

# SEVEN Bytes

## PSYCHOLOGY OF VIRTUAL WORKING PART 1: BUILDING TRUST IN VIRTUAL WORKING

As the Covid-19 pandemic has pushed us into uncharted and rapidly changing territory, business leaders are burdened not only with a vastly increased cognitive load to manage the business impact, but also with the challenge of how best to support and connect with colleagues and teams, at a time when our people face personal and social disruption.

Although the flexibility of virtual working is commonplace in many organisations, it certainly isn't the norm. Many organisations have had to embrace virtual ways of working at an accelerated pace.

How can we facilitate maximum productivity and wellbeing for our people in a virtual environment, which for many organisations and teams, is new terrain?

Psychological research on the benefits and challenges of remote working has highlighted that **creating and maintaining a climate of trust** is one of the most challenging aspects of remote working<sup>i</sup>, but it is an essential enabler of high performance<sup>ii</sup>.

Many leaders may struggle with relinquishing the control of observing whether others are delivering or not. This requires a difficult mindset-shift from one that focuses on monitoring time-bound task-completion to one based on empowerment and trust in others to achieve and deliver outcomes and results.

In face-to-face working, we come to trust those co-workers who are seen to perform well and deliver. In the virtual world there aren't the same opportunities to observe each other and assess trustworthiness and follow-through on commitments. Interestingly research suggests that *initial* perceptions of trustworthiness are

particularly important in virtual teams<sup>iii</sup>. To overcome these challenges, try where possible to form virtual teams from among those who already know and work with each other; seek to build rapport from the outset; promote sharing of information about work progress and provide opportunities for team members to share and discuss their work progress and indeed blockers.

The foundation of trust lies within a shared understanding of each other and the nature of the team itself<sup>iv</sup>. Confronted with a lengthy period of uncertainty ahead, some may struggle to focus on day-to-day tasks that may seem trivial in the face of the pandemic. Coming back to our team and organisational purpose is a great first step in aligning together before moving forward.

To nurture a Trust Climate while working virtually and to re-connect your team with your collective mission, a useful team exercise to consider involves reflecting on and discussing the following:

- What are we here to do **a)** as an organisation & **b)** as a team?
- In light of the current situation what do we need to prioritise, what do we need to press pause on, and what do we need to re-imagine?
- In light of the above, what are our collective and individual goals and commitments over the coming weeks/months?
- What will enable us to reach these goals and what might get in our way?

Regularly connect and use these common goals and guiding purpose over the coming weeks and months to check on progress and cultivate team cohesion and trust.

**CLICK HERE TO READ PART 2:**  
<https://seven.ie/psychology-of-virtual-working-part-2-connecting-with-each-other-in-virtual-working>

<sup>i</sup> Effective Virtual Working through Communities of Practice. Kimble & Li 2010

<sup>ii</sup> The role of trust climate in virtual Teams. Journal of Managerial Psychology. Brahm & Kunze 2012

<sup>iii</sup> Zolin, R, Hinds, P, Fruchter, R, & Levitt, R. (2004). Interpersonal trust in cross-functional, geographically distributed work: A longitudinal study. Information and Organization. 14. 1-26.

<sup>iv</sup> Working Together Apart? Building a Knowledge-Sharing Culture for Global Virtual Teams. Creativity and Innovation Management. Zakaria, Amelinckx & Wilemon 2004

