



Virtual Leadership: Leading in the New Normal

In late 2019, the International Workplace Group (IWG) global workspace survey of more than 15,000 workers showed that more than two-thirds of professionals around the world telecommute at least one day a week, with 53 percent working remotely at least half of the week.

Given current world events, that number is vastly different today. Now, millions of individuals around the world have shifted to a full-time work-at-home status. As a result, leaders who once led primarily in a face-to-face environment are being challenged with the task of embracing a new role as a virtual leader, perhaps for the first time.

Other findings from the IWG survey indicate that the current work-from-home paradigm may never shift back to working full-time from a corporate location. The results show a major power shift toward the employee—they now have more input on how they work and where they work. Employees, now used to the flexibility of working from home, may demand this as their new normal, especially if they've demonstrated they are just as productive and competent working from home. This makes the role of the virtual leader more important than ever to organizational success.

It's a universal truth: leaders judge themselves by their intentions and others judge leaders by their actions. For virtual leaders, the impact of this perceptual disconnect is multiplied because most of their actions are invisible to those they lead. Your virtual team members experience emails, texts, written reports, conference calls, and the occasional one-on-one call. What does their communication reveal? Leaders should review the last fifteen emails they have written.

The true test of a leader is what happens when you are not there. And for virtual leaders, that's all the time!

—Ken Blanchard

Would you describe them as servant-oriented? Or are they reactive—requesting immediate responses, monitoring work, or providing answers without diagnosing the development needs behind the question? What was the nature of your last few conference calls or video conferences? Did they engage the hearts and minds of attendees, or do you suspect that one or two people showed off their expertise while everyone else caught up on their email?

Leading virtually requires a leader to use the same good management skills they would use in a face-to-face environment but amplified. Managers can no longer get away with providing the same mediocre leadership they used in face-to-face situations because now they can't lean on their personal relationships with employees.

Virtual leaders don't have opportunities for those incidental hallway conversations that occur in face-to-face work environments, so they tend to have fewer interactions with direct reports. This means each interaction takes on more significance. People who manage from a distance often don't have the safety net that personal relationships or opportunities for informal communication can provide. Thus, normal mistakes managers make have a significantly greater impact in the virtual work environment.

Consider a poorly run meeting. When held face-to-face, it is frustrating and annoying. But a poorly run conference call is even worse, because attendees feel less of an obligation to pay attention. People begin multitasking and the group immediately loses synergy. Leading virtually requires a whole new mindset. *How do I maintain connection? How do I foster trust? How do I provide feedback?* Even something as basic as *How do I know they're working?* requires a new strategy.

We all intend to be servant leaders. Here's how to make that intention visible in the world of virtual leadership.

Develop a Servant Leader Mindset

Most leaders have deliverables and project responsibilities beyond leadership. Without employees at your door asking for attention, it's easy to focus on your own priorities first and your people second. Whether or not you are aware of it, your team can sense when they are not your priority. You can accomplish impressive results on your own, but it's important to remember that the value you add is multiplied when you focus on leading your team toward success. Focusing on others makes them feel important and fosters inspiration and challenge. Inspired and challenged employees take the initiative and often suggest process improvements to make work easier and provide better results. They also take the lead on their own projects and tasks. As your team members become more competent and committed, they help you achieve your results.

Be Attentive and Mindful

Leaders need to be attentive and mindful in their conversations with team members. That's important face-to-face, but it's absolutely essential in a virtual work environment. Attentiveness means knowing the goals, motivations, needs, and experiences of team members and recognizing when changes occur. Because working effectively in a virtual environment requires a high level of independence, leaders must consistently communicate their desire to connect personally with team members.

