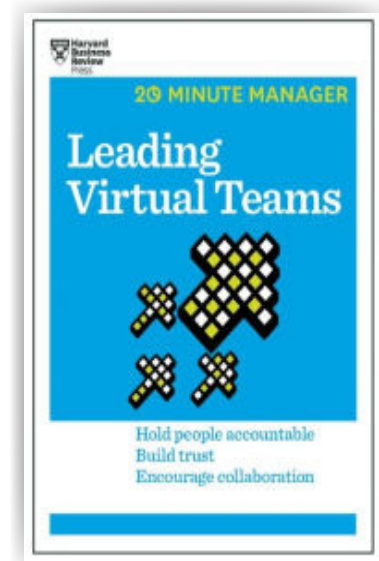


20 Minute Manager: Leading Virtual Teams

Hold People Accountable, Build Trust,
Encourage Collaboration

Harvard Business Review Press



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KEY TAKEAWAYS

Leaders of virtual teams can overcome the unique challenges of remote workforces by employing six basic strategies:

1. *Ensuring that their teams contain the right mix of skills and abilities.* Team members must be able to communicate and collaborate effectively, be open to the use of technology, and possess the skills that are needed for success.
2. *Assessing and fulfilling their teams' technological needs.* The success of virtual teams depends largely on the technology that they are given. Virtual team leaders must assess and implement the right tools to enable communication and the creation and sharing of content.
3. *Clarifying goals, processes, and norms.* Leaders of virtual teams must define common expectations, goals, processes, and norms to align the priorities of their teams.
4. *Regulating the messages and communication channels that enable effective collaboration.* Leaders must find ways to effectively share information through the appropriate channels. They must find the right balance of communication to avoid overburdening team members with information and undercommunicating their visions and objectives.
5. *Keeping team members motivated, engaged, and accountable.* Virtual team leaders must build rapport and trust among their teams and mobilize the social bonds that keep people engaged in and motivated about their work. They must also hold people to their commitments to prevent missed deadlines, poor results, and interpersonal conflicts.

6. *Resolving conflict from afar.* Leaders must manage conflict before it damages work relationships and creates toxic work environments. This can be achieved by practicing active listening, mediating, and encouraging transparency.

OVERVIEW

The Harvard Business School Publishing Corporation title **20 Minute Manager: Leading Virtual Teams** aims to help managers of remote groups succeed from afar. Virtual teams can present a unique set of challenges, including maintaining accountability from a distance and depending on technological means of communication, but these challenges can be overcome. Leaders of virtual teams can achieve success by ensuring that their teams have the right mix of skills and abilities for remote work, the right technological tools are in place, goals and processes are clearly defined and understood, and their employees remain engaged and accountable.

WHAT IS A VIRTUAL TEAM?

A *virtual team* is a group of people who work toward a common goal without sharing a common base of operations. The benefits of a virtual team structure include:

1. *The ability to maximize limited resources.* A manager can hire short-term employees from anywhere in the world who can help produce the necessary output during busy time periods while minimizing overhead costs.
2. *The ability to harness expertise from anywhere in the world.* A business manager can utilize a person's niche expertise—regardless of his or her physical location—through remote communication.
3. *The ability to streamline collaboration.* The broad array of communication technologies enables teams from around the world to work effectively and communicate efficiently.

Many of the challenges that teams in a traditional office environment face are magnified in a virtual setting. These challenges include:

- *Team composition.* Virtual teams may be composed of people who do not work well in a virtual environment. The way in which people work is just as important as their other abilities and competencies.
- *Isolation.* Remote work can cause people to feel lonely and less motivated. This can create a sense of alienation that lowers their ability to develop trust in their fellow team members.
- *Technology.* Unreliable or difficult-to-use tools can waste team members' time, reduce efficiency, demotivate people, and create confusion and redundancy. Finding the right technology is essential in removing a virtual team's barriers to work.
- *Communication.* Communication norms can be difficult to establish across multiple technology channels. Virtual teams are often bombarded with messages when the protocols and etiquette for regular communication have not been set.

There are simple solutions to each of these common challenges. For example, leaders can learn to assemble the right teams, implement appropriate technologies, coordinate work, build trust, and master the art of effective communication to manage their remote teams successfully.

GET THE RIGHT PEOPLE ON THE TEAM

Many employees who are capable and useful in a traditional office environment are not well-suited to the demands of a virtual workplace. While some people excel in an environment of flexibility and independence, others struggle with isolation and communication issues.

