shall enable others to unleash their potential, support them in times of change, share the burden of failure, and moreover connect people and selflessly honor their achievements. Eventually, such behavior leads to sustainable trust, deep relationships, and last but not least, achievements, which is the overall purpose of any type of leadership.

A good way of summarizing ideas and impulses is always to draw a chart. The framework for doing so is borrowed from Jonathan Gosling and Henry Mintzberg (see Abb. 1). The two distinguished authors developed a concept of a manager capable of combining five different mindsets in parallel. Due to its direct messages and clear structure this framework illustrates the core components of global leadership the best. Eventually, it should also encourage a critical reflection on the following statement: "The only barrier separating yourself from a promising future is you."

> Abb. 1

ACKNOWLEDGE THE PROBLEM BUT CONCENTRATE ON THE SOLUTION

'There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees, which are falsehoods on the other.' In the 17th century, Blaise Pascal already knew that the world is neither black nor white. As so often in life, it is

not about what is right or wrong – it is more about the capacity to change perspectives. This has nothing to do with a romanticized world view or with the abandonment of one's own standpoint. Much more, it is a process of sharpening your senses for the needs of your team members which you as a leader have to cater, enabling them to leverage their potential. Critics will argue that this is a soft topic. But there is nothing harder than managing people; there is nothing harder than the bottom line of business. Managing virtual teams correctly and deploying leadership skill is important because it makes business sense. And it is important because it will keep your people loyal towards you. Unlike so many disciplines in natural science, intercultural management and leadership allows more than one right answer. Acknowledging this "fact" is a first step in the right direction.

The findings in this article are incomplete. But so are humans. Do not expect everything to go right from day one. But do continuously work to improve yourself and your leadership performance along the way. If you are interested in further investigating the social-emotional processes of virtual teams or trust-building leadership traits to support your current or future career, refer to some of the tools cited above or grab one of the books noted under 'sources and further readings.' And if some of the concepts presented in this article make more sense to you, just give it a try. Do not neglect cultural differences, but do not overestimate them as well because most nationalities still share more than half of their value systems with other nations. Being open, smiling, and showing willingness to learn and cooperate is understood on all continents. <<

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