

Virtual Teams are growing- but are they thriving? 5 Dimensions Leaders and Teams can implement for ongoing virtual success

The Covid epidemic of 2020 significantly accelerated the reach and scale of virtual teams for individuals used to working in co-located office locations. Recent studies indicate that almost 2/3 of America worked from home during the initial wave of the Pandemic.⁽¹⁾ **Over the last seven months, virtual teams stepped up and performed admirably; yet, struggles and fractures are emerging.** According to a recent survey of companies representing about 450,000 employees, 40% of those organizations have started to report a decline in productivity as remote work fatigue sets in.⁽²⁾ Additional commentary indicated those companies are struggling to preserve their culture, and are having a hard time onboarding employees remotely. While many to most workers may likely return to the office in some capacity (*this author hopes for a hybrid solution appropriately leveraging both venues*), working as a part of a virtual team in some form is here to stay. As such, we must help prepare and equip virtual teams to continue to keep pace and achieve ongoing success.

This whitepaper will share **practical ideas from both a tools/techniques and a human connection/cultural reinforcement perspective** for 5 important Virtual Team Accelerators:

5 Dimensions for Virtual Team Success:

1. A Mindset for Virtual Teams
2. Virtual Team Structure, Rhythm & Momentum
3. Connection & Culture in a Virtual Workplace
4. Wellness for Virtual Teams
5. Effective Use of Virtual Collaboration Technology/Tools

1. A Mindset for Virtual Teams

How team members choose to *see and think* about operating in a virtual team will impact their *internal feelings*, which then manifest in *external behaviors* and ultimately *impact end results*. Proactively shaping productive thinking regarding virtual teams is an important starting point. Some helpful dialogue to invite motivational ways of seeing and thinking about virtual teams:

- *“What have we learned and experienced about virtual methods in the past months that we desire to hang on to? Where might virtual be just as- or possibly more- effective than in-person interactions?”*
- *“What ineffective or frustrating practices that were a part of co-located working can we leave behind? Where can we create more effective and motivating pathways forward using virtual methods and tools?”*

2. Virtual Team Structure, Rhythm & Momentum

Consistency, predictability, routines, and rhythms will help team members to increase control, lessen anxiety, and build high levels of confidence and productivity. Some examples of useful practices in this area:

- **Agree to shared “anchor blocks” of time during each day/week** when all team members are available to collaborate and be helpful to one another.
- **Allow daily “flex time” hours for individuals** to deal with unique personal challenges (e.g., checking-in with school aged children doing at-home learning, etc.)
- **Increase frequency of team and individual one-on-one check-ins and coaching.** Balance check-ins to be both personal “how are you doing?” focused as well as business progress focused. Provide frequent mini-coaching sessions as helpful.

“Will corporate cultures and communities erode over time without physical interaction? Will planned and unplanned moments of collaboration become impaired? Will there be less mentorship and talent development?”

McKinsey & Company ⁽³⁾

“What does burnout look like? What does mental health look like? What does that connectivity and the community building look like? One of the things I feel is, hey, maybe we are burning some of the social capital we built up in this phase where we are all working remote. What’s the measure for that?”

Microsoft CEO Satya Nadella ⁽⁴⁾



3. Connection & Culture in a Virtual Workplace

Many virtual teams have experienced initial success largely because they were once together in a common location where they formed personal relationships, built camaraderie, and gained an appreciation for the culture of the organization. Some special ways to pay attention to this dimension virtually:

- **Implement rotating “Virtual Lunch” meetings for team members** to get to know each other better on a personal as well as a professional level. In addition to work, share some personal thoughts as well, like dream vacations, or what you would do with a month of paid sabbatical.
- **Host monthly “feel good” virtual events**, such as Happy Hours, themed dress days, Holiday parties. etc. Rotate the leadership of these events within the team.
- **Share individual Team Member “Blueprints”** outlining personal values, strengths, work style preferences, etc.

4. Wellness for Virtual Teams

It is especially important to promote and practice wellness in virtual environments where individuals may not be together face to face for extended periods of time. We suggest considering a wholistic view of wellness that includes physical, mental, emotional, and relational realms. Some ideas to consider:

- **Repurpose commute time for physical workouts/activity if possible.** Also, commit to eating more healthily and for energy because you can now do so in your own home in a way that might not be as convenient to do in the office.
- **At mid and end of workday, intentionally reflect on important progress and accomplishments you made, as well as unexpected positives experienced.** What went well for you? Where are you proud of yourself? Where are you more informed/smarter in how to approach the tasks that matter most to you?
- **Utilize structured review practices which enable learning from both success and failure without blame or finger pointing.** This will make it safe for team members to share wins and struggles, what they are seeking to do differently, and how other team members can support them. Remind team members that failure is often a necessary step toward ultimate success.