The most effective team members in any environment possess a strong rapport and a distinct blend of skills that will enable their teams to reach their goals. However, virtual teams demand five additional traits that will improve team cohesion and effectiveness:

1. *Communication.* Virtual team members must be able to communicate frequently with one another in a clear and concise manner.
2. *Collaboration style.* Virtual team members must be self-disciplined, self-motivated, and able to ask for help when needed. People who require extensive supervision are not ideal candidates for a virtual environment.
3. *Temperament.* People who work in a virtual environment must have high emotional intelligence, and they must be resilient, equipped to mitigate conflict gracefully, and capable of building productive relationships without face-to-face contact.
4. *Technology.* Ideal virtual team members are open to the use of new technologies and well-versed in the technological mediums that are regularly used in their industries.
5. *Size.* Small teams have been found to be more effective and motivated than larger teams. In addition, small teams provide members with the opportunity to communicate clearly and build productive relationships with other team members.

Managers who are tasked with developing new virtual teams should strive to recruit people who possess the skills and personal qualities that are most needed to achieve their visions and goals.

Some virtual team managers do not have the luxury of hand-picking their virtual teams. As these managers contemplate tweaks to their existing teams, they should evaluate the skills and personal qualities of each team member, including how he or she communicates and collaborates; his or her comfort with the technology that is required; and his or her personal assessment of the team's strengths, weaknesses, and challenges. Virtual team leaders should also look for gaps in role clarity and training and develop plans to fill those gaps. Every role on a team should be clearly defined.

MANAGE THE TECHNOLOGY

Technology plays an important role in whether or not a virtual team will succeed in its mission. Technological tools enable virtual teams to communicate, coordinate tasks, and build professional relationships with one another, and having the right tools in place makes these tasks easier to accomplish.

Virtual team managers should assess their teams' technological needs, their organizations' security policies, and the resources that are currently in place. They should carefully consider how their teams can effectively communicate, create and share content, and synchronize calendars, and then develop budget plans for the purchase, installation, storage, and synchronization of new technologies. Managers who are considering the acquisition of new technologies should keep three principles in mind:

1. Familiar technologies can save time, reduce costs, and shorten a team's start-up time, so new technologies may not always be the right choice.

2. Compatible technologies may be crucial in sharing documents, but not in other areas, such as sharing an e-mail server. Managers should ensure that there is compatibility where it is most important.
3. Many virtual team members prefer simplicity, reliability, and accessibility over complex functionality.

Virtual teams often require a shared digital workspace that can enable collaboration. Websites, file storage services, messaging and archival systems, and version-tracking systems can all serve as effective digital workspace tools, provided that they allow virtual team members to:

- Upload and download content in a manner that identifies each person as a distinct, identifiable user.
- Share team documents, schedules, contact information, and updates.
- Communicate through discussion boards.

After selecting which technologies will be used, virtual team managers should establish clear guidelines for how they will be used. Protocols may include how files will be named and organized, which file types will be used, how version control will be managed, who will have access rights, and how sensitive material will be stored.

Managers should also establish protocols for how team members will communicate with one another. Guidelines may be established for determining what kind of content can be delivered by e-mail or by phone, who should be included in the distribution of information, how each person will make themselves available to others, and how communications will be documented.

Technologies may fail, and virtual team managers must prepare for this possibility. They should create, test, and communicate contingency plans, contact information, and other helpful information that can serve as an indispensable resource in instances of technological failure.

GET TO WORK

When a new team is formed or a new leader joins an existing team, a formal *launch meeting* should be held. Whether this meeting is held in-person or virtually, the goals should be to allow team members to introduce themselves, establish bonds, and build trust. Leaders can assign members to smaller *breakout meetings* to discuss team processes, specific aspects of their projects, or the team's sense of purpose.

When discussing the team's sense of purpose, team members should be encouraged to engage in a collaborative conversation that will allow them to define their purpose in a clear and compelling manner. This conversation can help the team to define its mission and resolve a number of key questions, including:

- What issues will the team address?
- What are the desired outcomes and the high-level deliverables?
- What will remain outside the scope of the team's projects?
- Which resources are available to the team?
- What are the team's key milestones?
- What opportunities and threats should the team keep in mind?
- How will the virtual team work to accomplish its goals?

It is critical for leaders of virtual teams to define common expectations to minimize the potential for misunderstandings and mistrust. Leaders should assign clearly defined tasks to small subgroups, clarify which work processes will be used to accomplish each task, and establish ground rules for professional conduct.

