



## Virtual Team Study Report

*We spoke with 35 high-performing virtual leaders from a range of industries in order to learn more about what they do differently in a virtual environment to minimize the impact that distance has on collaboration & performance.*

After conducting a groundbreaking study on virtual team success here at OnPoint Consulting, we found that more than 25% of virtual teams are simply not successful. More often than not, ineffective leadership is the primary cause of poor virtual team performance. By looking at the source of the problem we found that many organizations and leaders simply try to recycle practices used with co-located teams without appreciation for the unique characteristics of a virtual environment.

Many of our clients have asked us to compile a resource with tips and practical guidelines on how to effectively lead from a distance. In response to these queries, we spoke with 35 high-performing virtual leaders from a range of industries in order to learn more about what they do differently in a virtual environment to minimize the impact that distance has on collaboration and performance.

The following executive briefing summarizes the insights from those interviews. The RAMP Model, shown below, which describes the characteristics and behaviors that differentiate the most effective virtual team leaders was used as a framework to organize the results.

### **RAMP MODEL**

**R**elationships – Interpersonal Communication, Trust, and Conflict Resolution

**A**ccountability – Holding Team Members/Remote Employees Accountable, Taking Personal Accountability, and Achieving Team Results/Commitments

**M**otivation – Inspirational Leadership, Influence Skills, and Coaching

**P**urpose and Process – Creating a Sense of Purpose, and Establishing and Using Effective Virtual Team Processes



# Virtual Team Study Report

## Relationships

One theme that consistently arose in our conversations with virtual leaders was the importance of building relationships with virtual team members and the need to deliberately take action on building relationships. Unlike co-located teams, where physical proximity enables you to get to know people, virtual teams require focused and consistent effort around building trusted and strong relationships.

When building relationships, the most effective virtual leaders leverage both technology and a conscious change in their own behavior to overcome geographical boundaries. For instance, leaders in our survey:

- Host virtual birthday parties and baby showers using WebEx and Live Meeting type technologies
- Mail a snack that represents their culture to colleagues in other geographies so that people can share the snacks virtually during meetings
- Play online computer games with their team members
- Schedule a virtual coffee break every week, where people get together for 10-15 minutes of free form discussion
  - Use Face Time/video call and have everyone doing the same thing at the same time (e.g., bagel breakfast, happy hour)
- Send vacation pictures to spark conversation among team members
- Regularly schedule “care” calls or leave a voicemail praising a job well done
- Partner team members at different locations to ensure people collaborate across geographies which also serves as a way to build trust
- Informally call people to “chat and check in” – just like you might stop into someone’s office if they were co-located

*Schedule a virtual coffee break every week, where people get together for 10-15 minutes of free form discussion.*

While activities like these are effective in building relationships, the most effective virtual leaders try to meet the members of their virtual team in person. Almost everyone we interviewed indicated that nothing replaces a face-to-face meeting and that even one face-to-face interaction provides a stronger foundation for building trust and having difficult conversations.



# Virtual Team Study Report

Effective virtual leaders also encourage team members to meet one another. For example, one virtual team leader encouraged a team member to spend a week in an office in another country prior to taking a vacation there with his family. Other helpful tips for building relationships include:

- Have regular one on ones, these may be the only connection virtual team members have with the rest of organization
- Be supportive, give virtual team members the benefit of the doubt when an issue arises
- Allocate time for a “thank you round” on team calls -- encourage people to recognize someone who helped them
- Show interest in team members’ culture and lifestyle
- Create a reason for people to interact with each other, encourage people to talk with each other on business and non-business issues

## Accountability

Managing accountability in a virtual setting creates additional challenges. First, there are fewer opportunities to directly observe performance. Another difference is that employee autonomy becomes even more essential in a virtual setting. Virtual workers are often required to “manage” themselves and take individual responsibility for meeting deadlines and producing quality work. To address these challenges the effective virtual leaders we spoke with consistently:

*Develop metrics that are results oriented rather than process oriented.*

- Develop metrics that are results oriented rather than process oriented (i.e., goals that emphasize output rather than activity such as the number of hours worked)
- Find ways for team members to make their work visible. For example, merchandisers send a photo of product or insurance engineers submit site inspection reports
- Leverage technology to track progress on assignments (e.g., bulletin boards or team project management sites)



# Virtual Team Study Report

*Use short-term goals and deliverables as the basis to identify issues early.*

- Give employees more autonomy; allow them to organize their work and determine what gets done and when it gets done
- Work out a schedule of periodic check-ins to review work progress and initiate “how can I help” discussions
- Involve team members early in planning work and defining milestones

Because of a lack of direct contact or distance it’s not unusual for some virtual team members to not fully contribute to team performance. To address this problem, many of the leaders we interviewed:

- Use shared team resources, such as team websites to assign tasks, set deadlines and monitor progress publicly
- Post documents and action plans on shared sites to ensure transparency and visibility of task status to the whole team
- Develop meaningful metrics that connect individual contributions to team or organizational goals
- Use short-term goals and deliverables as the basis to identify issues early
- Keep team members updated on changes and help them prioritize projects as things shift

## **Motivation**

Research shows that remote workers face unique challenges such as feeling isolated and detached from the organization/team. Virtual team members also may not be prepared to balance the demands of work and life in a boundary-less world. In such conditions, the virtual leaders’ ability to help people deal with these challenges is a primary motivational force.

