

Who You Calling Virtual? Leading Virtual Teams

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Let's get one thing out of the way: there's no such thing as a *virtual* team. They're only called virtual because members are distributed across organization boundaries, time zones, and countries. And the virtual piece isn't the problem at all. It's a [red herring](#).

People like to blame their problems with dispersed teams on the technology. They complain: "The WebEx froze halfway through our session" or "All I can hear is buzzing on the [conference line](#)." Yes, these are problems. But, FoWE readers, you're tech people. You can figure it out.

The real problem is—and always has been—the *team*. Most of our teams aren't teams at all. They're conglomerations of people who have a shared project or function. So the first thing you need to decide on is: what do you really want?

Do you want people to show up on conference calls? They can do that without being a team. What you need is commitment. Usually the barrier to getting people to show up is [prioritization](#). They've got something else that's more important that pushes aside your work. It's time for a talk with them, and their managers, about how to free them up to participate in your work.

Do you want people to be good "team players?" What that generally means is that you want others to complete their work on

time and not make trouble. If so, you need [accountability](#).

Do you want people to collaborate deeply, work toward a shared goal, coordinate complex activities, hold each other accountable, and put the interests of the team over their own personal interests? Then you need a team.

If you do need an actual team and your members aren't housed in the same building, what can you do?

Build the Team. It's not just running a kickoff meeting. It's spending the time (and that's the trick) connecting with team members and helping them connect with each other. You can't see these people face-to-face, so you need to compensate for the lack of direct exposure with more time on phone calls and IM connecting 1:1 with your team members. Then, you need to help them do the same with each other. For tips on how to do this, check out Nancy Settle-Murphy's [Who Moved My \(Virtual\) Water Cooler?](#)

Keep It Up. Team leadership isn't a "once and done" kind of activity. Teams need care throughout their lifecycle. For example, they need direction, guidance, and structure in their early stages. Make sure to work with the team to get clear on what you're trying to achieve, who's responsible for what, and what the expectations are for collaboration. Once teams are up and running, they need

opportunities to come together and solve problems together. You can help them do that. And when teams end, they need time to reflect on what they've learned, codify their learning into a format that they can share with others, celebrate their successes, and end their work together.

Work on Communication. Studies run at by Sandy Pentland at MIT show that [communication patterns are a good predictor of team performance](#)—in fact, they're better predictors better than IQ scores, job titles, degrees, or personalities. Which communication patterns are more likely to be correlated with high performance? In a nutshell: balanced contributions among members, frequent interactions, and communication among team members (not just with you). So your job is to draw out your introverts, focus your extroverts, give everyone the tech they need to communicate frequently, and encourage them to talk with each other.

I'd like to hear from those who have been part of successful dispersed teams. What other tips would you add to this list?

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