Virtual Project Teams and the Gatekeeper Challenge

Working Effectively as the Sole Remote Employee

by Kevin McCreery

In today’s era of connectivity and global business, there is a greater chance that you will find yourself as part of a virtual team, collaborating with others on various product development or innovation projects. There are leading practices in place for addressing the challenge of virtual teams. But what do you do when you are the only off-site team member, working remotely with a team that is otherwise located physically in the same place? Here are some tips for the specific challenges you will face.

Understanding the Gatekeeper Challenge

Some of my favorite Harvard Business Review articles about the successful operation of virtual project teams include Getting Virtual Teams Right by Keith Ferrazzi, and Making Virtual Teams Work: Ten Basic Principles by Michael Watkins. But sole remote employees have unique challenges that aren’t addressed in the leading practices that exist.

The rest of your project team might be six time zones and a cultural leap away. You are likely to be in regular contact with only a few gatekeepers who act as entry points to the larger team. They may be working on the same task as you or in the same function as you.

Anyone who has played the game called telephone as a child knows that filtering a message through others can distort the original or true meaning. Obtaining information third, fourth or even fifth hand is no way to operate or make the best decisions possible, especially when the information is complex or highly contextual. As a remote team member, time and cultural barriers may already make you feel alone on a virtual island, further jeopardizing successful collaboration with the team.

You must find ways to get unfiltered information by getting to the source. You must put yourself in contact with the right people, whether it be team members, clients, or partner organizations. This sounds simple, but how do you put this into practice? After a recent personal experience working as the sole remote employee on the implementation of a Product Lifecycle Management (PLM) software system, I put together some practical advice for tackling the challenge of working with and beyond gatekeepers.

Important Questions that Remote Team Members Must Ask

It’s difficult to spot patterns or solve communication problems without collecting and analyzing data. Without data, we rely on hunches, feelings, or anecdotes to identify issues in working relationships. Based on my own experience, I recommend that you, as the remote employee, be disciplined about documenting not just your work tasks, but also your virtual working relationships in real time. Here are some questions you should ask, with an example of how I used them when I worked as a sole remote employee.

Who is able to substantively contribute, and with regard to what subject?
Working with my gatekeepers, a pair of technical experts and programmers on the data migration workstream, we were able to efficiently address many technical tasks in the extraction, transformation, and loading of data. This was especially true when the necessary inputs to the process were in place.

What are the roadblocks? Consider topics, people, and timeliness as potential obstacles.

I encountered a roadblock when I began to notice inconsistencies in data mapping decisions. To perform my job effectively, I needed more clarity on how these decisions were made. Through conversations and probing, I learned that my gatekeepers had not been directly connected to the subject matter experts (SMEs) who made the data mapping decisions. Therefore, they did not have the first-hand knowledge necessary to resolve data mapping inconsistencies or to quickly track down the information I needed.

What is the root cause of each roadblock?

The root cause of my gatekeepers' lack of knowledge on data mapping decisions was team structure. The technical team was structured for efficiency, and part of this structural efficiency was a separation of the technical team from many of the daily client-facing activities. To get the answers I needed to advance the team's work, I needed to reach beyond my gatekeepers to a different member of the project team who was more closely connected with client SMEs.

By seeking out answers to the three questions above, I was able to solve my problem. Once I understood the nature of gatekeepers in a project team, I became better able to work with them and, at times, beyond them. Even if you’re remote, you can make the team structure work for you.

Final Recommendations

In order to address the gatekeeper challenge, I recommend that you:

- **Be aware** - be cognizant of when established points of contact in your project team are not providing results
- **Be proactive** - use periodic health checks to identify the right people, inside or outside your team, who can provide information or assistance to you
- **Be assertive** - don’t hesitate to reach directly beyond the gatekeepers when necessary. When you do, find ways to diplomatically let the gatekeepers know when this happens, and why
- **Be understanding** - keep in mind that this issue may not be a symptom of any problem of the gatekeepers’ making, but rather an inherent challenge of being the sole remote employee

Working effectively as the sole remote employee on a project team can be challenging. If you truly understand how gatekeepers function on project teams, you’ll increase the odds of success. Whether you are the remote team member in this situation, or you’re putting one of your employees or team members in this situation, keep these recommendations in mind.

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