Here are a few things effective virtual leaders do to motivate team members in a virtual environment:

- Increase the use of paraphrasing and empathizing to confirm understanding: due to the lack of visual cues, the virtual leader’s active listening skills become essential



# Virtual Team Study Report

*Be aware that virtual workers face unique challenges—check with people to identify if they struggle with any issues.*

- Don't assume - provide context and more detail on the task/project to the team members to ensure understanding
- Be very flexible, even “over-accommodating” with your schedule: make sure you are available to the team members beyond “core” hours
- Give others access or share your calendar to facilitate accessibility
- Choose a proper communication channel for holding a remote coaching session: use face-to-face or videoconferencing for discussing what needs improvement whereas day to day check-ins are possible via phone or IM
- Form “passion groups” to reduce team size and engage people in areas/issues that they get excited about

Tips to facilitate a remote coaching session include:

- Make it a consultative, problem-solving discussion
- Make your message clear and concise to avoid misunderstandings
- Pay attention to your tone of voice and voice inflection
- Ask the person to reflect back what they heard to ensure message clarity
- Clarify next steps and schedule follow up calls
- Use email to summarize next steps and confirm mutual understanding
- Be aware that virtual workers face unique challenges—check with people to identify if they struggle with any of these issues (e.g., isolation, use of technology, time zone differences, work/life balance challenges)
- Make regular and impromptu contact with people
- Face-to-face is best, then video and then the phone

## **Purpose and Process**

Processes for sharing information and decision making are essential in a virtual setting. Many of the comments we received from virtual leaders focused on processes for communicating and conducting v-meetings.

## **Communicating:**

- Ensure that team members are aware of the expectations for communicating—everyone should know what the time frame is for responding to emails and voice mail messages



# Virtual Team Study Report

- Team members should know what technology to use for specific tasks such as information sharing, problem solving and idea generation.
- Decrease the use of email as a primary communication tool; texting, Instant Messaging and team website discussions are a better choice for a quick conversation
- Telepresence, Polycom, Microsoft Lync and Round Table products are available if a more complex and detailed discussion is needed
- Keep in mind that webcams are not universally appropriate. Some employees that work from home are not always ready for a video contact. At the same time, video conferencing was reported to be very helpful in keeping people engaged during team meetings

## Conducting V-Meetings:

- Due to time zone differences and maximizing people's time, only hold meetings when necessary. Do not hold regular status update meetings when that information can be shared on an Intranet site or through email.
  - Have someone who is on-site at another location be available on IM in case you need to understand meeting dynamics, etc. This helps compensate for the lack of visual cues.
  - If any team member is in a remote location, everyone should be (e.g., avoid having a group of people in a conference room and individuals in remote locations)
    - Rotate meeting times to make it easier for people and also promote a better work/life balance
  - Follow-up in writing to make sure everybody understands what the outcome of the meeting
  - Send material ahead of time to give team members a chance to review relevant materials before the meeting
  - Assign agenda items to people on the team to keep them engaged during the meeting
  - Have everyone thank someone on the team to start the meeting on a positive note

*Rotate meeting times to make it easier for people and also promote a better work/life balance.*



# Virtual Team Study Report

*Limit the meeting time to stay on track. For one team, the meetings only last for 15 minutes.*

- Maintain team member involvement throughout the session. For example: use chat to collect feedback from people who are not participating; conduct a “round robin” to check in with everybody, and use polling questions to collect opinions and perspectives; encourage “yes” votes to talk with “no” votes
- Limit the meeting time to stay on track. For one team, the meetings only last for 15 minutes. This is just enough time to review accomplishments, commitments for the next week and potential obstacles.
- If anybody has questions or comments they discuss the issue offline.
- Appoint a “tangent buster” to remind team members to focus on the issues at hand whenever they wander.
- Make shared notes visible on the screen – this is helpful for everyone to see and helps address misunderstandings quickly.
- Record meetings and post on shared space

For additional tips and guidelines for effectively working in a virtual environment consult our book, [Virtual Team Success: A Practical Guide to Working and Leading From a Distance](#).

For more information about OnPoint and our solutions go to [www.onpointconsultingllc.com](http://www.onpointconsultingllc.com)