



CENTRE FOR COACHING
IN ORGANISATIONS

White Paper
October 2020

Coaching Leaders of Virtual Teams

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Virtual teams are not new, but many leaders don't have experience of leading in this way. The sudden emergence of COVID means that many leaders are having to learn quickly. Some teams shifted overnight from working together physically to working together only through applications such as Zoom and Teams. Available research on virtual teams, and the evidence of our own eyes, suggests that many leaders must adapt the way they work if they are to be successful.

Where we see leaders failing to adapt, we see teams become disengaged, stressed and ineffective. In this White Paper we will look at what the literature says, connect that to our own observations, and suggest ways in which coaches can help leaders working virtually for the first time.

15 years of research

In 2017 Jennifer Gibbs and colleagues conducted a literature review of articles relating to virtual teams, casting their net back 15 years¹. From the papers they read they identified four areas where leaders may need to adapt and modify the way that they lead. We review each of those four themes in this Paper and illustrate with behaviours we've seen first-hand in the workplace or heard our coachees talk about in describing how they have adapted to the demands placed on them as a result of COVID.

Lesson 1: The Need to Step Up

Gibbs and colleagues suggest that in leading virtual teams “... it is necessary for the leader to impose more structure and be more explicit in establishing shared objectives and vision and coordinating tasks.” This is not to advocate an overly

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autocratic or hierarchical style of leadership (see below); rather it is to acknowledge that people are less able to interact when they are working from home all the time, than when they are together in an office. When people work together in an office they can, to a great extent, work out among themselves what each other are doing and how to coordinate and collaborate most effectively. They can chat informally about what the team as a whole is trying to achieve and how they are doing. This doesn't mean the leader doesn't have a job to do, but to a degree at least, that responsibility is often shared. When people are physically isolated, the leader has more work to do. The leader may need to step up, at least until such time as the team find new ways to engage with each other informally.

In our own coaching we have seen first hand the need for leaders to make sure people understand what they are supposed to be doing and how their work connects to the work of others. Managers have told us how hard they find it to prioritise in a virtual environment; how challenging it is to create a new daily structure. They experience themselves being less productive, yet are uncertain what to do about it. In the physical environment, where they were able to engage informally with colleagues, priorities were clear and structure emerged. Not so in the virtual environment. We have coached people new to their organisation, people who joined just before COVID struck. Some of these people are seriously stressed. They don't know their new colleagues and find it hard to get to know colleagues through virtual media. They need the support of their leaders to help them become more connected, but their leaders are not always available or cognisant of their needs. We see successful leaders make a conscious effort to connect people; through regular virtual calls; with groups and with individuals, sometimes gathering people every day. These forums helped people stay connected to the needs of the business, to the needs of each other, and to recognise each others' successes.

Lesson 2: The need to relate

The articles reviewed by Gibbs and colleagues talked about the importance of building relationships with and between team members. *"Effective virtual team leaders were able to mentor and display empathy, assert authority without being overbearing and display effective communication."* Many people have felt anxious, lonely, underworked or overworked during COVID. They need sometimes to just talk; to talk about some of the things happening in their lives that are not directly related to work. Again, this is relatively easy to do in the

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physical workplace. People can see whether others are busy or not, and approach them if they look open to having a conversation. It is easy to go and have a coffee together or to take a stroll. Few people have yet worked out a satisfactory way to replicate these experiences in the virtual world. Having a virtual coffee is not the same. Going for a virtual walk together is not the same.

Many leaders did a good job at the beginning of COVID bringing people together virtually to talk about issues not related to work. We saw people wearing funny hats and engaging in virtual drinks. These activities seem to have diminished in some work environments as people have found the initial satisfaction of such interactions fall away. Keeping people connected isn't only about keeping people engaged and motivated; it is also about ensuring people's wellbeing and mental health. Many people are reluctant to flag the extent to which they are struggling for fear of being seen as a nuisance. At such times it isn't appropriate to tell people they just need to suck it up and be strong. The best leaders make time not only to connect with their people, but to help their people connect with others - authentically. They require team members to make time to connect with each other and to ask others, with genuine interest, - 'How are You?' They invite the team to take collective responsibility for the wellbeing of all and make it OK for people to spend time just connecting. They recognise that this is a key element of their role.

Lesson 3: The need to manage diversity

Gibbs and co. say "... team diversity poses challenges but it can benefit performance, creativity and innovation if managed effectively." If diversity isn't managed effectively then 'fault-lines' emerge in teams, the alignment of team members along diversity variables. Potential variables include not only visible aspects of diversity, such as national culture or geographic location, but also power dynamics and status differences. Researchers have shown that perceived fault-lines have negative consequences in terms of engagement, wellbeing and performance.

We have seen some leaders during COVID openly acknowledge the value of diversity; not only in terms of obvious tangible differences, but also less tangible differences, including personality and personal beliefs. The best leaders help the team talk about their differences and to see these differences as a source of creativity and enhanced performance. They make time for people to get to know each other, to recognise the strengths that every individual brings to a team, and to find out how best to relate with one another.

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For example, the difficulties that parents have faced during COVID have been openly acknowledged by some leaders. COVID has made it easier for people to talk about these challenges openly. Some males are now assuming more responsibility in the home and playing a more active role in advocating flexible working arrangements.

Lesson 4: Technology can help or hinder

Technology clearly has a role to play in helping virtual teams work together more effectively, indeed interaction of any kind during COVID would have been impossible without technology. But technology isn't always helpful. Some applications are more useful than others, yet some organisations have implemented new technologies without due thought and consideration. Staff feel obliged to use applications that add little value. The most effective leaders have been quick to take advantage of new and updated applications, and yet at the same time are discerning. They encourage their staff to think critically about technology and how the team can fully leverage new functionality to improve team processes. The best leaders have a view as to which technologies work best in which circumstances and encourage their team members to think the same way.

Coaching leaders of virtual teams

Teaching people how to lead is not the role of a coach. But it is the role of a coach to ask questions and to challenge. When we ask questions, those questions are coming from *somewhere*. They come from our own experience of the story we are hearing, and the sense we are making of that story. Being aware ourselves of the challenges faced by leaders working with virtual teams makes it more likely our questions are likely to be useful. The best questions come from a shared understanding of what is happening across the broader domain. Our colleagues have useful things to offer, as do the academics and the social commentators. At times of change it is up to us to be curious and well informed.

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Notes & Acknowledgments

- i. Gibbs, J.L., Sivunen, A. & Boyraz, M. (2017). Investigating the impacts of team type and design on virtual team processes. *Human Resource Management Review*, 27, 590-603