

WHITE PAPER

# How to Lead Virtual Teams

## The Power of Leveraging Polarities



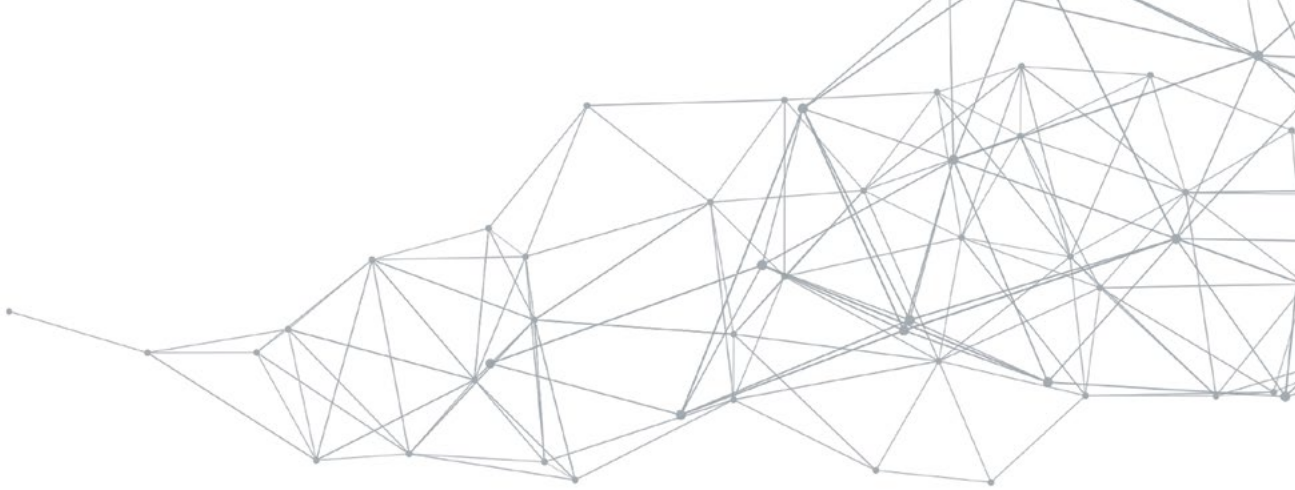
By: Jean Brittain Leslie and Emily Hoole





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## INTRODUCTION

# Polarity Thinking™ for Virtual Teams

Leading teams from a distance can be challenging. Research has found that virtual teams are especially difficult to manage, with some experts claiming more virtual teams fail than succeed. Organizations and CEOs looking to capitalize on the trend of empowered, autonomous teams to navigate through continuous disruption need new ways to support and develop their teams—particularly if they’re geographically dispersed.

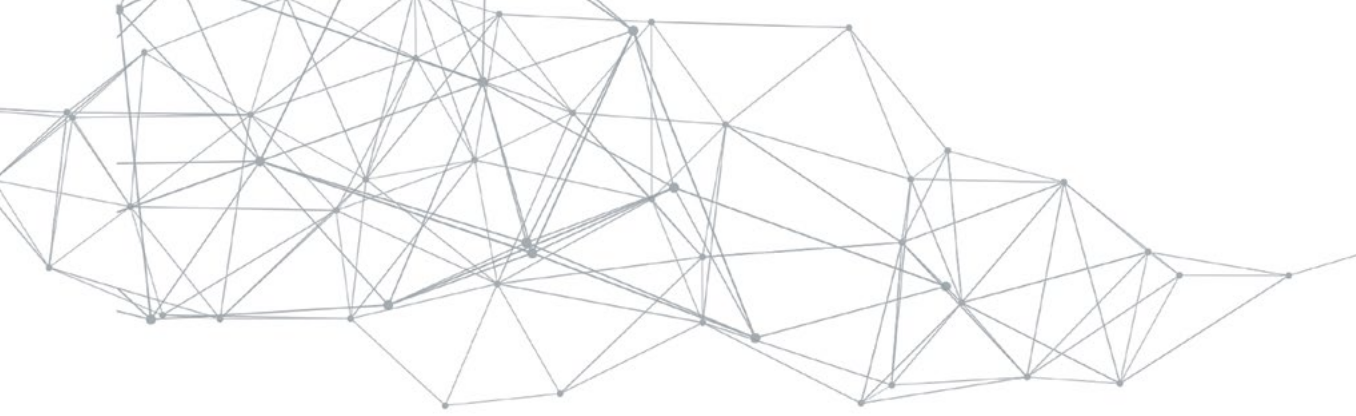
In our work with 141 virtual teams across the globe, from multiple industries and sectors, we found that introducing a new perspective—*polarity thinking*™—helps teams to improve their performance over time. **The polarity approach provides a shift in mindset, skillset, and practice that helps virtual teams manage the unsolvable tensions that are present—and even exacerbated—at a distance.**

