FOR THE PRACTICING MANAGER

Leading Dispersed Teams
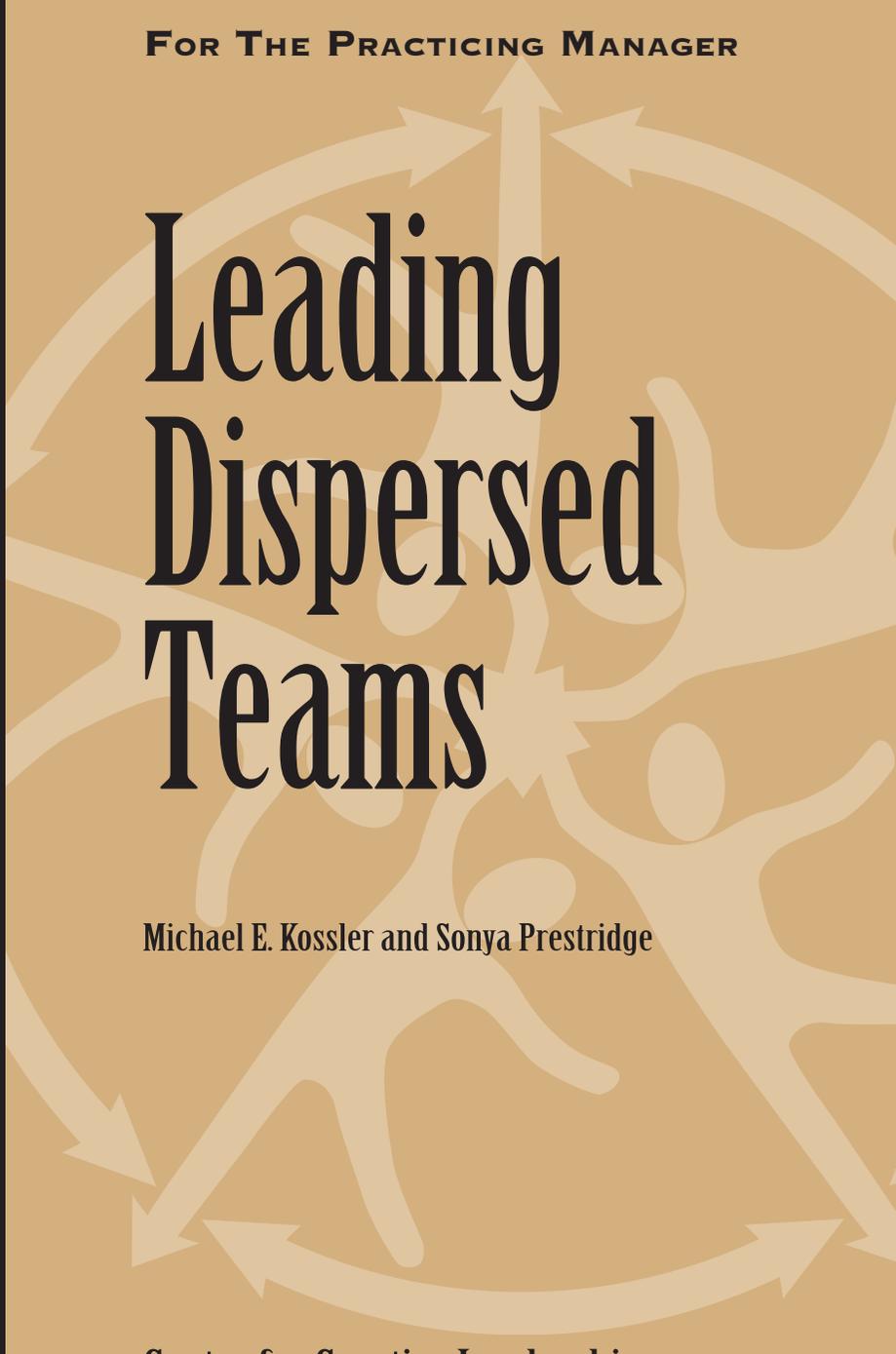
Michael E. Kossler and Sonya Prestridge

Center for Creative Leadership

AN IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOK

Leading Dispersed Teams

IDEAS INTO ACTION GUIDEBOOKS

Aimed at managers and executives who are concerned with their own and others' development, each guidebook in this series gives specific advice on how to complete a developmental task or solve a leadership problem.

