



Leading Remote Teams Is Virtually the Same

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Rajesh Ghosh was nervous. He lay on the surgical table, an anesthesiologist poised behind him. Dr. White, his surgeon, was explaining the procedure and the recovery, reminding Rajesh that medical residents would be observing him as part of their training. Rajesh had heard it before, but hearing it again now calmed him. He felt fortunate to be in Dr. White's care: She had originated the procedure; she was the worldwide expert on it. "I'll check in with you in recovery," she said to Rajesh.

The anesthesiologist now placed the mask over Rajesh's face. "Just breathe deeply and count backward from one hundred." Reassured both by his surgeon's words and by the medical professionals moving purposefully about him, Rajesh started to count. He was out at 94 ... just as a nurse was wheeling in a futuristic metal contraption.

Dr. White had never been in the same room with Rajesh Ghosh, yet she would now perform his surgery successfully from more than 1,000 miles away. Her eyes and ears? An array of television monitors. Her hands? A surgical console connected via high-speed fiber-optics to remote-controlled surgical robotic arms in the operating theater. As she operated, Dr. White provided a step-by-step explanation of the procedure to the assisting surgical staff in the room with Rajesh, as well as to the surgical residents observing from other remote locations. "Once you've rounded the learning curve on the remote device and gotten used to the slight time delay, you'll see that, with the exception of the remote arms and the monitors, all the tools and steps are the same as those of an in-person surgeon. Of course, there is one big difference between remote and in-person surgery: The remote device forces you to be even more vigilant than you would be in person; I think that's why early studies show that telesurgical procedures like this one involve a lower risk of infection, shorter hospital stays, and less pain and scarring."

An odd paradox is taking shape today. As globalization and technology converge to provide broad and immediate access to the farthest reaches of the world, the work itself is growing increasingly more "remote." A few years ago, most people performed their jobs on location in a workplace they shared with their teams and their managers. For the most part, only salespeople worked remotely and then only to be nearer their customers.

A growing proportion of people now work at a distance, linked only by technology. For many teams, co-location of all members is a thing of the past. They're dispersed around the globe, and may never meet face to face. Most of us today have participated in at least one project or work group involving some distantly located team members or managers; a significant number of us have worked with people for long periods of time before ever meeting them face to face; and some of us have never been in the same physical location as our manager or team members. Those who haven't yet experienced this soon will. In a 2007 Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU) study, almost half of the firms surveyed reported having remote workforces; within 5 years the proportion will be 70 percent.¹

What Does This Mean for Leadership?

The success of today's leaders depends on their ability to lead both co-located and remotely located teams and individuals. Leaders must establish effective working relationships with and among team members, communicate all aspects of the business and the work, build innovation and creativity, and drive performance and results, whether the team is co-located or distant, and sometimes with little or no face-to-face contact between individuals or the team as a whole.

Yet leaders at all levels struggle with how to do this effectively with remote teams. Conventional wisdom says remote leadership is different than traditional "proximal" leadership. It is more complicated, more difficult, and plagued by a high rate of failure. Many believe that lack of physical proximity prevents remote teams from developing the "chemistry for success" found in highly effective proximal teams.³ Team members simply need to be where managers can see them. In other words, don't expect remote leadership to be as successful as proximal leadership—according to conventional wisdom.

Fortunately, conventional wisdom about leading remotely fails on serious scrutiny. As the case of Dr. White suggests, remotely-led teams can be highly successful.

“If you are a leader, you can no longer avoid distance management: You can only choose to do it well or do it poorly. [Those] who do it well will offer a tremendous competitive advantage to the operations they lead. Those who do not may watch the unraveling of both their organizations and their careers.”²

nearly 300 people in successful remote teams found that 96 percent of them never met face to face with all of their team members and only 17 percent ever met with even a subset of them.⁴

Remote teams have some natural advantages—advantages that tend to mitigate the disadvantages perpetuated by conventional wisdom. Among other advantages, a remote global team can potentially provide round-the-clock service to its clients. And distance truly can “make the heart grow fonder,” as its natural limitations on teams act as a buffer for strong personalities and minimize stressful interpersonal dynamics. Technological interfaces can also be leveraged to create discipline for team interactions that in turn facilitate standardized processes. The highly successful remote leader learns to leverage these and other advantages.