A polarity mindset provides a fresh perspective on the challenges virtual teams are facing and empowers team leaders to address issues in new ways. **Virtual teams that can manage underlying polarities are more effective and higher performing.**

We identified **3 key factors that influence a team’s effectiveness**, each related to the team’s ability to get the most from leveraging polarities:

- **Technology and a strong real-time team connection:** Teams able to successfully leverage technology for effective communication and engagement *feel* less virtual. The more often team members meet face-to-face and leverage synchronous technology (e.g., videoconferencing), the lower their level of virtuality, and the higher their level of success.
- **Time zones and the physical distance of team members:** Teams spread across multiple time zones face the risk of working long hours to accommodate one another’s schedules. The greater the physical distance between members of a team, the lower the overall commitment of team members and the more challenging it is for the team.
- **Team structure, in terms of who is on the team and how committed they are:** The more teams an individual is a member of, the less time and effort they’re able to give, and the less effective the team is overall.

*The greater the physical distance and number of time zones between members, the lower the overall commitment of team members and the more challenging it is for the team.*



## Improving Virtual Team Effectiveness: A New Mindset

To work with polarities, teams need to be able to see both perspectives clearly and at the same time. For example, consider the team of a manager we'll call Sam. Sam leads a team of 8 cross-functional members located across the globe. His team recently was formed to develop a new digital platform with the potential to transform his company's entire business model. Sam has a good understanding of current pressures in the company and knows collaboration across countries and departments is required for success.

The team must work quickly, going from concept to prototype in 6 months, with the goal of an implementation-ready platform in 12 months for a go/no go decision. The challenge that Sam faces—

quickly engaging the team in the essential tasks according to the project plan and establishing high-quality working relationships—is typical with new high-pressure virtual teams.

Just focusing on the task at hand or the relationships has its advantages and disadvantages. For example, managing team social and interpersonal interactions is critical and lays the foundation for the effectiveness of other processes. And a focus on tasks ensures that the work of the team is delivered on time and that roles, responsibilities, and norms are clear.

But if Sam looks at the situation from an either/or perspective, he may only see one side of the story.

### Virtual Team Polarities Defined

***As its name implies, polarities refer to two opposites that are both desirable and necessary over time.***

Polarities are ongoing pairs that may appear to be in opposition to each other, but in reality, can be complimentary and synergistic. They are manageable with a *both/and* mindset.

Virtual Teams, for example, need to both:

