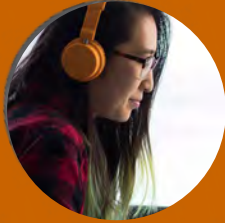# Leading High-Performing, High-Engagement Virtual Teams

During COVID-19 and Beyond

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Leading High-Performing, High-Engagement Virtual Teams, During COVID-19 and Beyond

The Way We Work Has Changed

Think back to your childhood dreams of work: no matter what you imagined yourself being (a firefighter, a teacher, an astronaut, a doctor), you undoubtedly imagined yourself *going* to work. Work was not just a job; it was a place people went for eight or more hours of the day.

All that has changed. Many of us now "go" to work in our home office, living room, spare bedroom, or kitchen. This was true even before COVID-19. A Gallup survey in 2016 found that 43% of the U.S. workforce worked from home at least part of the time; since March 2020, when the coronavirus hit, that number has grown to at least 62%. A study by Willis Towers Watson indicates that remote work increased 493% over just 18 months in 2019 and 2020.

Maybe this isn't a bad thing, for employers or team members. In one study of 16,000 call center employees, researchers found a 13% increase in productivity when employees shift to working from home. Working from home may make 80% of (pre-COVID) remote workers less stressed. And both companies and employees can save money. Employers can save $11,000 a year for every employee who works from home half-time; individuals save $2,000 to $4,000 a year on commuting and other expenses when working at least part-time from home.

Whether or not you like remote work, you can expect it to be a big part of the future work landscape. One survey found 75% of remote workers expect their employers to continue to provide flexibility after the pandemic has passed, leading Fast Company to declare "the office as you know it is gone."

The way we work has irreversibly changed.

Preparing for a new way to lead

Whether you're new to virtual work or an experienced leader of remote teams, this eBook is for you. We've written it to share what we know from our experience as researchers, coupled with our experience as consultants AND virtual workers.

We'll start with the basics by

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defining virtual teams. (It's not as clear as you might think.) Next, we'll outline the three primary concerns leaders have regarding virtual teams. Drawing from the growing body of research about virtual teams, as well as five decades of research into what makes for high-performing teams, we'll identify the ways you can sidestep the virtual work concerns. Along the way, we'll share insights for how you can leverage virtual work to get the most good for you, your organization, and your team members. Technology and time move fast these days, so we'll keep this brief – we've designed this eBook to be skimmable in 30 minutes or less.

One last thing before we get started: We began writing this eBook before we'd ever heard the word COVID-19. The pandemic has brought an unprecedented level of disruption to global health, economies, workplaces, and individual lives. We acknowledge this repeatedly in the following pages, but the insights provided here have a shelf life that extends long beyond the coronavirus's impact. Because of that, we share some examples and research that assume face-to-face work environments. Although in-person work may be limited for many right now, we trust our readers to make sense of the insights regardless of current conditions.

Ready? Let's get started.

Virtual Team Basics

Let's begin with some level-setting, to make sure we're all talking about the same thing. Here are some definitions:

Virtual: When we say a team is virtual, we mean it doesn't operate physically in the same space, and it relies on various technologies to

communicate and get work done. There are degrees of virtuality, as we explain in the sidebar *How Virtual Are You?*

If you work on the same corporate campus but in different buildings, and don't meet face-to-face, you can call yourself virtual. If you work on a team of 10 people in 10 different countries, each working from their home office, you're even more virtual. The more boundaries you cross (distance, time zones, language, etc.), the more virtual you are.

Team: A team consists of members who work *interdependently* to accomplish a shared goal or task. This is in contrast to groups, which may have a shared interest or identity, but their work is not interdependent.

For example, members of a virtual team working on an engine redesign will coordinate their work as they rethink the engine's specifications, source parts, test components, and revise their plans. Their work is interdependent: one member's productivity is dependent on that of the others, and they must regularly communicate to accomplish the task of redesigning the engine by a certain deadline.

By contrast, members of a virtual sales group may work for the same company and sell the same products within their own regional territories, but for the most part, their work is not interdependent: sales in Dallas are not dependent on sales in Denver.

If interdependence wasn't necessary, leading virtual teams would be an easy task. All you'd have to do is send an email to keep everyone updated, and your work would be done. But interdependence means team members must learn

to trust, share knowledge, and meet performance expectations together. Doing that well on a virtual team is the topic of this eBook.

Before COVID, when remote work was an optional "perk" organizations could offer, we most often heard three concerns or hesitations around going virtual. The pandemic hasn't changed much.

We discuss the three concerns in the next section.

How virtual are you?

Virtual teams are like snowflakes, no two are alike. Why is this? Because there are a lot of factors that determine a team's virtuality.

Virtuality is the degree to which a team is virtual. New research by the Center for Values-Driven Leadership, conducted by Dr. Dan Blood and Dr. Jim Ludema, defines seven dimensions of virtuality:

- **Geographic dispersion:** the physical distance between team members' locations

- **Temporal dispersion:** the time distance between team members. Temporal dispersion includes people working across time zones, and people working in the same time zone but on separate shifts.

- **Isolation:** the amount of time spent working alone without face to face communication

- **Balance:** the number of team members at each location

- **Technological reliance:** team members access to and reliance on technology such as video conferencing equipment, smartphones, and instant messaging software.

- **Communication richness:** the quality of communication based on its ability to provide cues, immediate feedback, and level of focus.

