



Is your virtual team thriving? The chances are remote

With the recent news about re-opening a small selection of industries in the coming weeks and months, I hear a lot of people talking about how great it will be for work teams to be back in the office, up-close and personal, and talking face to face.

And because I started a virtual team-building business more than 30 years ago (we were cool waaay before virtual teams became cool!), I'm often asked for my opinion on the best timing and process to transition virtual teams "back to normal."

My advice? **Don't.**

If you're smart, your virtual team should be here to stay

I'm not saying you should never go into the office, but having your team always prepared, ready and able to work remotely has huge benefits and advantages. Many companies have come to realize this during COVID-19, and in fact, business leaders such as BMO are strategizing beyond the pandemic with plans to enable staff—some 36,000 employees or 80% of its workforce in BMO's case—to continue thriving in an office-home work balance.

Here are some of the main advantages that are driving BMO and other companies to pursue a stronger online business model. And finally, contrary to popular opinion, employees who from home tend to be more productive—as well as less stressed.

“ Read some tips on virtual team best practices? They may not be remotely true - and they could destroy your team. ”

However, after working remotely with their teams for a month or so, many team leaders are wisely recognizing that leading virtual teams is very different, and requires a different skillset, than managing teams on-site. If you're reading this blog, chances are good that you've been asking yourself the same questions they are:

Situation #1

I read that I should hold my team accountable for their work by using tracking software on their computers. But will this really increase my team's productivity?

Answer: What I mentioned above bears repeating: employees working from home are more productive and tend to work, on average, four more hours a week than those working in the office. So productivity is not your biggest concern—building trust is. And tracking software is a virtual megaphone to tell your team you don't trust them and you feel they lack integrity, professionalism, and motivation. It's probably the fastest way you can damage your team's morale.

A better way to ensure the work is getting done is to assess the progress of the work. If an assigned project is satisfactorily completed by its due date, then you know your employees are working diligently. What are their key performance indicators under normal circumstances? Those don't change just because they're working remotely.

But keep in mind there's a dark side to those extra hours at-home employees work, and that's burn-out. Encourage a work-life balance that involves stepping away from computer at quitting time and not responding to emails at night. Let them know it's okay to take a walk at lunch or have a cat-nap.

Situation #2

For me, leading an on-line meeting is more challenging than face-to-face. My remote team members make fewer contributions to the discussion; they're less engaged; there seems to be more tension and misunderstandings; and the strong bond we had as an in-person team is eroding. Do I have to accept this is just the way it is with remote teams?

Answer: I've been asked this question frequently over the past 30 years, and the answer is a resounding no, it doesn't have to be this way. I'll be blunt—many of those who've just begun coaching people in the past few months about building remote teams think it's all about the technology; if you have the technology to meet online, then you have a strong virtual team. While it is important to have the right technology, you also need to have virtual team skills, and those are different than those you use when meeting face-to-face. I explain more about this in my [free resources](#), but here are a few best practices to help your remote teams thrive:



Encourage the use of cameras. This is important because it allows team members to gauge facial expressions, body language and social cues, which can lead to fewer misunderstandings and the resulting tension.



Remember there are real people behind those screens, and they may be feeling especially anxious these days. Take the time to do a round table, not just about the projects they're working on, but about how they're feeling and what else is going on in their lives. Show genuine interest.



Have a virtual open-door policy, just as you would on-site. Encourage employees to talk to you, and to each other, about anything they're concerned about.



Be wary of short-term fixes when building a virtual team should be a long-game plan. You can find lots of proven resources at <https://virtualteambuilders.com/virtual-team-resources/>.

Situation #3

Our company is undergoing a lot of change, and management just informed us we'll be seeing more people working remotely, both due to new branch offices and because they've recognized there are a lot of benefits to virtual teams. I'll have a hybrid team: half will be in the office, the other half will be working remotely in two different locations. I'm dreading this. I felt I was a competent-enough team leader on-site, but I struggled leading a virtual team during COVID-19. I feel like I don't know what I don't know. How can I gain more confidence, since this is going to be my "new normal"?

Answer: You can do this! Like any new skillset, it's a matter of practice and learning from established [resources](#). Hybrid teams have some additional challenges, so here are a few additional tips.



Whenever possible, encourage team members not to go on mute. While the in-house team members are chatting and laughing, being on mute can make the remote employees feel left out and disengaged from the conversation. This can create an "us vs. them" attitude.



Understand the valid concerns remote employees have when working off site. For example, many believe their projects and accomplishments will be less visible to upper management, and likewise, they'll be out of sight and out of mind when it comes to being considered for promotions. They may also feel out of the loop, isolated and less part of the team. Understanding this can help you open up discussions and find solutions to their challenges.



Get creative! Include your offsite team in teambuilding events through virtual social gatherings such as coffee klatches, meals, trivia games and more.



Virtual team-building is my passion as well as my business, and I always welcome a chance to talk about it. If you have more questions, don't hesitate to [reach out](#) or tap into our [resources](#).

- **COVID-19 Proves It: Virtual Teams are the New Normal**, a report explaining why the ability to work virtually is an essential skill for any resilient workforce.
- **Supporting Virtual Teams in a COVID-19 Environment**, including the latest research and statistics on virtual teams to help you plan your transition to the remote office.
- **Surviving and Thriving in a Coronavirus Environment**, an essential guide to the basics of working from home while maintaining team productivity and morale.
- **Seven Deadly Sins of Virtual Teams**, laying out the most common pitfalls of working remotely, and how to avoid them.
- **The Virtual Team Leader's Guide to Success**, providing essential tips for managers on building resilience, running meetings, managing multitasking, and more.
- Videos from our [new YouTube channel](#) include tips you can implement immediately to benefit your virtual team.