

# dRe-Launching as a Remote Staff

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As Submitted to *Working Remotely – A Framework for Success*

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## Leading a Virtual Team: *Creating Presence & Inspiring Engagement*

While the game has changed, your mission has not. We exist to [INSERT YOUR MISSION STATEMENT].

Before COVID-19 when we thought about “remote staff”, we thought of “contract workers” or some form of agreement with someone outside of our organizations. In this chapter, that will not be our focus. We will instead talk about how to be a remote staff and how to lead a remote staff in the era following COVID019. While there are many aspects that my colleagues will speak to in other chapters, we will focus on the one aspect that can transform your teams when full engagement is embraced.

### Leading Virtual Teams

Leading virtually is more difficult, more confounding, demands more of you as a leader, and takes more leadership maturity. Why? There are many reasons, a few of which are the loss of contextualism expressed through body language, facial expression, and tone of voice. This loss will inevitably lead to misunderstandings and confusion, leaving you and your team wondering what is happening to your relationship. Your team will miss having face-to-face interactions. There will be a loss of casual conversations that happen in the hallway or grabbing a cup of coffee or wherever your casual conversations take place. A lack of physical presence can diminish the very culture you have fought so hard to create. Without intentional effort, you will create an unintentional DNA that can lead to chaos.

Here are five disciplines that will maintain and even enrich your team culture and are essential to continue moving your mission forward.

#### It Starts with You!

Many leaders transitioning into virtual staffing focus on “how will I know they will...?” questions. That approach will not only limit effectiveness, it may even diminish what has already existed. Let’s breakdown this section into five categories.

1. *Choose to be “All In!”*. Reading this, it is much more natural to “zone out” than to “zoom in”. Knowing this, you must lead by example in every aspect. If you approach it as a “this is what you need to be doing” in order to be an effective remote staff person, your influence will be in jeopardy. Remote work begins with remote visualization. In the church’s case, most staff have never worked remotely and have no point of reference to pattern their work-life from. As a leader, it is your responsibility to pattern this for them.
2. *Lead from Your “BE”*. The only way you can effectively lead virtually long-term is to lead from your “be”. What do I mean by your “be”? It’s pretty simple actually. The cause we are called to participate in is dependent upon our relationship with God. Many of us have heard the term, “lead like Jesus” and may have even read Ken Blanchard’s book<sup>1</sup> titled as such. The bottom line, the level of your relationship with Jesus, is the foundation of this principle. It is impossible to lead teams for the cause of Jesus without spending time with Him. While leaders may think it is easier to show up in a virtual workforce, the focus and intentionality required to lead without being physically present is considerably higher. You have a face in a screen that is a small part of the environment in which it exists. Our flesh is simply not strong enough to resist the temptations of distractions without an intentional interaction with Jesus. Your time with God determines who you are or, as I like to say, your “be-ness”. You see, you can’t sustain *doing* without *being*, but when you “be” first, doing will naturally flow out of your “be”. This is the very foundation that will give you the strength to resist distractions because Jesus’ desire is always people over projects. Your highest mission in this cause is the people you lead. When you take care of your people, your people will take care of your mission. Your effectiveness is spiritual first, thus your spiritual preparation or lack thereof, will be reflected in every one of your interactions.

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<sup>1</sup> Blanchard, Kenneth H., and Phil Hodges. *Lead like Jesus: Lessons for Everyone from the Greatest Leadership Role Model of All Time*. Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 2008

This also shows up when leading non-virtually. Virtual leadership will expose your cracks at a greater level. It's the only way to lead like Jesus. You pour from your cup regardless of contents.

