



LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS

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Overcoming Virtual Leadership Challenges during COVID-19

As we all are facing COVID-19, many of us have stepped into a new reality of virtual working, which poses new challenges for leaders. It goes without saying, virtual is not physical and team connection and productivity will not automatically continue in a virtual world. Virtual teaming affords many benefits but presents a higher risk of misalignment and lack of collaboration, which may take a toll on team trust and employee engagement if not done right.

Virtual is here to stay

As a leader in this new reality, you need to quickly embrace virtual as your new normal, and you need to be the virtual role model for your team. Now you have the opportunity to take virtual leadership to the next level and learn how to deliver impact differently. These skills will stay relevant in our ever more digital world (think more teams working remotely; more freelancers; more divergent schedules). Securing virtual leadership competencies is crucial – not just now – but likely for the time to come.

Based on our solid experience, we have formed eight key principles to successfully lead your team from a physical to a virtual high-performing team.



Eight principles for mastering virtual leadership of teams

1 Re-ignite team purpose & clarify roles

2 Establish a new rhythm

3 Track capacity & progress

4 Leverage technology to collaborate

5 Be visible & check in frequently

6 Strategically over-communicate

7 Empower & promote self-leadership

8 Ensure well-being



Re-ignite team purpose & clarify roles

While often ignored, revisiting your purpose and team roles is vital to virtual teams and will drive direction and provide a sense of belonging. These tasks become even more important for leaders when moving to virtual with a need for a greater intentional, clear and structured approach.

Re-ignite purpose and principles

Ensure that your team knows its purpose both on an overall team level and a project level. The purpose and the principles you work by need to be crystal clear as well as understood by and committed to by all team members.



Identify necessary roles – and accept frequent changes

In your virtual setup, some roles might become irrelevant and some might be missing. Identify what roles are needed to deliver on your purpose and do not be afraid to make continuous adjustments.

Avoid being the bottleneck

When you have defined purpose and roles clearly, it is time to delegate to avoid being the bottleneck. This means letting go of control where you can and trusting your team members to deliver.

2 Establish a new rhythm

Make new traditions. The first 30 days as a virtual team will determine how you work together for as long as the team lasts. Make sure to deliberately decide what should and should not become a tradition for your team.

Be intentional about informal gatherings

Informal gatherings are invaluable to engagement and productivity, but they might not happen by themselves when you work virtually. Encourage people to be creative about how they meet.

Schedule recurrent activities

Stand-ups, check-ins, and regular team meetings are examples of the activities you need to host. Make these recurrent in the virtual space and prioritize them as they are key to making your team deliver on the purpose.

Embrace awkwardness

It will be weird the first time you host a virtual Friday bar. Laugh about it and call out the elephant in the room. You will get used to it!



Track capacity & progress

Awareness of your team's individual and collective capacity and having a continuous overview of task progression is key to engagement and productivity. However, getting it right requires extreme discipline and consistent use of technology.

Help the team prioritize existing and new tasks

You have to be extremely structured in prioritizing your team's tasks. Especially as you go from physical to virtual, you need to reassess what tasks are no longer relevant and what tasks have suddenly become critical or even missing.



Proactively and continuously update capacity

Always knowing who can support on what and when will help you keep your team members flexible as a resource to keep productivity at a high. Not a new task, but one that is made difficult by physical distance.

Maintain a shared overview of tasks

After the initial (re)prioritization, you need to keep one integrated overview of all tasks the team is working on. Use the overview to guide your continued prioritization. Think Kanban on steroids.

4 Leverage technology to collaborate

70% of business professionals expect the use of online collaboration platforms to increase in the future.¹ Virtual teams truly need to explore and incorporate technology into their ways of working to succeed.

Encourage co-creation and divergent thinking

Numerous technologies let you work together on a shared canvas. This will enable you to collaborate, co-create and spark creativity and ideas even though you are not co-located.



Establish a setup to drive collaboration

The world wide web gives you many opportunities for collaboration, and you need to decide what platforms are fit for the purpose and composition of your team and get your team on board right now.

See technology as glue

Your new reality is virtual and technology will therefore be your eternal enabler. Overcome initial frustrations, and focus on designing seamless ways of working through technology. Mastering this can even speed up your existing business processes.

Be visible & check in frequently

Virtual distance can lower your team member's trust by 83%, ability to innovate by 93%, and engagement by 80%.¹ To counter this distance, you need to make yourself available.

Accept that people have different needs

Stay open-minded to the shift in each team member's needs and, even more importantly, their different needs - listen and do what you can to accommodate.



Acknowledge the risk for change in performance

Past high-performers may struggle to adapt to virtual ways of working, while others perform better than ever before. Figure out what the barriers may be and do everything in your power to remove them. Help those who struggle, but do not forget to spot and accelerate those who are thriving.

Be personal and use technology to check in

Do not forget to show your team that you are available and there for them. Be present online and show your face. Working virtually is a chance for you as a leader to show more of yourself; invite the team into your home, dress down... do not just ask for task progress.

Strategically over-communicate

Leaders often question how they should communicate with their teams virtually, which typically results in radio silence. However, there is no such thing as communicating too much when it comes to virtual leadership.

Increase communication in disruptive times

In times of uncertainty, we need to communicate more, not less. However, if we do not have a *what* to communicate, then communicate the *how*, e.g. “we are currently working on...” or “we are planning to ...”. This will show decision power and an ability to act.

Delegate your messages

It is important to coordinate and structure your communication. Delegate who in your leadership team delivers what messages, when.

Be creative in how you communicate

Sending emails to your team is not your only option. Figure out how you can use different formats and platforms to communicate as to staying relevant and dynamic.



Empower & promote self-leadership

Leading remotely presents a paradox, as you need to keep the full overview, but you cannot lead everything all at once. Instead, you will have to build trust with and empower your team to take action and initiative to keep the wheels turning.

Embrace failure and learn from it

Mistakes will happen when you move into being a virtual team that would not have happened if you were still a physical team. You cannot prevent it, so how will you learn from it? Failures caused by pace, misalignment or the sheer joy of following a sudden new idea with no one to stop you, are some of the things that working virtually can lead to. Embrace it. See virtual ways of working as taking agile principles to the extreme: Fail forward and learn.

Build trust to drive innovation

By trusting your team, you give green light to act fast and try out new things. As a result, you will see innovation emerge from new and perhaps unexpected places and people in your team.



Ensure well-being

The well-being of your team members is critical to their engagement. Yet, well-being is considerably challenged by the virtual nature of your team, and you need to be more alert than ever to create the right conditions.

Make fluency fixed

Most aspects of your life quickly blend together in a blurry haze when working virtually. Do not let that happen – encourage your team members to set boundaries and conditions for their work.



Encourage healthy routines

Having healthy routines is not a new discourse in leadership. However, ensuring your team's mental and physical health going forward is crucial. All levels are at risk of completely burning out because boundaries are now non-existing.

Lead by example

Agree on a set of ground rules as a team and build the routines that will keep your people sane in the long run. Also, if you do not champion your team's rules for well-being, no one else will. Be a role model and pave the way for well-being in your team.

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