Is Your Virtual Open Door Policy Working?

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How effective are your communication channels with your virtual team? Does bad news come to you quickly or are you often surprised?   Have you invested in creating effective communication channels with your virtual team?

Recently Surinder Kahai and I started the interview phase of our book writing process (on leading virtually across cultures) as a means of gathering stories of team leaders who successfully lead virtual teams.   Although we are in the early stages of the interview phase, we have already found an important recurring theme: successful leaders *create* communication channels instead of hoping effective communication will happen.

Although leadership style and approach differ, most leaders want to know bad news quickly and want their employees to offer (and implement) solutions. For onsite teams, leaders offer an open door policy, or micro manage to stay on top of issues. However, how does this work when your team is virtual and can't see when your door is open. How do you open a virtual door?

From our interviews, we learned that successful leaders of virtual teams consciously create a communication channel with employees who are not co-located. To establish the connection, they schedule a regular meeting with each team member to talk about anything – what is going well, happenings in the company, coaching for development, etc. As one leader told us, 'as a result of our regular meetings, when issues arise the employee feels the connection already exists and they can easily let me know'.

During these regularly scheduled meetings, the employee and the leader are doing more than just exchanging information. They are creating social capital: building trust, understanding each other's preferences, exploring and confirming their shared commitments. Social capital is critical for collaboration, especially with knowledge professionals. Social capital refers to the trust, connection, reciprocity and affinity between people and within teams. How willing are you to share information with someone you don't trust? Do you help people who do not help you? Now imagine your willingness if the person is sitting in another location.

Most managers and leaders I speak with have not yet created these channels of communication. They organize regular meetings, verify the agenda, and hope the employees contact them whenever something goes wrong. However, the barriers are often higher than managers think and without a channel in place, only the brave, risk-taking employee will endeavor to make the contact.   Invest the time now in the relationship, open your virtual door, and the information will follow.