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Center for
Creative
Leadership®

The Ideas Into Action Guidebook Series

This series of guidebooks draws on the practical knowledge that the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) has generated in the course of more than thirty years of research and educational activity conducted in partnership with hundreds of thousands of managers and executives. Much of this knowledge is shared—in a way that is distinct from the typical university department, professional association, or consultancy. CCL is not simply a collection of individual experts, although the individual credentials of its staff are impressive; rather it is a community, with its members holding certain principles in common and working together to understand and generate practical responses to today's leadership and organizational challenges.

The purpose of the series is to provide managers with specific advice on how to complete a developmental task or solve a leadership challenge. In doing that, the series carries out CCL's mission to advance the understanding, practice, and development of leadership for the benefit of society worldwide. We think you will find the Ideas Into Action Guidebooks an important addition to your leadership toolkit.

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Executive Brief

This is a book about leading dispersed teams—teams that are made up of people who don't work in the same geographical area. Such teams don't often meet face-to-face. Usually their members are separated by time and distance, and they often bring different cultural views to bear on their work. Solving potential communication problems and devising processes for making decisions and managing conflict are challenges for leaders of dispersed teams. But before they can address those challenges, they need to analyze the support such a team will get from the organization as a whole. Dispersed teams are a necessary, strategic work unit in a world that continues to grow more interconnected every day. Guiding them to their full potential is a difficult challenge for even the most seasoned team leader.

What Is a Dispersed Team?

Simply put, a dispersed team has members who are not located in the same place. Like virtual teams or cross-functional teams, which can span organizational boundaries, dispersed teams also span boundaries. But their distances are measured by country, culture, and time zones. Their members come from different cultures and can bring with them radically different perspectives.

Dispersed teams bring together in one intriguing work unit the phenomena of human-technology interactions, teamwork, and communication among people separated by time, culture, and distance. Such features give rise to distinct challenges to effective performance and to the development of interpersonal relationships among team members.

Dispersed teams have gained some prominence in organizations because of the influence of international markets. Dispersed teams that span cultures, for example, can help ensure that an organization's products and services are a good fit with the cultures in which they are offered, which may be quite different from the originating culture. Coordinating the efforts of team members across differences and, at the same time, maintaining and boosting team effectiveness make up the challenge of leading a dispersed team.

Act Global, Think Local

Although quite different in makeup and operation, dispersed teams and local teams share some important characteristics. All successful teams need to be well designed. That includes defining the purpose

of the team, building in project management expertise, defining team member roles, and setting a clear direction toward completing assigned work. Perhaps most important, there must be clear and measurable goals and objectives that are understood by all members. To be effective, both kinds of teams have to coordinate and interweave a series of complex tasks.

The importance of team composition is another shared characteristic. Leaders pay careful attention to individual and team-level attributes and how they combine to form the team. Those attributes include things such as competence, the desire to work on a team, and whether members have similar jobs and interests.

Teamwork and trust are other attributes essential to both dispersed and local teams. On effective teams, members work together on tasks. Communication—sending, receiving, and interpreting information—and interpersonal relationships play a large part in determining the success of both kinds of teams. Both kinds meet regularly to report progress and refine tactics.

If dispersed and local teams are so similar, you might ask why it takes special attention to lead a dispersed team. The answer lies in their differences, which paradoxically can appear in the same areas as their similarities. When it comes to team design and structure, for example, scheduling difficulties can create significant project management challenges. Timelines and agendas, budgets, physical distance, time differences, and other factors can affect team member roles and make it more difficult to maintain a clear direction.

Differences in team composition also come into play. Because the members of dispersed teams have greater cultural differences, more awareness and tolerance are required when it comes to interpersonal relations. Without that awareness and tolerance, teamwork and trust are adversely affected, making it more difficult for the team to communicate and make decisions.

> ### Membership and Trust
>
> Leaders who promote a strong sense of membership in their dispersed teams go a long way toward developing trust among the members. Veterans of dispersed teams mention several tactics leaders can adopt to create a sense of membership.
>
> - Keep the team informed of long-term organizational changes.
> - Ask the team for input on critical organizational issues.
> - Make time for team-building activities.
> - Encourage personal contact and communication among all members.
> - Hold face-to-face or virtual meetings.

Leadership That Exploits Advantages

Dispersed teams require more direct and careful maintenance than local teams to reach their full potential. Team leaders who pay attention to the pluses and minuses of dispersed teams can design tactics and techniques that address specific concerns and increase team effectiveness. For example, one advantage enjoyed by dispersed teams is that they can work around the clock. Members on one side of the world can read email, respond to problems, and get back to their counterparts on the other side of the world before their workday begins.