- **Leader distance:** how far an individual team member is from the team's leader

The challenge of leading a virtual team will increase as the level of virtuality goes up. By paying attention to virtuality, you can help minimize challenges and make remote work a more productive and engaging opportunity.

Common Concerns about Virtual Teams

Can I trust people?

"How will I know they're doing their work if I can't see it being done in real time?" More than one CEO or manager has asked this question. It is often posed when a company first tests out virtual work, or when a new employee comes on board.

To be sure, there are examples of employees who have taken advantage of virtual work to moonlight for a competitor or catch every game during March Madness. But there is good news overall. Experienced virtual team leaders say employees who are trustworthy in person will be trustworthy at home.

Understanding and building trust on virtual teams is perhaps one of the most well-researched aspects of remote work. Whether managers trust employees is one factor, but getting team members to trust managers and the organization will have an even stronger long-term effect on your organization. We'll share more and offer tangible tips in the following section.

How can I build a strong team and culture?

Trust is table stakes for getting anything done on a virtual team. But to raise the bet, you've got to have a strong team and organizational culture. Leaders are naturally worried that the culture, which in many ways happens "automatically" when working face-to-face, will suffer when more people work remotely. How can employees feel an affinity to the organization and their team when they're miles or continents apart?

This isn't a question any practitioner or scholar has fully solved. But there are some answers, and they point toward the importance of connection. We'll share insights for building high quality connections, strengthening communications, managing misunderstandings, and creating positive cultures on virtual teams.

How can we go from functional to high-performing?

This final question is a real sticking point, especially for leaders who want to continue to provide flexibility long after pandemic restrictions are lifted. We can't just maintain the status quo; we need to sail forward with gusto.

Surprisingly, research says we often work more hours when working from home and can be equally or more productive. Management scholars also have five decades of insights into the most effective tools for leading high-performing teams. We'll put a virtual twist on these tools, and share them in the final section of this book.

If you're a virtual team leader, we believe you should focus your attention in three key areas: trust, connection, and performance. We explore these ideas throughout the rest of this resource.

Employees who are trustworthy in person will be trustworthy at home.

Building a High-Trust Team

No matter your remote work context, opportunities for distrust abound. Without the vocal and visual cues of face-to-face communication, you may question an employee's use of time, intentions, loyalty, competence, or tone. What's more, your employees might question the same of you, as their leader.

At work, trust is t*he expectancy that efforts will be reciprocated and not exploited, and that team process will work reliably* (Hertel, Geister, & Kondrat, 2005). In other words, we trust each other when I know you're doing the work we agree is important, that you're not taking credit for or messing with my work, and I feel confident that our overall plan is going to succeed.

The different types of trust

Trust is both relational and task based. Researcher and consultant Dr. MaryJo Burchard defines the elements of relational and task-based trust with her ASC-DOC model (see the next page). Burchard believes relational trust consists of authenticity, safety, and consistency, while task trust is built through dependability, ownership, and competence.

You can imagine how it's possible for both relational and task trust to exist in the same person. For example, you might trust your CFO to deliver sound financial forecast-

ing (task trust) and also provide good personalized career advice (relational trust). It's also possible to imagine how one type of trust can exist, while the other is absent. You may trust the CFO's financial forecasts but not her career advice, because you don't believe she has your best interest in mind, and you don't feel safe, secure, and protected around her.

Interestingly, in virtual teams, the kind of trust we need changes over time (Hertel, Geister, & Kondrat, 2005). During the early stages of a team's life together, we need to develop relational trust the most. As the relationships within the team mature, task-related trust moves to the forefront, which means that dependability, ownership, and competence become more important.

Trust in the organization and the leadership is also important. Imagine that you're assigned to a new virtual team tasked with developing a software application. The team was assembled by a leader who considered the skills of each individual and brought them to the team knowing that together, the team had the required knowledge to develop the software. If you trust the organization to make these decisions effectively, you have *institutional trust*. Research suggests institutional trust may have an even greater impact on outcomes in virtual teams than trust between the individual team members (Alsharo, Gregg, & Ramirez, 2017).

Why trust matters on virtual teams

To understand why trust matters on virtual teams, check out the results of a recent survey from CultureWiz-

ASC-DOC Model of Trust

Relational Trust	Task Trust
Authenticity: your words and actions can be taken at face value	**Dependability**: others can expect you'll do what you say you will do
Safety: others feel safe, secure, and protected with you	**Ownership**: others see you personally own the outcome
Consistency: your behavior is predictable	**Competence**: you have the skill and experience to do what's expected

ard that asked what makes a good virtual teammate. The answers are indicative of both relational and task-related trust. *The most important qualities of a good virtual teammates are:*

- Shares information (19%)
- Collaborative (18%)
- Proactively engaged (17%)
- Organized (14%)
- Provides useful feedback (12%)
- Has good social skills (11%)
- Offers assistance to teammates (9%)

Aren't each of those items related to trust? I trust you to make sure I have the information I need. I trust you to work with me, collaboratively. I trust you to get the work done and be responsible and engaged. Etcetera, etcetera.

Researchers Breuer, Huffmeier, and Hertel (2016) reviewed 52 research studies on trust in virtual teams and concluded that *trust is*

more important to virtual teams than to face-to-face teams. When trust exists, individuals are more likely to experience satisfaction, cohesiveness, commitment, and effort. They're better at sharing knowledge and learning from the experiences, and they perform at a higher level.

