

Five behavioural science lessons for managing virtual team meetings



With the onset of Covid-19, many firms have made the transition from physical workspaces to virtual ones, with limited or no planning time. After organisations get beyond the initial hurdle of shifting their workforce to a virtual format, they will be searching for a new definition of business as usual. During that time, it is important to bear in mind organisational issues that arise during social interactions. Even though a large percentage of the labour force is now working from home, many of these workers still rely on team interactions to create, innovate or assess risk. We come together in groups because we hold a belief that the outcomes we will end up getting are greater than the sum of the parts. The question then arises, “what lessons does the behavioural science literature have for managing teams in a virtual setting?” Here we document five major insights.

Management style matters

In virtual meetings, management style certainly determines outcomes. However, there is evidence that different management styles suit different goals. In [one study](#) by Fan, Kai-Tang, Chen, Yuan-Ho, Wang, Ching-Wen, & Chen, Minder (2014), the effect of management style in a virtual context was studied by simulating two virtual teams who were directed by two different management styles in a 2 x 2 experimental design. The teams were then asked to complete three weeks’ worth of meetings and discussions, culminating in a report. Participants with a manager that employed empathetic language and encouraging feedback, known as a transformational leadership style ([Aviolo & Bass, 1988](#), pp. 29–50), fostered a greater sense of creativity and more idea generation than those who were exposed to explicit and demanding direction, or a transactional leadership style ([Hollander, 1978](#)). However, the participants who were exposed to the transactional style had a higher production rate.

This result is consistent with numerous in-person studies on management style, including more recent research by Herrmann and Felfe, whose [2014 study](#) focused on leadership styles and creativity among German university students. Similar to the virtual context of Fan et al.’s study above, transformational leadership generated more, better quality creative ideas, while transactional leadership produced a greater quantity of idea generation, albeit of a lesser quality.

Trust is worth paying attention to

Higher levels of trust increase debate, deliberation and openness among team members ([Baskerville & Nandhakumar, 2007](#); [Schmidt et al., 2007](#)). The Fan, Kai-Tang, Chen, Yuan-Ho, Wang, Ching-Wen, & Chen, Minder (2014) study above also highlights that virtual settings can make trust-building difficult. Why? One can intuit difficulties of fostering trust within a virtual context where physical proximity is missing and social context is lacking. However, paying attention to building trust in a virtual setting is worth heeding. This comes across well in a study of virtual teams by [Altschuller and Benbunan-Fich](#) (2010) which involved 80 groups of students with three students per group, from a large university, assigned at random. The participating students were separated in a computer lab with no initial physical interaction, preserving the integrity of what would be an entirely virtual work relationship. The students were asked to perform a task together as a group and subsequently surveyed on trust-related variables such as positive impression formation, self-awareness and perceived virtual co-presence. The researchers then ran correlations between group performance on the task at hand and the variables for which they had been surveyed. Among other elements such as self-awareness and impression making, those who perceived a greater virtual co-presence, or who perceived themselves to be working closely alongside others had higher levels of trust and better performance. Therefore, trust mediates a relationship between virtual co-presence and decision-making performance. The managerial implications of this study lie largely within the special attention and energy needed to foster a co-present virtual environment that promotes trust, and in turn, greater team performance.

There may be gains to creative brainstorming

In a recent review of the literature on group decision-making Acai, A. R., Sonnadara, R. A., & O'Neill, T. (2018) pull together studies, both empirical and theoretical, on decision-making outcomes in virtual settings. Their review highlights that ideas and creative responses are generated more frequently in a virtual team setting, perhaps due to the less personal context. Despite a surge in idea generation, managers of virtual teams should still be leery in regarding the paradox of integrative complexity ([Streufer & Streufer, 1978](#)). Integrative complexity highlights the conflicting goals between “divergence” or looking for solutions from differing perspectives and “integration”, which is the process of arriving at and implementing a solution. If a team excels at one end of the process, they often find it difficult to perform the other, possibly due to information overload and an inability to organise information effectively (Acai et al., 2018). In a virtual context, idea generation is high, which may cause difficulty in the arrival at a solution that integrates differing perspectives.

