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Back to the future: a guide for all virtual leaders

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Did you know that nearly 80% of leaders now supervise a team member or members from a remote locations*? Therefore, you are not in this alone. Many leaders face isolation as a result of their team not being in physical close proximity to them.

What is important to learn from other virtual leaders, is that the fundamentals of leadership are no different than leading a team “in-person”, however the leadership **techniques** applied are.

To help you get started leading a team virtually, here are 3 principles that every virtual leader should know:

- 1. People come first:** It is very easy to get comfortable solely focusing on results rather than the people while being apart from your team. Do not forget to check-in with your team to see how they are doing and feeling. You do not build relationships through results; you build them through caring and connecting with your team.
- 2. Leading a team virtually means leveraging different leadership techniques:** While leading a team “in-person” requires more emphasis on body language and facial cues, a virtual leader needs to rely more heavily on clarity of communication, process and goal/objective setting.
- 3. Technology is your new bestfriend:** No longer are the days when technology adoption was an option, it is now mandatory to be successful. Virtual leaders need to invest in the high-quality communication and digital tools for the team.

With these 3 principles in mind, let’s dive deeper into each providing some strategies and tips on how to be a successful and effective virtual leader.

Principle #1: the people on your team always come first

Not being in close proximity when leading a team has its challenges. Some of those challenges include miscommunication from poor communication, difference in work ethics and lack of clarity or direction. While those challenges are important, one particular challenge seems to always trump others and that is “lack of empathy and personal connection”.

As a virtual leader, here are some strategies that can be applied on ensuring your team comes first:

- **Out of sight, never out of mind:** Setting up daily or weekly touch-bases are important to stay connected and top of mind with your team. If coaching is required, this would be a great opportunity to do it. Make sure to use agendas to ensure that any virtual meeting is kept on point and on track.
- **Dig deeper than just their work:** Outside of doing their role, find out how they are mentally and physically doing working remotely. Are they getting enough exercise, breaks and mental stimulation? Everyone is dealing with their own unique challenges.
- **Recognize the team’s efforts:** Understanding that there could be many roadblocks when working virtually that are out of your control, it is important to recognize your team for their hard efforts in moving a project forward or getting work done.



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Principle #2: leading a team virtually means leveraging leadership techniques differently

When working with a team remotely, you need to focus on the “*how*” more than the “*what*” when it comes to your team. It’s harder to tell “*how they are doing*” throughout the day since you are not able to see them in person.

In order to help smooth the miscommunications and breakdown in process when leading a team virtually, apply these strategies to help the team.

- **Focus more on the “how” of goal/task setting, not just the “what”:** At this point, setting goals and tasks are easy. It is helping your team understand **how** (as a result of not being readily available and in close proximity) they will complete these items that will help ease stress and anxiety. Create a list of priorities and then apply the SMART goals method which stands for “Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Time-bound” to keep track of their progress.
- **Create a communication charter with the team:** To ease miscommunication on the team, it is important to create a team communication charter or contract. Have everyone feel included by asking them what is important to them when it comes to communication etiquette.
- **Prioritize process:** As you and the team start getting familiar with your new virtual environment, it is important to revisit some standard business processes that might have worked in person but will not work virtually. How will onboarding a new client work virtually? How will signatures be attained? These are all standard processes that need to be reviewed, tweaked and officially updated to reflect your new environment.

Principle #3: technology is your new best friend

In person, how does one communicate? There is nothing like a good old fashion handshake or face to face interaction that helps bridge communication and strengthen relationships. However, when that is not possible, you need alternate ideas to still build credibility with your team. As a virtual leader, building rapport and communicating clearly with your team must always be a top priority.

- **Invest in high-quality digital video-conferencing tools:** Avoid frustrations with technology by investing in the right digital communication tools (i.e. Zoom, Skype for business, Microsoft Teams...etc.). Look for video-conferencing tools where you can see everyone on the team to help bring the team together.
- **The Chatter box Team:** Your inbox can quickly become overwhelmed if you do not have a process or tools in place to divert non-essentials emails or chatter elsewhere. Invest in a tool (i.e. Skype for business) that allows you to message each other via private or group chats to discuss non-critical items and best practice sharing.
- **Software Essentials:** Ensure the team has the right software to their job well. Think about each team member’s role and responsibility on the team. Will they be more on the phones calling clients or more administration based? When dealing with a lot of paperwork and clients, a tool that could be very useful for the team could be Adobe Pro that allows you to easily cut and merge separate PDFs.



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Final thoughts: leading is believing...

Whether you are leading a team in person or virtually, the fundamentals of leadership do not change...just the techniques do. Being a strong virtual leader means believing in change, testing new techniques and creating team rhythm to help build momentum. These recommendations and call to actions will help you build trust and credibility with your team, clarify and update processes and build the right kind of virtual leadership environment you want.

APPENDIX

1. 80% of leaders supervise a team member from remote location stat: <https://www.porchlightbooks.com/blog/giveaways/-the-long-distance-leader-rules-for-remarkable-remote-leadership>
2. Gallup Hierarchy of Engagement: <https://www.capital.org/s/content/a0Y4100000L5g5KEAR/the-employee-engagement-hierarchy>

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