Dispersed teams can also be a richer source of organizational innovation than local teams. A larger perspective helps dispersed teams solve problems quickly. Insights from colleagues around the world bring new dimensions to the work. Members can draw on cultural differences to access and understand viewpoints and opinions of others, which may, for example, influence how products and services are delivered to clients. Dispersed teams are able

to gather information and feed solutions to the organization that might otherwise be unavailable or take too much time to obtain.

On an individual level, members of dispersed teams enjoy some advantages over their counterparts serving on local teams. For example, as members learn about cultural differences through their work with others, they can develop more agile emotional competencies that enhance all of their work relationships. Members also gain international business knowledge and build resiliency by expanding their personal and professional networks. They gain a sense of empowerment through the autonomy that often accompanies the responsibility of serving on a dispersed team.

Leadership That Mitigates Disadvantages

As powerful as these group and individual advantages are, without effective leadership they can be undermined by disadvantages common to dispersed teams. The most significant disadvantages fall into two categories: problems with communication processes and problems with project management systems.

Leaders of dispersed teams need to be aware that communication skills are critically important to their team's effectiveness. The opportunities for misunderstandings (communicating in different languages and from the perspectives of different cultures remains problematic) are far greater on a dispersed team than on a local one. Communication problems are exacerbated by the lack of face-to-face contact and an absence or severe reduction of nonverbal signs (body language is a major information conduit between people). Correspondence by email and phone can leave out a lot of fine points and leave the team grappling with generalities and abstractions.

Further, dispersed teams face significant difficulty sharing information inside the group and with those outside if its members move into and out of the team. Local teams can depend on the

Dispersed Team Members Have a Love-Hate Relationship

Dispersed team members love . . .	but they hate . . .
new communication technology	technology breakdowns or not knowing how to use it
exposure to and learning from new ideas and methods	not understanding how something works at a different site
learning about different cultures	misunderstandings that result from speaking different languages
being able to travel to interesting sites and countries	the travel time and lengthy meetings they have once or twice a year
that they are capable of 24-hour problem solving and customer response	that they are expected to be available to respond to the customer around the clock
the autonomy—no one looking over your shoulder	feeling out of the loop and isolated

organization's bench strength to recruit and develop new members, but dispersed teams often require a more selective recruitment process. Some organizations may assign people to dispersed teams as a developmental opportunity and give only second thought to the skills and attributes they bring to the team.

Project management is also a difficult challenge for leaders of dispersed teams. As the distance between members grows, it becomes more difficult to schedule dates and times for meetings. Coordinating the team's effort is harder than it is for local teams. Many organizations don't provide strong enough support for dispersed teams, which need a more robust infrastructure than

local teams in order to counter the effects of distance, time, and culture. Members can often feel as though there are no decision-making capabilities, no authority, too much politicking with internal stakeholders, and too little attention paid to outside stakeholders like clients and customers.

Launching a Dispersed Team

Every dispersed team starts out with a purpose—a problem or new product or other project that needs the support of a worldwide team. But as with more traditional local teams, effectiveness doesn't just happen. Right from the start, it's important for leaders to consider two critical issues. The first of those is the readiness of the organization to launch and support such a team to the extent that it can be successful. The second is the setup and implementation of the team's first meeting. That first meeting may be the leader's most important step toward promoting membership and trust, establishing communication channels, and laying the groundwork for managing the team's tasks.

Assessing Readiness

A thoughtful and detailed analysis can help you determine whether your organization can support a dispersed team. That support includes structural issues such as communication tools and reward systems, as well as cultural issues such as a willingness to innovate and openness to different perspectives. Leaders who take on the responsibility of a dispersed team can often pursue this analysis by asking questions such as these:

- What best practices do the organization's current teams (local and dispersed) exhibit?

- Are lower-level employees empowered to make decisions?

- What attitudes toward change are found in the organization?

- Are there human resource policies in place to deal with recognizing and rewarding individual team members and entire teams?

- Are there policies in place to help expatriates and others working from a distance deal with feelings of not being included, isolation, and low morale?

- Can the organization provide and support stable, user-friendly communication technology at each site where team members work?

- Can the organization help to find potential members who are motivated, self-managing, comfortable with technology, and comfortable in a dispersed environment, and who have good project management and communication skills?

