

Engaging People Remotely Is a Real Challenge

Interview with Dr Penny Pullan ^{1, 2}

Author, Keynote Speaker, Mentor, Consultant



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Journalist's Introduction to Penny Pullan

Dr. Penny Pullan is an expert on developing leadership for virtual work and tricky projects. The majority of her work is with people in multinational organisations, who are grappling with tricky projects and programmes of change.

Based in the United Kingdom, she has worked with programmes as wide-ranging as running virtual summits and professional groups, certification of child labour in West African countries, supporting people who make insulin globally to work virtually effectively, the global implementation of SAP, introducing project techniques in the not-for-profit sector as well as "Project Management Excellence" training.

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Dr Pullan co-authored *A Short Guide to Risk Management* with Ruth Murray-Webster and co-edited *Business Analysis and Leadership* with James Archer. Her specialties include project and programme management, business analysis, business process management, business change, risk management, leadership of change, virtual leadership, implementing strategy, etc.

In 2001, Dr. Pullan was scheduled to fly to the United States to attend the start-up meeting for a global project, but her business trip was delayed due to the 9 • 11 incident. She had to quickly learn to work with team members on projects remotely. Since then, Dr. Pullan has initiated research on virtual team management and written a book on this topic titled *Virtual Leadership*. In this interview with Dr. Penny Pullan, we mainly focus on virtual leadership.

Interview

Project Management in Penny's Eyes

Q1. What is it that has motivated you to stay for over two decades in this profession?

Dr Penny Pullan (Pullan): I want to change the world and make it a little bit better than it would have been without me! Project management has helped me to do this and has also been a lot of fun. I don't think that it is possible to be bored when you're doing such a diverse and interesting job.

Q2. You have so many labels on you such as speaker, author, consultant, director, etc. Which is your favorite role and why?

Pullan: I love my job – which is a real mix of writing, speaking, working with people and running my own consultancy. For me, the key part that keeps me interested is the variety of what I do and the diverse people I mix with. Every day is different. Recently, I have worked in Paris with project managers from a medical devices company, in Southampton with people who are working on geospatial projects and remotely with researchers in the USA! In amongst these, I have had time to think and mull over the topics I've been asked to speak on to audiences around the world.

Q3. Someone has described you as being passionate, goal-oriented and ambitious. How do you describe yourself as a professional?

Pullan: I've noticed, as I get older, that I'm enjoying developing others as much as, or even more than, developing myself. There is something magical in getting alongside someone as their mentor and watching as they open up to new possibilities and then make them happen. So perhaps you can describe me as a mentor, keen to open up new possibilities and potential in all I work with.

Q4. Having been in this profession for over 20 years, what changes in project management have you observed?

Pullan: I've noticed that projects are becoming more and more complex! When I first started out, I remember working on a project that changed things for one manufacturing location. Now, similar projects in that industry are being rolled out around the world, with all the complications of virtual teams and cross-cultural working that's needed to make these global projects work. I've seen a corresponding shift in the project management profession from thinking that detailed planning and following defined processes will be enough, to embracing the softer skills that are so important to make projects work.

Challenges in Leading Virtual Teams

Q5. What are the major challenges in leading virtual teams? What are your suggestions on overcoming those challenges?

Pullan: There are lots of challenges in leading virtual teams! The one that comes out consistently as the biggest challenge for teams is engaging remote team members in meetings. **Engaging people remotely is a real challenge.** In team meetings, use visuals (more below) and call on people regularly throughout your virtual meetings. Agree that you'll do this as part of your upfront "ground rules" so that everyone knows that you'll call on them. Do fun things as a project team and use as many senses as you can! (There is much more on this topic in my book: *Virtual Leadership!*)

Another big one is developing trust between team members when you don't have time to get to know each other in person. I also find that people often find barriers in language and culture very difficult to overcome. With all of these, taking time to get to know each team member one-to-one is very helpful. When they know, like and trust you as their project manager, then things will become easier. When they understand how you work, what makes you tick, what's important for you and they know more about your culture, it helps. You should aim to learn these things about each person too!

