Virtual teams are increasingly popular, but managing them can present some significant challenges. Use the tips in this 10-Minute Guide to lead and support your virtual team effectively.

Organizations are turning to virtual teams more and more as they seek to reduce costs and access a wider talent pool. The financial benefits of these changes are clear, but the knock-on effects for managers can be significant.

For example, co-workers have to rely on online communication tools, and they can miss out on key information if it’s not shared effectively. Conflicts are common in virtual teams, too, because messages can get “lost in translation.”

As a manager, it’s your job to guide your team members through these challenges. In this 10-Minute Guide, we’ll look at how you can do this effectively.
So, how can you lead a virtual team effectively?

1. **Pick the Right People**

   When you recruit people, make sure from the outset that they are able to handle the challenges of virtual working.

   Look for people who, as well as being suitably experienced for the role, are self-motivated and well organized. They should also have excellent communication and IT skills, and they’ll need to enjoy solving problems without hands-on guidance.

   Look at personality, too. For example, strongly extroverted people may not be happy in a home-based role, and someone who likes to work alone may find virtual teamwork frustrating.

   At interview, ask candidates about how they have dealt with virtual teamwork in the past. Are they comfortable using Instant Messaging (IM), VoIP, and other online communications tools? If not, they may struggle.

2. **Focus on Communication**

   A lack of face-to-face communication is virtual team members’ greatest challenge. They can use online tools to compensate for this, but the communications infrastructure must work smoothly, and people must be confident using the technology involved.

   Think about using the following communication channels, in addition to VoIP, IM, and email:
   - A wiki, regularly updated by all team members, used to share knowledge.
   - Online meeting packages, such as GoToMeeting and WebEx, used to support screen-sharing (including presentations) in virtual meetings.
   - Online brainstorming packages, used for team-based idea generation.

   Without face-to-face communication, you may struggle to get your messages across clearly and sensitively. It’s your responsibility to ensure that information has been understood, so make sure that you choose the right communications method for each situation.

   For example, if you need to deliver sensitive information, and you can’t do it in person, use VoIP, video chat, or phone. If you need to agree goals or give instructions, choose email, or another written method, so that there’s a record of your conversation.

3. **Build Trust**

   Look for opportunities to bring people together informally. This will help them build trust, and look to one-another, as well as to you, for support.

   If it’s appropriate in your organization, encourage your people to use VoIP and social networking tools to connect with one another. These tools can give them an insight into their colleagues’ personalities and interests.

   Also, encourage your people to get to know their colleagues in other ways, such as through online chats, or via a virtual team room, where they can share news and photos. Let them know that it’s OK to spend time on this (within reason) as it’s a team-building activity.

   Remember that some team members may come from cultures where it’s not considered appropriate to share personal information. If you manage an international team, explore your team members’ cultures, and display cultural intelligence when interacting with your people.

   If you can, bring your team together in person at least once a year. Yes, this can be expensive and time-consuming, but it can also strengthen relationships, particularly if these are sometimes strained. When you assemble the whole team, you may find that you can make significant breakthroughs.

4. **Motivate for Success**

   You’ll need to work to motivate your remote team members. However, it’s tougher to discuss goals and preferred working styles when you’re not able to meet with your people face to face.

   So, set aside time to check in with each team member regularly about achievements, targets, and problems. You may want to ask team members to work through a personality test, such as the Big Five Personality Traits Model, or the Margerison-McCann Team Management Profile, so that you can understand more about what drives them, and get an insight into their strengths and weaknesses.
You can then use this as a basis for future discussions, and for career planning.

Remember that you also need to motivate your team as a whole. People working virtually should feel that they have the same opportunities as those at “head office,” so work hard to treat everyone fairly.

5. Understand the Challenges

It’s tempting to avoid discussing the challenges that virtual working presents, for fear of looking weak or appearing defeatist. However, the same problems are common to many virtual teams, and it’s helpful to recognize them, discuss them, and find ways of working through them. 

For example, it’s common for misunderstandings to occur in virtual teams. When colleagues rely on email, IM, and other electronic communications, it’s easy for them to take a comment personally, or to jump to conclusions.

Virtual workers can also feel isolated, while practical problems such as time zone differences and slow Internet speeds can cause frustration.

Ask your team members regularly about the challenges that they face, and coach them to explore solutions. Then, help them to use their insights into the team and its tasks to come up with answers.

For example, if a team member can’t participate in a brainstorming session because of time zone differences, ask her how she could use technology to submit her ideas. If another member of the team is feeling “out of the loop,” what tools can he use to reach out to colleagues?

6. Provide Support

You need to give each team member the guidance and support that they need, regardless of their location. Create the virtual equivalent of an “open door policy:” make sure that team members know how to get what they need from you, and give regular and specific feedback. Use active listening to show that you’re fully engaged when your team members speak to you.

Remember to manage team members’ expectations carefully. There will inevitably be aspects of virtual working that won’t be able to change, and it’s important that they don’t take out frustrations on colleagues. Instead, help them manage stress, and encourage them to ask for help when they need it.

Key Points

Set up your virtual team for success by hiring people who can demonstrate that they’re self-motivated, well-organized, and confident with online communication.

Then, make clear communication your priority, while acknowledging challenges and supporting your people to use their insight to find solutions.

You can learn about many other team management skills at www.mindtools.com/rs/management.