What Successful Remote Leaders Do

Effective remote leadership yields enormous potential benefits for leaders and their organizations. Imagine pulling together a long-term team of the best and the brightest remote talent for a project and merging it with your own local talent, unhindered by location, time zones, or budgetary and scheduling restrictions on travel—and still generating outstanding results.

In the same way that remote surgery can be virtually the same as traditional surgery, leading remote teams can be virtually the same as leading teams in close physical proximity—according to research done by Forum and others.

Not only that, but, with the appropriate leadership focus, remote teams often outperform proximal teams: A recent benchmarking study of

“Working from a distance has been good in the sense that the team has had to be willing to reach out. The discussion around how to communicate with me is always front and center in people’s minds.”

—Sales manager, North America

Leading remote teams is “virtually” the same as leading proximal ones—but it’s not absolutely the same. Managing team members in offsite locations requires taking more care than does managing co-located teams. Successful remote-team leaders pay attention to things they might take for granted in non-remote situations. They cannot rely on the casual walk-by conversation to learn what is going on; troubleshooting is more difficult for them, because they cannot access physical cues that signal problems; and developing relationships don’t feel as three-dimensional to them as quickly as they might otherwise. Success is possible for remote leaders—if they pay attention to certain effective leadership actions and practices for non-remote leadership situations. Remote leaders need not learn a lot of new and different things; they simply must pay attention to the same familiar things in slightly different ways.

Forum’s research found that those who lead remotely with success—whether or not they also lead proximally—are more vigilant, purposeful, and intentional about taking three leadership actions:

- 1. Mitigate the Differences:** Effective remote leaders actively reduce the impact of factors that differentiate building results remotely from doing so proximally.
- 2. Use Effective Leadership Practices:** Effective remote leaders extend their reach to individuals and to the team as a whole by applying the same high-quality practices they do to proximal leadership, but with increased vigilance and intention.
- 3. Leverage Technology to Build Virtual Work Spaces That Surpass “Real” Ones:** To manage remote teams effectively, high-performing leaders build virtual work spaces for people and ideas—work spaces that surpass “real” ones. Such leaders are highly competent in deploying appropriate and meaningful technological interfaces, and in building team members’ competence.

1. Mitigate the Differences

When there are no “halls and walls,” outstanding remote leaders are mindful of the impact of three factors that disproportionately affect the performance of remote teams: time, space, and culture (and they take steps to mitigate the impact).⁵

Anyone who leads non-remote teams and individuals knows that these three factors play out across the board. For example, scheduling meetings for local teams can seem like quite a logistical feat, even within a single time zone; a large campus, scheduling conflicts, and team members working on multiple projects can make it extremely difficult to bring a group of people—even co-located people—together

“Difference Makers”

Factor	Focus for Remote Leadership
Time Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leveraging resources in different time zones • Understanding and working with the ways different cultures value time[*] (For example, time may be considered a scarce resource or a plentiful one.) • Creating “time fairness” (for example, by rotating prime meeting times through time zones) • Clarifying deadlines and due dates
Space Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compensating for unavailable physical cues • Reducing the impact of geographical differences • Creating the impact of face-to-face meetings in virtual ones • Making and maintaining connections among team members • Dealing with the difficulty and cost of arranging face-to-face meetings • Being flexible and sensible • Getting the amount of contact time right (with the right number of points of direct and indirect contact) • Knowing when real-time communication is necessary
Culture Differences	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finding commonality among different values, attitudes, and backgrounds • Setting meaningful individual and team goals and expectations • Interpreting messages and communications appropriately • Getting the level of collaboration right • Developing a decision-making process that meets cultural needs • Overcoming language barriers • Identifying with others’ cultural frameworks, contexts, and circumstances • Interpreting accurately

^{*} Rosinski, Phillippe, *Coaching Across Cultures* (London: Nicholas Brealey Publishing, 2003)

“So I saw this person whose head appeared to be bobbing—shaking uncontrollably—as I gave my presentation. I have a medical background, so I thought, “They’ve got some kind of disease!” Later on I found that the head bobbing was a sign of approval and liking!”

