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# Five Steps to Leading Your Team in the Virtual COVID-19 Workplace



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After Fred finished his fifth Zoom meeting of the day, he sat for a few minutes and reflected on this new world of managing. His team was working from home and so was he. The face-to-face contact that was a key part of his leadership style was now denied to him and it looked like it would continue to be unavailable for some time to come. The question he was facing was the same one many thousands of other managers like him were asking: “How can I be effective as a leader of a virtual team while keeping my team safe in this COVID–19 world?”

The good news is that over the last 20 years, there has been a trend of employees moving to increasingly virtual work environments and much has been learned about how to lead virtual teams. This trend has grown exponentially with the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic when many organizations went from having a modest percentage of team members working virtually, to the entire staff working from home. A 2020 survey of 2,865 employees by Global Workplace Analytics found that 67% of those surveyed in the U.S. were working from home for the first time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. As an indication of how well this was working, the same survey reported that only 19% of the respondents wanted to continue working from home full time in the future. Clearly, the transition has not been a smooth one for many.

Previous studies of virtual teams have documented how challenges for both leaders and employees working remotely can be daunting. However, challenges can be more daunting for both leaders and employees who have had to suddenly shift their work patterns from an office to a home environment. The suddenness of this change made it difficult or impossible to adequately prepare leaders to lead in a virtual work environment. Many suddenly found themselves needing to ensure that their employees had access to not only obvious

things like support systems, reliable internet, appropriate computer interfaces, remote access to firewall protected databases or even a quiet place to work at home but, also, to less obvious things like learning Zoom or other group collaboration technology in order to hold impromptu brainstorming sessions, conduct interactive meetings to problem solve, sustain the culture, and enable informal discussions. When the face-to-face interactions that helped bond a team all became impossible they became challenges for leaders to address. A survey taken since the emergence of COVID-19 revealed that only 46% of respondents had access to basic collaboration technology, 64% had no remote work policies, and only 41% had a clear understanding of their role and priorities. These data illustrate a new major strain on organizations and managers who may have had little experience or training on the unique challenges of managing remote employees.

For many reasons managing virtual teams is different than managing employees in a traditional face-to-face office environment. While there are some benefits to working virtually such as better work-life balance by working from home, more efficient use of time gained by not commuting to an office, and increased access to the best talent that can be located anywhere, there are also unique challenges faced by virtual employees. Employees may feel lower levels of trust with and support from their manager and their organization as a result of working remotely. Moreover, since strong cultures are created by interactions with others in that culture and the visible reinforcements of cultural values found in an office’s signs, symbols, and artifacts, working from home inevitably diminishes the employees’ connections to the corporate culture’s values, beliefs and norms. Perhaps most importantly, the loss of frequent informal communication creates the need for leaders to employ new communication tools and techniques for their virtual employees.

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While few organizations were prepared to help their many managers cope with how to be effective leaders in this new reality, there is help available from research done over the last 20-years on leading virtual teams. Insights have been gained on how to lead, organize, motivate and build organizational support systems and strong cultures which enable virtual employees to be successful. The purpose of this paper is to organize and present strategies that have been found successful by organizations who have already met the challenges of leading virtual teams. We suggest that these strategies can be employed by the many organizations and managers that are now facing the challenges of leading productive employees in a COVID-19 world.

The goal is to renew the work team's culture in the new normal. Organizations and leaders know the critical importance of culture. It is the "software" that defines the values and beliefs of an organization as to how its members work with each other. Culture creates a work environment where leaders align their team members' personal goals with those of the organization through organizational support policies and processes, formal and informal communications, and the leader's behaviors. In the face of the major work environment changes that the COVID-19 pandemic has created, reestablishing and renewing the work culture with its shared values and beliefs has become an even more important leadership task. While the world of work has changed, the need for leaders to maintain their organization's strong culture has not changed. However, the actions and activities by which they do these things has. In other words, they must take the steps necessary to renew their team's cultural values, beliefs and norms by adapting to the new reality. The importance of this renewal to sustain a strong culture is especially important for virtual employees because a strong culture can help substitute for the lack of in-person communications and serve as a catalyst for strong communications across and within the team regardless of where the employees are located. If the leader's pre COVID leadership style depended on face-to-face communications and personal interactions, the new reality of managing virtual employees requires leaders to learn and use new communication tools and managerial techniques to sustain the culture.

We offer five steps for leaders to follow for sustaining and reinforcing a successful culture in a workforce that includes employees working virtually either full or part time. These steps address how leaders can help employees successfully confront the challenges they face when working remotely from home. There are things the organization can do and that leaders should do to ensure that the now virtual employee can continue to be productive as a part of team that must interact with others in new ways. These things range from establishing new organizational technical and employee support systems to leadership training on how to not only effectively communicate with virtual employees but, also, how to sustain their cultural values, beliefs, and norms in a trusting relationship with team members and the leader. To echo the consistent findings of Gallup surveys, employees need the tools to do their jobs and the feeling that someone cares about them and their progress at work. These are hard enough for leaders to achieve in a face-to-face work environment but even more challenging in a virtual one where tech support, leader feedback, and collaborating team members are far away.

The five steps we offer are, first to establish and explain the new reality; second, sustain the corporate culture and reinforce the perception of leader trustworthiness; third, upgrade leadership communication tools and techniques to better inform virtual employees; fourth, encourage shared leadership among team members; and fifth, to create and periodically perform alignment audits to ensure virtual employees are aligned with the organization's cultural values including its commitment to mission. All these steps start with the realization that managing a team is going to be different when the members are dispersed, and new leadership strategies, communication routines and tools are required.