Harvard scholar Dr. Amy Edmondson's research demonstrates that when we trust, we're more likely to feel confident in the risk-taking that helps us get better at what we do; this enables innovation and change. Risk-taking includes such things as asking for help, sharing and receiving feedback, sharing ideas, and discussing conflicts openly. "We innovate at the speed of trust," may be a Franklin Covey catch phrase, but there's some truth in it, especially for virtual teams.

Creating Trust

If trust is so vital to an effective virtual team, how can we increase our trust?

For leaders, if you're still struggling to trust your employees, we suggest you take Gallup's advice: study past performance and trust it. We also encourage you to look at current performance: is the work getting done well? Then no need to worry if your employee can be trusted. Instead, focus on your own trustworthiness – the level of relational and task-based trust your team has in you, their leader – and on the level of relational and task-based trust team members have with one another.

Here are 5 specific ideas for building trust, starting with the most important.

#1: Focus on psychological safety. Psychological safety is the shared belief that a team is safe for interpersonal risk taking. Without this sense of safety, organizations lose important mindshare because team members don't raise their hands with new ideas, or with emerging concerns. In other words – it is really hard to have a high performing team if you don't have psychological safety because people are afraid to speak up and take risks. Psych safety is a concept developed by Dr. Amy Edmondson at Harvard; we recommend her book, *Teaming*, to further consider psych safety on your team.

#2: To build trust, work on empathy. For virtual team leaders, research points toward the importance of having empathy for your followers, in order to build trust. Leaders must put themselves into the shoes of their team members and take interest in the problems they may have in the course of

their work, say researchers [Flavian, Guinalílu, and Jordan](#).

#3: Encourage non-work talk. Conversation about non-work topics may seem counterproductive to creating high-performing teams, but it is a vital tool for building authentic, trust-based relationships that make work go smoothly. This is especially true in virtual teams where informal conversations are unable to take place around the water cooler or over lunch. For more on the role of non-work talk, and how to foster it, see the side bar *Making a Personal Connection*.

#4: Test your team on the ASC-DOC model. Earlier, we introduced Burchard's elements of relational and task trust. Share these with your team and invite feedback. Ask, when a client or other team in the organization partners with us, how do you think they'd rate us on these measures? Where are we excelling? How can we improve in the future?

#5: Practice shared leadership. In their study of global virtual software development teams, Hoegl and Muethel (2016) found that *half of team leaders underestimated the capacity of their team to lead themselves*. As a result, the leaders monopolized decision-making authority. In virtual teams, the practice of shared leadership contributes to success. Shared leadership occurs when group members shift the role or behaviors of leadership from one person to another as needed by the group's context. In real life, that might look like a product innovation team that trades team leadership as the initiative moves from conceptualization, to design, to production, to marketing; or a multinational corporation that rolls out a new

database system but allows regional leaders to make decisions on timelines. Even more simply, it might be giving your team members decision making authority over their area of work. Whatever it is, turning more leadership over to the team, rather than through a hierarchy, leads to more effective virtual teams. Learn more in our sidebar below.

Creating Shared Leadership

How do you make shared leadership happen? Some practitioners suggest starting with a simple question, "What do you think?" In other words, train hierarchical leaders in your organization to intentionally ask for the insights of others. Teach team members to identify problems, then also propose solutions. (Our favorite expression for this: Don't tell me it's raining. Show me your umbrella.)
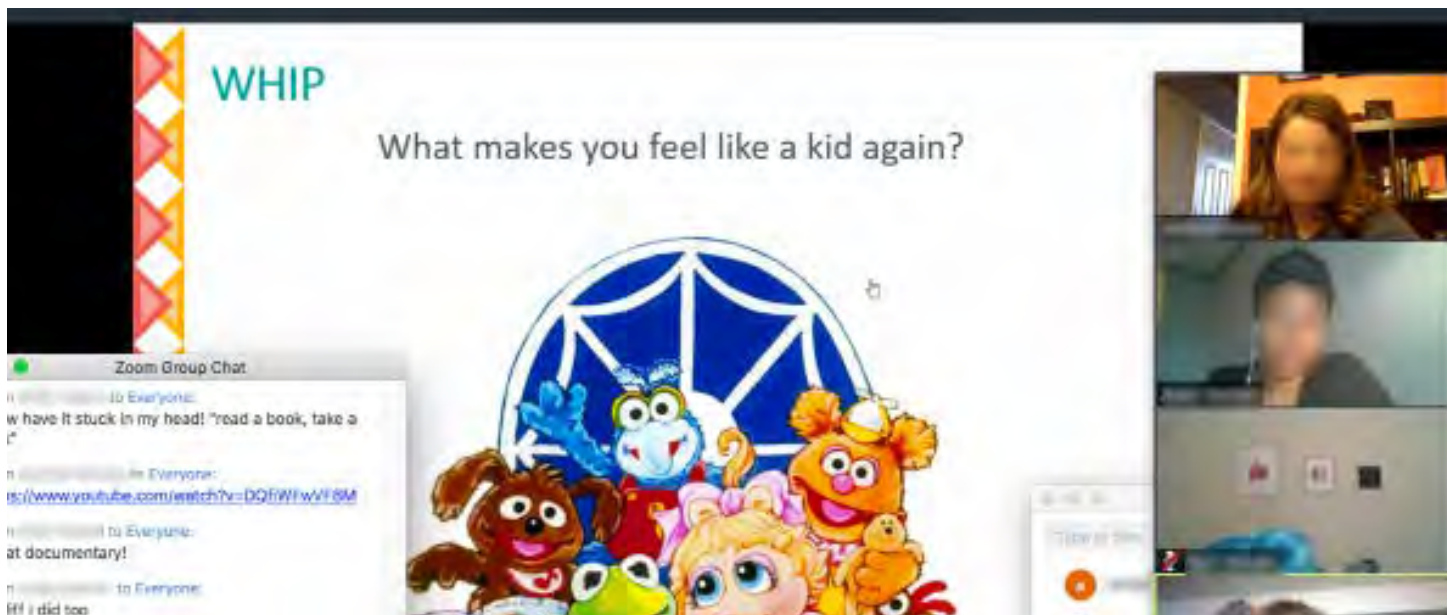
[A three-minute video](#) on our website illustrates this well, and also explains how creating shared leadership can help prevent executive burnout.

