

Productive Leaders

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5 Traits Leaders Need to Manage Virtual Teams



The remote workplace in the U.S. is more popular than ever, with as many as [37 percent](#) of employees telecommuting regularly. That statistic isn't surprising given the number of benefits that come with telecommuting. In Microsoft's white paper, Working Without Walls, remote employees cited better work-life balance, less stress, flexible work times, no commute, and a quieter atmosphere as some of the main [benefits of working from home](#).

While there are many perks to the virtual office, organizations often struggle with the challenges around leading remotely. Managing team members without daily face-to-face interaction has its own unique set of challenges. However, leaders who focus on cultivating these five skills in their virtual interactions with employees tend to excel at remote leadership.

1. Sympathy/Empathy

Caring about your employees is critical to developing the trust that employees need to effectively perform. Being empathetic is an important trait for any leader, whether in a physical or remote office. Leaders need to recognize that remote workplaces can create special situations that require more empathy because of the lack of physical proximity. Managers have to understand that employees not answering the phone on the first ring doesn't mean they are not working.

Electronic communication can often be more ambiguous than face-to-face communication. Because so much of how and what we communicate happens with our body language and eyes, it can be easy to misinterpret digital communications such as email and instant messaging. Leaders who recognize this and [practice empathy](#), and patience — rather than jumping to conclusions about a person's tone or intention — help cultivate an environment of trust, openness and improved performance.

2. Communication

It can be easy for remote team members to feel like they're on an island. Working from a home office can leave employees feeling disconnected from their leadership team, co-workers, and overall shared mission.

The best virtual leaders combat this tendency with regular and meaningful communication, recognizing that keeping employees motivated and informed can lead to [better work quality and increased productivity](#). They use multiple channels to regularly connect with their team members, give praise and reaffirm the greater purpose behind day-to-day tasks.

Communication has to be conducted in a way that works for both parties. Find out what works for the team. Are emails, texts, or project management work sites best? Find a system and use it often.

Leaders of virtual employees also need to take the time to regularly meet in person with their teams, if possible, and solidify the relationship that carries them through until their next meet-up.

In the Navy, we often deploy for months at a time. A standard Navy ship deployment is 6 months long, and that can be extended to 9, 10 or even 12 months, if the situation warrants. This is stressful on families, as you can imagine. We advise people to practice the "assume the best" when communicating with loved ones and friends. "If there are two ways to interpret something, choose the one that is the most positive" rule. Assume the best, not the worst.

Even in face-to-face office settings it is easy to have misinterpretations, so clear and frequent communication is key.

3. Accountability

One of the most difficult aspects of leading from afar is holding employees accountable. Leading virtual teams means that those leaders find ways to [maintain accountability, despite distance](#).

First, leaders set up clear goals and expectations from the beginning. They also use project management tracking systems to check on progress. Weekly calls or project updates are helpful. This ongoing dialogue prevents big mistakes later. If they need to provide course corrections, leaders do it through the right channels. We recommend using video chat for more serious conversations or in person, again, if possible.

If you are working remotely or in a different location from your supervisor, be a better employee by providing frequent updates. Don't let your leader wonder if you are doing your job, or if you are almost finished with a project. Give them updates more often than you think they need. This prevents doubt and reassures them so they don't have to wonder.

As the Officer in Charge of the Personnel Support Detachment, Pearl Harbor, Hawaii, my supervisory team was in Japan. During that tour, I worked for three different bosses. They all had different ways to manage from thousands of miles away.

One loved to call and chat 2 or 3 times a week. This was frustrating because these were always long, unscheduled calls that disrupted my schedule. However, they were necessary for my boss to know what was going on and be reassured. Another boss liked to "drop in" (from Japan!) to check up on me and my organization, to see if we were doing what we were supposed to be doing. A third simply said, "call me if you need me." In all three instances, I, as the employee had to adapt to my bosses' need for information and reassurance. In hindsight, I could have been a better employee if I had provided more frequent updates.

4. Reach-ability/Availability

It's easy to see when someone's office door is open in a traditional office setting. It's more difficult to perceive someone's availability from across the country or on a different continent.

Great leaders make it easy for their virtual employees to be in touch with them.

First, they schedule normal office hours when they're available and welcome phone calls or video chats. They share their calendars, so people can see when they're busy and shouldn't be disturbed, and when they're available to chat. They also set up weekly check-ins to ensure all team members have one-on-one time with them regularly. Finally, great leaders make sure everyone who needs them is able to reach them, especially in case of an emergency.

5. Flexibility

Working from home often leads to a more flexible work environment, and while it may seem counter-intuitive, it also leads to [increased productivity](#). Some people work best by getting up early. Others work best between 7-12 at night. Telecommuting allows people to set their own schedules to work when they can work best.

One of my Navy people loved early mornings. She was routinely at work at 5 AM, so it seemed silly for her day to end at 4:30, like everyone else. She liked the private office environment when she could blast the radio for a few hours, and when she was alone, she was wildly effective. We changed her working hours so that she came in from 5 AM until noon. This completely benefited me. By the time my day was over around 6 PM, I had work for her to do. I put the work on her desk, and when I came in the next morning at 7:30, she had it ready to go. I always looked well prepared for the 8 AM staff meetings because of her.

Great virtual leaders embrace flexibility, have trust in their teams, and let them work in the way that best suits their schedules. Leaders also recognize that if they're constantly worrying about whether an employee is being productive, there is a greater issue of trust that needs to be addressed.

If you're leading a team remotely, consider using these five traits to improve how you and your team work together. It could lead to increased productivity and more motivated and fulfilled teams.

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