## **STEP 1: ESTABLISH AND EXPLAIN THE NEW REALITY**

The first step is to get the team to acknowledge that this new reality represents a change and all the fears and anxieties that people feel in the face of change will be addressed by the leader. Leaders should be transparent about any changes the organization may be taking regarding business strategy and product or services be offered which may impact work activities. Change means uncertainty and the leader should access all the tools available for managing change that have been used successfully in the past. Gaining employee acceptance that they must learn how to work at home is the first step a leader should take to be successful in this new reality. Understanding that this may not be a short-term phenomenon is also important to encourage employee acceptance of change. This new reality can't be ignored and requires everyone to learn new communication tools, time management skills, and interpersonal interaction skills. People working at home are encountering multiple personal and professional issues that a leader needs to address to sustain their productivity.

The new normal for the team requires the leader to display a greater sense of empathy and sensitivity to the challenges of working out of the office. The first question asked of a team member should always be, "how is the family or how are you doing?" Being quarantined can be difficult for families and a very lonely vigil for singles and leaders need to recognize this as much as they recognize the distractions of having family interruptions. Simply put, it is important for leaders to start conversations by communicating a genuine concern for the safety and well-being of the team members and their families. It is also important to acknowledge the uncertainties everyone shares over what the new normal will be as well as how it will affect each of them and the team. The leader must be able to tell everyone what is known about the organization's policies and procedures for working in this new environment, the resources available to help, and any changes in the work flow and mission. This means, of course, that the organization should have policies, procedures and systems support for remote employees and, if it doesn't, the leader should create operational procedures and policies that define expectations for those working from home for the first time due to the pandemic while actively advocating for the organization to act. Eliminating uncertainty is a key task for the leader and the team members need to know that their leader as the primary link to the organization is actively working on their behalf.

Ramping up communications should be done in two ways. First, establish regularly scheduled one on one calls or video enabled meetings to establish regular contact with each direct report. This allows for open communication, expressions of personal concern for their welfare, active listening to any concerns or frustrations, and reinforcement of the culture, values, and mission of the organization. Leaders in these calls can acknowledge their awareness of the unprecedented pressure their employees are experiencing while staying at home, teaching their kids, missing social interactions with friends and coworkers, wondering where they can find a peaceful place in their homes to work, and feeling nervous about themselves and their organization's future. Even if the leaders cannot tell their team members all they want to know, leaders should tell them all they do know and demonstrate that they care about them, their well-being, their future, and their families. Empathy is important in uncertain times like these.

Second, after establishing regularly scheduled one on one meetings to check in on their team members individually, the leader needs to schedule weekly team meetings. The team needs to be reminded of the importance of their continuing operations as a team. These meetings generally use video conference technology like Zoom or WebEx technology, but other options are available and may be more desirable depending on needed technology and security protocols. Regardless of the technology, such meetings should accomplish four important goals. First, to communicate and reinforce the organization's goals and how the team's goals connect to those goals. Second, that the organization has, is getting, or will sustain the technological resources needed to support the team members at home. Third, that the leader is committed to sustaining the team and its members, its culture, and its ability to achieve its goals. Fourth, how the team is doing in reaching its goals (the performance metrics) and what problems the leader must resolve. Accomplishing these meeting goals has several important elements.

The first element is to establish ground rules for communication with the team members, across the team, and with the team's internal and external customers. A communication etiquette should also be established; time limits on responding to team member questions; setting times for interaction that respect family obligations and time zone differences, and participation expectations for discussions that require personal interactions instead of relying only on email and texts. Responsiveness is very important when employees are working virtually. Besides providing necessary information to a team member, a leader's timely response also sends a strong message to a distant employee of respect - that the leader is paying attention and doing whatever is possible to support that member and the team.

The weekly team meetings should also have a rhythm of a set time and length as if the team was back in the office such as a one hour meeting every Monday morning at 9. The time set should show recognition of family obligations or other commitments associated with working from home. A second weekly meeting should also be established for the team members to collaborate and engage with each other to discuss work or any other topic they wish to discuss. In a traditional office environment many issues and obstacles to task completion are resolved by face-to-face encounters

among and between team members. When these interaction opportunities are eliminated, an alternative process for collaboration should be created such as online chats and screen share applications like Skype or Lync. Leaders should encourage online collaborations, so they can happen organically or in an "on-line break room". Leaders should also periodically participate in these to keep track of issues and concerns needing intervention, further discussion, or involvement of other organizational units. To replicate some of the camaraderie and informal interactions of face to face meetings, the leader might even introduce some fun activities like warm up "do you know" type quizzes, virtual pizza/ice cream celebrations, or other techniques to build sense of community and team collaboration.

When teams must collaborate, facilitating it becomes a critical concern for leaders when employees are working from home. Both task and informal collaborations allow everyone to stay connected to a mission driven culture and leaders should reinforce the norm that team members are expected to interact with each other to help solve problems, share knowledge, and resolve issues even when they are not able to connect face-to-face. Leaders should reinforce how important this continuing contact is to team success and publicly recognize and reward positive team collaborations to reinforce the behavior. The more interdependent the team's tasks are the more important this collaboration is, but it is still an important leadership responsibility even for largely independent workers. Meeting often with their colleagues virtually reminds everyone that they are part of a team and a shared culture.

