



## LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS

# Leading Virtual Teams

Working from home has become a new norm for everyone. We all are moving away from the traditional working hours at the offices, and the boundary between office and home is increasingly blurring. Due to the pandemic, work that was considered impossible has now moved online, remotely, within a matter of days and weeks across the globe.

According to a recent study by Morgan Stanley, which was published in The Guardian, only 34% of UK workers have got back to the office, while many other businesses have publicly stated that they will extend the option of WFH indefinitely. Facebook has said that 50% of its jobs will become remote within 10 years; Twitter has given a choice to WFH henceforth to almost its entire workforce, globally; global law firm Slater and Gordon has given up its London office; fund manager Schroders says staff can continue to work flexibly for an indefinite period, as has the investment bank JP Morgan and legal firm Linklaters.

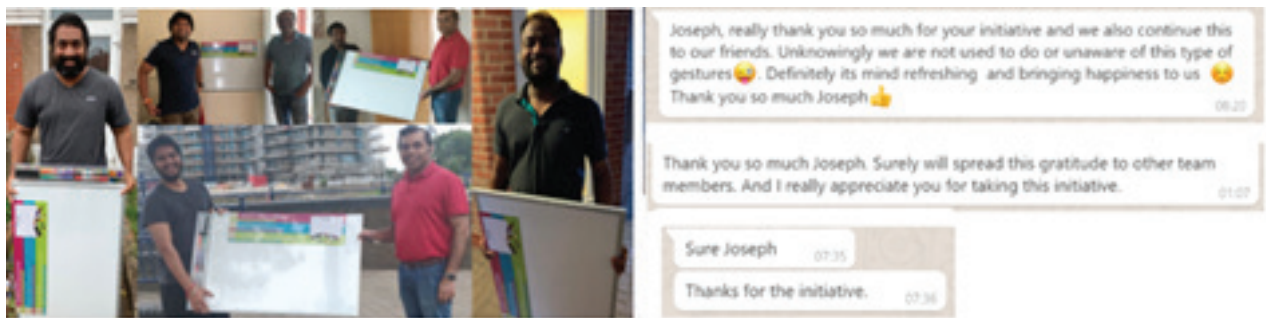
This raises a genuine challenge, “How to effectively manage virtual teams.” Reflecting upon my personal experience, below are some of the key principles that could help solve the challenge.



# 1. Trust

Trust is the 'key' in any relationship - both personal and professional. When employees trust their leaders, they naturally work towards a shared vision, and collaboration happens. Always try to establish the trust first; it might be a challenge, especially with the new virtual teams, where face-to-face interaction is a rarity. A shared mission, collaborative spirit, and strategic team building could help build trust in remote and onsite workers alike. Trust could be established by being - Caring, Authentic and Competent. Managing virtual teams isn't hard as long as we are able to build a strong rapport with our remote team members.

One thing, we can do as leaders, is to pay close attention to how we engage with others; Making an effort to show our colleagues that we believe in them, taking time to understand their aspirations and letting them know what you could do to support them – these small acts of kindness create meaningful experiences.



Acknowledging team's effort during COVID lockdown

Every relationship has moments of conflicts and disagreements, but a conscious effort can be made to empathise and recognise new ways to move forward. This would strengthen the relationship with the people in your life and also further fuel your own sense of purpose.





## 2. Communication

Communication strategies are paramount while managing virtual teams. Leading with transparency and openness helped me to ensure that expectations are appropriately set and fulfilled. It's vital for leaders to identify their team members' communication styles. Some of the team members prefer to be open and loud, while others might thrive with "as needed" conversations. It does not mean that introverts are less engaging than the extroverts, it just takes different things to get them stimulated. Asking the right creative questions helps most of the times. Leadership is about helping the teams with the clarity on the goals and also supporting them through the uncertainties. Usage of phrases like "we, us and our" helped with team bonding. Asking, "What are your thoughts about how we can improve?" goes a long way instead of using phrases like "I want you to," or "I need you to," etc. From my personal experience, I have observed that it is easy to alienate a team by assuming poor performance is due to their lack of ability or effort, rather than situational factors. Being aware of this tendency aids effective communication.

