



## LEADING THROUGH UNPRECEDENTED AND CHALLENGING TIMES

# Leading from a Distance: 5 Lessons for Successful Virtual Teaming

In these uncertain times, we believe leadership matters more than ever. As the COVID-19 crisis unfolds, “social distancing” is becoming a new normal. Working remotely will likely become a more common environmental factor for leaders guiding teams and organizations in the future. In this context, leaders must master virtual work environments to keep geographically dispersed team members aligned, connected, engaged and performing.

Leading a virtual team or employees who are geographically dispersed can be challenging. In our extensive research, we found that more than 25 percent of virtual teams are not fully performing and 33 percent of teams rate their virtual leaders as less than effective. Making the current situation even more difficult for many leaders is that employees are scattered across different geographic areas and have little face-to-face contact with one another; information and priorities are constantly shifting; and there is little time to address individual needs.

Leading virtually is still leadership. Effective leadership remains the best predictor of success and long-term organizational viability, and this was true even before the emergence of the pandemic crisis. Effective leaders are “impact-multipliers,” who work through people, teams and organizations and rely on attributes such as self-awareness, empathy, humility, agility and resilience, even as some of the demands of leading virtually are different.

Our research identifies what differentiates top-performing virtual teams and the most effective virtual leaders. The insights from our global research highlight immediate opportunities for leaders to act in a virtual environment. Here are five lessons learned from our work with successful virtual leaders.

# Five key lessons for leading from a distance

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## **LESSON #1: NO TRUST, NO TEAM.**

Trust is a crucial factor for effective collaboration on any team. Effective virtual leaders look for new ways to infuse team spirit and trust into their teams, helping to boost cooperation.

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## **LESSON #2: CREATE A “HIGH-TOUCH” ENVIRONMENT**

Collaborative software and video conferencing platforms can help employees interact with one another regularly, encouraging collaboration and relationship-building.

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## **LESSON #3: CONDUCT EFFECTIVE V-MEETINGS**

In the absence of regular face-to-face contact, holding frequent virtual meetings becomes increasingly important to keep everyone on the team informed and aligned.

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## **LESSON #4: EMPOWER AND MOTIVATE TEAM MEMBERS**

People are often expected to work more independently in virtual teams. Effective virtual leaders set up a system to monitor progress and follow up frequently but avoid micromanaging.

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## **LESSON #5: SOFT SKILLS ARE ESSENTIAL**

Soft skills are particularly important for virtual leaders, as they must work to maintain frequent communication among members, inspire people to achieve goals and manage conflict.

## #1 No trust, no team

Trust is a crucial factor for effective collaboration on any team. Virtual teams have a unique challenge in that they tend to develop trust at the task level more easily than at the interpersonal level. The implication of this is that it often takes longer to build interpersonal trust when people are working virtually. Effective virtual leaders look for new ways to infuse team spirit and trust into their teams, which, in turn, can help boost cooperation. Our research finds that a few practical steps can make it easier to build trust among virtual teams:

- » Early on during the team's formation or transition to a virtual environment focus on (re)creating rapport by hosting several virtual meetings to build relationships, create a sense of purpose and address team goals.
- » Explicitly use techniques and technology to encourage open and honest communication during virtual meetings.
- » Empower people to make (and then act on) decisions.
- » Find ways to help people interact informally outside of the team's work.

## #2 Create a “high-touch” environment

Communications technology has made virtual teaming possible, but such platforms are obviously not a perfect substitute for human interaction. It can be easier for team members to become isolated, focusing solely on their work without a lot of social interaction.

Collaborative software and video conferencing platforms enable employees to interact with one another regularly, helping to create a high-touch environment that makes relationship building possible. A few other tips that virtual leaders can use include:

- » Create opportunities for virtual coffee chats, lunches or virtual happy hours to help people engage with other team members.

- » Use videoconferencing versus audio-only meetings to foster engagement.
- » Find ways to highlight the accomplishments and contributions of different team members.
- » Have team members from different locations pair up/partner and rotate these pairs/teams periodically to help build new relationships, particularly with people from different functions or geographies.

## #3 Conduct effective virtual meetings

In the current environment virtual meetings have emerged as a practical solution to bringing people together to achieve goals. In the absence of regular face-to-face contact, holding frequent virtual meetings becomes increasingly important to keep everyone on the team on the same page. However, many employees are often distracted and multitasking. What can leaders do to help enhance the quality of “v-meetings”?

- » Deliberately make time for connecting people and deepening relationships at the start of every v-meeting — when people feel “checked-in” to a meeting they tend to stay more engaged.
- » Use technology to stay connected — the use of breakout groups, polls and chat functions help to promote a two-way dialogue. Use texting or instant messaging to check in periodically outside of meetings.
- » Eliminate useless meetings. Confirm that a meeting is necessary and then explicitly involve people in the meeting agenda to ensure high levels of participation and engagement.
- » Hold shorter, interactive meetings and use email or other communication tools to share information.
- » Consider rotating the facilitator role to engage other team members in meetings.

## #4 Empower and motivate team members

People are often expected to work more independently in virtual teams, which makes it even more important to find ways to delegate work and provide team members the freedom to make decisions on their own. Of course, accountability is still critically important for virtual teams. In many cases, team members are dependent upon others to complete work, so leaders must facilitate open communication to ensure that everyone is productive. Effective virtual leaders set up a system to monitor progress and follow up frequently, but avoid micromanaging. Here are a few practical tips to empower and motivate people in a virtual setting:

- » Make “care calls” to periodically check in on team members.
- » Set up smaller teams composed of people interested in specific topics so they can work more autonomously on projects.
- » Provide virtual feedback or coaching in a timely manner.
- » Find ways to highlight the accomplishments and contributions of team members.
- » Celebrate success as a team with virtual office parties or team lunches over video conferencing.

## #5 Soft skills are essential

Our research found that virtual leaders and teams perform better when they deliberately engage in “skill development” individually and collectively. Soft skills, in particular, are important for leading virtual teams, as leaders must work to maintain frequent communication between members, inspire people to achieve goals and manage conflict. Some effective strategies that companies can use to bolster their virtual teams’ soft skills include:

- » Using assessments and individual development plans to help develop virtual leaders.
- » Conducting virtual team-building sessions to help team members socialize and get to know one another.
- » Continuously assessing the development needs of team members — then conducting skill-building focused on identified areas of improvement.





Leadership matters more than ever in uncertain times. With remote working and virtual teams becoming the new normal, attributes such as self-awareness, empathy, humility, agility and resilience are even more important if leaders are going to effectively build trust, develop strong relationships, coach from a distance and hold employees accountable for performance. Our research into what differentiates top-performing virtual teams and the most effective virtual leaders underscores the importance of these soft skills and highlights ways leaders can build trust, encourage collaboration, conduct effective meetings, and empower and motivate employees in this new, more virtual work world.

## For more information, please contact:

**Nicolas Albizzati** (NALbizzati@SpencerStuart.com), North and South America

**Darleen DeRosa, Ph.D.** (DDeRosa@SpencerStuart.com), Leadership Advisory Services

**Dimity Hodge** (DHodge@SpencerStuart.com), Asia Pacific

**Patrick Hynes** (PHynes@SpencerStuart.com), Leader, Leadership Advisory Services

**Laura Menezes** (LMenezes@SpencerStuart.com), Brazil and Latin America

Darleen DeRosa, Ph.D., and other experts in Spencer Stuart's Leadership Advisory Services team contributed to this article.

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