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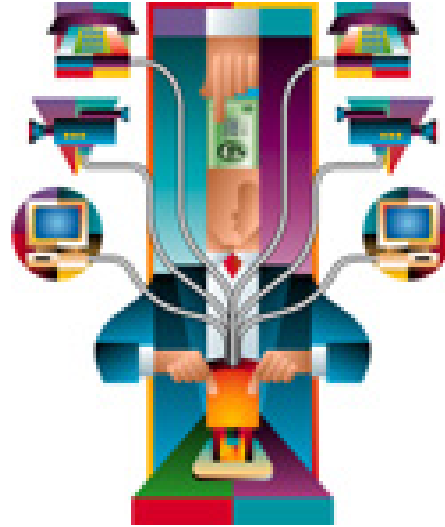
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Long Distance Leadership

By [Christine Duckworth](#)

Technology has created a network of faceless workers--and new paradigms for leadership.



In the 1970s, Charlie and his Angels were isolated to the imaginary world of television. The idea of an off-site leader delegating, motivating, and maintaining relationships by speaker phone was entertaining, but unrealistic. Today, the fictitious Charlie has been replaced by real life long-distance leaders using conference calls, email, fax, and videoconferencing to deliver their messages to employees in other offices, states, and countries.

Has technology created a new paradigm of leadership? How have leaders maintained their influence across the distance? What are the benefits and drawbacks of long-distance leadership? Five successful leaders share their experiences.

**Kelly Fairbairn,
President of PPS International
Greenville, South Carolina**

Fairbairn remembers a time not long ago when she would sit down and visit with each person in her office. Her leadership style was a hands-on approach that allowed her to stay in touch with office issues. Today,

the president of PPS International leads a group of twenty training consultants from New Jersey to Taiwan. Fairbairn believes that communication is the key to successful leadership, and that clear communication is even more critical in long distance work relationships. "A shared office creates a common context and understanding of issues. Information can be shared consistently and any misunderstandings can be cleared up quickly. When you're working across distances, information can fall through the cracks, people can read too much in a message, and timing can be off," she says. Geographic separation requires her to be more purposeful in her leadership role. "Communication is tactical and specific. I need very clear agreements with people on what will be done and how it will be done."

Can you still sit down and visit over the distance?

The distance and time zones have limited the amount of face time that Fairbairn values, but she still maintains a personal relationship with each consultant. Though she may see a consultant only two or three times per year, technology allows Fairbairn to stay in touch with each person on a regular basis. Phone, fax, and email are the most frequently-used communication tools in her office. When it comes to deciding which tool to use, she takes the lead from those who follow her. Many consultants rely on email to overcome time zone differences and to accommodate erratic travel schedules. Email allows Fairbairn to stay in touch with training sites as far away as India regardless of time zones and to deliver documents and responses immediately. While Fairbairn "loves technology" and the convenience of email, she recognizes the value of interpersonal, synchronous conversations. She tries to be available to those consultants who prefer telephone conversations.

Anytime, anywhere leadership

For Fairbairn, anytime, anywhere leadership has allowed her to choose her lifestyle and hometown, and allowed the consultants in her company to do the same. With the far-reaching powers of email, fax, and conference calls, Fairbairn is "no longer limited to talent in my town." This gives Fairbairn access to the best in the business from around the globe, which she

sees as an asset to both her company and her clients.

Fairbairn's key to successful long-distance leadership? "Communication is critical. Trust is essential. Select those who are trustworthy and have similar values."

Jim Webb
Managing Director of Aon Risk Services
Southfield, Michigan

Jim Webb believes that technology is a tool to communicate, not a substitute for leadership. While Webb uses fax, email, phones, and videoconferencing to get the job done, he prefers face-to-face communication. "You can't escape technology. We should use those tools and embrace them, but technology isn't a substitute for leadership. You don't see a football coach meeting with his players at half-time via videoconferencing."

Like Fairbairn, Webb is forced to be more structured when communicating via technology. He has adapted his casual, open communication style to overcome some of the inherent communication barriers of asynchronous messages. Webb contends that "technology can't replace the one-on-one relationship. Body language reflects so much of what a person is really thinking and feeling. You just can't get the whole picture over the phone or through email."

Good leadership is good relationships, according to Webb. If you want people to follow, you've got to build the relationship. Webb believes that "extraordinary performance is the result of an emotional bond between leaders and followers. Good leaders enable people to do more than they thought they were capable of doing." Webb makes a point of meeting face-to-face whenever possible to maintain the human element of leadership. "I want to know the people I work with. I want them to see me, to see the pictures in my office, to know that I'm a real person." In spite of geographical barriers, he tries to maintain a 'family-like' atmosphere for the 162 people he leads.

First Lieutenant Matt Rogers
54th Engineer Battalion, US Army

Bamberg, Germany

First Lieutenant Matt Rogers knows a few things about technology. As the S-4 Primary Logistics Officer of the 54th Engineer Battalion, Rogers has the responsibility of moving 250 vehicles and 450 officers and soldiers to strategic sites. With such cumbersome logistics, you might assume that Rogers has less time for building relationships. Yet, Lieutenant Rogers makes it a priority to build bonds with every one of the men and women he leads.