Communicating the new reality through establishing new routines to enhance communications with now virtual employees is important to establish the new reality. In a typical office work setting there are routines with established patterns of communication and interaction. Without the office's structure, the leader must create routines that can substitute for that office structure. Moreover, leaders can add new options to enable employees to use any extra time for personal and professional growth or just to promote mental health in stressful times. Hewlett Packard, for example, started offering meditation and mindfulness services from Headspace to help employees unplug from work while at home. Other companies offered their newly remote workers on line access to yoga and Pilates classes or professional development, educational, and skills-based programs. Such routines ensure that the team members stay focused on accomplishing team goals while acknowledging the additional challenges team members face when working at home.

Managers successful in this step place extra emphasis on their goal setting, and performance management skills. These become more critical for virtual teams as individual and tasks need greater task structure, defined project time lines, and measurement of specific goals. Setting defined goals instead of defined work hours allows the team members the flexibility they need to accommodate their new realities. When task goals are specific, measurable, actionable, realistic and time limited (SMART), employees can use nontraditional work times to complete work tasks and better accommodate any family time demands that occur while working at home. While goal setting is an effective managerial tool in traditional office settings, it is critical in virtual

settings where goals should be set for performance, behaviors and learning. With specific goals the leader can focus on the metrics that matter for each team member and the overall team.

We offer the following leader actions to implement this step:

- Hold weekly meetings with entire team early in week at a set time that accommodates team members' at-home responsibilities and obligations to check on goals, progress, and problems.
- Hold weekly meetings with each team member at convenient times for them to review progress towards goals and to identify any personal, professional or team problems that need leader resolution.
- Schedule weekly meetings for team to collaborate and build relationships
- Start meetings asking two questions; "How's everyone doing?" and "Are you having any problems I can help you with?"
- Remind team of its importance to overall organization and other stakeholders in their work output.
- Define and enforce communication norms and etiquette

## STEP 2: SUSTAIN THE CORPORATE CULTURE AND REINFORCE THE PERCEPTION OF LEADER TRUSTWORTHINESS

After communication norms and work routines have been established, the second step is to establish an environment that sustains and reinforces the team's commitment to the organization's culture. As virtual team members are extra dependent on the leader to define and sustain the organization and team culture, the leader needs to spend extra time and effort building trustworthiness. Employees need to trust in the leader as truth teller, source of organizational and team knowledge, and active advocate to the organizational leadership and other units that control resources needed by the team. Building and sustaining trust is especially important for managers of remote employees where there is a high risk of team members feeling isolated. Having lower levels of trust can negatively impact their engagement in the culture, the organization's mission and team productivity. There are many benefits when there is a high level of trust in the workplace and the leader's effective management of the culture is critical. The research shows that trusting team members are more proactive, have a higher level of focus on task output, display more optimism, communicate more often, and are more open about providing feedback.

To sustain the culture and build leader trustworthiness, organizational leaders should make sure they have learned how to employ the tools of establishing culture. Leaders teach culture by what they consistently say, do and write. Since culture is shared the routines established in Step 1 help ensure that the team members have a time to share it. The leader should add to the words defining the culture by using visual reminders such as superimposing a values statement on the web screen, using it on a background for virtual meetings, or even sending corporate value statements and symbols to employees for display in their homework locations. Celebrations of important personal and professional

milestones remind team members of what is important to the culture and each other even if they can't do it in person. Asking team members to comment on how the team values came into play in each job or reading correspondence from stakeholders can remind team members that even though they are at working at home they are still part of something important and worthwhile. In other words, the same effort to establish team culture and how it fits into the overall organization's that was used in the office should be the minimum effort for leading a virtual team. It is harder to do so it will take more effort and creativity by the leader.

Other things the leader can do to established and sustain a trustworthy culture can be divided into four categories: advocating for organization infrastructure and policies that set team leaders up to be successful, leadership actions that ensure they consistently follow through on commitments, and decisions that treat employees fairly based on transparent, objective policies, and, finally, team trust building.

**Organizational Strategies.** The strategies an organization adopts to support virtual employees establishes the infrastructure and culture for the organization to earn its employees' trust. Organizational trust is earned through thoughtful policies and procedures which take into consideration the unique needs of their virtual staff. This can be done through ensuring the adequacy of the technology infrastructure and tech support, training leaders to succeed in a virtual work setting, ensuring team tasks, roles, and expectations are clearly defined, and having human resource policies aligned with the needs of virtual employees. Through careful attention to these organizational responsibilities, employees feel they can trust their organization to support their virtual communication needs as well as feel respected, recognized and supported by organizational policies and processes. The leader should actively advocate for these and make it known to team members that the leader is trying to ensure that the organization is acting in trustworthy ways.

The first issue for organizational attention is the critical one of technological support. Newly distant employees need quick resolution to the technological issues that working from home creates. Timeliness signals organizational concern and builds trust of distant employees that the organization cares and will do what it can to solve these frustrating issues. Technology hardware, software, applications, and tech support need to work properly if the organization expects employees to be efficient and effective. What is generally available in an office is more critical for the distant worker sensitive to any signal that the organization is unconcerned with those working at home. The virtual leader should do everything possible to make sure the organization is responsive to the technology needs of each employee. The new work at home workplace can have data security and privacy issues not faced in an office setting. The organization will need to provide training and instructions on how to access the company's technology and data base from their home devices. In addition to the learning how to access the organization's data and systems, employees will need to be taught the enhanced collaboration tools being used in order to enable employees working remotely to collaborate effectively, share their desktops, and have impromptu meetings.