—Data training manager, Asia

in the same room for a meeting; and critical cultural differences—even those within single countries—can impact team performance. The interplay of these three factors magnifies their impact on remote teams.

The table above highlights the things leaders must pay particular attention to in remote situations.

2. Use Effective Leadership Practices

Effective leaders reduce the negative aspects of leading remotely by “extending their reach.” They use five tried-and-true leadership practices:

- Emphasize Responsiveness
- Use Empathy
- Accelerate Accountability
- Create Connection
- Help

The good news for remote leaders is that most of these practices are the same ones used by high-performing leaders of local people and teams. The not-so-good news is that these practices are challenging to use effectively, no matter the location of team members and leader. Add the time, space, and culture issues related to remote teams, and they become even more challenging. Just like Dr. White, effective remote leaders pay closer attention to using these practices: they are intentional about when and how they do so.

3. Leverage Technology to Build Virtual Work Spaces That Surpass “Real” Ones

Communications and collaboration technologies can drive high levels of performance in remote teams when they are well suited to the purpose at hand. Unfortunately, most managers just stick with what they know, which hinders exploration of other useful technologies. Only by exploring technology can leaders create virtual work spaces that truly surpass “real” ones.

As the graphic below shows, what seems to matter most to overall results is the amount of interaction with information or people various technologies and media make available to the team and leader.*

Leaders impact the potential value of interactions by what they do—for example, by the expectations they set for using technologies or conducting face-to-face meetings, and by the ways they hold people accountable.

What Works?

Many leaders make assumptions about the effectiveness of various technologies for communicating remotely and encouraging interaction and collaboration remotely or proximally. Research on effective remote leadership has



The table below describes the five Effective Leadership Practices and provides specific guidance on how to use them as a remote leader.

Effective Leadership Practices for Remote Leaders

Practice	What Effective Remote Leadership Requires
<p>Emphasize Responsiveness Make yourself as available to remote team members as to local ones</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being flexibly available and accessible in multiple ways • Establishing the most effective way to respond (for example, by telephone, e-mail, text message, or in person) to the team and individuals • Intervening in a timely manner • Taking extra effort to pay attention to remote resources (They are not close enough to you to remind you to pay attention to them.) • Establishing regular check-ins and seeking others out, should you not hear back from them
<p>Use Empathy Attuning to others feelings and viewpoints, and accepting others perspectives (The most critical aspect of empathy is acknowledging — verbally or otherwise — the validity of others ideas, issues, concerns, or feelings.)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being transparent with the team about any differences among them and creating opportunities for everyone to learn about and from one another • Identifying and cataloguing what you know about each team member’s needs, viewpoints, and contributions, and taking it into account in every interaction; ensuring that all team members share it • Intentionally learning about each team member’s perspectives, traditions, languages, and ways of thinking, and encouraging team members to learn about one another • Learning about differences in directness of language and the role of context in communication, and sharing your learning • Inquiring and listening with authentic curiosity
<p>Accelerate Accountability Building ownership for results in individuals and the team as a whole</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clearly stating accountabilities for objectives and goals • Ensuring the entire team understands all accountabilities • Constantly reexamining accountabilities with individuals and the team • Setting up regular times to provide guidance and advice to individuals and team members • Reinforcing stated intentions and goals • Explaining what, why, and when things need to change • Behaving consistently and reliably <p><i>The quid pro quo for all the freedom we offer is a tremendous emphasis on accountability.⁶</i></p>
<p>Create Connection Building links between remote team members, the rest of the team, and the organization as a whole</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Embracing your role as chief communicator • Identifying appropriate technology connections • Looking beyond technology in order to create connections • Identifying tradeoffs for different technological interfaces: e-mail, texting, voicemail, videoconferencing, webcasts, and so on. • Working with the team to identify the technology interface appropriate to each situation • Knowing when getting together face to face is an absolute must • Identifying team members who must be closely connected in order to achieve results, and building their connections • Building rituals that expand connections in virtual meetings (for example, “virtual water-cooler” discussions)
<p>Help Providing support to individuals ’ and teams ’ success</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Responding speedily to requests for support • Anticipating any help that will be needed • Creating helping relationships within the team • Knowing the needs of each team member at all times • Asking, asking, asking

