



# VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP RESEARCH WHAT MAKES A GOOD VIRTUAL LEADER?

2020 Research Report.  
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[fastlead.com/virtuallleader](https://fastlead.com/virtuallleader)

PHOTO: GABRIEL BENOIS / UNSPLASH

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

# KEY FINDINGS

## SURVEY CONDUCTED SEPTEMBER 2020

360 respondents.  
192 people leaders.  
169 team members.

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### RESEARCH QUESTION

Do leaders have an accurate view of how their people are coping?

### KEY INSIGHT

Leaders tend to be more positive. Their view of how teams are coping may not be accurate.

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Are introverts better than extroverts at working virtually?

There was no correlation to suggest that introverts or extroverts were more effective than the other.

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Is working virtually more productive for some people?

About 25% of respondents said since working virtually they have experienced reduced stress, increased productivity and improved overall well being.

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Does prior experience working virtually result in higher performance now?

There was no correlation to suggest that any amount of prior experience in working virtually has led to higher performance now.

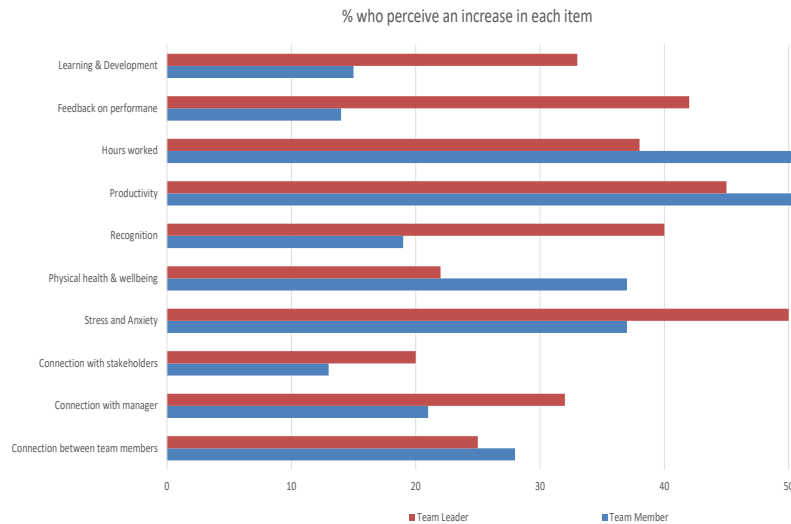
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What leadership activities have the greatest and least impact on the team?

Nurturing connection and collaboration between team mates is a clear priority for leaders, followed by ensuring the team does not perceive the leader is providing less recognition, feedback and development.

## QUESTION 1

# Do leaders have an accurate view of how their people are coping?



If there has been an actual improvement in the employees' experience, then team leaders appear to overestimate the level of that improvement.

### TEAM MEMBER

*"I have no idea what the general mood is day to day."*

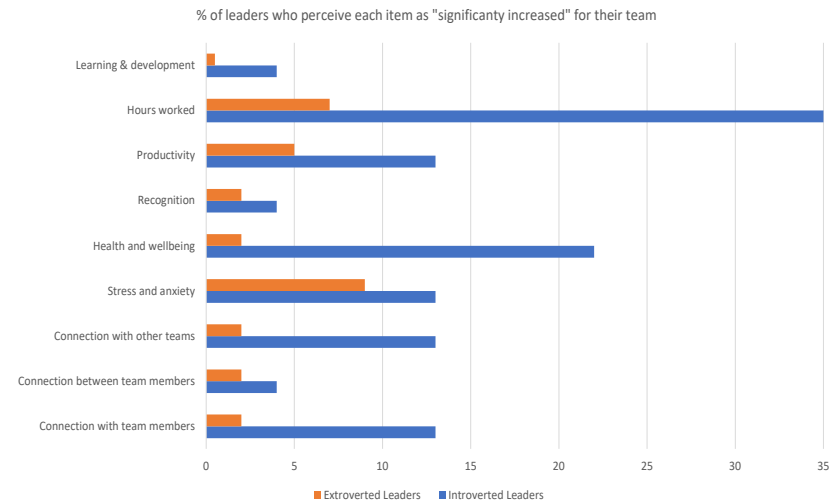
However, leaders seem to accurately perceive if the experience has decreased.

