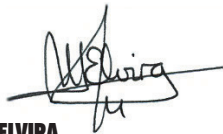


Leading Virtual Teams



MARTA ELVIRA

Professor of Strategic Management and Managing People in Organizations and holder of the Puig Chair of Global Leadership Development, IESE.

The completion of Apple's new headquarters marks the long-awaited realization of **Steve Jobs'** final design dream. The ring-shaped building – officially called 'Apple Campus 2' but nicknamed 'the Spaceship' for looking like a giant UFO – is an architectural wonder befitting of the makers of the iPhone, and featuring curved glass and transparent pods in place of traditional walled offices. In conceiving a space for more than 12,000 employees, "the achievement is to make a building where so many people can connect and collaborate," Apple design chief **Jonathan Ive** told *Wired* magazine.

Having pushed the boundaries of social collaboration with tech, Apple aims to do the same with office space. And Apple isn't alone: Facebook, Cisco, BMW and Corning have also redesigned their offices to maximize team performance. A common feature of all these efforts is the desire to enhance personal interactions and the "accidental mingling" from which creativity and innovation spring.

With ever-growing globalization and a wider range of flexible work options, the challenge of managing geographically dispersed, virtual teams to ensure performance is more urgent than ever. In ongoing research with **Isabel Villamor** (MBA '16), Ph.D. student of Management at George Washington University, we have detected five aspects that global professionals should prioritize:

1 Self-leadership. Self-leadership has been shown to yield positive results in nearly every context, but even more so in situations with high levels of team dispersion. Empowering leadership sets guidelines and then delegates leadership functions across team members. However, the more that leaders empower their teams and promote self-leadership, the more important it becomes to support that freedom. Performance data-gathering tools, peer reviews and group communication archives can help in this regard.

2 Trust. For virtual teams, a lack of familiarity with each other, owing to fewer social interactions, may translate into lower levels of trust. For this reason, leaders should establish norms such as predictable communication and quick response times – and track them to make sure they are being adhered to.

3 Cultural intelligence. Virtual teams are often formed to leverage the knowledge of experts from different locations. This means geographically dispersed teams are culturally diverse, by nature. As such, leaders need to encourage a global mindset and cultural intelligence on three levels: awareness of different cultural norms; understanding different values, attitudes and practices; and exercising proper verbal and nonverbal behavior during intercultural interactions. In other words, leaders need to use mind, body and heart when heading global teams – not just knowing and doing what is culturally appropriate, but respecting others' feelings in the process.

4 Detail-orientation. Leaders must pay attention to the details of team dynamics, as conflicts can arise from the slightest things. At the start of a project, teammates should be introduced, expectations set and behavior guidelines given, to reinforce the self-leadership and trust mentioned earlier.

Leaders should regularly touch base with remote teams, and celebrate milestones with them. Doing this together keeps people motivated and reduces feelings of isolation. If inheriting a virtual team, study how things went before, in order to improve in the future. Even with virtual teams, there needs to be at least one face-to-face meeting: any of the previously mentioned moments could provide the perfect excuse for that to happen.

5 Right fit. Research confirms that one bad apple can indeed spoil the bunch, which is why having the right team members in place is critical. Leaders should consider individual preferences for working virtually, encourage open dialogue and use positive reinforcement to affirm desired practices. Current team members can help with the recruitment of new members: this has the added benefit of facilitating the integration of those new members.

Not all virtual teams have the benefit of a state-of-the-art corporate setting like that of Apple. But with the right leadership – which pays careful attention to the five aspects listed here – companies can enjoy collaborations that are just as successful. Achieving corporate objectives is possible, no matter the constraints of time and space.

First published: Elvira, M. "Leading Virtual Teams". *IESE Insight*, issue 34 (2017), pp.5