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3. *Champion Virtual Leadership.* Your team must see it modeled and embraced before they can engage it. If you don't believe in it, you cannot get your team to embrace it. One key to demonstrate your buy-in is to burn the bridge to the past. When you point to the past by saying, "when we get back to normal" or "when we can all get back in the room", you communicate you are not committed to virtual leadership. Virtual leadership is here to stay and if we don't embrace it, we will alienate the future. I have heard many church leaders say, "we are innovating with ways to lead and connect with our people", when in reality, the church is just now showing up to a party that has been going on for years.
4. *Lead Pastorally.* In a virtual environment, there is a much greater need for pastoral leadership. While many non-church organizations have been leading this way for years, the church has not. It goes against the grain of our frame of thought as ministry leaders. The only model we have experienced is one that is often called, "ministry of presence". While that is an easier path when leading pastorally, we need to blow up that traditional mindset of ministry. Your team needs you to help them build a framework for virtual ministry. In order to do that, you must first pastor them. They are experiencing a void in presence and maybe even some grief over the loss of what they knew. Make this the core of how you lead by setting aside time to pastor and care for your team first, empowering them to cascade it to others. Show your care, compassion and empathy for them, then it will begin to show up in the way they lead others.
5. *Stick with Trust.* We've been trained by leadership gurus to "inspect what you expect", yet we have come to learn that there is a fine and dangerous line between this and micromanagement. And now, working remotely, we can't inspect the present, leading us to a naturally sinful thought of "I wonder what they are doing", "are they working their scheduled hours" and maybe even "I wonder if they are working at all". In a state of unknown (even more so in the non-physical-presence virtual environment), we default to control which is rooted in a lack of trust. It will be essential to reset our default to one of trust and to fight "micromanaging", which would convey a lack of trust. Good leaders need trust and freedom to work freely. I am not saying delegate and disappear. I am saying to trust, communicate trust, and live out trust. Measure outcomes (Patti Malott addresses this more deeply in Chapter 9), not activity. If you feel you need to manage tightly, you probably have not yet managed and developed your team well.

### **Create Your New Rhythms & Share Them**

Remote working well is not about what your team does, it's about what you do to lead your team to work remotely. Don't get distracted; and it all begins with you modeling it. Your team needs to know you're adjusting too. Remote work demands more lateral leadership than in-person leadership. In-person, you can move in and out of another's sphere and then go to your workspace and get busy. They see you leading and focusing. Virtually, just as you don't know what they are doing, they don't know what you are doing, so tell them. Not to build yourself up, but to demonstrate that you are in the boat with them. As you set your virtual rhythms, share with them what they are, how you arrived there, and why you landed on them. As Jonathan Smith said in Chapter 1: virtual work is not a one-size-fits-all plan; it is an each-one-discovers-their-best plan. Discovery comes easier when you have a partner on the path. Be that partner. Be a partner, be vulnerable, and be pastoral.

### **Communicate, Communicate, Communicate**

If your organization is like mine, you have become reliant on project management tools like, Workzone, Monday.com, Basecamp, Evernote and the list goes on. These are fantastic tools to integrate into your organization, but they do not replace leadership. They are simply tools and using them to manage people leads to losing people. In a virtual environment, managing only through tools communicates the work is more important than the worker. Leadership is not about your mission or missions, it's about the people you have been entrusted to lead. Virtual work can multiply your team impact, but it takes more intentionality and a higher level of presence. Yes, I know that may not make sense, so at the end I will share a few ideas to spark thoughts that fit your style and organization.

### **Champion Clarity**

Lack of physical presence takes away an intangible togetherness that enhances relationship and influence. This means you need to add more clarity than ever before. One strategy I have used is to identify a “clarity coach”. This person is someone who needs extreme clarity for them to move forward effectively. It’s not that they can’t lead, it’s simply that they want to lead in the same direction as you and the vision of your organization. Have them in room listening for clear direction and asking clarifying questions in the meeting where applicable. Then circle around and ask them for feedback to increase your clarity quotient.