### TEAM LEADER

*"Top challenge? Maintaining accurate awareness of my direct report's mental health during a crisis period."*

## QUESTION 2

# Are introverts better than extroverts at working virtually?



Introverts and extroverts did not appear to be any more productive than the other.

There was no correlation with between introversion or extroversion and any of items measured in the survey.

However, it appears introverted managers are

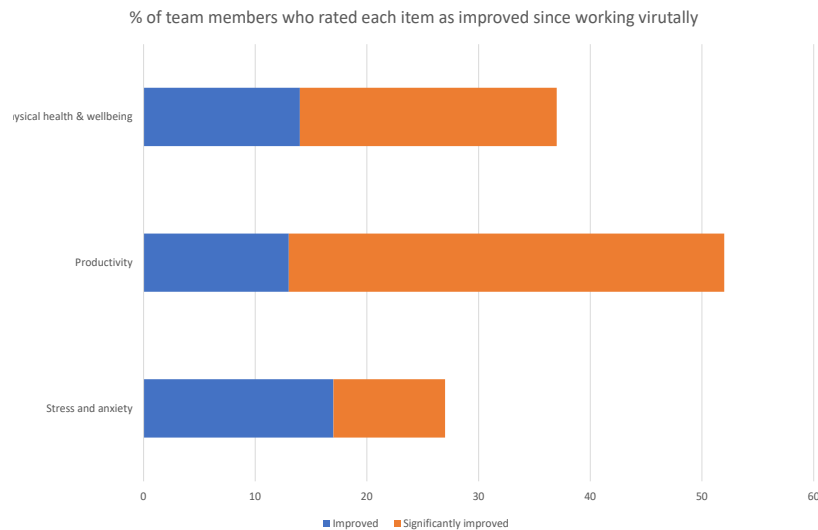
much more likely than extroverted managers to believe the overall experience for their team members had significantly improved.

### (INTROVERTED) TEAM LEADER

*"It is harder to spot early if someone isn't feeling mentally well - usually someone on the ground may notice things."*

## QUESTION 3

# Is working virtually more productive for some people?



Almost 25% of team members feel they are better off working virtually.

### TEAM MEMBER (REPORTING HIGHER PRODUCTIVITY)

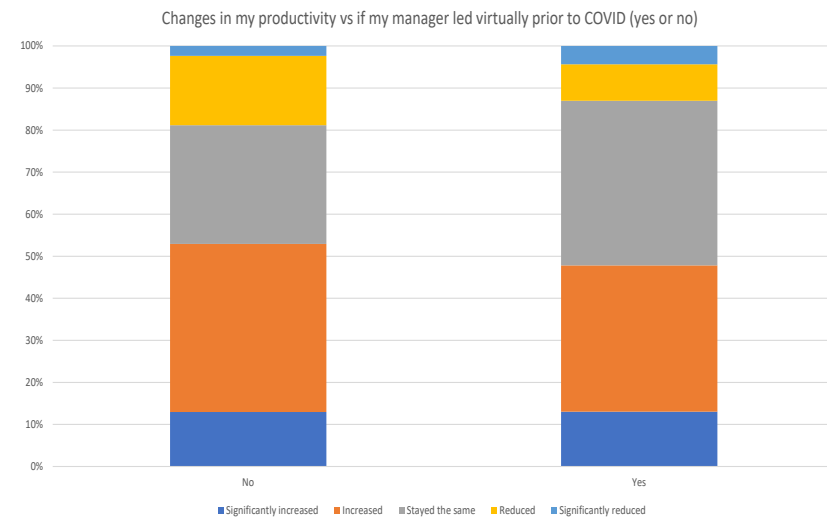
*“[We have] More frequent group meetings where everyone has video switched on and we laugh, joke and exchange ideas and bitching about the previous week.”*

They report their stress and anxiety has reduced, and their productivity and overall well being has improved since they started working virtually.

