Virtual Leadership - Essential Skills for Managing Remote Teams

NOVEMBER 04, 2020 - <u>DOM BARNARD (../AUTHORS/DOM-BARNARD)</u> - 8 MIN READ

The current global situation has accelerated the trend towards remote working, however many businesses and leaders are struggling to adapt to this new way of life.

In addition, remote collaboration will continue for the foreseeable future, with Gartner reporting that 74% of companies plan to shift some of their employees to remote working permanently after COVID-19.

Companies such as Shopify, Slack, Square, Twitter and Google have already announced plans (https://www.entrepreneur.com/article/354872) for long term or permanent remote working, with more companies joining the list each month.

In this article, we look at the importance of virtual leadership in these uncertain times, as well as essential skills a virtual leader should have to manage remote teams (https://www.seanhopwood.com/2021/05/16/dos-and-donts-of-managing-remote-teams/).

What is virtual leadership?

Virtual leadership is a form of leadership in which teams are managed via a remote working environment. Like traditional leadership roles, virtual leaders focus on motivating employees and helping teams accomplish their goals.

Virtual leaders must take a different management approach compared to leading in an office, as team communication isn't done in person, but rather through online and virtual mediums. As such, virtual leaders need a different skill set to leaders in an office setting.

> Virtual leadership focuses heavily on improving collaboration through communication, accountability, and transparency.

Big Tech CEOs giving Virtual Presentations - Who performs the best?

This video shows four big tech CEOs presenting on video. Which do you think communicates the best? Who would you rather have as a leader?

These presentations show several important elements of leading remotely, which we'll cover in this article.

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The importance of virtual leadership

The pandemic has forced much of the workforce into remote working, and for many employees, this is the first time they have tried working from home.

However even before the pandemic, working from home was an increasing trend with many saying the pandemic just sped up this process:

- 4.7 million people were already working remotely from home before the COVID-19 pandemic. (Flexjobs (https://www.flexjobs.com/blog/post/flexjobs-gwa-report-remote-growth/))

- 74% of companies plan to shift some of their employees to remote working permanently after COVID-19 (Gartner (https://www.gartner.com/en/newsroom/press-releases/2020-03-19-gartner-hr-survey-reveals-88--of-organizations-have-e))

- Before the pandemic, 52% of global employees work remotely once a week, and 68% do so at least once per month (Owl Labs (https://www.owllabs.com/state-of-remote-work/2019))

- 77% of remote employees say they're more productive when working from home. (CoSo Cloud (https://www.cosocloud.com/press-releases/connectsolutions-survey-shows-working-remotely-benefits-employers-and-employees))

As shown in the above stats, companies were already starting to embrace remote working before the pandemic. As more and more teams become remote, the need for strong virtual leadership skills has grown.

In addition, the way leaders now interact with employees has changed. Virtual leaders can't check in with workers the same way in-office managers do, so they have to put their trust in workers' capabilities.

This new type of leader needs to focus more on setting clear expectations and goals, as well as creating a culture of accountability.

Essential virtual leadership skills

Working remotely means leaders can no longer have casual conversations in the breakroom or in the hallways, but it's entirely possible to translate in-person leadership skills into virtual skills, so that you can continue that human connection with your team.

Strong leadership is essential for creating a business culture that's productive, innovative, and able to adapt to an ever-changing professional landscape.

Here are our essential skills every virtual leader needs.

1. Stay in contact with remote employees

This could take any number of forms, such as setting up weekly catch-up calls or having frequent team meetings. No matter how it is done, the virtual leader needs to be proactive about staying in contact with the entire team and staying abreast of what they're working on, how projects are going, what obstacles they're facing, and what they need.

Schedule weekly 1-on-1 meetings with employees (https://blog.ultimatesoftware.com/how-to-virtual-one-on-one-meeting/), this allows them to:

- Get help on projects they are working on
- Discuss projects and goals
- Build connections with you
- Get support on their development journey

By offering availability, your employees will feel that you value the relationship.

Remote working can get more complicated if not all employees are working on the same time zone. To maximize productivity, make sure there are at least a few hours of overlap for all employees on your team. This allows everyone to get familiar with the team, even when they are dispersed.

