

Book Review

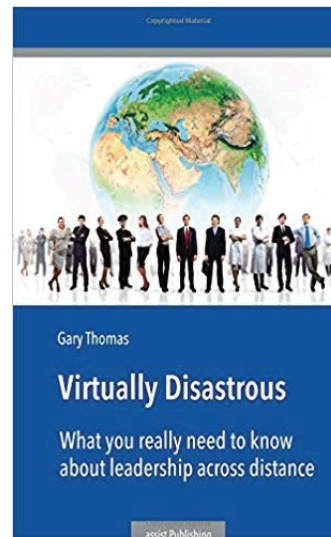
Virtually Disastrous:

What you really need to know about leadership across distance

by Gary Thomas

Assit Publishing, 276 pages

Euro 19.90



This book is about “the elephant in the room that no one sees”... and about a big misunderstanding.

The elephant stands for the systematic underestimation of the difficulties arising from virtual cooperation in global business. The big misunderstanding is the overestimation of cross-cultural issues within those difficulties.

By underrating the impact virtual working conditions have on people, companies do almost about anything to make work (and life) of their employees more difficult. By overestimating the impact of cross-cultural issues, an all too obvious scapegoat is found: “I knew you couldn’t work with those ___, they are so ___!”. Yet, the real reasons for “disastrous” cooperation are veiled.

The subtitle “What you really need to know about leadership across distance”. It’s not only for leaders; it’s for anyone who works in an international project team spread over several locations, people who cares for improving communication and cooperation in virtual teams, e.g. trainers and team coaches.

Systematically the author sheds light on the key aspects of successful virtual cooperation, such as team identity, overcoming isolation by bridging distances and ways to lead without hierarchy. Each chapter explores the topic from various angles, full of real life examples and practical suggestions for improvement. For me, it is those little stories and anecdotes

that account for the real value added for me as a reader. Take for example an incident where the avoidance of a production breakdown with the potential to cause a multi-million loss required the smooth and effective cooperation between Germany, the Netherlands and India. Guess what happened...?

The practical perspective is backed by sound theory – models like theme-centered interaction by Ruth Cohn or the team stages of Tuckman are set in context to the setting of virtual cooperation, adding structure to content. Towards the second half of the book, the author digs deeper into aspects like communication (channels), conflict (resolution) and cross-cultural leadership. An entire chapter is dedicated to “trust” as the essential key resource, as a “condition sine qua non” and how to foster and grow such trust within virtual teams.

What I – being a cross-cultural trainer/coach myself – particularly like about this book are four things:

- the humorous and captivating style in which it is written,
- the wealth of – extremely credible – experience that shimmers through and the amount examples from global business,
- the hands-on improvement suggestions anyone can implement right away and
- the structure of the book with short subchapters, highlighted key messages and summaries at the end of each chapter.

Great piece, indeed!

Reviewed by Stephan Hild

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