It is also important to note that over half of all team members believe their productivity has increased since working virtually.

## QUESTION 4

# Does prior experience working virtually result in higher performance?



There was no correlation with having any previous experience working virtually and increased likelihood of maintaining positive outcomes such as connections between team members, stress and anxiety, well being or productivity.

Those with prior experience were just as likely to have positive or negative outcomes as those who reported they had no experience working virtually.

## QUESTION 5

# What leadership activities have greatest impact on the team?

By analysing the data and the feedback provided via open-ended comments from both team members and leaders, we were able to identify a number of insights which people leaders should find helpful in leading virtual teams.

### 1. CONNECT THE TEAM

Connection between teammates appears to be much more important than connection with the manager.

The majority of the challenges identified in open comments related to connection within the immediate team.

Whether connection between teammates increased or decreased had the biggest impact on productivity.

### 2. COMBINE SOCIAL, FUN AND TASK

Almost half of all comments from people who believe connection with teammates has increased suggest this has to do with regularity and combining social, fun and task.

However, it is also important to make sure the regularity doesn't become too routine.

### 3. FOCUS LOCALLY

Teams may be becoming more siloed from each other.

Maintaining connection with other teams doesn't seem to matter to people.

In fact, people who said their productivity has significantly increased were 3x more likely to say connections outside the team has decreased.

### 4. IMPROVE PERCEPTION

The presence of stress and anxiety has a far greater negative impact on productivity than the absence of stress has a positive impact.

### 5. REMIND THE TEAM

75% of people who said their productivity has increased also said their physical health and well being increased

## NOTES ON SURVEY METHOD

Over a period of 5 days in the first week of September 2020, HFL promoted an anonymous online survey by emailing its client network and utilising social networking, resulting in over 360 respondents.

The survey directed people leaders (n=192) to rate ten items as to whether they believe their teams would observe an increase or a reduction of that item since working virtually.

Non-people leaders (n=169) were asked to rate their own experience as to whether each item had increased or decreased.

Additional questions asked respondents to:

- Rate their experience working or leading virtually prior and during Covid
- Rate themselves against an introversion/extroversion scale
- And against other demographic questions like size of the organisation and their team.

Team leaders and team members were given open text commentary to feed back on the challenge of working virtually:

- What has worked well
- What hasn't
- What advice would they give to their own leaders or organisation.

## ADVICE FOR LEADERS

If you could give your manager some feedback or advice about leading you virtually during the next year, what would it be?

People are asking their leaders to be more available and more empathetic. They want more regular one-on-ones with their manager but not about tasks.

Instead, check in that people are feeling OK and coping.

Interestingly, people want to have more fun online with their team. But it appears if the manager organises the fun, it fails.

It seems that it is better if the manager encourages social and fun activities but the employees organise these themselves.

### TOP THEMES

1. Increase your availability and visibility
2. Have more regular check-ins
3. Encourage interaction and inclusion between team members
4. Show empathy and understanding of people's concerns
5. Communicate often

*"Check in more regularly to see how everything's going. Check that I'm doing ok."*

*"Be psychologically present."*

*"Communication and understanding are better than confusion and chaos."*

*"Interactions should not be solely management interactions but emotional check ins providing an element of fun."*

*"Take the time to understand what's working and what's not for individual team members."*

## ADVICE FOR TEAM MEMBERS

As a team member, what are the three biggest challenges you face working virtually?

The majority of the challenges stated by team members relate to reduced interactions and connection with their immediate team.

To a lesser extent, they are missing the interaction with their wider network of colleagues or stakeholders.

Issues relating to poor technology or distractions at home were also raised.

### TOP THEMES

1. Loss of incidental and random interactions
2. Team connectedness (including team welfare)
3. Work and personal life merging
4. Technical issues with remote working
5. Inadequate office facilities at home

*"Time to build relationships outside of immediate work/projects. .... Recovering from setbacks when there's nobody around to buoy you up or distract you."*

*"Self-motivation; less rich daily life because of absence of unplanned interactions."*

*"The lack of human contact, sense of belonging to a team, it's difficult to switch off and take a break."*

*"Networking opportunities outside my team, staying connected with my team, collaboration."*

*"Kids, doorbell, etc - distractions fridge, TV, beach, etc - No whiteboard!"*

# BETTER VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS

## IT'S NOT ABOUT YOU

Maintaining regular contact between the manager and the team is important and many are working hard to maintain connection with their staff.