Now, that works for group meetings, but clarity is just as essential in one-on-one interactions. Here is where your presence and *simply asking questions* is key. Don’t say things like, “Am I clear?” or “Do you understand what I am saying?”. Those are hierarchical leadership comments that hinder your ability to lead virtually—and non-virtually. Use questions like, “Because I want you to have everything you need, how can I support you with more clarity?” or “What are some things that you need from me to move forward?” or “What am I missing that you need to move forward?”. Ask questions that focus on what you as the leader can do to support your team member in a way that honors and respects them as a person first, then as a teammate.

### **Coach, Coach, Coach**

Virtual work environments tend to inadvertently create a Pilate delegation approach. What I mean is that it reflects Pilate’s approach about what to do with Jesus. Once the people said crucify Him, Pilate washed his hands in the bowl to signify he was no longer responsible for what happened. That is not delegation and certainly doesn’t communicate you care for them and want to help them succeed.

The best approach to leadership is a “coaching” approach. This involves you as the leader asking more questions than talking. Your team member is in their role because they are experts in their field, so treat them as such. I have no desire in leading someone that I have to come up with all their plans. However, I do love leading those who come with a plan and let me ask good questions. Coaching them up, coaching them forward and coaching them back from missteps is all on you as the leader.

Some describe coaching as a guide alongside like when you teach someone to ride a bicycle. I see our role as leaders and coaches is to help our staff connect the dots in their life experiences and learnings. Most of us have experienced so much learning. We have learned in the classroom, through reading, going to conferences, talking to colleagues and many more avenues. Research has shown that these types of learning results in a 20-50% retention levels, however coaching results in 60-80% retention. This is accomplished through coaching people to connect the dots of what they already know. Then it is not new information they need to learn, it is the assimilation of what they already know, creating self-ownership, And self-ownership beats discipline every time.

### **Last Point**

Physical separation creates an environment of erosion of every principle I’ve talked about in this chapter. Without intentional effort, pastoral care dissolves, trust wains, unity separates, and clarity clouds. Being present is not defined by you being in the room. It requires intentionality.

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## **Next Steps**

- Focus on your time with Jesus—in the scriptures and in prayer.
- Burn bridges to the past by not thinking virtual leadership is only temporary; don’t think “when we get back to normal”.
- Here are five simple steps to help you coach better:
  1. **Build Authentic Relationships: You Pour In, Not Leverage For**  
Relationships can be challenging, and our temptation can be to limit the level of engagement or even to control the relationship. When we choose that path, and we do choose it, the other person will feel it knowing that you are more interested in what you can draw out of the relationship more than what you will put into the relationship. John Maxwell has been known to say, “reach for the heart before the hand”. Authentic relationships only flourish from the heart, building bridges of influence.

2. Ask Curious Questions: Ones that go Beyond the Surface

Questions tend to take on a life of their own. They can be filled with undertones of condemnation when certain tones and inflections are used, yet full of inspiration when focused on the person. Anyone can ask the surface questions of information transfer, but the great leaders ask questions that create perspective and understanding. Ones that are truly about the success of the person you are coaching, not about the outcome you desire.

3. Evoke Deeper Thought: Discover the Ripple Affect

As you are coaching a team member, present questions that will get behind the wall of the current state or status quo. Create an environment where they can dream without boundaries. When you do, the thoughts will flow, not only in their lives and ministry, but it will ripple through your whole team.

4. Inspire Stretching Action: Take Them Past Them

Studies show that by the age of eight, most of our thoughts about ourselves are negative. In our world today, people need someone to believe in them. In fact, they need someone to believe in them more than they believe in themselves. We all have limiting beliefs that place lids on areas of our lives and leadership. Great leaders inspire others to stretch for things they never thought they could achieve.

5. Coauthor Time Bound Plans: From Here to There by When

I believe that people have no shortage of yearning to get to their desired outcome, they have a shortage in a clear plan. In fact, it may be their desire to get that's keeping them from achieving it. What I am saying is that because of a missing clear path, people give up too quickly. Great leaders come alongside their team members to help them create plans that begin with completion, then identify steps, resources and people who can help them get there.