These are just some of the questions leaders should ask before launching a dispersed team.

As a guide to your own analysis, the checklist on pages 14–20 will help you measure your organization's readiness in these areas. To get the best results from the checklist, consult with organizational stakeholders (those people in the organization with an interest in the team's success) to determine whether all the planning and preparation has been done.

Dispersed Team Readiness Checklist

Using this checklist, measure your organization's readiness to form and launch a dispersed team that will be connected remotely and whose members can interact face-to-face only on a limited basis. The checklist can help you recognize weak points in the design and support of your team and reinforce its strengths. It's not necessary that you have all "Yes" responses before you launch a dispersed team or before you take on the challenge of leading one. However, the fewer "No" responses you have, the better positioned the team will be to realize its potential.

The checklist is divided into two sections. Section 1 covers the basics of forming and launching a dispersed team and serves as a quick assessment of team structure and support. Section 2 adds items that are key to a properly functioning dispersed team. This section can help you address potential problems early on.

Start with Section 1. Read the introductory explanation and checklist statement. For each statement check the box that describes the situation as it is. Don't answer in terms of how you would like the team or organization to be or how you think it should be.

Section 1: Basics

Organizational planning and support.
For a dispersed team to succeed, the organization needs to have thoroughly planned for its launch and have resources and support in place.

The organization has a clearly developed and articulated business strategy that calls for a dispersed team.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The team enjoys unequivocal support from the top of the organization.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The organization has a basic understanding of team concepts and processes, and how they play out in dispersed teams.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The organization is willing to invest money so that members can travel for face-to-face meeting time during its start-up and launch phases.	Yes ☐ No ☐

The organization has established a means of monitoring the long-term organizational change that results from launching a dispersed team.	Yes ☐ No ☐

If the use of dispersed teams is an organization-wide strategy, consider the following two items:

The organization can link its dispersed teams to each other and to its ongoing work.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The organization has visited or studied other organizations with dispersed teams to determine best practices.	Yes ☐ No ☐

SECTION 2: KEYS TO EFFECTIVE DISPERSED TEAMS

Purpose, goals, objectives, tasks, roles, authority, timelines, and performance measurement and learning systems.

For a dispersed team to be successful, it must have a sense of why it exists (purpose) and what it's trying to do (goals, objectives, tasks). Roles and authority must be carefully defined, and there must be timelines and performance measurement and learning systems.

Purpose.

The team has a clear mandate.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The team can articulate its purpose.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The members can answer the question, What are we going to do?	Yes ☐ No ☐
The team's purpose stretches its capabilities.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The members can answer the question, What is our final product or outcome?	Yes ☐ No ☐

Goals and objectives.

The team can set up cooperative goals at the beginning.	Yes ☐ No ☐
Each goal has at least one objective, and each objective is linked to at least one task.	Yes ☐ No ☐

The team can articulate specific goals.	Yes ☐	No ☐

Tasks.

The team has a set of interdependent tasks designed to connect goals with outcomes.	Yes ☐	No ☐
Responsibilities have been defined, and relationships between members and tasks have been developed.	Yes ☐	No ☐
The team is assigned collective responsibility for its results.	Yes ☐	No ☐
The team has clarified which tasks and decisions need all members' input and which do not.	Yes ☐	No ☐

Roles.

A procedure is in place for each member to get to know the other members' functional areas and what they contribute to the team.	Yes ☐	No ☐

The team has a leader or member who can play each of the following basic roles:

logistics coordinator (someone who can schedule team meetings, conference calls, and other activities related to the team's work)	Yes ☐	No ☐
task monitor (someone who can ensure that the team stays focused on the work it needs to complete)	Yes ☐	No ☐
process facilitator (someone who focuses on how the team's work gets completed by guiding the team in exploring different approaches and strategies)	Yes ☐	No ☐
team communicator (someone who is responsible for ensuring that all information related to the team's work—content and process—is disseminated to all members)	Yes ☐	No ☐

executive champion (someone outside the team who has a vested interest in seeing the team succeed and is willing to help obtain needed resources, overcome organizational barriers, and provide guidance on how to approach and complete the team's work)	Yes ☐ No ☐
technology coordinator (someone who is knowledge-able and capable of training team members in the use of all connective technology available to the group.)	Yes ☐ No ☐
social coordinator (someone who addresses the social needs of the team, such as helping build collaboration and trust among team members)	Yes ☐ No ☐

Authority.