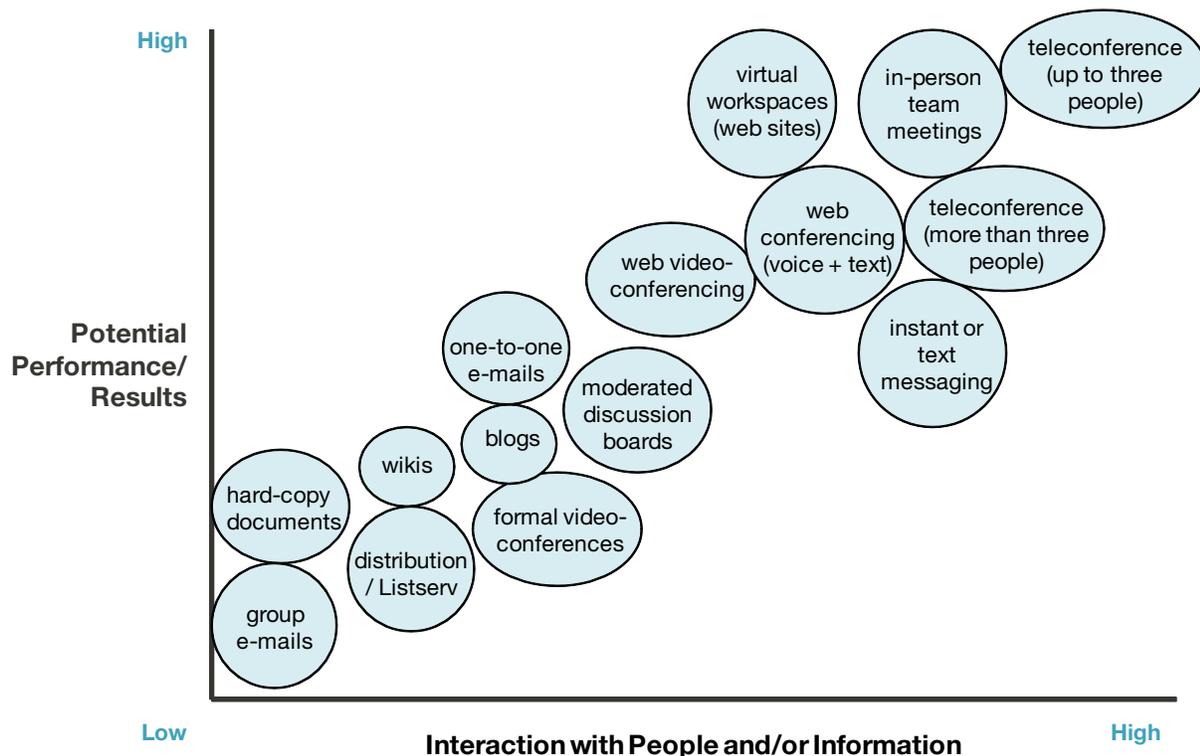
turned up some surprising results in this area. Some of the technologies we think most useful actually tend to be least useful.⁷ Some things to keep in mind:

- Synchronicity is only important when ideas must be shared or issues dealt with immediately and in real time.
- E-mail is a poor tool for team collaboration. To avoid leaving anyone out, everyone must copy everyone and “reply to all” — which leads to e-mail overload. Over time team members begin to ignore communications from one another.
- Working face to face is the gold standard of collaboration and interaction; however, most people prefer to meet (whether travel is involved or not) about only the most important things. They may not wish to gather for purely social reasons.
- Two thirds of all successful remote teams in one study did not use videoconferencing, citing three things as major distractions from collaboration and accomplishing work:
 - Videoconferencing’s delays
 - Its fuzzy visuals (whether fed through a videoconferencing facility’s camera or through a home webcam)
 - The potential need to actually go to a videoconferencing facility

These teams preferred teleconferencing, even when it involved participating outside normal working hours.