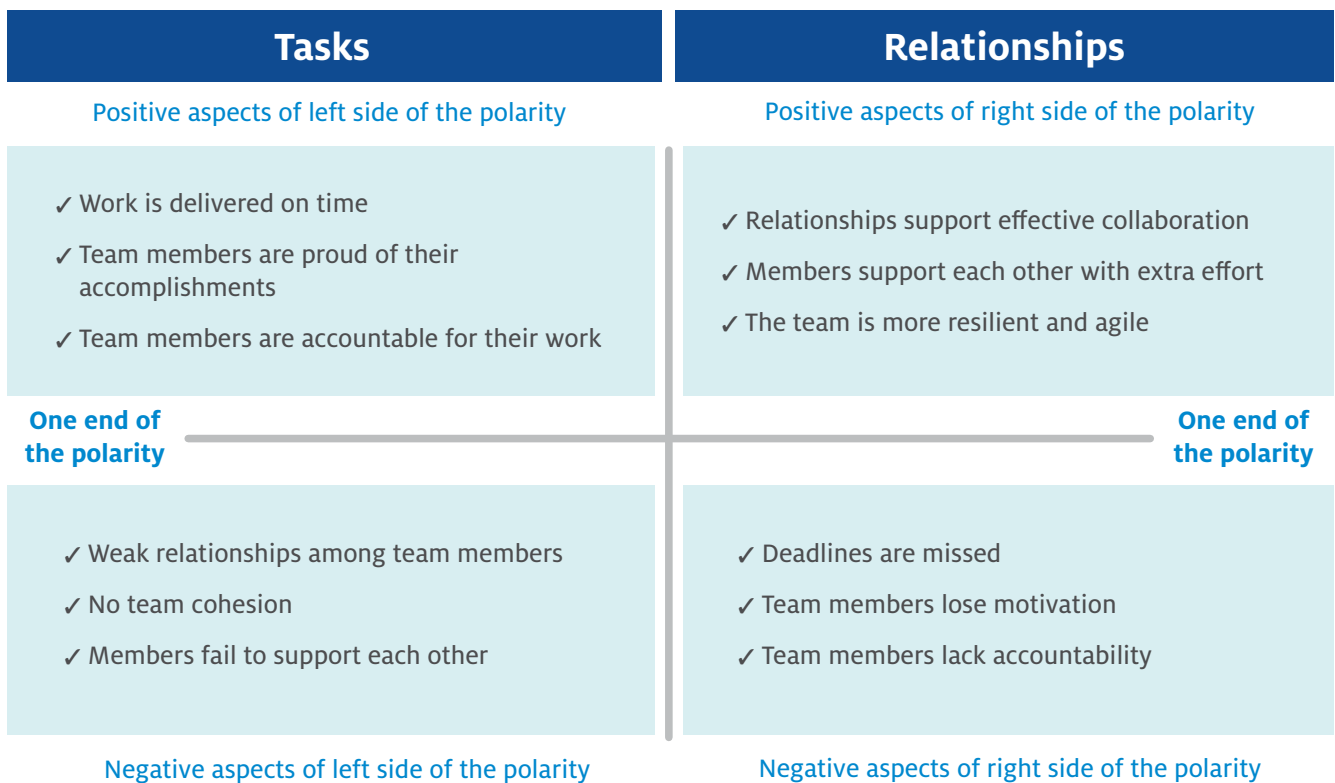
1. accomplish tasks *and* foster relationships;
2. embrace individuality *and* collective identity; and
3. invest in technology *and* manage expenses.

These polarities are challenging because managers have to pay attention to both elements, despite their conflicting tendencies. Focusing on one at the expense of the other will lead to problems that ultimately demand attention.

## An Either/Or Mindset

- **An exclusive focus on tasks** and getting down to business ensures that the team’s work is delivered on time, that progress is made, and that team members are held accountable.
- **But an overemphasis on tasks** can result in a team that lacks trust and supportive behaviors that allow the team to weather significant challenges.
- **An exclusive focus on relationships** builds a well-integrated team that supports productive collaboration, increased team orientation, and fosters a culture that supports positive relationships.
- **But an overemphasis on relationship-building** may result in missed deadlines, losing sight of team objectives, and misplaced accountabilities.

**So, which one should Sam and the team focus on? The answer, of course, is, both.** Using a polarity mindset, he can see both positive and negative consequences of each side of the pair (in this case, tasks and relationships).



Modern business technology, in general, supports a task orientation. Email, for example, is typically used to convey performance or task information, rather than relationship-building activities. On the other hand, there is a point at which non-task-related social discussion interferes with task performance.

When the team's meetings are more chitchat than task-focused, team performance can drop. **That's why virtual teams are most successful when they have both a task focus and a relationship focus across time, culture, and distance.**

*To develop a both/and instead of either/or mindset in your team, listen carefully when asking team members about the problems, difficulties, and frustrations they encounter in their work. Cultivate the team's ability to hold two opposing ideas in their heads at once, and help them look for synergies in seemingly opposing ideas, to increase team effectiveness.*



## Managing Polarities to Increase Effectiveness: A New Skillset

In his acclaimed book, *Opposable Mind*, Roger Martin points out a common theme from his interviews with business leaders, which is, successful leaders “have the predisposition and the capacity to hold two diametrically opposing ideas in their heads,” and they are “able to produce a synthesis that is superior to either opposing idea.” He goes on, “the ability to use the opposable mind is an advantage at any time, in any era.”