Tools like Zoom, WebEx, Microsoft Teams, and Slack allow employees to voice and video conference or collaborate

through instant messaging of questions or notices. This can be done between two employees or within a group to create a virtual chatroom. These tools allow employees to share their screens to collaborate on a shared document or troubleshoot a task problem. Software applications like Microsoft OneDrive, SharePoint, Drop Box, or Google Docs allow employees to concurrently work on data sets or projects without access or replication issues. By providing a thoughtful, comprehensive technology infrastructure and training, employees working remotely will feel the organization cares about their ability to be successful in their new work from home arrangement. Much of the technology that supports employees working virtually sits on cloud services and only requires internet access to utilize these applications. However, organizations should also prepare for and communicate contingencies for when employees lose access to the internet, or when support applications go down. Companies should consider having the ability to rapidly deploy air cards overnight to employees who may be without internet service for more than a short time. Organizations should also ensure that processes are documented and trained back-ups available, so others are able to step in for those encountering technological challenges to complete time sensitive tasks. In addition to technology cues which help create a supportive, trusting culture for virtual employees, the organization should ensure the leaders are trained and responsible for spending the extra time and effort in defining task and role expectations for both team and individual team members. This means all employees should understand that each has a role to play in the team and exactly what that role is. This can be communicated in several ways. First, every job should have a job description that clearly defines key responsibilities for each employee. The job descriptions would then be supported by documented operating procedures (desk procedures) for common tasks which establish the responsibility of each person on a team and the timing that each task should be completed. Next, work plans of who is assigned to specific tasks, with the task priority, and due dates should be documented in a place where everyone on the team can access and review the project plans. Last, regularly scheduled team meetings should occur so that virtual team members can share their status, risks, and collaborate on solutions. All these activities create a role clarity and consistency which will create a trusting environment.

Human resources also play an important role in building and maintaining a trusting culture for virtual employees through the programs it creates for training, rewarding, and recognizing employees as well as the policies it creates for the unique issues associated with employees working at home or at distant locations. These policies and procedures should account for what employees need now as well as plans for their future. If this pandemic exists long enough, then HR will need to create new policies and procedures for handling recruitment, selection, and on boarding of new employees in the virtual workplace as turnover will inevitably occur. HR will also need to review all its plans and procedures for handling employee issues such as promotions, career counseling, discipline, training, drug testing, and leadership development as they will all require different procedures in the new reality.

Moreover, the unique issues of work-family conflicts, mental health, and work stress will necessitate new ways

of recognizing and resolving these employee issues when they are not in an office. New training for leaders to check on how employees are doing will be required to ensure that mental health issues are caught early, and resolutions offered in a timely way. Distant workers will need new ways to access employee assistance programs, career development counseling, and personal disputes that many organizations will have to invent as they never had a virtual workforce before. The way in which HR deals with the newly virtual employee will send a strong signal to all employees as to how trustworthy the organization is. Indifference to the unique challenges many face when working from home is a path to destroying trust in organization.

Additionally, ensuring appropriate training is available for virtual employees is an important role for human resources. Training should be made available on demand as modules, so employees can access it as needed. This training can range from job skills related to professional and career development (e.g., executive education and academic programs) to personal health (e.g., yoga and Pilates) but, the organization's provision of this training signals its concern for the development of its employees regardless of location.

Beyond training, human resources should make sure policies related to pay and rewards are adjusted to account for a virtual workforce. When employees are no longer in the office, greater transparency is needed to communicate to all how the team and its members are tracking towards performance goals. A trustworthy leader is one that reminds HR that high performing team members should be in consideration for promotions or as candidates for further training. The routine meetings managers have with the team need to spend time addressing progress to goals and also recognizing success. These meetings should also enable leaders to manage performance issues. While in the office, this may have happened in quick, impromptu coaching conversations or feedback, managers now will need a forum and scheduled frequency to provide feedback. Human resources can play an important role in reinforcing this element of the culture by institutionalizing what metrics will be used to measure performance, where they can be reviewed, and guidelines on performance conversations that managers can leverage. They can also encourage managers and leaders to celebrate successes. Lastly, human resources should establish consistent policies related to employees working from home. These policies should include what expenses (internet, additional phone lines, office supplies, etc.) can be reimbursed. In addition, whether or not there will be any changes to core working hours and what to do if an employee goes missing for longer periods of time during the normal business day. By establishing working at home rules, human resources can establish consistent standards which when equitably applied to all employees, increases trust.

**Leader strategies.** Leaders play the most important role in building trust. Effective virtual team leaders have learned to adapt their communication and management approach to better respond to the needs of a virtual employee. Virtual employees may live in different time zones or have different work environments that a leader must accommodate in how and when to communicate with those employees. Distant employees also no longer have easy access to informal hallway conversations where information and concerns are readily shared. Leaders who understand and address these needs

for information and actively work to fill the communications gaps in communications build higher levels of trust. Employees will see them as important and honest sources of the information that used to be available in the hallways and that provides important contextual supplements to the traditional work-related communications that all leaders provide.

