

NANO TOOLS FOR LEADERS®

LEADING VIRTUAL TEAMS: OVERCOMING KEY CHALLENGES

Nano Tools for Leaders® are fast, effective leadership tools that you can learn and start using in less than 15 minutes — with the potential to significantly impact your success as a leader and the engagement and productivity of the people you lead.

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THE GOAL:

Increase the engagement, productivity, and satisfaction of virtual teams by addressing their most critical roadblocks.

NANO TOOL:

As the number of remote workers increases, so do the numbers of virtual teams and the managers charged with leading them. What those managers are finding is that these teams' challenges are amplified versions of the same ones facing their co-located counterparts, with some extra challenges all of their own. Virtual teams require greater, and different, care and attention. A failure to meet these needs often leads to less-than-desirable results.

Research on virtual teams shows two levels of challenges: those that are relatively easy to recognize and address, and those that are deeper and more complex, requiring more deliberate focus. The good news is that there are concrete measures leaders can take to tackle and resolve all of these challenges. The Action Steps below provide detailed guidance.

ACTION STEPS:

To lead highly effective virtual teams, you need to overcome both the surface-level and the deep-level challenges. Start with the surface-level challenges, and then progress to the deep-level challenges.

Surface Level:

- 1. Find the Right Technology:** Don't assume that every technology is created equal, or that everyone has a similar ease of use. Ask about and take care of any tech-related issues, and consider using different platforms for different purposes (collaboration, brainstorming, scheduling, and social/water cooler, for example). Being able to see and hear each team member (by making audio and video mandatory) is vital to addressing deeper-level concerns.
- 2. Balance Time Zones:** When team members are spread out over various time zones, leaders should think about how to work around this fairly. Regular meetings and check-ins are critical for success, but making the same person or people attend at midnight or 4 a.m. isn't the way to do it. You may need to rotate time to ensure that it's fair for everyone — but be sure to discuss this in advance and check in on how it is going.



- 3. Flatten the Hierarchy:** Make sure every team member has a chance to provide input — and gets heard. It can be harder to do this on a distributed team, but leaders have to instill norms during virtual meetings that reduce the chances that any one person or group dominates the conversation.
- 4. Counteract Language Barriers:** Similar to hierarchy problems, if everyone does not share the dominant language, the team leader needs to be sure everyone gets heard, and solicit input from those who may feel marginalized due to language barriers.

Deep Level:

- 5. Build Shared Identity:** When team members don't view themselves as part of the team as a whole, it creates dysfunctional dynamics. There are a number of things leaders can do to eliminate us-versus-them thinking and instill a shared identity.
 - Make sure everyone understands the team's goal, and continuously remind them of their progress and their importance to the organization as a whole.
 - Have regular meetings and check-ins where everyone is included and heard, and their inputs and achievements are recognized as valuable.
 - Virtual office tours and social activities can help workers get to know one another better and appreciate the realities of remote working for each member.
- 6. Develop Shared Understanding:** When team members have different sets of information, or lack information, misunderstandings can arise that impede their ability to work effectively. Deliberately work to ensure that everyone is fully sharing their knowledge and experience, and to understand the constraints and challenges that everyone is facing, both in their different work locations and, as appropriate, in their non-work lives. Make the expertise, roles, and progress of each team member clear to all, and be sure to solicit diverse opinions and options very deliberately.

HOW ORGANIZATIONS USE IT:

Alex Turnbull, founder and CEO of software company Groove, leads a team located across nine time zones. He says there are three keys to keeping everyone productive and connected. First, everyone needs to meet at the same time. At Groove, there are five meetings a week lasting from 10-30 minutes, all with set agendas. Second, take control of asynchronous communication so team members don't need to continuously bug each other about the status of projects and who is doing what. Project management software can simplify this process. Third, encourage real-time hangouts, especially ones that don't revolve around work topics. Again, software can make meeting up at a virtual water cooler easy to do.

Bryan Miles, chairman and co-founder of BELAY, a virtual services company, says leading his virtual team of more than 1,000 contractors depends on trust. Instead of micromanaging (which is especially easy to do with project management software), allow team members autonomy to choose the ways they work toward your shared goal. Miles also agrees that maintaining connections is critical; he uses virtual happy hours, coffee breaks, and birthday and other milestone celebrations.

Apple, Amazon, Microsoft, Pepsi, H&M, and Netflix, to name a few, use virtual experiences to strengthen their virtual teams. A popular one is [Tiny Campfire](#), a 90-minute activity that includes games, ghost stories, the ingredients to make s'mores, and a wood fire scented candle and matches to create a sensory experience remotely. SpaceX, Nike, Adobe, and Sephora use the [Go Game](#), a team challenge event that levels the playing field: everyone on your team is a contestant. The game you choose is led by a host, and you get a dedicated IT specialist to make sure it all runs smoothly.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

- “The Secrets of Great Teamwork,” Martine Haas and Mark Mortensen, *Harvard Business Review* (June, 2016). Describes the four factors that have an outsized impact on successful teamwork today and shows managers how to get them right.
- Martine Haas directs Wharton Executive Education’s two-month online certificate program [*HR Management and Analytics: Unlock the Value of Human Capital*](#). She also teaches in [*The Adaptable Leader: Strategies for Emerging Leadership*](#), [*Effective Execution of Organizational Strategy*](#), and [*CEO Academy*](#).

ABOUT NANO TOOLS:

Nano Tools for Leaders® was conceived and developed by Deb Giffen, MCC, director of Custom Programs at Wharton Executive Education. *Nano Tools for Leaders®* is a collaboration between joint sponsors Wharton Executive Education and Wharton’s Center for Leadership and Change Management. This collaboration is led by Professors Michael Useem and John Paul MacDuffie.