

9 BEST PRACTICES

to Lead and Manage Your Virtual Team

BY SUZANNE BATES

A crisis has a way of bringing out the best and worst in people, and that is twice as true for teams. Teams are, after all, groups of individuals who have come into the new pandemic world with different capabilities, viewpoints, and experiences. Now they must work together in the most challenging time of their professional lives, in a virtual setting. Prior to this global disruption in business, they may have been thriving, doing just OK, or struggling. In a crisis, teams are learning as they go. However, the degree of difficulty is exponential for all of them, and the learning curve is steep.

This is a moment for leadership. You must help your team navigate this new world. As they look ahead, embrace the new normal, set a course, and make decisions on complex issues, they have to do so without the benefit of being face to face. They must tackle critical issues in the unfamiliar world of videoconferences, as well as by phone, email, and chat. These less personal ways of working together are stressful and fatiguing, especially when the team is juggling additional responsibilities at home.

Your business is, and will be, in hyperdrive for an extended period of time. You will very likely have to embrace virtual for the long term. Even as you begin to bring people back to the workplace, virtual work is here to stay. This means creating new approaches to work. You will be adopting new technology and attending to new security protocols and logistics. As a leader, you're going to have to model how to communicate, collaborate, align, debate, and problem-solve as a virtual team.

In working with and advising leaders in some of the top companies in the world, we are observing how they are making it work. We have been studying what makes teams work for decades, and we are now seeing it in action in the virtual world.

Drawing on our work and experience, here are nine strategies that will help you lead and manage your team virtually.

1 Rethink your driving purpose in the new normal.

Where you are going has not changed, but how you'll get there will (and must). Hit the reset button on what the new normal means to your team and organization. Take a clear-eyed look at what has changed. This analysis will inform your team's mission and strategic priorities. You must do this even as you juggle the day to day, to avoid wasting time. Now is the time to set a course and agree on strategic priorities so that you are working together as one enterprise team.

2 Build trust through honesty and transparency. This is a time for teams to be straight with one another. Admit to the challenges and barriers you face. All of us are managing brand-new issues. We are doing this while juggling family life, personal health, fatigue, and outsized responsibilities. When you are just a little more open and vulnerable, your team will be too. Many find working at home inevitably enables them to reveal more of themselves, and that's a good thing because it builds the bonds of trust that are gold in teamwork.



3 Establish the new norms for how you will work together virtually. Productive team interactions are too rare, even in the best of times. It's easy to miscommunicate, even when you are face to face. Right now, you have a chance to rewrite the rules for working together virtually through technology. Take the time to assess and codify what is working well and make it a standard practice. This includes how you will stay in touch, inform, collaborate, and make decisions. These protocols are powerful and self-reinforcing. They will pay off during times of both crisis and stability.

4 Get ahead of the swirl by keeping people in the loop. In times of uncertainty and change, anxiety blooms. This is greatly exacerbated in the virtual world. It can be difficult to keep people apprised. As the team leader, you need to model good communication by being intentional in your messages, with a frequency and cadence that are appropriate. Avoid allowing people to fill the void with rumors, hearsay, and imagined worst-case scenarios. Address issues as soon as you hear about them, head-on. And fill the pipeline of communication with real but positive messages of encouragement, thanks, and praise. When people feel acknowledged and appreciated, they engage and work harder even when they are virtual.

5 Use the appropriate virtual channels to meet and make decisions. Video is surging forward as a tool for teamwork for a reason. It is the next best thing to being there. As human beings, we are wired to look for nonverbal signals. Body language, eye contact, and voice all are critical

tools we need to interpret and respond, and video is the key to that process in the virtual work world. But a good strategy for virtual work takes into consideration all the channels of communication and leverages the right ones for the right purpose. Use email to inform, create a record, or handle detailed issues. Use online chat to ask a quick question. Pick up the phone when it is time to get off chat and have a conversation. Use all the channels, and model this for your team as well.

