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Interview with Penny Pullan
by Yu Yanjuan, PMR
Interview

Tips on Virtual Team Management

Interview with Dr. Penny Pullan [1,2]

Advisor, Mentor, Speaker, Thought Leader
Author of Virtual Leadership (Kogan Page, 2016)
United Kingdom

Interviewed by Yu Yanjuan
Journalist, Project Management Review: PMR (China)
International Correspondent, PM World Journal

Journalist's notes

With the spread of COVID-19, lots of people worldwide have to work from home, and under this context the book *Virtual Leadership* quickly becomes a bestseller. Behind the popularity of the book is the confusion of project practitioners: How to overcome the challenges faced by virtual teams? How to build virtual mindset? How to motivate virtual team members? How to hold virtual meetings efficiently? How to practice virtual leadership? How to create a virtual work culture? With the questions in mind, our journalist Yu Yanjuan (English name: Spring) has the honor to interview the author of the book, Dr. Penny Pullan. In fact, it's our 2nd interview with Penny Pullan. (Read the first interview at
 http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/Home/article/detail/id/443.html)

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[1] This interview was first published in PMR, Project Management Review magazine earlier this year. It is republished here with the permission of PMR. The PM World Journal maintains a cooperative relationship with PMR, periodically republishing works from each other's publications. To see the original interview with Chinese introduction, visit PMR at http://www.pmreview.com.cn/english/

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Introduction to the interviewee

Penny Pullan, Keynote Speaker, Author, Mentor and Consultant, is an expert on developing leadership for virtual work and tricky projects. The majority of her work is with people in multinational organizations, who are grappling with tricky projects and programmes of change.

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.

She has 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. Penny Pullan was scheduled to fly to the United States to attend the start-up meeting of a global project, but her business trip was delayed due to the "9•11" incident. Dr. Penny had to try to work with team members on projects remotely. Since then, Dr. Penny Pullan has initiated research on virtual team management. In 2016, she published a book on this topic titled *Virtual Leadership*.

Interview
Challenges in leading virtual teams

Q1.   With COVID-19 spreading worldwide, many project team members have to work from home. What are the challenges of working remotely?

Penny Pullan (Pullan):   Yes, things have changed a great deal recently! One of the advantages of working remotely has been that it allows organizations to use the best people wherever they are based geographically. Now, given the spread of COVID-19, working remotely is the safest way to work with anyone else, even if you are both based in the same city. At the same time, project team members may have to share their homes with other members of their family, which can be distracting at best and impossible at worst, and leaders need to take this into account.

Q2.   What are the major challenges in leading remote virtual teams? Any suggestions on overcoming those challenges?

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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 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!

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, things will become easier. When they understand how you work, what makes you tick, what's important for you and what's your culture, it helps. You should aim to learn these things about each person too!

How to establish virtual mindset

Q3. How should we establish the virtual mindset?

Pullan: Now that people have had to go virtual to keep working, it is important to think beyond the technology. The temptation is to think that once you can connect via video conference, that you have solved the problem of virtual working. In reality, the technology is only just an enabler. To be able to work together effectively takes another level entirely!

One element that is important is the mindset which people have when they lead virtual teams. Some people try to be in control and micro-manage. This is a mistake and the most likely outcome is that team members will disengage. A much more effective way is a facilitative mindset, where a leader will make it easy for people to collaborate and work well as a team. This means engaging and motivating the others in your team. Know their preferences and strengths (and weaknesses) and know your own. Build common ground and allow time for relationships and trust to develop.

Virtual motivation and engagement tips

Q4. As project leaders or managers, how should they engage and motivate virtual team members? Any tips?

Pullan: Know your team members! What would they like to get out of the project you are working on together? What are their aspirations and how do these fit with the needs of the project? If you can align these, you are much more likely to motivate and please team members.

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

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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!

Engaging people is a whole challenge of its own. There is not one magic silver bullet to solve it; merely a number of different things, which, when combined, make engagement much stronger. I find that having time to get to know each other really helps, as does building common ground by finding things that you have in common. When passing on information, try to use a narrative form, like a story, rather than long lists. Of course, the narrative form does not need to be a fairy tale! When you present information in a story-like manner, people will listen and stay listening for the beginning, the middle and through to the end. I find that it is really helpful to share videos in live meetings so that people can see each other's body language and facial reactions a little. Also helpful is live drawing on a shared screen during meetings and other visual elements.

Q5.   You've emphasized "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.

We have a number of ways to do this and we should encourage the team members to overcome their fear of drawing by learning how to draw simple graphics of people!

We have five senses, and in phone or conference calls, we only use one of these: our hearing. To create a richer level of communication, add in visual cues such as video streams of the faces of each person in the meeting. If you need to share detailed information, use a shared screen and draw/annotate live on it. I find that if people can see things moving and changing on their screens, they are more likely to keep watching.

Q6.   In virtual environment, what should we do to ensure the best possible participation of key stakeholders?