This checklist is a helpful starting place for virtual teams that want to practice shared leadership:

- Willingly share leadership with others
- Defer decision making to those with expertise rather than hierarchical power
- Seek win-wins and joint outcomes
- Keep focus on higher level goals and common good.

As you may have noticed, shared leadership is also a time-tested way of developing leadership. The more talented, experienced leaders you have on your team, the higher performance you can expect.

Pictured:
A screenshot of a conference call with the whip around question, What makes you feel like a kid again?

Making a Personal Connection

To build relational trust, one starting point is to encourage non-work conversations. One organization we know uses a "whip around" question at the start of team conference calls. The meeting's leader asks a non-work question that encourages lively responses. Participants take turns answering the question, and sometimes provide photos or web links in the conference software's chat box to give more feedback. We asked members of this team to share some of their favorite whip around questions:

• Which celebrity couple would most break your heart if they separated?

• What was your favorite year of grade school? (Share a photo in the chat box, if you can.)

• What was the last song you sang when no one else was around?

• What's the one thing you buy at the grocery store every week (other than milk, eggs, bread)?

If this kind of playful conversation is out of character for your team, you can always ask questions that are less social, but still not directly focused on work tasks. For example, "We have a core value of creativity. When have you seen someone showing creativity at work this month?" Or, "What's been a high point experience for you this week?"

These ideas are great for team meetings. But don't forget to include personal connections in 1:1 conversation. Check in with remote colleagues daily, through text message, Slack DMs, or quick emails. Share appropriately personal glimpses into your own life. For example, on Friday afternoon you might message a colleague, "I'm signing off at 4 today; leaving to do some back to school shopping for my kids. Let me know if you need anything." And finally, look for ways to make interactions more meaningful. Our 2018 Forbes.com article on giving "How are you?" a makeover went viral; find tips for more meaningful conversation here.

To really liven up your virtual team, check out these six tips for fun and fellowship, including hosting a Yappy Hour.

Creating Strong Connections

Once you've established a solid baseline of trust on our team, you need to think about culture. How can you build a strong, connected, engaged team? The ideas we shared in our sidebar about making a personal connection are a good place to start; but how can you turn those side conversations into important connections between colleagues?

One way to start is by asking, "what's happening when there's disconnection?" Disconnection often happens because a breakdown in communication.

The mutual knowledge problem

George Mason scholar Catherine Cramton (2001) has identified five common communication problems that contribute to misunderstandings and disconnection in virtual teams. She calls these "the mutual knowledge problem," and says that eliminating them is a first step to building a strongly-connected team.

As you read through this list, ask yourself, how often does this happen on my team? We provide a tip for each problem, to help you bridge the gap.

1. Failure to communicate contextual information: Context matters in leadership. For example, things like natural disasters, family emergencies, local holidays, and political and economic turbulence can have major short and long-term effects on the way individuals are able to accomplish their work. Team members need to be mindful of their colleagues' situations and the preoccupations they may be feeling at any given time.

Tip: Be mindful of who and where your team members are as individuals and as part of other teams, and the intricacies this creates. Show your thoughtfulness by asking for and responding appropriately to context-specific information.

2. Failure to communicate information evenly: It's easy to pass information to someone you sit next to; it's harder to remember to inform partners who work in distant offices. It's also difficult to notice when someone's address has inadvertently been left off an email chain.

Tip: Watch out for information voids – corners of the team that information may reach last. Go out of your way to ensure these individuals get connected.

3. Differences in importance of information to individuals: Cultural differences (for example direct vs. indirect communication styles) and role differences can change what parts of a message people view as important. Learning to communicate importance in ways that get heard is essential for leaders of virtual teams.

Tip: When working on a global team, study the communication patterns of your team members' cultures. (We recommend the GLOBE project resources.) Additionally, look for ways to duplicate and reinforce important messages that need to be heard by all. This is particularly important for multi-lingual teams.

4. Differences in speed of access to information: Access to information technology or relational affinity may change the speed at which information is accessed across your team.

Tip: Make sure all team members have access to the same technology, even if that means foregoing some bells and whistles. Ask well-connected team members to look out for colleagues who might feel distant, and direct information their way. If decisions are made during one shift, make sure a reliable plan exists for transferring information to the next shift.

5. Differences in the interpretation of the meaning of silence: Distance adds new dimensions of uncertainty to silence. Is a colleague quiet because they're working, or because they're mad?