- **Be present.** We spend so much time multitasking in the remote environment. But what's the impact when we're not totally present with somebody on the phone or in a Zoom meeting? Leaders need to practice being more present in meetings and calls and help others be more present as well.
- **Pay attention to individual differences.** This begins with knowing what motivates each person and which approach to use in a virtual work setting. It also means getting to know people's individual work preferences. How do they like to communicate? When do they have the most energy?
- **Lead with intention.** This is about the leader taking a minute to think before they act. *What energy do I want to bring to this meeting, this interaction, this phone call? What sentiment do I want the person to feel afterward? How much structure and support do I want to provide for them? And once I have identified my intentions, How do I do my best to make my intentions come to fruition?*

Ask for Feedback and Act on It

Can you identify an action you believe your leader could take to be more effective that you haven't shared with them? Of course! Giving constructive but unsolicited feedback to a leader feels so risky, most never attempt it.

As a virtual leader, you can't observe visual clues such as shifts in body language or eye contact that might signal discomfort, misunderstanding, or ineffective communication. Leaders of virtual teams must admit that we usually have no idea how our messages are being received by our team members. Complicating this issue is that the symptoms of lack of trust and low engagement levels aren't obvious in a virtual workplace. These symptoms include withdrawal, doing the minimum amount of work required, and discounting the contributions of others. A lack of awareness combined with invisible symptoms means virtual leaders may be blind to escalating team problems. To be effective, we must put our egos aside and solicit honest feedback from team members. These three questions can work wonders if you ask them regularly and act on them cheerfully:

- What do I do that helps you?
- What do I do that gets in your way?
- What could I do to help you be more successful?

If you don't get feedback the first time you ask, repeat the questions regularly. And when the gift of feedback comes, accept it graciously and use it to strengthen and benefit your relationship with your team members. They will appreciate your efforts.

Foster Community

Most leaders are unaware of how much they connect to an organization and a team by being on-site. Face-to-face, leaders pick up cultural cues and norms by observing behavior, dress, language, and communication patterns. Effective virtual leaders work diligently to connect team members to the larger organization by actively facilitating collaboration, creating the team culture, and helping virtual workers unite to build community spirit.

- **Build trust.** This is where community starts. It's crucial for a leader to be reliable and responsive in a remote environment. But each leader must take the time to define what reliable and responsible behavior looks like. This means setting up clear norms or ways of working so that people know what to expect if they send the leader an instant message versus an email. In a virtual environment, it's easy to be out of sight, out of mind.
- **Provide technology support.** Leaders need to make sure people have the necessary tools and technology to do their jobs well. That's a big issue right now. Too many people who are newly remote workers have only laptops and don't have a separate monitor. That's not optimal for training or for working from home. Organizations should show people they care by providing them with the equipment and support they need.
- **Invest in connection.** One of the challenges with remote work is that people can start feeling like a piece of machinery being used to get the work done. Emails and meetings are purely transactional. Leaders need to dedicate time to talk—just catch up, check in, and stay connected. Whether it's at the beginning of a one-on-one or a team meeting, they should use the first five minutes to connect with people, asking about how they are doing and what they're up to.
- **Celebrate success.** This is another aspect of work life that often gets forgotten in the virtual world. We finish one project and go on to the next one. Or somebody has a significant event in their life and we don't acknowledge it. Celebrating is all about recognizing individual and team contributions. Look for ways to do that in the virtual world. In regard to large global teams, it's important to know what their holidays are. Ask team members to take their laptop and go around their house and show anything they've done for the holiday. It's a great way to celebrate other cultures and build communities.

How to Accelerate Performance and Development

It's easy to lose track of the development needs of people who work virtually. Virtual leaders have to stay focused on team members' needs for direction and support in the short term as well as career and personal goals in the long term. This increases satisfaction, builds loyalty, and creates a more valuable employee.

- **Focus on output.** First, new virtual managers shouldn't worry about what people are doing every minute. Instead, they need to be clear on what they want people to achieve and keep their focus on the results. If goals are met, the leader shouldn't be concerned about how and when people are doing their work. Many people work in less-than-ideal environments at home with a lot of competing priorities that can result in odd working hours.
- **Encourage self-reliance.** Building self-reliance means setting clear goals and then checking in on a regular basis to see what's needed in terms of direction and support. One recommendation is to use coaching questions. Or include a virtual coaching guide in the program.
- **Facilitate networking.** There are two reasons that we specifically call out networking as a desired habit: One, it creates connection for people; and two, it means leaders don't have to do all the coaching themselves and thus aren't expected to be the expert all the time. The goal is to help team members create relationships with others whom they can go to for help.
- **Assist with career development.** If a leader is not having career development discussions with their remote employee, somebody else will. The leader should be talking to their direct reports about their career, which areas they want to develop, and what kind of help they need.