Going remote requires a robust online communication, effective file storage and a viable collaboration plan. When teams are working remotely on different schedules, people could feel like they're expected to be online all the time. But this lack of distinct downtime isn't good for the team. As a leader, it is my responsibility to establish communication norms, while encouraging people to continue to work flexibly as needed. Defining clear "communication hours," helped to a great extent. For example, during the working hours, team members are expected to check and respond to the messages, while in the non-working hours, they can either call or text – only for urgent or time-sensitive communications. Hence this way, people don't have to be in front of their laptops, monitoring emails or chat messages. It is always a best practise to pause and think "Do I really need this person now, or can it wait until tomorrow?" I personally believe that an "always-on" culture isn't sustainable, and these boundaries allow team members to set their flexible working hours.



### 3. Emotional Wellbeing

Working from home is a growing trend. Although it can be hugely liberating, it can also generate crippling loneliness. Creating psychological safety is vital during virtual meetings. Teams do their best work when they feel that they can raise questions and share their ideas and risks, and the support that they require without the fear of repercussion. In my career, I realised that it is the leader's responsibility to create this psychological safety in virtual meetings, where the distractions are high and it is not easy to detect non-verbal social cues. Most of the video conferencing software offers some simple tools like polling, chat and voice call. Polling function gives an opportunity to the team to be heard. Anonymous polls help people to express their feelings and opinions without the fear of being judged and isolated. Usage of chat could be encouraged to make the team more comfortable to contribute non-verbally. At times, just a voice call without video would allow better listening and make the team members feel less self-conscious. Always following up with a summary of the meeting helps to ensure that everyone is on the same page. It also helps to check individually with the team members who seem disengaged or reticent to contribute.



Picture taken during a team building exercise

Self-care is very important; some of the most essentials are sufficient sleep, good nutrition, exercise and time to relax. Exercise could be as easy as a short walk or yoga for few minutes. Periodic screen and mobile breaks for a few minutes in a day to stretch drink some water or a short walk changes both your physical and mental state. Most of us would have experienced long busy days and very little sleep during highly demanding situations. Of course, caffeine would have helped us to a certain extent. Few other ways to mitigate the risks of exhaustion while working is to focus on routine tasks that don't require a lot of creativity and avoid taking on any high-stakes activities, as it leads to sleep deprivation, making you more prone to making mistakes. Delegation is another magic word in such scenarios. Even a short nap or rest could make a meaningful difference in your effectiveness. It is important to reflect on what activities recharge you. Rediscover your hobbies and make a conscious decision to prioritise, carving out time for it. Investing time in yourself isn't indulgent, but mission critical. Research shows that our decision-making ability dramatically suffers when we neglect proper rest. I tend to say this to myself, "The more the busy it becomes at work, it's important for me to take care of myself." Resilience is an important characteristic when leading a team, especially through challenging times.



## 4. Limiting beliefs

It is a limiting belief to believe that culture is not important when leading teams remotely. It is critical for leaders to continue leading with optimism, helping their team and customers stay resilient amidst uncertainty and to focus on sustaining a healthy team culture. Especially through the pandemic, team members need to feel more connected, not only to the business goals, but also to each other. It is vital to set aside time for team members to highlight and share their wins to foster the right culture. This can be as simple as celebrating when a team or department hits a milestone or any regular routine expression of positivity. It may even influence other teams to regulate their own mindset.



One of my reflective questions was how to incorporate corporate values in the virtual world. Maybe restating corporate values in the messages to the teams could be a start. The values could become corporate vernacular and the team members will eventually start observing the relevance of it in the organisation goals and actions.

It is important to establish a “Culture of Learning” for remote teams. It is also vital to encourage them to learn something new. Keeping a list of what you’ve learned and how it was used might also help to stay focused and motivated to track the progress and set new goals. Sharing short stories of individual experience of learning on a specific tool, behaviour or skill would be of a great help to the team. Facilitate a buddy system or assign peer coaches to check in with each other for support.

Taking these steps enabled the team members to take their professional learning and development into their own hands. Reinforcing a culture of learning will keep your team engaged while they’re working from home.



## 5. Leading Productivity

Productivity has become far more important in this era of remote working. Often, it opens up to the risk of bad Time Management or burnout due to erratic working hours. It has become imperative to set clear expectations, based on their roles and responsibilities. It is an important realisation to understand that it is unrealistic to expect everyone to work at the same pace and at the same time. It's very important to have an overall time of the deliverables and understand how much each person is accomplishing week by week, if not day by day. One of the advantages of remote work for both employees and the employers is that work is measured by productivity, not by time spent at work. We are very much used to performance evaluations at work. Feedback or Feed forward are an integral part of our continuous assessment. Working from home solicits to include feedforward comments from family members. For a working parent, it's vital to include their kids. In my personal experience, discussing with kids has helped me listen with an open mind and managing my emotions better, and not getting defensive. This has been my secret mantra of 'striking the balance' between home and work.