Tip: Use technology that delivers more cues when important conversations or decisions are underway. Consider how cultural, language, or personality differences might impact communication, and address them individually with team members. When in doubt, reach out.

If the medium is the message, pick the right medium

In addition to addressing Cramton's (2001) common communication problems, it's important to ask, "how can we communicate better?" Improved communication will strengthen team member connections to one another and to the organization overall.

Philosopher Marshall McLuhan famously opined that "the medium is the message." By this, he meant that how we send our message communicates much of our intent.

A teenager who gets a breakup message via text knows exactly what that means.

One way to improve communication on virtual teams is to give thought to the best medium for the message you want to send. Use email to gather information or share simple updates. Pick up the phone or schedule a video call when a longer conversation is needed to solve a problem. Strategy conversations and com-

plex decision making often require face-to-face time (Hertel, Geister, & Kondrat, 2005), when conditions permit.

That probably seems obvious. But how often have you been on the receiving end of a seemingly endless email chain where a team is trying and failing to reach consensus on a complicated topic? These agonizing emails often involve multiple threads of thought, unclear references to earlier messages, and little progress toward strategic decision making. Have you ever surrendered to someone else's possibly inferior plan, just to make the emails stop? If so, you are not alone.

High performing virtual teams have members who call "Stop!" when the medium no longer serves the message. You can almost feel a sigh of relief when someone emails, "I just called Jack and worked this out. Here's what we propose …" Or, "Let's pause the conversation and pick it up on tomorrow's staff call."

Picking the right medium for your message also means choosing channels that offer a higher number of cues whenever you can. We hold our weekly team meetings via Zoom video calls, and we always start with a quick check-in to see how each person is doing. After years of using phone calls, we discovered that we felt a much stronger sense of connection when we could see one another, and we were more attentive to the conversation when we had the accountability of the camera on us. For example, video conferencing reduced the likelihood of one of us being distracted by email during conversation pauses. Essentially, we found a better way to create high-quality connections.

But beware of Zoom fatigue.

Sometime around May 2020, after most of the world's knowledge workers had moved to virtual-only workplaces, social media posts began to proliferate around the topic of how tiring endless video conference calls can be.

Have you noticed this too? To understand why, here's a simple test. During your next video conference call, notice where your attention is drawn. It is often to the thumbnail of your own video, right? Video conference calls require us to monitor our own behavior in a way that isn't necessary in face-to-face conversation or by phone. Additionally, you may notice that you're more focused on demonstrating your attentiveness by nodding, expressing surprise with your eyes, showing support with a smile, and using your hands to gesture enthusiasm or confusion. These behaviors enhance connection and communication richness, but they can also be emo-

High performing virtual teams have members who call "Stop!" when the medium no longer serves the message

"One of the things I've seen with a number of our clients – everyone is suffering with town-hall-itis. They do these big townhalls to reach out and talk to people. But it's hard to get that connection when you have that big audience. The video is a 1-way transmission. There are a lot of conversations about leveraging collaboration technology like Microsoft Teams to do things in a much smaller way, connecting our leadership with our people. Creating connection points between junior and senior people."–Jimmy Etheredge, North America CEO, Accenture (Read more.)

tionally and physically draining.

"When you're on a video conference, you know everybody's looking at you; you are on stage, so there comes the social pressure and feeling like you need to perform," says Clemson associate professor Marissa Shuffler in a [BBC article](). "Being performative is nerve-wracking and more stressful."

What can we do about this? Find the balance that works for you and your team.

- Turn off the camera when it's appropriate.
- Break up back-to-back video meetings with an old-fashioned phone call.
- For long meetings, build in a short break every hour.
- During longer breaks, get outdoors or take a walk, if you can.
- Watch your team for signs of fraying. As a leader, you can model healthy behaviors in order to implicitly grant permission for others to do the same.

High-quality connections at work

So far, we've offered ideas for improving virtual team connection and engagement through better communication. But often the tone of what is communicated is as important as the channel of how it is communicated.

We are more likely to have a high-performing team when our communication is marked by regular, short, positive interactions (no matter if those interactions happen over instant messaging, email, the phone, or in person). Researchers call these "high-quality connections," or HQCs. We experience HQCs when we feel a sense of positive energy in the moment, when we feel respected and cared for in the connection, and when the feeling is mutual (Stephens, Heaphy, & Dutton, 2012).

Positive communication creates HQCs, and HQCs lead to higher performance because they improve the way people think, feel, and behave. High-quality relationships and the psychological safety they create enable greater learning and innovation in teams and organizations (Carmeli, Brueller, & Dutton, 2008).

You've probably found this to be true in your own life. Imagine you're feeling grumpy as you begin work one morning. You didn't sleep well, the news on the talk radio station was depressing, your kid's virtual schooling wasn't going smoothly, and you're feeling stressed about the quarterly numbers. But just as you pour a second cup of coffee, a colleague calls you with an idea to add to the strategic plan your division is drafting. Her idea is solid, and you feel your attitude perk up as you talk. You ask thoughtful questions about how to implement her idea, and you're impressed at the insights she's gleaned from observing on the monthly cross-divisional calls. You say you'll pitch her idea to the SVP and give her credit. She, in turn, thanks you for creating an open door for bringing new ideas. You hang up and return to your laptop, realizing that this short call has turned your mood around.