The team can decide how to meet stakeholder demands without first receiving special authorization.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The team can decide what actions to take, and when, without first receiving special authorization.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The team can decide whether to change its strategy and tactics, if necessary, to meet stakeholder demands without first receiving special authorization.	Yes ☐ No ☐

Timelines.

The delivery dates for the team's results are set.	Yes ☐ No ☐
The team has a calendar with delivery dates, deadlines, and other milestones clearly spelled out.	Yes ☐ No ☐
There are strict guidelines for managing the team's project.	Yes ☐ No ☐

Performance measurement and learning systems.

There is a credible, specific performance measurement system for appraising progress, providing feedback, and allocating rewards.　　Yes ☐　No ☐

For monetary rewards, more than 80 percent is available only for team rewards, not for individual awards.　　Yes ☐　No ☐

The team plans to celebrate milestones and the conclusion of its project.　　Yes ☐　No ☐

A process is in place for assessing and sharing with other managers and teams what is learned from the project.　　Yes ☐　No ☐

Qualities and skills of team leaders and members.
For a dispersed team to be successful, it must have the right people (selected for the skills and attributes they bring to bear on the team's work) and be the right size (enough people to do the work, but not so many that roles and responsibilities are duplicated). Team members include the people on the core team, people in the organization who act as a kind of extension of the team, and external partners or experts and support people who can be recruited as needed.

The dispersed team has members who . . .

are willing to work in a team environment	Yes ☐	No ☐
are good self-starters and are self-directed	Yes ☐	No ☐
are highly motivated	Yes ☐	No ☐
have tolerance for the unexpected	Yes ☐	No ☐
are open to experimentation	Yes ☐	No ☐
are curious and exploratory	Yes ☐	No ☐
seek out relevant information	Yes ☐	No ☐

are willing to learn new technologies	Yes ☐	No ☐
are able and willing to play multiple roles	Yes ☐	No ☐
are able to share the leadership and take a leadership role at different times in the course of the team's work	Yes ☐	No ☐
can understand the perspective of others	Yes ☐	No ☐
enjoy working collaboratively	Yes ☐	No ☐
are careful listeners	Yes ☐	No ☐
are risk takers	Yes ☐	No ☐
can build on the ideas of others	Yes ☐	No ☐
are cross-culturally adaptable	Yes ☐	No ☐

Technology and communication.
A successful dispersed team uses a mix of technology to maintain excellent communication links among its members. These links enable interactions that spawn and maintain relationships.

Your organization has the following technology in place for supporting dispersed teams:

phone	Yes ☐	No ☐
email	Yes ☐	No ☐
collaborative software (for example, Google Docs or Microsoft Teams)	Yes ☐	No ☐
intranet	Yes ☐	No ☐
internet	Yes ☐	No ☐
remote conferencing software capabilities (for example, Zoom, Skype, WebEx)	Yes ☐	No ☐

You and your team have . . .

document management	Yes ☐	No ☐
group calendar and scheduling	Yes ☐	No ☐
project management	Yes ☐	No ☐
communication	Yes ☐	No ☐
knowledge management	Yes ☐	No ☐
If the team can't meet face-to-face during its start-up phase, there is remote conferencing software available for this critical stage.	Yes ☐	No ☐
The team's home base has been identified with mailing and email addresses, as well as telephone numbers.	Yes ☐	No ☐
You have contact information (phone, email address) for all team members.	Yes ☐	No ☐
You have collected information that lists in priority order each team member's preferred mode of communication.	Yes ☐	No ☐
Members have access to all information relevant to aligning with the team's purpose and achieving its goals.	Yes ☐	No ☐
Team communications will be shared as an aid to project management and for orienting new members.	Yes ☐	No ☐
Members will be able to make quick decisions and coordinate their actions as a result of the information distribution process.	Yes ☐	No ☐
There is support to help members learn how to use the technology available to the team.	Yes ☐	No ☐

Meeting for the First Time

It's impossible to overstate the importance of a dispersed team's first meeting. A team with members separated by time, distance, and culture has only a brief window for clarifying goals, building membership camaraderie, and securing member commitment to the team. The leader of a dispersed team should pay careful attention to planning and running its first meeting.