5. Effective use of Virtual Collaboration Technology/Tools

Virtual technology can provide a powerful platform for team members to connect and create work products with one another. The market is currently exploding with products such as Microsoft Teams, Zoom, Skype, Bluejeans, Adobe Connect, etc. Regardless of what your teams use, It is important to remember that technology itself cannot provide the complete solution to team success. Virtual teams must use the technology and tools in ways which also promote human feel in interactions and emulates the effectiveness of in-person practices. Consider doing the following:

- **Manage on-line meeting time tightly.** Virtual meetings feel longer and more draining than live sessions. One must work harder to keep engaged with team members on a screen than they would if they were face-to-face with those individuals. Additionally, the temptation for multi-tasking is ever-present. To keep energy and focus sharp, limit topic presentation times to no longer than 10 mins, followed by interactive conversation where all can contribute. As useful, use “timed talk” of 2 min or less per comment, and “round robins” to ensure that each person has a chance to offer their thoughts on important topics before any one member speaks multiple times.

Half of employees working remotely due to Covid restrictions would prefer to remain in a fulltime work at home situations on a permanent basis. ⁽⁵⁾



- **Limit/have clear agreements around multi-tasking** (e.g., emails, texts, other work, etc.). What is appropriate? Not appropriate? When (if at all) appropriate?
- **See and be seen well.** Use “Cameras On” approach as a general default. Be mindful of backgrounds that may be distracting to others (e.g., “propeller head” if sitting under a ceiling fan, “dark out” if sitting in front of a bright window, blurry virtual backgrounds, etc.). For smaller meetings, arrange video tiles (if possible) on the top of the screen close to the camera so that you can speak directionally toward the person versus looking to the side or below them on your screen. Remember also that it might provide a refreshing break to hold some meetings via phone vs. video format.

A Structured Approach to Help Virtual Teams Adopt these Dimensions

As many virtual teams are currently dealing with high amounts of stress and overload in figuring out how to make their situations work best, a well-intended approach of just sharing some general guidelines to implement might not yield consistent and sustainable results within that team or across multiple teams.

A structured facilitation process which engages the team to collaboratively consider, define, implement, and continuously improve on their virtual team success is recommended. Such an approach could take the form of a series of targeted virtual working sessions where the team can focus both on (1) Collaboration techniques to achieve virtual efficiency in work, and (2) Team development activities to connect more deeply with one another and lean into their work together. A productive approach could include these steps:

1. **Conduct a rapid pulse assessment to define current team effectiveness**, both for efficiency in collaboration and connectedness as a team.
2. **Utilize assessment results to provide developmental thinking, practices and tools** to deepen team connection, commitment and productivity. Focus development activities on real-life needs and deliverables.
3. **Facilitate virtual collaboration leading practices working sessions** to both strengthen existing techniques and adopt new methods to leverage technology collaboration tools and ways of working.
4. **Provide team and individual coaching sessions** to help team members function well as individuals, and to collaborate well together.
5. **Define a process for rapid improvement monitoring and success multiplication** for individual team effectiveness, and to share with other virtual teams.

In Conclusion

As previously stated, the recent scale and speed of virtual teaming has been unprecedented. While much work and many workers will likely return to a physical office environment, it is clear that some form of virtual teamwork will remain.. We will do well to provide robust assistance to meet the unique needs of virtual teams. Technology tools will be a part of that solution- but cannot fully address the most pressing challenges around human and cultural connection. As the well-quoted saying goes, *“the soft stuff is the hard stuff”* (and especially so in virtual teams due to their remote work nature). While the *“if”*, *“when”* and *“how”* of returning to co-located office environments sorts itself out, our immediate goal as leaders is to quickly learn from what has taken place, do more of what is working, course correct what is not, and rapidly design solutions and structures for moving virtual teams productively forward to build a better normal and meet the demands of whatever the future requires.



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Footnotes

- (1) Megan Brennan, "US Workers Discovering Affinity for Remote Work," *Gallup*, April 3, 2020, [gallup.com](https://www.gallup.com).
- (2) <https://commercialobserver.com/2020/09/work-from-home-productivity-decline/>
- (3) <https://www.mckinsey.com/business-functions/organization/our-insights/reimagining-the-office-and-work-life-after-covid-19>
- (4) <https://www.geekwire.com/2020/pandemic-isnt-hurting-microsofts-bottom-line-changes-still-worry-satya-nadella>
- (5) <https://news.gallup.com/poll/311375/reviewing-remote-work-covid.aspx>