In addition, leaders need to recognize that there may be less communication regarding the organization's culture, strategy, and goals when employees are working from home. Visual cues in the office are no longer available, so leaders must be thoughtful for how they provide organizational updates. The importance of these should not be neglected just because they cannot happen in person as they had in the past. Organizations' business updates or cross organizational information sharing are critical vehicles to keeping employees aware of and informed about company's values and progress towards goals. Employees not routinely provided with this information will struggle with maintaining the organizational commitment and cohesion that sustains a culture and a commitment to an organizational mission. Effective virtual leaders listen well to hear the issues their team members raise, to catch the nuances in the conversations, and observe how comments and texts are phrased. Without the informal and nonverbal communication that leaders rely on in the office setting to complement the verbal, virtual leaders must listen extra carefully as the nonverbal cues are no longer available. These are how leaders sustain a trusting culture.

**Team Strategies.** The last important area of focus for a leader to address in order to sustain a trusting culture with virtual employees is ensuring that team members can see how they collectively and individually connect to the organizational strategy and goals. Similar to other organizational and leadership strategies to accommodate virtual employees, managers should over communicate (e.g. frequent status meetings, sending out updates to the team, having a publicly accessible project plan on a tool like SharePoint). Within these meetings, having leaders ask for feedback and ideas further engages team members into accomplishing common goals. Leaders must show by their words that they want team members to feel psychologically safe. Feeling safe so employees will continue to take appropriate risks, speak up with their concerns, and continue to take initiatives on new projects and opportunities is harder to do in a virtual world but no less important. Leaders should enhance their willingness to listen with empathy and speak with sincerity as the best available tools they have to communicate that they retain their faith in their employees' judgment and capabilities even when they are unable to physically pat them on the back or do the other things that are done in office settings. Leaders know the importance of ensuring team members of their psychological safety. Psychological safety is often defined as a condition in which human beings feel (1) included, (2) safe to learn, (3) safe to contribute, and (4) safe to challenge the status quo – all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way. The research shows that leaders who promotes an environment that is psychologically safe have teams with higher levels of success and reinforce trust in the leader. In the new reality of virtual organizations, the leader may become the organization to team members and the role of leader in

establishing and sustaining a psychologically safe work environment is critical.

We offer the following leader actions to implement this step:

- Find ways to remind team of cultural values, beliefs, and norms in what is said, done and written in both team and individual communications
- Use rituals, virtual celebrations of professional and personal milestones, and send physical symbols of the culture to employee homes to keep culture top of mind for team members
- Remind team members of communication and data sharing protocols that build trusting relationships
- Don't forget to include those who remain at home during partial reopening of offices
- Engage with tech unit to ensure team members have ready access to tech support and best available collaboration equipment and platforms
- Engage with HR to ensure team members have ready access to professional development training, educational programs, career counseling, pay and benefits, mental health support (e.g., EAP, Yoga, etc.), and corporate recognitions and communications.
- Engage with other organizational units and customers of work product to ensure team have ready access to needed resources, information, and cooperative collaborations
- Remind team members that the new work environment is still psychologically safe as they (1) are all included, (2) safe to learn, (3) safe to contribute, and (4) safe to challenge the status quo – all without fear of being embarrassed, marginalized, or punished in some way.

### STEP 3: UPGRADE LEADERSHIP COMMUNICATION PRACTICES AND TECHNIQUES TO BETTER INFORM VIRTUAL EMPLOYEES

Although communication is implicit in much of the earlier discussions of steps, it is so important it merits consideration as its own step. Leaders should be trained to understand that communication techniques which may have worked well in face-to-face settings need to be modified or enhanced to meet the communication needs of virtual employees. Christopher Reynolds, Chief Administrative Officer of Toyota North America stated in a recent *Wall Street Journal* interview on managing virtual employees, "There's no such thing as too much communication." Obviously one of the key factors in using virtual teams has been the development of advanced communication technology to ensure adequate communication with distant workers. However, just buying and distributing communications technology to virtual employees will not automatically make them effective. Leaders must also find new ways to compensate for the lack of nonverbal communication cues that are generally available in an office environment. As well, virtual employees do not benefit from the informal, water cooler talk where employee bonding and information sharing often occurs. People working away from the office have often felt left out of the communication flow anyway and, if the leader not actively fill in those gaps, there is likely to be misunder-

standings and confusion. Communication gaps can lead to lower employee engagement, lower levels of team and cultural cohesion, and reduced trust between and among employees. The reality for newly virtual employees makes these gaps more apparent and leaders must expend greater effort to align employees with the organization's culture as well as its goals and objectives.

To eliminate the gaps and reduce their adverse outcomes, leaders must adapt their communication practices and techniques for their virtual employees. Researchers have found that specifically focusing on communication frequency, predictability, responsiveness, clarity, and mode can help overcome the challenges of working with virtual teams. Paying attention to these communication tools and techniques helps ensure employees working from home feel connected to the organization's mission and culture.

First, regarding frequency, frequent leader communication creates a stronger relationship with virtual employees and more communication between and among employees. Indeed, a recent Gallup survey found that employee engagement is higher when managers communicate with their employees on a daily basis (e.g. email, text, instant message, etc.). Frequent communications, formal and informal, increase team effectiveness and performance. For example, a leader may have scheduled weekly team status meetings and monthly one-on-one meetings with people on their team with group chats or texts in between to ask team members about their weekend or make sure they saw an important email. Increasing frequency could also be accomplished with a weekly blog, newsletter, or business social media application like Yammer or Slack. Leaders could also use instant messages to regularly check in.