If possible, the team's first meeting should be face-to-face. It's unlikely that the leader of a newly formed dispersed team will have the resources necessary to bring all members together for sophisticated team-building events (such as ropes courses or white-water rafting). Getting members together for a simpler meet-and-greet affair is probably within reach of most if not all team leaders. Given that situation, it is possible for you to create an effective first meeting in which members discuss the issues involved in their working together, how their work aligns with the organization's goals, and how they might interact with one another more effectively.

An effective first meeting will have a positive impact on subsequent face-to-face and electronic meetings because it sets the stage for collaboration. When members know one another personally, it is easier for them to rely on one another. If a dispersed team is able to gather in person for its first meeting, its work is less likely to be negatively affected by time zone differences. Members who have had the opportunity to meet in person are more likely to have conflict about strategic issues rather than personal ones, which also benefits team performance. Conflict about how to address challenges and tasks can actually create more ideas and new perspectives, but personal conflicts can make a team less effective because attention is drawn away from the work and directed toward rivalries and animosity. Managing those conflicts is an important skill for team leaders to have, but distance and difference make personal conflicts difficult to resolve.

For subsequent meetings, consider these additional recommendations:

Select an appropriate technology that matches the meeting's purpose. For example, if the purpose is to share information, it may not be necessary for all members to participate at the same time and you could get needed responses by email. If the purpose is more time sensitive, you may need to use voice communication (such as phone) or remote conferencing software. Choose the simplest technical solution—the purpose of technology is to serve the team, not to dominate it. Don't try out new technology during an important, time-critical session. Test new technologyyourself before you subject the team to it.

Take time zones into account when scheduling a meeting of a dispersed team. This can be tricky if, for example, you have people in North America, Europe, and Asia. If you can't avoid asking a member to attend a meeting in the middle of the night, arrange the meeting schedule so that inconvenience rotates among members.

Be aware that some team members may not be fully participating. Social status, culture, language problems, differences in time, and distance may make it difficult for some team members to participate fully. Make sure the team understands that everyone is expected to contribute, and find alternative methods of participating if necessary.

Leading a Dispersed Team

Effective teams have a clear purpose, an empowering team structure, strong organizational support, capable internal relationships, well-tended external relationships, and efficient information management. These characteristics are necessary for both local and

dispersed teams. But even if you have extensive experience leading teams at the local level, taking on that responsibility for a dispersed team raises uniquely difficult challenges. Once a dispersed team is established, a leader who wants to ensure the team's success needs to focus on three specific attributes of teamwork: communication and information sharing, decision making, and conflict resolution.

Communication and Information Sharing

Dispersed teams require greater amounts of information and more frequent communication than local teams. As the leader of such a team, direct special attention to both formal and informal communication. Help your team establish and agree upon lines of communication, when to communicate, and how to communicate. Design a way for the team to document and store its communication so that it can create a team history. Dispersed teams can use any number of communication media, including email, software that enables group decision making, and remote conferencing software. The members of your dispersed team should understand the capabilities of each communication tool and which one is best suited to which kind of information-sharing task. In addition, the team should establish guidelines and procedures for the use of the tools.

The worksheet on page 24 will help you review and plan the communication options for your dispersed team. Use it each time you add or change members, each time you add or change a communication tool, and periodically to ensure that all team members recognize the options available.

Decision Making

Whether practiced locally or globally, teamwork boils down to people working together to make decisions. High-performing teams have effective decision-making processes in place. They

Dispersed Team Communication Planner

Complete a worksheet like the one below as a team activity. Use it to identify the types of information that will have to be communicated to and between team members. In the Subject column, list all of the different subjects that might have to be communicated to members of the team. Provide an example of the subject and record it in the Example column. Assign a priority to the subject using the scale at the bottom of the worksheet and record that in the Priority column. Finally, using the list at the bottom of the worksheet, determine the technology that will be used to communicate the information and the responses to that information, and record that in the Technology column.

The following is a sample of how a dispersed team might respond. Use it to create a worksheet for your own team.

Subject	Example	Priority	Technology (Send & Respond)
meeting	schedule meeting	medium priority	email
decision	need input before final decision made	medium to high priority	email or phone
customer problem	customer dissatisfied with order	urgent	phone
staffing changes	announcement of new executive assignment	FYI	email or interoffice mail

Priority Legend*
urgent—respond immediately
high priority—respond within 24 hours
low priority—respond within two weeks
FYI—no response needed

*Customize this legend to fit your team's specific needs.