However, many leaders are neglecting the relationship between the members of their team. People appear to be much more concerned about connection with their teammates than their manager.

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## BEWARE OF GROUNDHOG DAY

Everyone is experiencing a sense that everyday feels like the last. It is important to ensure your regular routine of meetings set up to maintain connection and collaboration doesn't reinforce this Groundhog Day affect.

The feedback provided in the survey suggests it is important to alternate the purposes of regular meetings and to keep changing online social activities. After work online trivia every Friday night will feel like a forced social activity quickly.

## DELEGATE

Delegate to the team its approach to maintaining connection between team members. Empower them to identify the methods, frequency and platforms to maintain the team's social connection, collaboration and productivity.

It likely some experimentation will be required until the team creates an approach to working virtually together that works for everyone.

From the feedback, it appears some managers allow the team to give up if the approach doesn't work at first, which of course is a mistake.

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## CHECK IN OFTEN, WITH EMPATHY.

Everything looks better from a distance, so it is important you ensure you accurately understand how your team is coping working virtually.

The feedback clearly suggests that more frequent but shorter one-on-ones that are less task focused and more about how the employee is coping and feeling actually leads to more productivity, not less.

Too much task focus from the manager erodes trust, creating perceptions of micro management.

# BETTER VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP RECOMMENDATIONS CONTINUED

## **AVOID THE PERCEPTION OF LOSS**

Leaders who are too busy or feeling overwhelmed should focus on avoiding the perception of loss of connection, feedback, and recognition from their teams.

People who feel that working virtually has resulted in a loss of connection with their team and that their manager is providing less feedback on performance and recognition have a greater negative impact than increasing connection, feedback and recognition has a positive impact.

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## **MULTIPLE ONLINE PLATFORMS**

Empower your team to find and test more than one online platform.

Relying on one platform to support online collaboration, productivity and social connection seems to have a strong likelihood of failure on achieving on any of those three outcomes.

However, leaders may need to address issues relating to shared technology, cybersecurity and training.

## **WATCH OUT FOR SELF-PERPETUATING SILOS**

The data and feedback suggest that people not only don't really seem to care that the quality of connection between other teams has reduced but may see it as beneficial in some cases.

In the research data, self-ratings of productivity increase as connection between other teams decrease. Leaders may need to design tasks and work projects which require cross-team collaboration for no other reason than supporting cross-team collaboration.

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## **SKILL-UP IN VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP**

Two-thirds of leaders felt they could benefit from training in virtual leadership. Our research showed that prior experience in working or leading virtually is not resulting in any increased likelihood of being successful in our current Covid-imposed remote working environment.

HFL has updated its Fastlead VLeader Program with latest research and the findings of our survey to ensure the program can help virtual leaders understand what it is going to take to lead in the new normal.

**MORE INFORMATION:**  
[FASTLEAD.COM/VIRTUALLEADER](https://fastlead.com/virtualleader)



# WHAT'S NEXT? MORE QUESTIONS?



If you have additional questions about the data, virtual leadership, or other research questions on people leadership or the development of technical specialists, please get in touch.

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**DARIN HAS RECORDED A  
DEEPER DIVE INTO THE DATA  
ON OUR HFL YOUTUBE  
CHANNEL - [CLICK HERE.](#)**

## INTRODUCING FASTLEAD VLEADER OUR NEW VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP PROGRAM

**Every leader is asking the same two questions. Should I be doing things differently in this new virtual environment? Are the changes I have made the right ones, and the most effective tactics?**

**What leaders need most now is a check-up – short, sharp, practical, and applied. News they can use.**

**Leveraging the latest research (including our own), we have shaped two empowering programs that help leaders audit, review and improve their leadership behaviour.**

[FASTLEAD.COM/VIRTUALLEADER](https://www.fastlead.com/virtualleader)