

Leading Virtually



Virtual work is here to stay. Where does this leave leaders? Do the leadership skills they've honed over the years with co-located teams also work well in virtual situations where team members are geographically dispersed and tethered by technology? Fortunately, researchers have tackled this question in a variety of ways. In this paper, the authors thoroughly review the disparate literature, drawing several implications for leaders who are new to (or struggling with) the vagaries of virtuality.

It turns out that many traditional leadership behaviors apply equally well on-site and off. But this analysis turned up four that deserve special attention in virtual settings because they're more challenging and/or have outsized effects in this context.

1. **SETTING THE COURSE:** This includes defining a mission (or sense of purpose), as well as establishing goals and expectations. While always valuable, setting the course is particularly difficult when team members are unable to meet in person. The key lies in going the extra mile to ensure that all team members are actively involved in team launches. This not only enhances shared understanding, trust, collaboration, and motivation among team members, but also boosts early team performance.
2. **EMPOWERING THE TEAM:** By necessity, formal leaders of virtual teams strive to create a milieu in which shared leadership flourishes. They instigate and support team members' efforts to assume larger roles in decision-making and problem-solving, as well as in the initiation of ideas, allocation of tasks, coordination of work, monitoring of team progress, and even mentoring and coaching. The evidence is clear: In dispersed work situations, more empowered teams are not only more collaborative, but also better performers.
3. **STRENGTHENING THE TIES THAT BIND:** Solidarity in virtual teams is facilitated by a proper launch and team member empowerment. But it takes additional effort to deepen and maintain the comradery that emanates from in-person encounters. For this, it is essential to make time for face time – to purposively design and schedule on-line (video) activities that replicate the informal contacts that occur among co-located team members. This isn't easy, but studies consistently show that the extra effort pays dividends in terms of both team member morale and team output.



4. SYNCHRONIZING TECHNOLOGY AND TALENT: Bottom line, virtual team success depends on optimizing the interplay between technology and talent. Researchers have conceptualized this as a three-part process. First, assembling a technological infrastructure (array of hardware and software) capable of facilitating both the tasks to be done and the teams’ dynamics. Second, ensuring that team members have the knowledge and capabilities required to optimally use the available technologies. And third, staying agile; making regular adaptations to technology and talent as circumstances change. Studies show that all three play significant roles in determining the success of virtual teams.

While focusing on leadership, the authors also briefly explore the roles and responsibilities of organizations in supporting virtual work and workers. They conclude by highlighting the many questions that remain unanswered in this realm, particularly around hybrid and globally dispersed teams. And, thus, encourage HR and other leaders who have interests in improving the utilization of virtual work in their organizations to contact Professor Brad Bell (bb92@cornell.edu) to discuss possibilities.

This ResearchBrief by the following authors below is based on the *Annual Review of Organizational Psychology and Organizational Behavior* publication "Leading Virtually."



Brad Bell, William J. Conaty Professor of Strategic Human Resources and CAHRS Academic Director, ILR School, Cornell University



Kristie McAlpine, Assistant Professor of Management, Rutgers University



N. Sharan Hill, Associate Professor of Management, George Washington School of Business