Pullan: Once again, it is about really knowing these key stakeholders. What is it that they are looking for from the project? See what you can do to build up a relationship of trust with each of them, making sure that you understand what their preferences are with regards to virtual communication. You are likely to need to flex to what suits them rather than what suits you.

Q7.   You mentioned the importance of building trust many times. In virtual environment, what specific trust-building methods do you suggest?

Pullan: There is no shortcut to building trust. It's key to remember that trust is given by others, rather than something that you can create yourself. If people know you and like you, trust is likely to develop. If you are credible and reliable as well, so much the better.

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As for methods, I suggest that you get to know people one-to-one, do what you say you will do, and be consistent and fair in your dealings with your virtual team members. While trust takes a while to build up, don't forget that it can disappear in an instant!

Tips on virtual team-building and meetings

Q8.   Remote team-building is not that easy. Would you please share some tips on virtual team-building activities?

Pullan: Yes, you're right. Remote team-building isn't easy. You can't take everyone out on a white water rafting course or even out for dinner together to get to know each other and build the team. But there are things you can do to get to know each other and build common ground and connections across your team.

There are so many options! You can adapt in-person events to virtual events. Ideas here include virtual meals, where you bring along a plate of food, or perhaps just a nice drink, and have a chat about things outside of work with your team. You could even have mini campfire session: to do so, send everyone a little candle, chocolate biscuits and a marshmallow. Then you all light your candles, melt your marshmallows and eat them sandwiched between chocolate biscuits. Delicious! Be careful that you don't set anything alight - although that would make it memorable, but for all of the wrong reasons. Other ideas are for things that you couldn't do in-person. What about playing online games?

Another way to build your remote team is to do some excellent work together on a core part of your project.

Q9.   What should we pay attention to in holding virtual meetings?

Pullan: First of all, we need to be clear whether we really need to have a meeting. Too often, I find that new virtual teams try to do far too much work in meetings. Virtual meetings are tough and staring at a screen all day, going from one video meeting to the next, is not conducive to good health or productivity! Instead, balance the time spent together in meetings with effective work together asynchronously, using collaboration tools that allow people to contribute at a time to suit them, accessing discussions and documents in a shared space.

Remember that virtual meetings generally need more preparation than the equivalent meeting in-person, not less. I find there are six 'magic' statements to complete at the start of any virtual meeting:

- We are here to… This is the overall purpose of the meeting – the point of coming together.
- Today we will … Here I set out four or five objectives that will help us to meet the overall purpose.
- Our Plan… This is the time plan for the meeting.

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- Who's doing what… Here I agree roles and responsibilities for individuals.
- How we work together… Here is where I agree the ground rules for the session. In virtual meetings, this includes things like: using mute in a noisy environment, and stating your name at the start of anything you say.
- What's next… Here it is important to set out what will happen as a result of this meeting.

Remember to keep your meetings engaging with visuals and narrative, and keep them as short as you can. People tend to disengage after an hour, if not before.

Virtual leadership

Q10. In your opinion, what are the characteristics of virtual leadership?

Pullan: Virtual leadership works when the leader serves the other people in the team, making it as easy as possible for each person to achieve their best for the team. The leader acts as a facilitator, literally 'making it easy'. They create an environment where everyone can thrive and develop: both the team as a whole and each individual. Interestingly, this sort of leadership works best when it is practised by each member of the group, not just the official leader.

Q11. 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 ears 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.

The list above is not exhaustive, but these ones would all be very useful.

Virtual-friendly culture

Q12. As organizations, how should they establish a culture friendly to virtual work?

Pullan: In the past, many organizations have seen virtual work as a second-class option. With the advent of COVID-19, it has become the only option for work in many cases! I think that

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this experience will change how things go forward, as people have been thrown into this new way of working and found that it suits them.

As I have mentioned already, virtual work does not work well when the leader adopts an autocratic, command&control leadership style and tries to micromanage their team. If that is your culture, then virtual work will be difficult. A more virtual-friendly culture is one where team members are supported by the leader and their colleagues to do their best work, with autonomy on how to do the tasks, and they can work on things that they enjoy doing and that have a meaning and purpose that makes sense to them.

Q13. Based on your observation, in virtual work, what are the keys to project success?

Pullan: For me, a team that know each other, like each other and trust each other to do their best will do well, whether in a virtual environment or not. Of course, this is harder to build when virtual, so the leader should put aside time and effort to do so, with one-to-one meetings with individuals and time in meetings to build common ground across the team. The mindset of everyone on the team is key as well – it should be a facilitative, supportive team with everyone doing whatever they can to deliver their own work and help others to do the best they possibly can.

To read the original interview and to learn more about PMR magazine, visit
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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* (PMR) Magazine and website. She has interviewed over sixty top experts in the field of project management. Before joining PMR, she once worked as a journalist and editor for other media platforms in China. She has also worked part-time as an English teacher in training centers in Beijing. Beginning in January 2020, Spring has also served as an international correspondent for the *PM World Journal*.

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