A second communication technique that is important for leaders is the degree to which their communications are predictable. Predictable responses to inquiries or task requests positively impacts a member's organizational commitment and team performance. Leaders who provide detailed, thoughtful responses build trust and improve a member's sense of engagement and feeling of being valued and respected. Thus, a leader should avoid being unpredictable as it can cause a team member to read something unintended into the variance in communication (e.g. you are upset with their question, you do not find their communication very important). Such unpredictability in communication breaks down trust and can change an employee's perspective on the culture and leader's trustworthiness.

A third related communication technique that needs the leader's attention is timeliness of response. Research by Gallup finds that employees expect calls or messages to managers and leaders returned within 24 hours. The expectations on how quickly a manager should respond to texts is even quicker. The more timely the communication back to virtual employees is, the more engaged and committed employees are to the organization and attaining specific goals and objectives. The expectation of timely responses does not also mean that a manager must provide a comprehensive or complete response to a complex question as the sender knows that research or follow-up with others may be required. A good best practice for timely communication is immediately or as soon as possible acknowledge receipt of the email and include in the response a time line for providing a complete response. This response builds trust as it

signals the recipient that the inquiry and the sender are important and deserve the leader's quick attention.

The fourth communication technique that leaders should attend to is clarity. Leaders are expected to send communications that are clear. Whether the communication is giving direction or feedback, the communication needs to be understood by the receiver. Indeed, a classic definition of authority is a leader's communication that is accepted by the recipient. Implicit in this definition is that the communication must be understood. Employees cannot do what they don't understand so communications must set clear direction and expectations. Clearly documented task assignments, measurable goals, team member roles, and due dates positively affect team performance. In a traditional face-to-face office setting, much performance feedback or coaching on tasks happens organically and informally at employees' desks, in break rooms, or quick, impromptu huddles, or sometimes in just a leader's simple facial expression or gesture. In a virtual workplace, the informal and nonverbal communications are largely gone so communication must become clearer by being formal and documented. Lacking the informal and nonverbal options, managers and employees talk on the phone, instant message, or meet online. Because of the limits of those communication techniques, managers of virtual employees must follow-up conversations with clearly documented summaries of expectations. Likewise, results from online huddles must be clearly documented so that everyone understands each other's task responsibilities, priorities, and due dates. Providing clear roles, goals, and task expectations also helps align virtual team members with the organization's culture, mission, and vision. and with each other.

The last communication technique that needs special attention by virtual leaders is thoughtful selection of the mode of communication to ensure a best fit of the message with the recipient. Selecting when to use an email instead of a phone call, or instant message, depends on how the recipient expects to receive that particular message. In effect, the recipient is the leader's customer for a message and the leader should consider the way in which each recipient prefers to receive different types of information when selecting the best mode. Many leaders have used video calls with Skype, WebEx, or Zoom but they are not always the best fit for every communication between a leader and the team. If documentation is needed as a reference for specific work tasks, tracking decisions, or technical analysis, then the mode that allows that is the best fit. For urgent notifications or requests, instant message or text is generally most effective. If something is very important leaders should use multiple modes to ensure the redundancy that increases the odds that communications are received. Multiple mode usage also signals urgency. Zoom or WebEx may work best for 1 team meetings where people are familiar with each other or small group meetings where initial introductions can benefit from the intimacy. However, for other meetings a standard conference call with screen share (to show or collaborate on documents) may be the better choice. The choice of communication mode is very important because it impacts how virtual team members interpret the message.

Overall, these communication practices and techniques should be considered together as each contributes to the effectiveness of the communication in reaching the virtual



team members. Managers who are able to adapt their communication frequency, predictability, responsiveness, clarity, and mode to be effective in the messages they send to their virtual employees will benefit from improved performance and increased trustworthiness while increasing their ability to effectively communicate goals, culture, and values. In addition, these communication practices and techniques provide the structural support for leaders to effectively develop their employees and manage through performance issues. The bottom line is that when an organization transitions to a virtual workplace, it puts an extra burden on the leader's ability to communicate effectively when the physical reminders of the company's culture and mission and the informal communications that are part of the traditional office environment are no longer available.

We offer the following leader actions to implement this step:

- Communicate in a timely way to show respect for team members and responsiveness to their needs (responding quickly sends a message so check all modes frequently for messages)
- Communicate frequently with team members to show they aren't being forgotten
- Communicate in predictable patterns to avoid feeling of uncertainty
- Communicate clearly by checking to ensure that what was communicated was understood
- Carefully select the communication mode that best fits the message and the receiver
- Monitor closely the technology to ensure communications are smooth

#### **STEP 4: ENCOURAGE SHARED LEADERSHIP AMONG TEAM MEMBERS**

Following the steps to earn trust and communicate effectively with virtual employees' managers can now focus on the method of leadership that is most effective for virtual employees. Shared leadership is the process where team members each play a role in the collective leadership of team tasks. Research has found that shared leadership can improve performance results from virtual teams when compared to more traditional leadership techniques. For virtual teams, shared leadership can take on greater value because some of the benefits of shared leadership are directly related to challenges in virtual teams. Specially, shared leadership requires greater team member engagement and group interaction, which leads to team members building more cohesive interpersonal relationships and working together more closely. If team collaboration is a critical part of virtual team success, shared leadership is an important way to enhance that collaboration.