Respect Brain Time

Because virtual leaders aren't often face-to-face—or even in proximity—with their direct reports, some require frequent progress reports to ensure work is being done. When constant activity reporting combines with an always-on, instant-access culture, the likely outcome is overloaded team members working at a frenetic pace. Exhausted from operating reactively and documenting every detail, these knowledge workers have no time left to reflect, innovate, or collaborate thoughtfully to solve problems. Build the expectation in your team that constructive quiet time is not only allowed but also honored, for individuals as well as groups.

Establish norms that clarify purpose and parameters. Brain time should

- Be writing-, planning-, or project-focused
- Be limited in duration
- Not be used as an excuse to avoid others
- Include a back-up strategy to handle urgent issues
- Be planned and respected

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Be deliberate about getting to know each person on your team. Learn about each member's culture and be open to differences in values, attitudes, and viewpoints.

Show Personal Interest

As a leader, you know that understanding your people, their motivations, and their career and personal goals is critical to building trust, inspiring loyalty, and providing appropriate direction and support when needed. Trust is built on visible demonstrations of care.

So how do you show people on your team that you care without the casual connection that happens naturally when people work face-to-face? In one-on-one as well as team meetings, great virtual leaders encourage transparency and personal relationships. They also freely share information about themselves. Whether you share vacation photos in meetings, ask about family and hobbies in one-on-one conferences, send thank-you gift cards at the end of a project, or conduct virtual team-building activities, servant leadership means deliberately making time and space to build relationships in ways that are meaningful to your people, even if you are thousands of miles apart.

Respect Differences in Time Zones, Ethnicities, Cultures, and Points of View

It's tempting to always hold meetings at times that are convenient for the majority of team members, even when some members are on other continents. But in consideration of people who live in other time zones, why not rotate the times of your virtual meetings? Doing so demonstrates visible respect for everyone's contribution. This way, no one person or group is repeatedly inconvenienced by having to meet at odd hours.

Be deliberate about getting to know each person on your team. Learn about each member's culture and be open to differences in values, attitudes, and viewpoints. An engineer and salesperson from the same culture may be more diverse in how they approach a problem to be solved than are two individuals of different nationalities who do the same job.

Take Control of Your Technology, Time, and Energy

It doesn't matter whether as a virtual leader you love or hate technology—or even have both feelings simultaneously. Choose a couple of types of technology and master them.

- Manage your email carefully so that you are not overwhelmed and you don't overwhelm others. The book *The Hamster Revolution* by Mike Song, Vicki Halsey, and Tim Burress has useful tips for conquering email overload.
- Control your calendar so that you have time to dedicate to servant leadership and serious brain work.
- Figure out which type of communication works best for you and your team.
- Choose a virtual meeting platform and become competent with it. Use it for brainstorming and for encouraging participation through polls and chats. Make sure everyone knows how to share their screen to learn best practices from their teammates.

Remember, technology is not the master—it's the servant. Don't let it rule you. Answering emails while eating is bad for your digestion, weight, and energy. And sleeping with your cell phone within reach is not good leadership—it's obsession.

Conclusion

Virtual leadership starts with taking care of yourself. As they say before a flight, put on your oxygen mask first, then help others with theirs. Be kind to yourself. Pay attention to what exhausts you and what energizes you to better manage your health, energy, spirit, and mood.

In many ways, good virtual leadership is the same as good face-to-face leadership. It's about doing all the important things leaders need to do, but in a different medium and environment. The research shows that anything leaders do in a face-to-face environment, they need to do more of—and better—in a virtual environment.

Being a leader in a virtual environment is a challenge. So, go beyond good intentions—take action to show your team members they are your top priority. Follow these guidelines to demonstrate what is most important: people.

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