

# How to successfully lead a virtual team

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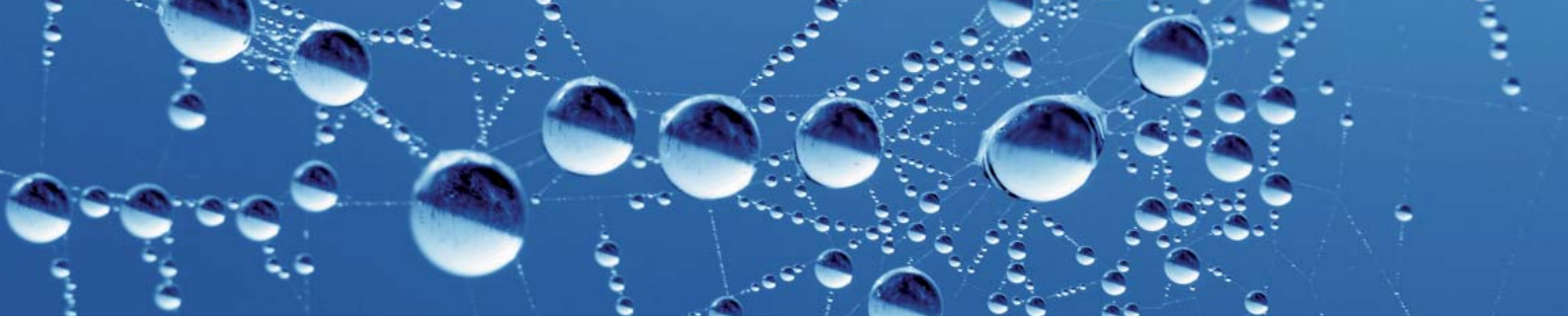
The number of virtual teams is multiplying as organisations grapple with the challenges of working globally and seek to harness the widest range of skills, experience and ability. Virtual teams enable knowledge, skills and experience to be shared across a range of locations, functions or organisations and can be a cost and time effective way of managing work, delivering projects and leading people. Here Chris Smith, Director at Bath Consultancy Group, outlines some steps you can take to ensure you successfully lead your virtual team.

## 1. Understand why you need the team

As with any team the start point is to ensure that people are very clear about what the team is there to do; its purpose and the scope of its remit. Linking the purpose of the team to the organisation's strategy is imperative. This clarifies its role and creates a strong link between the work people do and the big picture of the organisation. We say 'if you're not sure where you're going, you'll probably end up somewhere else'. Spend time at the outset ensuring people have discussed and understood the purpose of the team and revisit this as the team progresses, reminding people as issues arise. If you only focus on activity you may quickly lose sight of the outcome you are working toward.

## 2. Invest time to plan your strategy and goals

But it's not just linking upwards, shared goals and objectives need to be in place within the team so each individual understands why they're there and how their role connects with others. The more diversity there is in a team the greater the potential it may offer but the harder it can be to integrate its activity. Understanding each other's roles and the individual reasons for being in the team can help people align and support each other in getting things done. The leader should facilitate discussions that enable the team to clarify their roles and accountabilities rather than be tripped-up by differing assumptions.



### **3. Use a team's energy and innovation**

Great teams unleash everyone's creativity and individual expertise, regardless of time and distance. It helps if the leader develops an in-depth understanding of the skill sets and approaches of individuals through one-to-one dialogue; it is better if this is shared between team members. Often virtual teams will work across cultures so a leader must be skilled in creating conversations and dialogue, engaging people and exploring issues and openly acknowledging barriers. When working at distance the tendency is to focus on task rather than spend time on process and relationships. In fact they become more, not less important if you want to get the most from the team.

### **4. Conflict can be creative**

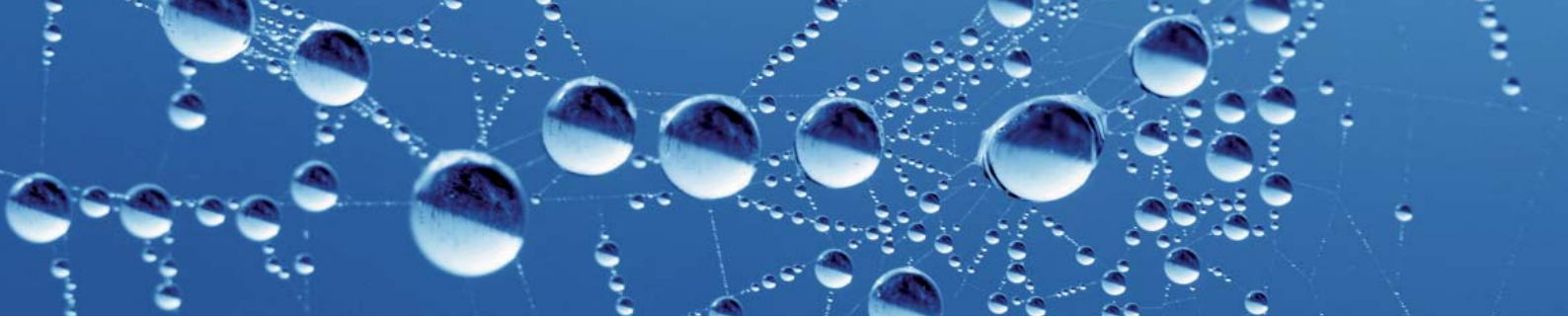
No team will ever run smoothly but when working virtually you don't always have the visual clues about the behaviour of others, which can quickly lead to misunderstandings. The leader needs to foster a culture where there is a presumption of positive intent. They should generate safe and open forums where conflict can be raised and explored. Heated exchange may be valuable to thoroughly work through key issues, at least in some cultures. This needs to be separated from poor communication or false assumptions, which can create interpersonal conflict that damages a team.

By providing every individual with a chance to be heard, while maintaining a strong and structured process for decision-making, teams will often find more creative options for delivering and working together.

### **5. Remember that it doesn't all need to be virtual**

Clearly, technology is key to enabling virtual team working, so it's important to look at the best combination of solutions that will give your team an accessible place to share information, connect together and build relationships. But do not be too distracted by technology; it does enable effective collaboration but great technology solutions do not make great teams, while great teams can be formed and will work around poor technology if they have to.

From our experience, most people working in virtual teams say they work much better if they can occasionally meet face-to-face, especially at the outset. Take the opportunity to bring the team together when you can and use the time to build relationships and review process issues. Too often teams use this precious time on information sharing and tasks that might be done just as well when they are apart. Build in time to hear from each member and also enable them to have some one-to-one time; facilitating supportive and challenging relations between team members. Be wary of alienating those who may not be able to take part in these face-to-face sessions.



## 6. It's all about delivery

High performing teams are those that deliver, at each stage and at every milestone in a project or in their leadership of others. A team is not an end in itself; it is there to achieve by delivering value to its key stakeholders. Feedback on the achievement of goals and objectives is essential for all to have. A good leader will ensure that these goals and responsibilities are consistently and continuously met; a great team will hold each other to account for their delivery. Milestones, results, deliverables can be useful as outputs that show progress for a team towards its goals. Find ways to recognise individual contributions and jointly celebrate successes; even if you cannot all be together in the same place to enjoy it.

Bath Consultancy are now helping leaders of virtual teams develop their team performance by enabling the creation of team charters to establish effective ways of working and offering team coaching to develop teams to their full potential.