To successfully implement shared leadership within a group of virtual employees it is recommended to start with a training strategy to help members understand how shared leadership works and what successful team outcomes look like. Shuffler and his colleagues have discussed the culture and infrastructure that should be established to enable successful shared leadership on virtual teams. The infrastructure should provide a process for how team members will coordinate with each other to provide risks, project

needs, and status updates. They suggest establishing a group mission, expectations and goals, and then create a defined process for team members to collaborate, provide updates, and share feedback. Leaders would then shift to a role of supporting and advising the team members on leadership roles, and monitoring and coaching performance.

Since one of the challenges with virtual teams is the diminished ability of management to monitor employee activity and team dynamics, effective shared leadership can help meet this challenge. When implemented well, shared leadership changes the leadership paradigm. Instead of relying on the formal leader to provide all guidance, supervision, and performance feedback, shared leadership places virtual colleagues in different leadership roles with defined responsibilities for team outcomes. These roles increase member vesting in team outcomes. Moreover, shared leadership quickly exposes team members who are highly engaged by this level of ownership and those who are unable or unwilling to take on any leadership roles. Shared leadership can be especially important for virtual employees because it shifts the responsibility for maintaining teamwork and communication to the team members acting as a team instead of relying entirely on management to provide this collaboration.

For example, a manager at a large outsourcing organization distributed the management of processing responsibilities to each member of the team. The entire team is collectively responsible for processing human resource questions and transactions which come in from other employees. These are grouped into different categories, such as, payroll, health insurance, retirement, disability and leaves. The manager has appointed one member of the processing team to be accountable for each category of processing to ensure that requests are completed on average in less than two business days, that customer satisfaction with the transactions is high, and that the accuracy of the processing is above 98% correct. Each week at a team meeting, the person accountable for each category of processing provides a status update and a report on any unexpected challenges, such as higher than anticipated volume. In addition, at the meeting, they share ideas for continuous improvement for their process from the review of the prior week's results. Even though the team is working all requests collectively, this shared leadership allows for each team member to have direct ownership of a process and engagement is at a level deeper than if the manager was managing each transaction at the manager's level. Executing a strategy of shared leadership has a great number of advantages for virtual teams and managers can benefit from thinking creatively as to how they might distribute ownership to engage more of the team in leadership roles.

We offer the following leader actions to implement this step:

- Train team members on how to take on leadership roles
- Identify the leadership skills of each member to ensure proper assignment of roles that each is good at and which has development potential
- Encourage team collaborations and information sharing to allow members to see each other's contributions to the work product

- Celebrate accomplishments of team and spotlight contributors
- Ensure the infrastructure for work collaboration, providing updates, and sharing feedback is accessible, understood, and working
- Monitor the team collaboration in routine meetings (Step 1) to ensure conflicts are identified and resolved
- Coach those who need help in performing their leadership role

## **STEP 5: CREATE AND PERIODICALLY PERFORM ALIGNMENT AUDITS TO ENSURE VIRTUAL EMPLOYEES ARE ALIGNED WITH THE ORGANIZATION'S CULTURAL VALUES INCLUDING ITS COMMITMENT TO MISSION**

The last step is to create and periodically perform an audit to ensure that the virtual employees are aligned with the organization's cultural values and its mission. It's not enough to tell everyone that the organization has a culture and a mission. It is necessary to check. The purpose of an audit is to check on whether or not something is happening the way it is supposed to. This step requires a leader to do exactly that. Thus, we audit to find out if the virtual team members are aligned with the culture, the organization's mission, the team's tasks, and the leaders' ability to lead. One critical key to building and sustaining trust is that everyone agrees on the team tasks, the shared culture, and the organization's missions. If everyone agrees on what they are supposed to do, why they do it, and how they work as a team, the odds are very good that the leader has practiced the leadership skills that work best in a virtual team setting. By practicing the communication practices that best fit a virtual team, that leader has learned how to adapt the leadership skills to a virtual setting. A common belief is that what gets measured gets managed and the audit can be the metric on how well the virtual team is adapting to the new reality.

We offer the following steps to perform an audit. It is short, focused on communication and caring. It balances the tasks of setting goals and assessing performance to keep the team and its members focused on the task with the leader's practices of caring. Not only does it check to ensure that the leader has taken the time to present clear, operational goals in ways that the team members understand but, also, makes the effort to provide feedback on task performance for both individuals (privately) and team (publicly). The audit should capture the human side of the leadership as well as task performance and remind the leader to pay attention to the mental health aspects of those on a virtual team. There are issues for a leader to address for those employees that are out of sight and heard only via voice connections, emails or texts. The virtues of management by walking around are largely lost to the virtual team leader so the opportunities to catch the frown of dissatisfaction, to hear the grumbling at the water cooler, or to offer some coaching in an informal meeting in the hall are unavailable. Nonetheless, the dissatisfactions still occur, the reasons for the grumbings still exist, and the need of an employee to have a quick informal chat with the boss doesn't disappear.

The items we include on [Table 1](#) can be added to or deleted as desired to fit the leader's circumstances. It is a start to develop a tool that will force the leader to periodically review the key issues in building and sustaining the relationships with the virtual team members that yield a trusting relationship. It is the leader's task to ensure that those who are unable or unwilling to be in an office environment still gain all the benefits of being part of a strong mission focused organization in which everyone is enabled and encouraged to perform their best work.