Qualities of Virtual Team Leaders

Q6. In your opinion, what are the top competencies of virtual team leaders?

Pullan:

- Respect for others, including their culture, nationality, language, context, perspectives;
- Openness to ideas from others;
- Integrity, being transparent and avoiding hidden agendas;
- Equality and fairness to your team and sharing the pain, for example not allowing the most remote person to have to be up late for meetings all the time;
- Caring and empathy, showing consideration for others in your virtual team;
- Confidence in your own abilities and judgment;

- Commitment: show that once you've said you'll do something, you will deliver;
- Listening: I love the Chinese symbol for listening, which includes the ear but also the eyes, undivided attention and also the heart! It's a model for how to listen to team members!
- Organised;
- Calm under stress, to be able to deal with the tricky situations that come up in projects.

There are many more, but these ones would all be very useful.

Power of Visuals

Q7. You've made a keynote speech titled "Power of Visuals". Would you please introduce it in detail?

Pullan: As humans, we are able to process visual information so much more quickly than verbal information. As our projects become more complex and we work in virtual teams, we should use appropriate visuals to help support our communications in our work. In the keynote, I shared a number of ways to do this and encouraged the audience to overcome their fear of drawing by learning how to draw simple graphics of people!

Q8. What are your tips on risk management in virtual teams? And how should we deal with complexity in virtual teams?

Pullan: The risk management process is the same with virtual teams. What is harder about virtual risk management though is engaging people in the process! Just as with complexity, use visuals to help and make things as engaging as you can. How can you make risks fun? How can complexity be interesting? How can you split things down to create great challenges for smaller groups to focus on?

Motivators of Virtual Team Members

Q9. Based on your experience, how to motivate stakeholders and virtual team members?

Pullan: I find Daniel Pink's summary of motivation of knowledge workers from his book *Drive* applies well to stakeholders and virtual team members. He talks about purpose, mastery and autonomy as being important, once payment is good enough not to distract people. So, be clear on the purpose of your project and the bigger difference it will make to people and the world. Let virtual team members develop skills in areas where they'd love to develop mastery. Encourage people to work autonomously, agreeing up front what needs doing and then supporting without micromanaging!

Tips on Ambiguity

Q10. When faced with ambiguous requirements in leading virtual teams, what should PMs do?

Pullan: In our complex world, things aren't always simple and there are not always simple solutions to the problems that occur. Instead, things are often ambiguous, with added uncertainty about the future. What many project leaders do in this situation is to use a more agile approach, where it isn't as important to have all of the requirements pinned down right from the start, but that the requirements can be uncovered progressively as the project moves on. Of course, it's important to have a clear vision and high-level scope of what the project is trying to do and to work on the lower level requirements over time.

Q11. What role do you think AI will play in future virtual project teams? In your eyes, what will the future of project management be like?

Pullan: It's going to be exciting! As AI can reduce the more formulaic parts of our role a little, then there will be even more scope for us to shine as individual human beings.

We're in this volatile, uncertain, complex and ambiguous world. For me, it's the human aspects of the project manager that will help PMs stay competitive. As I said, AI will do more and more of the things that are formulaic and predictable. The soft skills of relationship building and problem solving alongside other people are aspects that we have as humans are what will set great PMs apart.

Impression on PMs in China

Q12. Have you collaborated with virtual team members from China? What are your impressions on them?

Pullan: Yes! I also have family links with China over many years. My mother was born in Hong Kong and my grandparents lived in Shanghai and all over China in the 1930s and 1940s. I find my Chinese colleagues very committed to their work and to learning and developing themselves. I have had to learn to appreciate just how important face-saving is to my Chinese colleagues over the years and to understand how best to ask questions given this.

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About the Interviewer



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Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring), Bachelor's Degree, graduated from the English Department of Beijing International Studies University (BISU) in China. She is now an English-language journalist and editor working for Project Management Review Magazine and website. She has interviewed over forty top experts in the field of project management. In the past, she has worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in various training centers in Beijing. For work contact, she can be reached via email yuyanjuan2005@163.com or LinkedIn <https://www.linkedin.com/in/yanjuanyu-76b280151/>.