## 6. Efficient mentorship or coaching relationship

Mentorship helps both mentors and mentees. Great leaders naturally tend to build the mentorship relationship with their colleagues. Mentor relationship that develops organically is the most fruitful one. I was lucky enough to have great leaders who helped me to realise this evidently. I always try to make conscious effort to create such experiences within my teams.



[https://youtu.be/gD\\_tv7IIC7g](https://youtu.be/gD_tv7IIC7g)

A recent study from Olivet Nazarene University illustrates that 76% of 3,000 surveyed American professionals believe mentorship is important, yet only 37% actually have a mentor. Equally illuminating is the fact that 61% of the survey respondents explained that they never asked someone to be their mentor. Instead, the mentoring relationship developed naturally. Now, the challenge here would be, "How to find a mentor during this era of virtual working?" First thing that comes to my mind is to try and explore remote networking. Within the organisation, try to participate in webinars and initiate the communication by sharing your thoughts either verbally or non-verbally using chat. If someone's action or message resonates with you, try to follow them via LinkedIn and try to establish a meaningful conversation by understanding the common interests that helps both. Members of remote teams should develop personal relationships by making time to talk to colleagues on non-work topics. Most important thing is to take initiatives to meet interesting people - both inside and outside the organisation.



## 7. Throwaway remarks

Usage of words has become far more important while managing teams virtually. It is vital to refrain from making personal comments as this might tarnish your reputation. Instead, highlight the issues that you have in regards to closing the deliverables. As leaders, we all are accountable for creating an inclusive workplace. It requires a lot of humility and commitment to facilitate and grow an inclusive culture within the organisation.

## 8. Not to compare yourself with your peers

One of the benefits of virtual teams is that the physical limitations are the same, irrespective of the location of your peers. It allows us to stay connected with everyone across the organisation. But sometimes, seeing other people's successes can make you feel competitive or even like we're falling behind. There are a few strategies that you could deploy to overcome such feelings. Firstly, develop self-awareness and track your triggers. Identifying what drives you to compare yourself to others is vital. A question to ask yourself is, "Which associate's accomplishments make you feel insecure?" Once you identify this, you could change your perception by looking at their accomplishments objectively and reflect on what it is that you could learn from their progress. This would help you to counteract your self-doubt by achieving some other deliverable using your strengths. It will help you regain confidence and perhaps support you to gain the momentum towards your own goals. Focusing on your own goals is imperative and being aware of the distractions would be a great strength to possess. This enables you to "let go" of the "shoulds" which often lead to perpetual insecurity. Once the team become self-aware, the easier it is for them to self-correct their mistakes to a certain extent and think outside the box.





## 9. Innovation

One of the advantages of working remotely is that it's now easier to bring in a broader group of participants to generate ideas, collaboratively. Prior to the pandemic, the default preference for most of them was to have in-person meetings, where we didn't engage much with people who couldn't be physically present as part of the idea-generation process.

Due to different time zones, it might be difficult to get everyone to attend meetings at the same time, but it could also be viewed as an advantage. For scenarios like brainstorming session, you actually don't need the group to be together to come up with the best ideas. The group think theory shows that, during idea generation, individuals think differently about a problem if they work alone. But when you bring the group together to generate ideas, they tend to think alike, converging on a common solution.

Sharing ideas among teams regularly might help us adapt to the approach of allocating a percentage of time for the release cycle of innovative work. Innovation sprints would be an ideal way to go forward, depending on the areas of interest and availability of the team members.

To conclude, it's fair to say that the pandemic has changed everything, and we all have had to adjust to new ways of living and working. The below web link holds some simple tips that could help you feel more productive and to take care of your mental health in these difficult times, while working from home.  
<https://www.nhs.uk/oneyou/every-mind-matters/7-simple-tips-to-tackle-working-from-home/>

It is interesting to note that all the above mentioned principles form the abbreviation of “**Intellect**”.

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***Not to compare yourself with your peers***

***Throwaway remarks***

***Efficient mentorship***

***Leading productivity***

***Limiting beliefs***

***Emotional wellbeing***

***Communication***

***Trust***

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Digital Leader & Executive Coach sharing principles of leading virtual teams

