

TRAINERS CORNER

Managing from a distance: more than just technology

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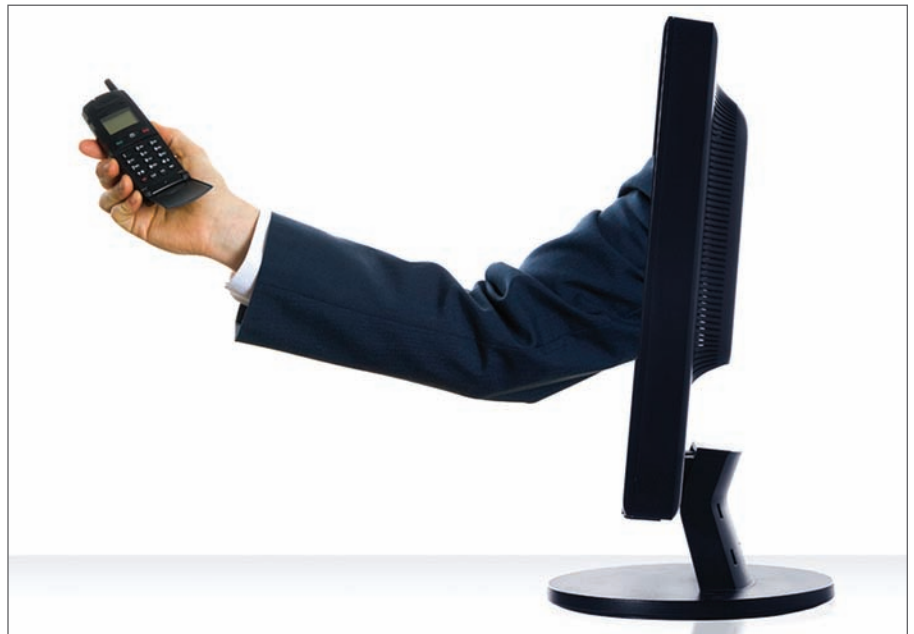
HAVE YOU EVER called a direct report on the phone and given him precise instructions, only to find later that he did not follow through on what you requested? Or have you endured a "30-minute" videoconference meeting that lasted two hours, only to close with no resolution? If so, then welcome to the exciting world of remote communication and management. Virtually anywhere you can find people communicating and managing from a distance. You can also find missed information, poor accountability, a lack of follow-through and a good deal of frustration.

Advances in communication technologies over the past decade have had a significant impact on the oil and gas industry. To date, however, most of us have been slow to acknowledge that effective remote management requires not only communication technologies but also a special set of skills and an understanding of how communication works when it is conducted through teleconferencing, videoconferencing, e-mail and the like.

The oil and gas industry is trying to resolve this problem by training employees to recognize and respond to the challenges of communicating and managing remotely.

Remote communication carries many inherent challenges, not the least of which is the challenge of accurately conveying the intent of your message. The little ways that you communicate your intent in face-to-face communication are often so subtle and habitual that you are not even aware of them. A slight twist of the lip transforms a harmless comment into a sarcastic criticism. A momentary glance in one direction indicates the object to which you are referring. But when communication takes place over telephone or e-mail, these critical expressions aren't there.

All too often, we go about our business communicating as normal, unaware that an essential part of our message will never reach our audience. And we wonder why that direct report failed to do exactly what we told him over the phone.



Technology advances have enabled remote communication and management, but to be effective, employees also need to understand the challenges of remote communication.

Are we doomed to sacrifice the clarity of our messages for the operational benefits of managing from a distance? Fortunately, the answer is no, but it will require specialized training, which can pass on lessons learned by observing some of the best remote communicators and identifying best practices. For example, when the best communicators need to clarify the intent of their words while communicating from a distance, they take care to state in sufficient detail why they are saying what they are saying.

The value of this best practice was made apparent during a classroom exercise to teach participants how to communicate effectively using e-mail. Each participant was given one piece of a larger problem, then told to communicate with one another to solve the whole problem. The catch, however, was that they could not speak; rather, they had to use pens and sticky notes to communicate.

One participant, after finishing her portion of the problem, approached her co-worker and scribbled the note, "What's your problem?" to which the co-worker responded with an offended expression on his face. "Nothing! What's your problem!" Obviously, the intent of the original message was not conveyed. If she had

written instead, "What's your problem? I would like to see how it fits with the one I'm working on," the co-worker would have understood her intent. Explaining why you are saying what you are saying is one of many things that the "best" do when communicating remotely.

Clearly, there are many other challenges and best practices that must be addressed during training to bring about the desired results. In general, a three-part solution is recommended when training people to handle the challenges of remote communication: (1) provide personnel with a clear understanding of the way that face-to-face communication works so that they can (2) identify the specific barriers posed by the remote communication media that they use daily, which sets the stage for them to (3) acquire the appropriate skills that will allow them to overcome those barriers.

This approach not only enables employees to diagnose problems that arise in their daily communications, it also equips them with skills to overcome those problems quickly and effectively.

The RAD Group is an international organizational development consulting firm with over 25 years of experience helping organizations in the oil and gas industry. ♪