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What's happened here? In short, an HQC has transformed your day, and probably that of your colleague as well.

How can we create more HQCs on virtual teams?

Creating a culture of respect, empathy, and perspective taking (to consider the perspective of the other) is one way. You can also look to create positive emotions by taking time to laugh, offer support, and share appreciation.

One virtual team leader we know recently planned a short time of appreciation sharing during a monthly meeting. He invited team members to take turns sharing things they appreciated about other team members on the call. The conversation went on three times longer than planned, but he let it continue. "It was easy to see we needed this," he told us. In short, his busy and understaffed team needed the affirmation and HQCs. The positive, collaborative energy

it created allowed them to accomplish their work-related agenda in record time.

In one study of high-performing teams, researchers found that *the most successful teams made 5x as many positive comments as low-performing teams*. They also asked as many questions of others as they advocated for their own perspective (Losada & Heaphy, 2004).

A growing body of research shows that thriving relationships are marked by an imbalance of positive to negative communication. We call this the *positive to negative dialogue ratio*; at work and at home, great relationships are characterized by an abundance of affirmation. It can't be artificial or super saccharine; it has to be real. But, no matter what medium you use to communicate, you can build your team by looking for every opportunity to identify strengths, affirm direction, say thanks, compliment ideas, recognize hard work,

celebrate successes, and open the way for constructive input.

When relying on email as your primary means of communication, as some virtual teams do, doubling-down on positive communication is necessary. Research suggests that attempts at communicating positivity via email are perceived as neutral messages, and neutral messages are often perceived as negativity (Byron, 2008). If you want to make sure your message of affirmation is heard, say it clearly and repeatedly.

Equally importantly, you can *lead through your questions*. This is especially important in virtual communication. When you're meeting with someone face-to-face, you can see in their physical behavior when they have something to say. They may lean forward, shift in their seat, even raise a hand slightly. Over the phone, you don't have the same physical cues. As a result, it's easy for great insights to get missed or for important red flags to go unraised. Leaders can limit this risk by pausing to ask specific questions: "Amir, you've been quiet. What do you think?" "Linda, this will impact your department. What's missing?"

The good news is that positive communication and positive performance are inextricably linked. MIT researchers found that for each 10% that a team outscored other teams on virtual communication, they also outscored those teams by 13% on overall performance. In short, you can leverage your communication patterns to create high-performing teams. Communicate often, lead with questions, share appreciation, create a 5:1 positive-to-negative dialogue ratio, and build high-quality connections.

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The Link Between Connection & Inclusion on Virtual Teams

While 2020 will always be remembered as the year of COVID-19, it is also the year many organizations committed to building inclusive organizations. We asked diversity, equity, and inclusion expert Dr. Salwa Rahim-Dillard, founder of Equision and the diversity leader for U.S. Cellular, to help us connect the topics.

To start, we have to understand what *inclusion* means. "Inclusion is a perception or feeling of belonging and having value for being your full, authentic self," says Rahim-Dillard. "Feelings of inclusion are co-created, but leaders play an integral role in the process."

If employers continue to offer flexible work options after the pandemic, it may create a more inclusive environment, especially for people with disabilities who found workplaces to be unaccommodating and working parents who needed flexibility. It may also limit events that created feelings of exclusion, such as seeing a colleague and a boss interact socially.

But Rahim-Dillard cautions, virtual work creates new challenges, especially as it comes to video conferences. "Seeing a home on a webcam gives you a chance to peer into people's lives," which might feel uncomfortable. "There's a level of psychological safety we need to let people in our space. But if you believe your leader doesn't fully trust you, it can do damage to leave the camera off."

"Leaders need to be very intentional about these interactions. Set clear expectations, let people know in advance if cameras are required to be on, and understand a cultural factor may be at play, if someone chooses to turn the camera off."

Enabling Exceptional Performance

In this final section, we want to address our last concern – *how do we create virtual teams that deliver exceptional performance?* In previous sections, we covered the essential performance building blocks–share knowledge, build trust, create psychological safety, enable high-quality connections, practice positive communication, and lead through questions.

Research confirms the importance these factors. In a study of 135 articles on virtual team performance, University of Johannesburg researchers found four of the top five factors that influence virtual team performance are related to people: their character, their personal traits, their communication patterns, and the bonds between them.

Next, we want to dig into two additional building blocks of high performance: defining clear purpose, strategy, and goals; and creating a learning orientation and a growth mindset.

Defining clear purpose, strategy, and goals

Let's start by defining purpose.

Purpose is WHY we do what we do. It is the reason we exist, and why we'd be missed if we didn't.

Purpose-driven people and organizations are working for something more than the money they make and the status they earn.

One definition we like says purpose is "a central, self-organizing life aim that organizes and stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning" (McKnight & Kashdan, 2009).

Notice that this definition explains what a purpose is – a self-organizing life aim – and what it does – stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning.

Make sure you remember that – a purpose is different from other things in that it helps you set goals, manage behaviors (which is another way of saying, make decisions) and gives you a deeper sense of meaning, of why you exist on this planet, in this company, on this team.

You can never completely fulfill your purpose. A goal – even a big one – you can meet. For example, you could have a goal to be the #1 accounting firm on the East Coast. That's ambitious, but achievable. It's not a purpose. It's a goal.

