

Business in a Knapsack

Can you run your projects when you're on the run?

by Michelle LaBrosse, PMP®, Chief Cheetah and Founder, Cheetah Learning

Business on the go is part of our lives today. Whether you're running a business or you're running a project when you're on the go, don't mistake mobility for absence. When you're not there in person, you need to be more effective at being there virtually. That means you have to sharpen your communication skills like a pro. Most of us think first about the technology tools in our knapsack and forget about the invisible tools – until there's a problem. Communication is one of those invisible tools that every business needs to hone – especially in a virtual world.

Here are Six Keys to Clear Communication in a Virtual World

1. Build trust in person and grow that trust with clear expectations.

In order for people to work effectively virtually, there has to be trust. Trust doesn't happen magically. It is built when you bring your team together for training or team building, and then continues to grow with clear expectations consistently set by leaders and met by the team. It's important to bring people together at least once a year. The other thing I've learned is that you don't have to have everyone fly into one location at once. I often meet with my key people on my team one on one. I can fly wherever they are or have them fly to meet me when I'm in a nearby city. In those meetings, I often really get a handle on something that wasn't obvious before; and then when we're virtual again, I have invaluable insight that wouldn't have been possible before the time we spent together.

2. Manage Results, Not Activity.

In the physical office environment, "busy work" often gets mistaken for real work. In the virtual environment, when you can't see what people are doing, the key is to manage results. Set expectations and monitor the results, not the daily activities. This is empowering for people who are motivated and who take the initiative, and on the other hand it is a virtual microscope, which reveals people who don't know how to get things done. You can usually spot a poor hire in a couple of months and save yourself and the individual a lot of time and heartache.

3. Schedule Regular Communication.

It's important that there is a regular time for reporting both progress and potential pitfalls to the team. This keeps people on track and gives everyone the discipline of a team check-in. It's amazing how much can be accomplished in a 30-minute conference call when you set expectations beforehand and tell everyone what you need to accomplish in that timeframe.

4. Create Communication that Saves Time -- Not Kills It.

Have you created an e-mail culture that wastes time with endless “daisy-chain” conversations that take several hours to read? Does your team spend hours trying to solve an issue with an e-mail conversation that could have been solved with a 30-minute conference call? With e-mail being a critical tool in our work environments, it’s important to create a new culture of effectiveness around it. Ask yourself: How you can make your team’s e-mail communication even more productive? Set e-mail rules for your organization. Here are a few of my favorites:

Michelle’s Favorite Email Rules

Survive the Quick Read by Putting what You Need in the Lead

I don’t have time to read a long rambling piece of prose about anything. Remember that I’m glancing quickly to know what is important and what you need from me. Put that in the subject line and immediately tell me what you need at the top of the e-mail.

Don’t CC the Whole World

Don’t create work for your colleagues if they don’t need to be cc’d. Copy only those who need to know, and let the rest of us receive one less e-mail.

Don’t Use E-mail to Blow a Fuse

When you’re angry, step away from the keyboard. Nothing is more disruptive or upsetting to anyone’s day then getting negative garbage and anger in their e-mail box. Cool off and then send a sane response.

Don’t Forget that Old-Fashioned Device Called a Phone

I love it when people say to me: “She didn’t respond to my e-mail.” And then I inevitably ask: “Did you call her?” And I get this funny look while the person goes back in the memory bank and remembers the good ole phone. It still works wonders, especially if an e-mail chain is getting confusing and/or wasting people’s time. Pick up the phone when the e-mail isn’t saving time.

5. Create Standards that Build a Cohesive Culture.

What are your standards of quality? How do you define excellence? What does your brand mean to each employee? Making sure everyone knows the answers to those three questions is even more important when people are

scattered geographically. Virtually, you need to create cohesion with excellence and a sense of pride in what your company stands for. People want a reason to belong and a strong culture gives them a sense of belonging and also the confidence of knowing what the rules of the road are for them and your company.

6. Rules of Responsiveness.

When people are working remotely, it's important that you define what your rules of responsiveness are for your culture. How quickly are people expected to return an e-mail, an Instant Message or a phone call? What is your protocol when people are out of the office or on vacation? If you're in a customer service environment, it's important to have clear expectations regarding how to respond to all customer inquiries. No one likes to be kept waiting, and knowing what to expect immediately lowers the blood pressures on both sides of the customer/company relationship.

Once you have your communication keys in place, don't forget to be a model of the behavior you want to cultivate. Set some boundaries for yourself, and let your team know when you're not available. If you're on a family vacation, give people plenty of notice, and let them know the time period when you are not available. Empower people when you are unavailable. You'll be surprised how the world still turned while our Blackberry was off!

Stay tuned for more. This was just a taste of my upcoming book about my experiences running Cheetah Learning from a knapsack. Stay tuned and we'll provide more details as we get closer to a publishing date.

About the Know How Network and Cheetah Learning

The Know How Network is a monthly column written by Michelle LaBrosse, the founder and Chief Cheetah of Cheetah Learning. Distributed to hundreds of newsletters and media outlets around the world, the Know How Network brings the promise, purpose and passion of Project Management to people everywhere. Visit www.cheetahlearning.com to learn more about Cheetah PM, the fastest way to learn about Project Management and get your PMP. You can also get your career in gear with CheetahWare, free Project Management tools from Cheetah Learning.

About the Author



Michelle LaBrosse, PMP, is the founder of Cheetah Learning, and author of *Cheetah Negotiations* and *Cheetah Project Management*. The Project Management Institute, www.pmi.org, recently selected Michelle as one of the 25 Most Influential Women in Project Management in the World, and only one of two women selected from the training and education industry. She is a graduate of the Harvard Business School's Owner President Managers (OPM) program and also holds engineering degrees from Syracuse University and the University of Dayton. Cheetah Learning is a virtual company and has 100 employees, contractors, and licensees worldwide.

Her articles have appeared in over 100 publications from around the world. Her monthly column, the Know How Network is carried by 400 publications, and her monthly newsletter subscription list includes more than 50,000 people. To date, more than 30,000 people have become "Cheetahs" using Cheetah Learning's innovative Project Management and accelerated learning techniques.

Michelle has been running her company virtually for the past 20 years. She has grown the company 100 fold in the past 20 years, and she credits her success to using the Cheetah Project Management method to better manage both people and technology. Michelle's mission is to help people achieve great results, FAST, by making it fast, easy and fun to learn and do Project Management.

She lives in Nevada with her family and likes to rejuvenate in Alaska where you'll often find her kayaking, golfing or hiking.