Have We Been Asking the Wrong Question?

The work of Forum and others suggests that vigilantly and intentionally applying some standard leadership practices in work with remote teams can encourage performance that is superior to that of proximal teams. Proximal-team leaders can learn from high-performing remote-team leaders: They can be more vigilant and intentional in mitigating differences, using effective leadership practices, and leveraging technology to build virtual work spaces that surpass “real” ones.



What a Remote Leader Should Know About Interaction Technology/Media

This table outlines various technological interfaces, from non-electronic options such as paper mail and package transport to the latest and greatest high-tech options (as of the time of publication), as well as examples of the interfaces' most effective uses and—perhaps more importantly—the least effective ones. Use this table to customize the way you leverage technology to enhance your remote team's performance.

Technology/Medium	Use	Most Effective Uses	Least Effective Uses
Traditional Mail/ Hard-Copy Documents	Information transfer; distribution of documents for review	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing the team with polished, professionally produced project outputs • Providing information available in hard copy only 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When speed is essential
E-mail	Quick information transfer	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending team updates • Sending electronic documents • Requesting action • Communicating non-sensitive information • Creating real-time records 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When sensitive problems or issues must be handled • When providing feedback (unless recapping real-time conversations)
Instant Messaging	Immediate interaction; transfer of a limited amount of information to a single person	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking in with team members • Requesting a limited amount of information 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When making detailed requests • When interacting with all team members simultaneously • When sending documents
Text Messaging	Immediate, potentially interactive transfer of information to one or many others	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Checking in with team members • Requesting a limited amount of information • Sending messages and reminders (virtual alarm clocks) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When communicating extensive information • When making detailed requests
Distribution/ListServ	Information transfer among many people that provides a record	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Sending updates • Communicating results • Sending FYIs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When interactivity or quick action is required
Formal Videoconferencing (groups)	Communication including physical visual cues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating product updates • Conducting small-scale training sessions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When developing documents collaboratively • When communicating extensive updates or conducting large-scale training sessions • When team members' access to a physical conference center is limited
Webcams (one-to-one or in very small groups)	Communication including physical visual cues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating face to face 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When physical co-location is required by the task
Voicemail	Information transfer in urgent or emergent situations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Briefly communicating wins • Reinforcing individuals or groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When a record of communication is required • When communicating about difficult issues or handling objections • When providing feedback other than praise or reinforcement

What a Remote Leader Should Know About Interaction Technology/Media (cont.)

Technology/Medium	Use	Most Effective Uses	Least Effective Uses
Conference Calls (usually more than three people)	Limited interactions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussing issues • Handling team disagreements and misunderstandings • Answering questions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When providing individual feedback
Teleconferencing (two or more people)	Communication that encourages understanding	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Touching base; asking and answering simple questions • Conducting extensive private conversations • Providing feedback and communicating performance management issues 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When a record of communicating complex information is required
Web Conferencing (voice plus media)	Synchronous, multi-way communication that does not depend on physical visual cues, enhanced by synchronous access to documents and other media	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating product updates • Conducting small-scale training sessions • Conducting project launches 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When conducting large-scale training sessions • When physical co-location is required
Virtual Work Spaces (team websites)	Team workspaces whose effectiveness equals or surpasses that of “real” work spaces in terms of ready access to information	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating updates on work in progress • Sharing files — particularly those that require tracking and version control • Posting work produced • Posting project information • Posting teleconference information • Accessing team members virtually 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When physical co-location is required • When synchronicity is required (for example, in live conversations)
Wikis	Idea and document capture	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing multiple content authors with project work space • Capturing data in a dynamic encyclopedia format 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When content is primarily authored by a single person
Discussion Boards	Idea sharing	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating globally 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When an immediate response is needed • When communicating policies or procedures
Blogs	Idea sharing; building on others’ ideas	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communicating strategy updates • Creating an ongoing record of team/individual activities and best practices • When conferring an imprimatur of “publication” is desired 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When conducting conversations or debates • When communicating sensitive information
Face-to-Face Meetings	Highly effective multi-way communication and interaction (team-building quick hits)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Providing performance or developmental feedback • Solving problems/resolving issues • Interacting with information tactilely; conducting pilot tests 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • When providing updates or progress reports

Leading Remote Teams Checklist

This checklist provides some tactics highly effective leaders use to put the REACH leadership practices into place with remote teams and/or individuals. As you review the list, ask yourself which tactics you are already using, and which you might be able to use more. Record your own tactics in the blank spaces.