Furthering the claim that more idea generation does not necessarily lend itself to higher levels of productivity [Chidambaran and Tung \(2005\)](#), randomly assigned students to groups in a simulated team setting. Paradoxically, the more brainstorming and idea generation that occurred in each group, the poorer the decision-making quality. They also observed that students in smaller virtual groups had better outcomes and participation, with the larger groups exhibiting less participation because of a lack of visibility. This study implies that virtual group size matters in the context of decision making. It may then make sense to separate the brainstorming session from the decision-making process when virtually working. Brainstorming sessions may relate to product design, pitching approaches or the assessment of risk. During this phase encourage people in a larger group to bring their ideas to the table, having a smaller group do the work of integration. Putting some time between the brainstorming phase, and when the option “to go with” is chosen has the added advantage of taking the emotion out of the decision-making process and [curbing groupthink](#).

Confirmation bias can be greater

Confirmation bias arises when new information is ignored that does not support the verdicts and outcomes that are already preferred by a group. In a virtual working setting accessing new information is easy. There is after all email, messaging and quicker access to internet. Out there somewhere is something or someone that confirms what you are thinking right now is right!

[Minas et al.](#) used cognitive neuroscience information systems (NeuroIS) to examine the decision-making processes within virtual groups (2014). They found that although virtual based teams exchange more information than they would in a face-to-face context, confirmation bias is even stronger when processing the extra information. The authors found that team members in a virtual setting spent significantly less time processing information that did not corroborate their pre-discussed findings. Thus, the study indicates that confirmation bias occurs more frequently within virtual settings. This implies that more than in a face to face context, managers of virtual teams should deliberately encourage the inclusion of preference-challenging information and dissent in decision-making meetings.

There is no silver bullet

In order to understand the obstacles that stand in the way of virtual inclusion for the City of London's workers, [Lordan \(2020\)](#) engaged with 35 of its most senior leaders, asking them about both the obstacles and best practice for virtual inclusion. These leaders came from 16 companies and comprised CEOs and other executive committee members (5), non-executive board (2), income generators – managing director level + or equivalent (15), senior HR (5) and senior non-HR functions (first line of defence, technology, risk and audit) (8). The companies represented were: Aberdeen Standard Capital, Alliance Bernstein, Allianz Global Investors, Citi, CIBC, Goldman Sachs, HSBC, ING, J.P. Morgan, Mustard Seed, NatWest, Rathbones, Refinitiv, Standard Chartered, Starling Bank and UBS. The study indicates that there is no silver bullet to tackling inclusion in a virtual setting, but there are many actions that management can easily take to improve virtual team dynamics. These include:

1. Humanising interactions with colleagues to foster psychological connectedness, which in turn encourages innovative, impromptu discussions.
2. Creating space for virtual coffee breaks or water-cooler meetings to allow management to spot any interpersonal concerns like poor well-being or burnout.
3. Prioritising effective communication with management as teams adjust to virtual work with a seemingly uncertain future.
4. Avoiding groupthink by encouraging every voice to be heard with chat boxes, open forums and the deliberate inclusion of less vocal team members.

Here we have laid out five behavioural science lessons that relate to team meeting dynamics in virtual-settings. The silver lining in the grey sky of the Covid-19 lockdown is that this is an opportunity for us to learn more about how these lessons generalise in a whole host of settings. We hope very much that readers will consider doing this, and share their findings with us.

Read this article in Spanish [here](#).



Notes:

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Rachel Jaffe is an MSc student in organisational psychology at LSE. She uses data analytics to study the intersection of behavioural science and corporate performance. Rachel is passionate about diversity and inclusion initiatives, technology and problem solving.



Grace Lordan is an associate professor in behavioural science at LSE and director of the [Inclusion Initiative](#). She is an economist by background, and her research is focused on understanding why some individuals succeed over others because of factors beyond their control. In this regard, she has expertise on the effects of unconscious bias, discrimination and technology changes. Grace is also interested in using the techniques of behavioural science to design interventions for firms to promote good conduct, diversity and inclusion and curb biases that creep into high stakes decision-making. She has advised and given talks to large investment banks and international conferences on these topics. She has also led projects to advise commissioners in the UK and policy makers in the EC. At LSE, Grace trains executives in these approaches through her teaching on corporate behaviour and decision-making. You can find her at g.lordan@lse.ac.uk, and on Twitter: [@LSE_TII](#) and [@GraceLordan_](#)