An organization's purpose might be more like, "to delight customers with solutions that bring their visions to life." That's a purpose because it is an organizational aim that stimulates goals, manages behaviors, and provides a sense of meaning, but it can't be completely and permanently fulfilled because there's always a new customer to delight.

Purposes have power. A virtual team that is clear on its purpose will go above and beyond to build trust, share knowledge and leadership, create high-quality connections, and put in the hours needed to help their organization thrive. But purpose has to be communi-

> Once a virtual team is clear on its purpose, the purpose becomes a driver for strategies and goals.

"How you rally a team in times of incredible stress and make the transition to sustainability relies on how people understand their purpose, their ability to connect themselves and their work to the larger vision. ... In uncertainty and when you're looking for connectivity, no one wants to get on the phone and talk for 4 hours about transactions. They want to get on the phone and talk for 4 hours because they believe they're making the world a better place." –Cathy Bessant, Chief Operations & Technology Officer, Bank of America

([Read more.](#))

cated. Remember how "failure to communicate information evenly" is one of the elements of "the mutual knowledge problem?" Fail to communicate your purpose evenly and consistently across your organization, and it won't matter how compelling the purpose is, it will have little effect. As a leader, you have to bring the purpose consistently into daily team conversations.

Using purpose to set strategy and goals

Once a virtual team is clear on its purpose, the purpose becomes a driver for strategies and goals. "Real teams are much more likely to flourish if leaders aim their sights on performance results that balance the needs of customers, employees, and shareholders. Clarity of purpose and goals have tremendous power in our ever more change-driven world," say the leading teams scholars Katzenbach and Smith. (For a great explanation of the connection between pur-

pose and strategy, we recommend this HBR article by our colleague Jonathan Trevor at Oxford, and his co-author Barry Varcoe).

McDonald's has long had a purpose of being its customers' preferred place to eat. A decade or so ago, they realized they were no longer their customers' favorite place to buy coffee, so McDonald's identified a strategy that aligned with their purpose. That strategy led to the development of the McCafe line of beverages. And then they tied those strategies to goals.

Goals are how you know when you're getting closer to your purpose and when you've made progress along the way. Goals should always be measurable and

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for a specific timeframe. They are especially powerful for virtual teams because they can provide a marker of shared progress.

One manufacturing company we've worked with operated global virtual teams throughout Europe, Asia, and North America. Over time, their performance faltered, and on-time delivery to customers fell to just 60%. The company's purpose was to be the preferred and most reliable partner for its customers, and they were failing to live up to it.

A new global VP held a series of virtual meetings with his operations leaders around the world to reaffirm the purpose and establish strategies and goals. They designed a strategy of moving to lean manufacturing and set an ultimate goal of 95% on-time delivery, with milestones along the way. Everyone on the team needed to contribute to implement the strategy and reach the goals. Together, they made it happen. In less than two years, they met their target of 95% on-time delivery.

The importance of a collaborative process

That last story points to an important final point about purpose, strategy and goals: they have to be shared. When work is interdependent, as it is on virtual teams, effective leaders engage their whole team in developing and implementing the plan. "*People support what they help to create*," said pioneering organizational theorist Richard Beckhard in 1969; time has only confirmed how right he was.

In a recent analysis we conducted of successful global change projects, we found that change projects that were collaborative from the start were significantly more

successful than those with less participatory processes. Set a clear vision, and invite people to participate in shaping and implementing the project overall. This is absolutely vital when working with global or virtual teams. Distance can be isolating. Intentional outreach to engage others brings their insights directly into the process. It helps to reduce resistance and build ownership of the change since you've given people real opportunities to create the future and shape the work.

Creating a learning orientation and supporting a growth mindset

In the previous pages, we talked about having a purpose and goal-driven mindset. That's important. But too much of a focus

Four Factors of a Learning Orientation

1. The project leader is seen as an interdependent partner. Not an infallible authority. The leader clearly expresses his ability to make mistakes if others don't contribute. And then he opens the door for those contributions, often by not speaking first.

2. The team is seen as empowered partners – not as skilled support staff. Good ideas and important contributions can come from anywhere.

3. Mistakes and challenges are to be expected when learning something hard. The team understands implementing change will take time to master and that successes and failures will be required along the way.

4. The project's purpose was communicated as a worthy goal–something aspirational that advances the organization's mission or a common good (such as better patient outcomes or delighting clients).

on outcomes can actually lead to failure. Research shows that teams who focus on learning, rather than winning, advance faster and ultimately outperform the competition.

Fostering a learning orientation

The idea of being a learning organization first flourished through the work of Peter Senge. Learning organizations are skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge. As we discussed in the communication section above, this is especially important for virtual teams, where you can't rely on learning from in-person observation. Amy Edmondson, the Harvard researcher we mentioned earlier, was a Senge protégé, and has explored this topic extensively. (Here is a great summary article on learning organizations.)

Edmondson provides a powerful example in her book *Teaming*. When a new cardiac surgery process was developed, Edmondson tracked its implementation in four different hospitals. Two succeeded in implementing the new procedure, two did not. In the end, it didn't matter what resources, expertise, or track record of innovation they had, the difference between high performance and failure was whether the project was framed as learning or winning by the project leader. Four factors were essential to a learning orientation (see the sidebar).

Edmondson also writes that you can further develop a learning orientation by being open to ideas, appreciating differences, allowing time for reflection, and putting concrete learning processes into place.