2. Work expectations and goals

Working remotely offers employees greater flexibility, not only on where they live but also on what exact hours they work. For example, some employees may prefer to work later in the day and take a longer lunch, so that they can workout or take their dog for a walk. Virtual leaders should be aware of this and not set unrealistic expectations.

When teams are not physically in the same location, often the best way to measure employees performance (https://geekflare.com/remote-workers-productivity/) is through

outcomes and goal completion. Specifically, measurable goals are crucial, and tracking them frequently can help to ensure team members stay on track and that the team leader is able to identify problems before they become catastrophic.

Having realistic expectations about these goals, time employees should be working and communicating those expectations will help everyone stay happier in their roles.

3. Clear and concise communicators

Effective communication with your team is another major hurdle in virtual leadership. There's a lot more room for misunderstandings when you don't have the benefit of tone, facial expressions, and body language to help you decipher what someone means when there's any ambiguity.

That means there's a higher chance of having miscommunications if the managers and team members in a virtual team are not excellent communicators. Communications must be clear and concise, even more so than they need to be otherwise. Provide enough detail and direction to avoid being ambiguous and eliminate any confusion.

Be aware that not everyone on your team or in the virtual meeting will have English as their first language, as well as different cultural backgrounds. Keep these in mind when running meetings and involving the team.

Verbal delivery

Verbal delivery is a key part of virtual meetings. Ensure you don't talk too fast or others on the call might miss what you're saying. This is something you can practice through virtual meeting simulations, where you record yourself speaking and listen back to what you are saying.

- Virtual presentation simulation (https://virtualspeech.com/courses/virtual-presentation)

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This short video gives an example of the Microsoft CEO presenting clearly and concisely on video.

4. Lead with empathy and foster trust

To be an excellent virtual leader, you need to get in touch with your team members at an emotional level, and completely honest and transparent when sharing data and status updates (even unfavorable information) in order to maintain credibility and preserve the integrity of the data being shared.

Check in with your team individually to see how they're doing, particularly as some may find adjusting to remote work difficult. Ask about their families, their hobbies, or something interesting they saw on social media. Empathize with them to show a shared

understanding - letting them know that you see them as a person, not just an employee.

> When you lead with empathy (https://www.forbes.com/sites/carriekerpen
> /2019/07/16/want-to-be-a-better-leader-lead-with-empathy
> /?sh=3e69921e116a), you create an element of humanity in an otherwise
> detached virtual environment. This helps eliminate the sense of isolation that
> virtual workers can experience, allowing them to feel like they're part of a
> live community.

New employees may have a hard time adjusting to full time remote working, without actually meeting the team in-person. You can try creating a mentoring program for these employees, by pairing them up with more tenured individuals in your team. By encouraging the mentor-mentee relationship, your employees can grow and develop in new ways.

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5. Use the right communication method

Use appropriate channels for your communication and set expectations on how the communication channels are to be used. Discuss when it's appropriate to use instant message, email, and virtual meetings. Understand when a meeting is necessary versus a quick announcement.

Nowadays, virtual leaders have a range of technology at their disposal, but there's a time and a place for each mode of communication. The key is to match the medium with your message. These are the appropriate messages for each medium:

- **Instant messaging**: Programs like Slack and Teams are best for quick communication needs, like checking project statuses, asking questions, or coordinating schedules.

- **Email**: When you need to communicate something to be referenced later on, like long, detailed messages or directions, as well as messaging multiple people at once.

- **Video**: Connect face-to-face through video whenever you can.

Give yourself time to get comfortable with these tools; even the most tech-savvy people need time to adjust to new technology.

6. Encourage open dialogue

If you've established trust, you've set everyone up for an open dialogue. A recent study by HBR of 50 financial firms (https://hbr.org/2014/12/getting-virtual-teams-right) confirmed that leaders of dispersed groups, in particular, must push members to be frank with one another. One way to do this is by modeling "caring criticism."

When delivering negative feedback, use phrases like "I might suggest" and "Think about this." When receiving such feedback, thank the person who offered it and confirm points of agreement.

A tactic for conference calls is to designate one team member to act as the official advocate for honesty, noticing and speaking up when something is being left unsaid and calling out criticism that's not constructive. On the flip side, you should also occasionally recognize people for practices that improve team communication and collaboration.