When completing the audit, we offer the following strategies to implement this step:

- Schedule a periodic audit that assesses the status of key actions identified from the prior steps
- Make sure audit has included important actions to periodically assess and doesn't include actions that can be assessed less often
- Add items that are unique to the leader's leadership style, team goals, member personalities, and relationships with members
- Ensure that employees know the organizations mission and goals and how their job impacts the pursuit of the mission and goals

## **CONCLUSION**

The buzz phrase 'the new normal' has been commonly used to describe the changes in the world since the emergence of the COVID-19 pandemic. One of the most significant changes has been the many employees who have suddenly found themselves working from home, who had never worked remotely in the past, and had not previously had training in or experience with working from home. The disruption caused by this dramatic change has created stress for both leaders and their teams. While many organizations and their leaders have now worked through the initial challenge of how to make working remotely a reality, many are now reflecting on whether or not their communication and management routines are helping their leadership get the best results possible from their newly virtual employees. Even if employees are able to slowly return to their offices, there is a high likelihood that many employees and organizations will continue to have significant numbers of employees working from home in the future. Leaders must understand how virtual teams are different and take the action steps like those offered here to be successful.

The good news is we have already learned much about how to do this from leading employees who have successfully worked remotely for over 20 years. There are some proven leader actions and techniques which can make virtual work arrangements effective. We have offered the 5-steps derived from the 20 years of experience to help managers of newly virtual teams to be more effective. Not only do we define each step but offer specific recommendations for using them. Perhaps the most valuable is the last step, the audit, as it forces leaders to regularly monitor the things that can impact their team's effectiveness.

This audit, a sample which is provided above, can help a leader check that he or she has taken the time to communicate effectively, build trust, share leadership responsi-

**Table 1** Team Alignment Audit: activities to ensure the leader has sustained the culture and aligned the virtual work environment to the organization. Leaders may decide to add or delete items based on their organizations goals and objectives

Communicate New Reality	Hold weekly team meeting early in week at a set time that accommodates team
Trust	<p>Hold individual weekly meetings with each team member</p> <p>Schedule weekly team meetings with the purpose of the team talking and engaging</p> <p>Start each meeting with two questions; “How are you and your family doing?” and “Are you having any problems I can help you with?”</p> <p>Remind team members of their importance to overall organization and other stakeholders in their work output.</p> <p>Define and enforce communication norms and etiquette</p> <p>Find ways to remind team of cultural values, beliefs, and norms in what is said, done and written in both team and individual communications</p> <p>Use rituals, celebrations of professional and personal milestones, and symbols to keep culture top of mind for team members</p> <p>Remind team members of communication and data sharing protocols that build trusting relationships</p> <p>Include those who remain at home during partial reopening of offices in team events</p> <p>Advocate for those unable to return to offices because of family responsibilities, preexisting health conditions, or fear when and if offices reopen</p> <p>Engage with technology unit to ensure team members ready access to tech support and best available collaboration equipment and platforms</p> <p>Ensure team members have access to professional development training, educational programs, career counseling, pay and benefits, mental health support, and corporate recognitions and communications.</p> <p>Engage with other organizational units and customers to ensure team ready access to needed resources, information, and cooperative collaborations</p>
Communication	<p>Ensure team members are encouraged to share ideas, take risks, and provide feedback</p> <p>Communicate in a timely way to show respect for team members and responsiveness to their needs (responding quickly sends a message so check all modes frequently for messages)</p> <p>Communicate frequently with team members to show they aren’t being forgotten</p> <p>Communicate in predictable patterns to avoid feeling of uncertainty</p> <p>Communicate clearly by checking to ensure that what was communicated was understood</p> <p>Carefully select the communication mode that best fits the message and the receiver</p> <p>Double-check the technology to ensure communications are smooth</p>
Shared Leadership	<p>Prepare team members to take on leadership roles</p> <p>Identify the leadership skills of each member to ensure proper assignment of roles that each is good at and which has development potential</p> <p>Encourage team collaborations and information sharing to allow members to see each other’s contributions to the work product</p> <p>Celebrate accomplishments of team and spotlight contributors</p> <p>Ensure the infrastructure for work collaboration, providing updates, and sharing feedback is accessible, understood, and working</p> <p>Monitor the team collaboration in routine meetings (Step 1) to ensure conflicts are identified and resolved</p>

bilities, and present clear, operational goals and tasks in ways that the team members understand. If everyone agrees on what they are trying to accomplish, why that is important, and how each team member has a contribution to make, the odds are very good that the manager has mastered the leadership skills that work best in a virtual team setting. An audit also helps ensure leaders are capturing the human side of the leadership as the items we include reminding leaders to pay attention to the mental health aspects of being on a virtual team. There is an old saying that no one cares what you know until they know you care and this is both harder to do when team members are not operating in a face-to-face environment and more

important to do using all the communication tools and techniques available. There are issues that need a leader’s attention for those employees that are out of sight and heard only via voice connections or tweets. The many benefits of management by walking around are largely lost to the virtual team leader so the opportunity to catch the frown of dissatisfaction, the grumbling at the water cooler, or the informal meeting in the hallway is unavailable. Nonetheless, the dissatisfactions still occur, the reasons for the grumbings still exist, and the need of an employee to have a quick informal chat with the boss doesn’t disappear. By dedicating time to understand the new challenges caused by working outside the traditional office,

leaders can recreate their culture to fit the unique needs of a dispersed workforce for now and in the future.

## CREDIT STATEMENT

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## FURTHER READINGS

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