Early in the team-forming process, leaders must learn about each team member's professional and personal priorities and determine how they align with the team's shared vision and goals. To effectively align priorities, leaders should consider the following options:

- Redefining roles to accommodate each person's professional goals or personal commitments.
- Redistributing tasks to match employees' availability.
- Pairing team members to balance out weaknesses.
- Arranging schedules to maximize synergies.
- Working with other leaders to whom employees report to harmonize directives.

Leaders must prioritize the building of rapport and trust because there are few opportunities for virtual employees to casually interact and create a sense of connectedness. This connection can be established by encouraging team members to create video tours of their workspaces, establishing a forum for "water cooler" casual chats, or allowing team members to share highlights and lowlights of their weeks during regularly held meetings.

Leaders of virtual teams must also make an effort to keep team members engaged. This can be accomplished in five ways:

1. *Fostering shared leadership.* Leaders can empower their team members to be leaders by assigning them special projects, allowing them to share their progress, or inviting them to oversee virtual team-building exercises.
2. *Recognizing and praising collaborative behaviors.* Leaders should encourage and regularly express appreciation for people who work together to solve problems.
3. *Encouraging people to acknowledge the efforts of others.* Leaders should praise team members who recognize their fellow colleagues' successes.
4. *Playing games.* Leaders may encourage the use of mobile multiplayer games, book discussion groups, and the sharing of music to create fun, collaborative environments with a sense of connectedness and engagement.
5. *Building a team rhythm.* Leaders should hold regular meetings and check-ins on the same day and at the same time every week to build consistency in their teams' tempo.

COMMUNICATE EFFECTIVELY

Effective communication is crucial to every team, and it is particularly important to virtual teams. To keep team members informed and updated, virtual team leaders often send more messages than anyone else on the team. These leaders must pay attention to how each team member prefers to communicate and encourage team members to document everything, keep everyone informed, and share information freely.

When team members receive extensive amounts of information it can lead to *communication fatigue*. Some forms of communication, such as phone calls and video conferences, require a high level of

engagement from team members; however, e-mails and text-based conversations are often ineffective in establishing emotional connections or fostering intellectual collaboration. Leaders must help their teams find the right balance and encourage communication that will motivate people and not distract or exhaust them.

A manager's communication style can directly impact the team's productivity in two ways:

1. Leaders may *overcommunicate* when they are trying to compensate for a perceived skills gap or if they do not trust the members of their teams to communicate effectively. To become more effective communicators, leaders should fill their skill gaps and help their teams learn to solve problems and work independently.
2. Other leaders may *undercommunicate* when they are too busy to make communication a priority. These leaders must learn to delegate and make time for team communication. However, undercommunication may be appropriate in some instances, such as when everyone on a team understands the big picture and needs less contextual information to complete their work.

COPE WITH COMMON PROBLEMS

Leaders of remote teams must navigate through an assortment of common workplace issues, including evaluating performance, maintaining accountability, and managing conflict, but they have the additional challenge of taking on these issues remotely.

When evaluating employees' performances from a distance, leaders must find innovative ways to observe behaviors and gauge performances. Successful strategies include:

- *Taking notes.* Leaders should log each employee's helpful comments, suggestions, degree of stubbornness, ability to mediate conflict, and willingness to collaborate to create a detailed record of performance.
- *Limiting self-evaluations.* Employees tend to overrate their abilities and take credit for positive outcomes while overlooking their negative qualities. Leaders should evaluate whether employees' self-perceptions are important to the performance assessment process.
- *Getting group feedback.* Virtual teams are collaborative in nature, and team members can provide great insight into the strengths, abilities, and weaknesses of their fellow team members.

Virtual team leaders also face challenges in maintaining accountability from afar. They must talk to their team members about anomalies in their behaviors, check in with employees in a positive way, and meet with team members to discuss any performance problems that may arise.

Finally, virtual team leaders must learn to identify and solve team conflicts before they impact work relationships. They can employ conflict-resolution strategies, such as maintaining online discussion boards to create transparency, practicing active listening to gain a comprehensive understanding of the issues, and reassigning people who cannot get along.

Virtual leaders cannot be prepared for every issue that may arise, but those who experiment with new ideas, implement effective tools, and recruit the right people can reap the benefits of close, cohesive teams that are well-equipped to reach their goals.

PURCHASE THE BOOK