Put this into the context of a virtual team–your own. Pause to re-read the last few paragraphs and ask yourself, *Does my team operate with a learning orientation?*

- Do we know why our work is meaningful and purposeful?
- Do we welcome mistakes and challenges because they represent learning?
- Does everyone feel empowered to share ideas and make contributions?
- As a leader, am I acting as an interdependent partner rather than an infallible authority?
- Are we–am I– open to ideas?
- Do we acknowledge and appreciate differences?
- Are we building in opportunities for reflection?
- Do we have concrete learning processes?
- Are we good at sharing knowledge?

> A growth mindset is the idea that you can grow and develop through hard work. We believe this is a defining hallmark of teams that are able to achieve and sustain high performance.

"One thing I didn't fully realize before was just the capabilities we have today, the technologies, that allows us to rethink where we work, how we work, and the tools that are available to us.

One of the things we have done is launch something called Workplace 21, which asks how can we imagine the workforce in the future, knowing what we do now. Workplace 21 is looking beyond the pandemic, to see how some of the changes might become incorporated, with the guiding principle of better fulfilling our purpose as an organization.

.–Mauricio Gutierrez, CEO, NRG Energy (Read more.)

You can draw clear difference between teams and individuals that have this learning orientation, and those that don't.

Creating a growth mindset

The idea that mistakes are a part of the learning process–a sign that you're making progress toward your goal–aligns well with the concept of growth mindset developed by Stanford's Carol Dweck. (Be sure to check out her book, *Mindset: The New Psychology of Success.*)

A growth mindset is the belief that one's abilities can be developed through hard work, dedication, and application. You may think that sounds obvious, but in reality, many people spend a lot of time thinking their abilities are fixed, that they're born with a basic amount of intelligence, and they can't really extend that. Anytime someone says, "I'm bad at math," or "I'm not much of a public speaker," they're expressing the opposite of a growth mindset, a fixed mindset.

A growth mindset is the idea that you can grow and develop through hard work. We believe *this is a defining hallmark of teams that are able to achieve and sustain high performance*. When you have a growth mindset, you respond differently than when you have a fixed mindset. You're more resilient, you're more open to change, you keep going and get things done.

Consider this scenario:

Imagine you are newly assigned to a global team working to implement a new enterprise software system. You don't have the technical skills you need. If you have a fixed mindset, you'll see it as an insurmountable obstacle and avoid the task at all costs.

If you have a growth mindset, you'll see this as an opportunity to learn something new and take the initiative to develop the skills.

Your team develops an implementation plan and shares it with the Chief Information Officer. She's critical of the plan, believing it overlooks important factors. If you have a fixed mindset, you'll feel deflated, grow defensive, and wonder why you were even asked to participate on the team in the first place. If you have a growth mindset, you'll consider the CIO's feedback carefully as an opportunity to refine the plan and make it more effective.

After revisions, the implementation plan is accepted. Soon, a teammate comes to you with bad news. The coding team has identified an unanticipated problem, and it will cost two weeks of time to resolve. If you have a fixed mindset, you might grow angry, ranting that mistakes and delays are unacceptable and the problem should have been anticipated. In contrast, if you have a growth mindset, you may also be frustrated, but you will work with your team to revise timelines, resolve the problem, and consider how future processes could be more anticipatory.

Now think about how important a growth mindset is to a virtual team. Resilience, feedback, and learning become even more important when you need to trust that colleagues you can't see are contributing 100% to the project.

> Resilience, feedback, and learning become even more important when you need to trust that colleagues you can't see are contributing 100% to the project.

A Closing Exercise

We've covered a lot of ground in these pages, but let us summarize it this way: *for an engaged and successful virtual team, we recommend focusing on trust, connection, and performance.* You've encountered many tips for doing this throughout this book. We hope they'll prove useful.

In closing, we want to offer one final exercise to help you synthesize the learning. Dr. Bob Quinn, one of the founders of the Center for Positive Organizations at Michigan University and a pioneering leader in positive organizational scholarship and leadership development, says that we learn leadership through crisis (which most of us try to avoid) or through reflection.

This is a reflection exercise. Find 15 minutes and a quiet place, then read the questions below and journal your answer in the space provided.

I'm sure throughout your career, you've had ups and downs. Highs and lows. Today, we want you to think about a high point experience: the best virtual team you've ever been a part of. (If your virtual work is limited, think instead of the best team.) A virtual team where real trust existed, connection and communication was strong, and performance was high. Tell the story of this team, providing as much detail as you can.

Now think about trust on this team–how was relational trust built between teammates? How was task trust built? What about organizational trust? What did you do that made this possible? Others?

Next, think about connection and communication. How did it work on the team? How did you make sure knowledge reached every corner of the team, and everyone felt connected and informed? Think of a few examples of high-quality connections: what was true of these experiences? How did you make this possible? Others? The organization?

Finally, think about the team's performance. What was the connection between purpose, strategy, and goals for the team? Would you say the team had a learning orientation? How do you know and what did this look like? Did you and others have a growth mindset? Think of a few examples of when you exhibited a growth mindset: what was true of these experiences? How did you help make high performance possible? Others? The organization?

Thank you for joining us on this journey to better understand exceptional high performing teams. We'd love to hear your ideas and experiences; send them to cvdl@ben.edu. And please visit our website for information on monthly executive education webinars, offered online for free, on timely topics like building engaged virtual teams and creating inclusive organizations.

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