7. Make yourself accessible

A virtual team leader must be willing to make themselves accessible and available to team members. Accessible leadership means that you are easily approachable, like having an

open-door policy in a physical office.

Unfortunately, many managers are seen as distant, who only distribute assignments from their office. This won't work for a virtual team. Leading teams that are physically apart requires you to close that gap. Let your team know that you're available to talk and support them, whenever they need.

8. Give your team the right resources

Employees will be at their most productive when they have the right resources and environment to be at their best.

Consider giving each employee a budget to buy equipment for their home setup. Companies such as Shopify are taking this approach (https://www.cnbc.com/2020/03 /12/coronavirus-shopify-gives-employees-1000-stipend-to-work-from-home.html), by giving each employee a $1,000 stipend to buy supplies while they work from home.

Creating a lasting virtual culture

There will be a number of difficulties to overcome when transitioning your team or organization to remote working. For example, traditional managers who struggle with worker autonomy and accountability may find it difficult to adjust to being more transparent and adaptable over long-term planning.

- 5 questions that new virtual leaders should ask themselves (https://hbr.org/2020/05 /5-questions-that-newly-virtual-leaders-should-ask-themselves)

Here are some steps you can use to promote a culture of remote working:

- Ensure your managers are familiar with the key skills in this article, and identify any of their weaker areas which they can improve.

- Transform the organization into one where remote is a priority. Invest in home equipment for employees so that they can perform their jobs just as well from home.

- Ensure employees take training specific to working virtually, such as virtual presentations training (https://virtualspeech.com/courses/virtual-presentation) or virtual sales training (https://virtualspeech.com/courses/virtual-sales-pitch).

- Keep an open dialogue and clear communication with team members. Some of them might be feeling isolated, so regularly communicate with them through 1-on-1 meetings and messages.

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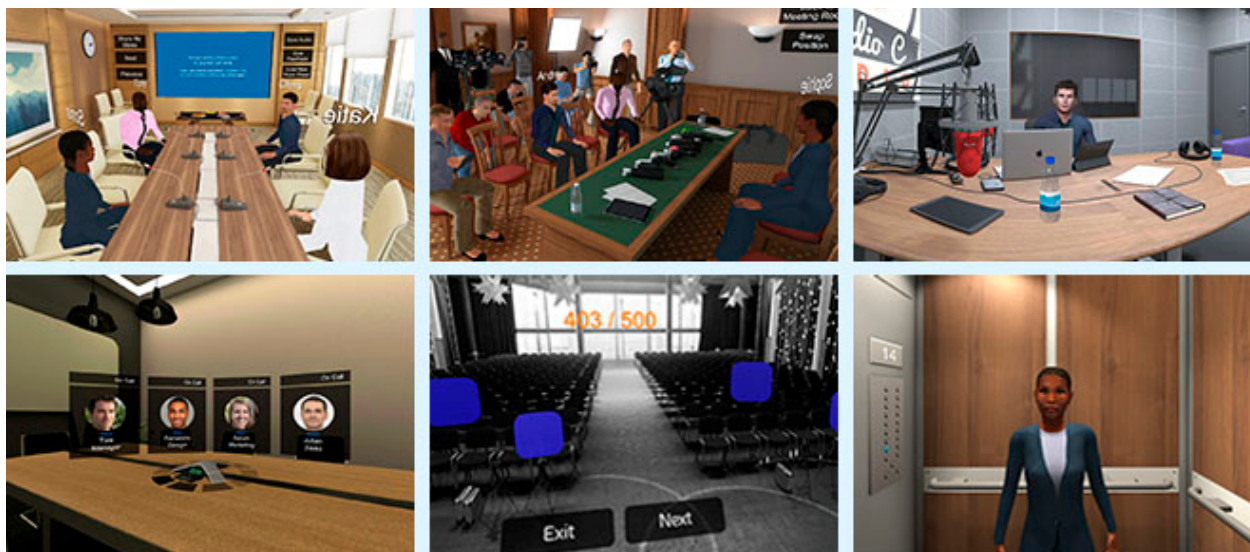Leading remote teams (https://virtualspeech.com/blog/virtual-leadership-skills?ref=footer)

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