Technology Choices*
face-to-face
phone or voice mail
email or collaborative software
interoffice mail or postal service
team meeting (face-to-face or virtual)

*Customize these choices to fit your team's specific needs.

know when the whole team needs to make a decision, and they know when the team leader or a small group within the team can make a decision. Members understand and accept the decisions made because they understand and accept the process. But those processes don't just spring up from the ground. Facilitating effective decision making on a team is a primary challenge for every team leader. When it comes to leading a dispersed team, that challenge becomes exceedingly complex because of the difficulty in bringing the team together.

Separation by distance, time, and culture makes it harder to build consensus and understanding for the team's decision-making process. If the whole team needs to decide on an action, for example, that decision might be delayed because it takes planning to set up a virtual meeting or to bring members together face-to-face. If the team leader or a smaller group of members makes a decision, it's possible that it will be misunderstood because of language or cultural divisions.

The worksheet on page 26 will help you build a decision-making process for your dispersed team. Use it with your team to formalize how certain decisions are to be made and communicated to members. Review this worksheet periodically to ensure that all members recognize and understand how the team makes and communicates decisions.

Conflict Resolution

Almost invariably, a dispersed team experiences some type of interpersonal conflict among its members. In that way it is much the same as any local team. But depending upon how conflict is managed (or not managed), it can be either a positive or negative influence on team effectiveness. For dispersed teams, it is difficult to bring conflict out into the open for discussion and resolve the issues that give rise to it because members are separated by dis-

Dispersed Team Decision-Making Worksheet

Complete a worksheet like the one below as a team activity. Use it to identify specific decisions the team will have to make, more general types of decisions that are likely to occur, who is responsible for making the decision, whether the decision needs to be shared with the team, and if it does, how it will be shared with the team (or people outside the team). In the Decision column, list all of the different types of decisions that will be made. Provide an example of the decision and record it in the Example column. Determine who will be responsible for making the decision by using the legend at the bottom of the worksheet. Record the responsible person in the By Whom column. Finally, referring again to the legend at the bottom of the worksheet, determine the manner in which your team will communicate its decision and gather responses to it. Record the answer in the Notification column.

The following is a sample of how a dispersed team might respond. Use it to create a worksheet for your own team.

Decision	Example	By Whom	Notification
budget expenditure	office supplies	individual team member	no notification required
budget expenditure	travel expense for team meeting	team leader and selected members	phone (conference call)
budget expenditure	budget cutback	team leader	email

*Decision Maker**
team leader
team leader with input from team
team leader and selected members
entire team
individual team member
referred to senior management

Customize these identities to fit your team's specific needs.

*Decision Communication**
face-to-face or virtual team meeting
phone or voice mail
email or collaborative software
interoffice mail or postal service
virtual team meeting
no notification required

Customize these descriptions to fit your team's specific needs.

tance and time, and possibly by cultural differences as well. With-out the face-to-face immediacy often enjoyed by local teams, con-flict in a dispersed team can remain hidden or grow unchecked.

As the team's leader, you may be the only member who is willing to address an evolving conflict and work to resolve it. It's up to you to pay attention to the team's evolving notions about dealing with conflict and to guide its growth when necessary by asking members to look at how their methods of handling disagree-ments benefit or harm the team's performance. By reviewing the common components of conflict with your team and by planning a process for managing conflicts as they occur, you can reduce the negative consequences and emphasize the positive outcomes of conflict.

The worksheet on page 28 will help you build awareness about conflict among team members, and it can guide them toward processes that minimize and resolve unproductive disagreements. Review this worksheet periodically as your team develops its perspectives and processes for managing conflict.

Dispersed Teams: Leadership Challenges for an Interconnected World

The way organizations conduct business has changed dramatically, shifting from regional enterprises to global markets. Progress reports arrive from remote work locations in real time. Information is its own currency. Communication and computer technologies enable and encourage this worldwide shift, and workers, team leaders, and executives will find it more likely than ever that they will be called on to collaborate with associates no matter where on earth they are located. Such a world suggests that teams can be-

Dispersed Team Conflict Management Worksheet

First, have team members discuss their feelings about conflict. To guide the process, use a worksheet like the one below. Have members record their responses in the Views on Conflict section. Next, ask them to identify common kinds of conflict and to describe their experiences (not necessarily while serving on the current team) in those situations. They can use the Type of Conflict and Experience columns to record their responses. The next step is for the team to agree on which types of conflict the whole team will address and which ones will be resolved privately. Whose responsibility is it to address each type of conflict? Have members record the team's response in the Resolution Responsibility column.