If I have a choice, I choose to be together

Unlike the associates of Fairbairn's international company, most of the army personnel under Rogers's leadership are on the post. Rogers sees centralization as a huge asset. "If I have a choice, I choose to be together. There are no real advantages to separation." Still, Rogers uses fax, phone, email and even FM radio to communicate throughout the day. "Email is useful when you have a lot of information that you need to convey quickly. (The receivers) can print it out, read it, and then come together and talk about it." Every morning at 6:30, the officers in his battalion get together to review events, plan strategies, and discuss issues. That's the time when emailed messages can be discussed in detail, misunderstandings can be clarified, and further planning can take place.

Rogers uses the phone and email to get in touch with officers on other posts throughout Europe. Often, it's not possible to meet in person during the planning stages of field training exercises. However, Rogers insists that it's crucial to make final arrangements face-to-face. "It's still important to meet in person and coordinate plans as a group. In face-to-face meetings, we tie up loose ends, address issues that come up, and brainstorm. That doesn't happen through email."

As a first Lieutenant, Rogers is accustomed to both giving and receiving orders. In both cases, he believes that physical presence is an important part of the message. "A leader can write a five-paragraph speech in a book to inspire his followers. Or he can give that speech in person. When the President of the United States comes to your post and you can see how intense and sincere he is, you're definitely more apt to fight for his cause." Rogers knows that physical

presence is important to motivate and reinforce the message. As a leader, he worries that email masks his soldiers' true state-of-mind. "I can't see tone in an email; I can't hear frustration. If I get an email, I'll pick up the phone or walk over to see the person so I can get the full message – not just the words."

When mixed messages are deadly

Rogers recognizes that he can't always have personal contact with his followers. Out in the field, three or four units are assigned to different strategic locations. Rogers stays in contact by FM radio, but is often frustrated by the shortcomings of long distance communication. If orders are interpreted differently at even one location, lives are at risk. Rogers explains that "When four units have a different understanding of the orders, you will have to recover from those actions. I get in the HMMV (humvee), drive to the location, and show them in person. When you're executing orders, and communication is critical, always go to them or ask them to report to you."

And what if you just can't get there in time?

Like Fairbairn, Rogers believes that trust is essential. And like Webb, Rogers builds trust through relationships. "Let them realize that you're not going to steer them wrong. They see I've been good to my word in the past. You need to prove you're there for them. Soldiers know when a leader is there for them and when a leader is there for himself. You can't give orders to run through bullets unless you've built that relationship. If you've run through bullets, they will follow you."

What if you're not dodging bullets?

Are there other ways to build relationships? Rogers tells a story of working with his mechanics on a tank chassis in the pouring rain. "They gave me the hardest job and it took me forever. I'm sure any one of them could have done it faster. I finished the job though, and they appreciated the help. More important, I gained their respect and trust."

Rogers's advice for long distance leaders? "Take the time to be with your followers. Leaders make excuses

and allow themselves to get carried away with work.Face-to-face contact will payoff tremendously."

Mary Lynn Pulley, Ph.D.
Senior faculty for the Center For Creative Leadership
Greensboro, North Carolina

Dr. Mary Lynn Pulley is guiding organizations through the shifting paradigms of long distance leadership. Leaders in the new century are faced with a complex set of challenges, according to Pulley. In the old economy, power and information were held securely, strategies were planned well in advance, and organizations moved steadily ahead. Today, power and information must be distributed, strategies must be designed on-the-fly, and decisions must be quick and approximate. The redistribution of power has redefined the role and tenure of leadership itself.

Leadership can emerge from anywhere in the organization and power may shift according to the context. Pulley contends that "the foundations of business haven't changed--communication, retention, unifying people--but now there's an overlay of technology." The impact of technology has caused traditional leaders to rethink their roles. Hierarchies are giving way to multiple networks that share information freely. 'Knowledge ecologies' or cross-functional teams are replacing structured departments. Board rooms are moving to online virtual meeting rooms.

Pulley reaffirms the critical need for good communication with geographically dispersed teams. Before launching a project, Pulley recommends the following:

- Identify how progress will be measured, what success will look like, and what roles each group member will play. Long distance collaboration requires leaders and group members to be clear about their purpose and expectations.
- Discuss symbols of reward and gratitude with teams before launching a project. Pulley recalls one group that sent online cards as a way to motivate and recognize contributions

from team members.

- When collaborating online, establish cues that indicate group members are listening, confused, or laughing. These can be as simple as using a J to indicate laughter.
- Track group communication. Create a synthesizer role to pull long distance conversations together for the team.
- Foster a virtual team atmosphere. Leaders need to be purposeful about establishing a culture across distance to capture interpersonal connections that bind teams.
- Maintain a virtual persona. Pulley warns that online personalities can be perceived as cooler, task-oriented, and more abrupt without the interpersonal cues that occur in live conversations.
- Be open to possibilities. The potential for e-leadership is yet unrealized.

New leadership paradigms

Technology permeates every aspect of our lives from board meetings to army missions, cell phones to videoconferencing, and new frontiers in e-learning. In spite of changing technology, the foundation of effective leadership remains stable. As a leader, you still need to build relationships, establish trust, and unify people. Instill a vision or a clear idea of the mission so that followers can perform their jobs successfully in your absence. Establish shared values to strengthen a long distance network and give people a sense of purpose in their work.

Technology is a powerful tool to facilitate leadership, but it's not a substitute for live leaders. Take the time to clearly communicate with followers. If the mission is critical, deliver your message in person. Leaders of the digital age will not succeed if they extol the glories of technology while ignoring their greatest resource-- people.

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