6 Create the environment for constructive conflict. Make sure the team knows that just because you are virtual does not mean you don't want to have the good fight to encourage vigorous discussion and good decision making. In a virtual team setting, it is more important than ever to surface issues, uncover ideas, and engage in a healthy debate as you work to solve problems together. Debate gets to the best answers, creates alignment, and gets people working together toward common goals. Allow time for real discussion, ask opinions, be inclusive, hear people out, and make it comfortable to disagree.

7 Be visible in the virtual world. This is not the time to hunker down or disappear. Increase your check-ins—one-on-one with your reports and together with your teams—to ask how things are going, what they are learning, and what they think could be coming up that needs to be addressed. Ask about the bad news too, so you can address issues immediately. Your visibility will encourage people to be in touch. Visibility also creates systematic lines of communication.

8 Inject some fun and humor into your team culture.

One of the things people miss most about the more casual interactions of an in-person office is the opportunity to have some fun and joke together in between meetings and work at their desks. Consciously find ways to replace this, such as:

- **A 5 p.m. “mingle.”** Have everyone put aside their work, bring a beverage, and raise a glass to the accomplishments of the week. Some teams enjoy games and activities, so if your team has creative members, let them inject fun into the virtual get-togethers.
- **Virtual celebrations.** If you usually have a cake in the office for birthdays and celebrate other events, be sure to do this virtually. There’s nothing like a group trying to sing “Happy Birthday” virtually to bring a smile to the team.
- **Chat channels with appropriate humor.** Set up an all-team chat channel and encourage people to share stories, ideas, jokes—and make sure to participate yourself. Humor is one of the best ways to manage the stress and make things feel more “normal.”

9 Make virtual team meetings work. The first step in making meetings work is to make sure you don’t have too many. Review and declutter the meeting calendar. This is very important when working virtually because of the demands and fatigue that come along with it. Make sure every meeting has a purpose. Audit the calendar and eliminate what is unnecessary. And then employ good meeting management. Have an agenda for every meeting. Ask people to do prework so the time together is productive. Let people out of meetings if they don’t need to be there. That includes you. If you don’t need to be there, delegate and hand it over to the leader on your team who should manage it.

Many leaders embrace the “PLAN” rule for team meetings:

Purpose

- Establish a need and clear purpose for the meeting.
- Start with the end in mind and determine the desired outcomes.

Logistics

- Consider the right group, the necessary roles to have in the room.
- Leverage the right technology tools to maximize potential engagement.

Approach

- Be purposeful and prioritize options for more efficient decision making.
- Clarify roles from the start, including decision making, agenda tracking, participation, notes.

Next steps

- Focus on deliverables, not topics, outlining clear and specific actions and accountability.
- Distribute meeting minutes with assigned next steps shortly following the meeting.

MANAGE YOURSELF, WHILE MANAGING YOUR VIRTUAL TEAM

Managing a virtual team, or a virtual organization, will take a toll on you. Take care of yourself. Manage your time, energy, and emotional well-being for the long haul to protect yourself from the mental and physical stress.

A few do’s and don’ts that you may work valuable:

Do balance your own time at home. Remote work can take over life if you don’t set boundaries. Keep a schedule that includes time for family, exercise, meals together, virtual chats with friends, and personal time.

Don’t try to replicate your in-office meeting schedule and cadence remotely. Longer meetings can work fine in an in-person setting. In a virtual environment, fatigue sets in after a few hours, and often even sooner if the calendar is filled with meetings.

Do close your virtual door occasionally. As you work to keep the lines of communication open for informal talks, balance this with time for yourself, just to think. Block this time on your calendar as an appointment so people know when you can be reached. If you do this, you’ll model it for your team and help them maintain a healthy balance too.

Don’t waste time worrying about how much people are working. Now is the time to trust in the team and focus on outcomes. It can be hard to shift the mindset away from needing to see people working to believe they are, but there is no more important shift in leading a successful virtual team. You will be surprised at how well people rise to the occasion, and how much they care about the success of the company.

Virtual work is here to stay. It is no longer just a matter of convenience, work-life balance, or cost mitigation. It is a requirement now and in the future. You have the power as the leader of your virtual team to make virtual work better than ever. What has accelerated in these unprecedented times can be a fantastic opportunity to become a high-performing team in any environment. What you learn from this experience will make you better now and in the future. [AQ](#)

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