Views on Conflict

The time I felt best about conflict was when . . .

The time I felt worst about conflict was when . . .

Type of Conflict	Experience	Resolution Responsibility
Facts. Conflicting views or interpretations of facts can be identified, confirmed, and resolved.		
Goals, tactics, and strategy. Conflicting opinions about processes and outcomes can be identified, discussed, and negotiated.		
Personal preferences. Differences in approach, viewpoints, and ideals can be identified, addressed, understood, and negotiated.		

Type of Conflict	Experience	Resolution Responsibility
Values. Conflicting, closely held personal values can be difficult to surface and resolve.		

come global entities and deliver the high performance and innovation that organizations expect from more traditional local teams.

The similarities between dispersed teams and local teams suggest that organizations and team leaders can use what they already know about teams to form and manage them successfully. But leading a dispersed team presents unique challenges. If organizations aren't sure about why or how to use dispersed teams or if they don't have the resources to back them properly with the right technology, people, and training, they won't realize the full potential of these collaborative units.

Suggested Readings

Harrington-Mackin, D. (1994). *The team building tool kit: Tips, tactics, and rules for effective workplace teams.* New York: American Management Association.

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Prince, D. W., & Hoppe, M. H. (2000). *Communicating across cultures.* Greensboro, NC: Center for Creative Leadership.

Sessa, V. I., Hansen, M. C., Kossler, M. E., & Prestridge, S. (2001). Dispersed teams need to get off on the right foot. *Leadership in Action, 21*(2), 14–18.

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Background

Since 1990, the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL) has worked with many organizations and teams through its educational initiatives. The goal of these initiatives is to help participants develop team management skills through experience with practical teamoriented applications. These developmental experiences provide research-based information about how high-performance teams work. They cover such areas as team member selection, crosscultural differences in teams, and resolving team conflict.

In addition to providing team-oriented educational programs and customized interventions, CCL launched in 1996 a research project into the work and performance of geographically dispersed teams. Since 1997, various CCL faculty members have presented their findings and analyses at conferences and through various publications. CCL continues to develop its understanding of teams—how they can be led more effectively, how they can best achieve organizational goals, and how they can be created and maintained for improved results. Its goal is to pass that understanding on to team leaders and their organizations so that teams can meet and even surpass performance expectations.

Key Point Summary

Dispersed teams have members who are not in the same place; they come from different countries, cultures, and time zones.

Like local teams, dispersed teams need a well-planned design and structure, the right composition, and teamwork and trust. But there are significant differences between dispersed and local teams, and leaders of dispersed teams must pay special attention to those

differences in order to exploit the advantages of dispersed teams while mitigating their disadvantages.

Before launching a dispersed team, it's important to assess the organization's readiness to support it. To succeed, a dispersed team needs thorough planning and adequate support. It must have a defined purpose, clear and measurable goals and objectives, and tasks that require members to work together. Roles and authority must be carefully defined, and there must be timelines and performance measurement and learning systems. The team must have the right people and be the right size. The technology to maintain communication among members is essential.

If you determine that your organization is ready to launch a dispersed team, the next step is to carefully plan its first meeting. If at all possible, the first meeting should be face-to-face, giving the members the opportunity to get to know each other personally and thereby setting the stage for collaboration.

Once a dispersed team has been launched, there are three specific attributes of teamwork that must be emphasized: communication and information sharing, decision making, and conflict resolution. Since good communication is so important to a dispersed team, each member should understand the capabilities of each communication tool and which one is best suited to which kind of information-sharing task. Facilitating effective decision making is a complex challenge for the leader of a dispersed team; the team must formalize how decisions are to be made and communicated to the members. And since a dispersed team almost invariably experiences some type of interpersonal conflict, the leader must guide the team in planning a process for managing conflicts as they occur.

Dispersed teams present unique challenges. Organizations need to prepare for and support them properly to realize their full potential.

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Leading Dispersed Teams

Dispersed teams have members in different countries, cultures, and time zones. Such teams share some important characteristics with local teams, but they also present unique challenges. Organizations need to prepare for and support them properly to realize their full potential.

LEAD CONTRIBUTORS

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The Center for Creative Leadership is an international, nonprofit educational institution whose mission is to advance the understanding, practice, and development of leadership for the benefit of society worldwide. We conduct research, produce publications, and provide a broad variety of educational programs and products to leaders and organizations in the public, corporate, and nonprofit sectors.

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