Practice	Tactics	✓
Emphasize R esponsiveness	Keep several clocks, each set to one of the time zones in which your team members work	
	Rotate meeting times among time zones so no one is always inconvenienced	
	Implement mechanisms to ensure regular (daily) voice communication, at least between a subset of team members	
	Talk on the telephone with a subset of team members each day	
	Ensure regular, continuous contact with and between team members, via whatever media	
Use E mpathy	Create social bonds	
	Help team members cross cultural boundaries	
	Ask questions but don't interrogate	
	Know your own cultural limitations	
	Test assumptions (yours and team members')	
	Relate to team members on an equal footing	
	Create ways for team members to learn about one another's roles	
	Turn to bicultural "interpreters": people experienced in more than one culture	
Accelerate A ccountability	Ensure common purpose	
	Emphasize commonalities on an ongoing basis	
	Agree on protocols for team processes: response times to postings, "replying to all," and so on	
	Cultivate overlapping short- and long-term interests	
	Constantly test for clarity	
	Identify the motivations of individual team members	
	Use rewards and recognition	
	Consider the multiple impacts of a situation or decision	
	Define the circumstances in which autonomous decision-making is allowed	
	Build trust	
	Conduct small "experiments" in coaching and learning	
	Make the implicit explicit	
	Balance priorities	

Leading Remote Teams Checklist (cont.)

Practice	Tactics	✓
C onnection	In choosing media for communication, ask others about their preferences	
	Spend time and energy on team building and connecting people to purpose	
	Ensure your technology is working	
	Visualize team members' work spaces	
	Learn about the various cultures in which team members are working	
	Use blended methods of training	
	Ask team members to identify themselves "around the clock" on telephone calls ("This is Terry at 6 o'clock on the West Coast," for example.)	
	Establish a work-group website that provides reminders of: decisions, the team's rationale and purpose, project goals, objectives, tasks and progress updates, and team members' profiles (including roles and responsibilities)	
	Manage (or assign a team member to manage) each discussion thread on electronic work spaces	
	Assign team members the task of summarising discussion threads for the group	
	Post links to documents/information related to upcoming meetings and encourage advance electronic discussion	
	H elp	Ensure that everything of substance that the team creates is categorized and easily retrievable
Use your authority appropriately		
Obtain information you and team members need		
Look for patterns		
Stay open to considering alternatives and options that others suggest		
Be clear about your intentions		
Plan as much as possible for any unintended consequences		
Set up processes in which team members act as resources to one another		

Endnotes:

1. Economist Intelligence Unit, “Business in Motion: Managing the Mobile Workforce,” 2007 (www1.alcatel-lucent.com)
2. Kimball Fisher and Maren Duncan Fisher, *The Distance Manager* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2001)
3. Lynda Gratton, “Working Together ... When Apart,” *Business Insight*, www.sloanreview.mit.edu, June 15, 2007
4. Ann Majchrzak, Arvind Malhotra, Jeffrey Stamps, and Jessica Lipnack, “Can Absence Make a Team Grow Stronger?” *Harvard Business Review*, May 2004 (This benchmarking study involved 293 participants from 54 highly effective remote teams in 26 companies selected from a variety of industries around the world.)
5. Fisher and Fisher, *The Distance Manager*
6. CEO of a virtual company quoted in Trina Hoefling, *Working Virtually* (Sterling, Virginia: Stylus Publishing, 2003)
7. Ann Majchrzak, Arvind Malhotra, Jeffrey Stamps, and Jessica Lipnack, “Can Absence Make a Team Grow Stronger?”

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