**Using a polarity approach, teams can get the best of both poles, while avoiding the downsides of either.** *Action steps* in the figure on the next page illustrate the possible actions Sam's team can take to be both task-oriented *and* relationship-oriented. Similarly, *early warning signs* are indicators the team may be over-focusing and getting into the downsides of one side or the other. In the case of Sam's team, productivity, team orientation, and accountability underlie the nature of action steps and early warnings for this polarity.



## Possible Action Steps

### Positive aspects

- Sam and the team recognize individual and group achievement of milestones in meetings and highlight accomplishments for senior leaders.
- Sam and the team use agile approaches, such as the Scrum and Sprint frameworks for development, to constantly clarify members' tasks and deadlines.
- Sam and the team manage the budget and resources to ensure each team member has the equipment and resources to do his/her job.

### Positive aspects

- Sam holds a face-to-face kickoff meeting and mid-year review to ensure team members get to know each other as individuals.
- The team institutes a culture and process of giving each other effective feedback, such as using CCL's Situation-Behavior-Impact (SBI) model.
- Team members take the time to celebrate, laugh, and have fun with one another.

Relationship-Oriented

Task-Oriented

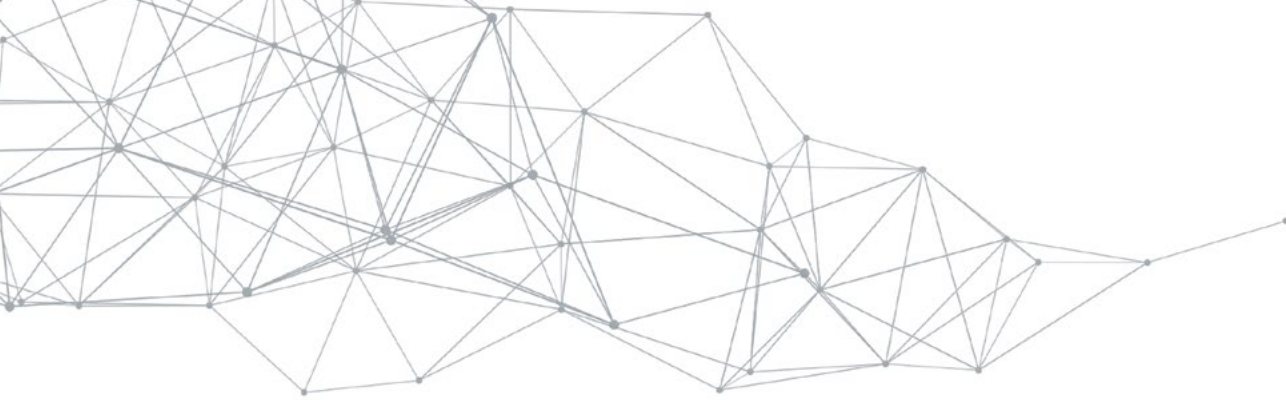
## Early Warning Signs

- Sam notices a decrease in member attendance and engagement in team-building activities.
- Team members don't put forth extra effort to support each other.
- Team members observe a decrease in amount of spontaneous communication among them.

- Team members spend less time on their individual tasks.
- The team experiences an increase in the number of meetings overrunning and failing to cover all points due to discussion of non-task issues.
- Team members are reluctant to hold each other accountable.

### Negative aspects

### Negative aspects



## 3 Critical Factors for Virtual Team Success

It's a simple fact that no two teams are alike, and therefore, success managing polarities varies by team. On average, we found teams who manage polarities well improve their outcomes by 5%, though some teams in our study were able to improve their outcomes by over 50%.

The 3 key factors that our research uncovered which play a contributing role in teams' successes:

- 1. Technology:** A Real-Time Team Connection Helps Teams Feel Less Virtual
- 2. Time Zones:** Physical Distance Can Lead to Long Hours and Burnout
- 3. Team Structure:** Consider Who's Involved and How Committed They Are

*Treating polarities like they are problems to solve with a single solution (which most leaders learned to do early in their careers) is a guaranteed setup for failure. Change efforts require a new skillset for success.*

# 3 FACTORS YOU CAN'T IGNORE WITH VIRTUAL TEAMS



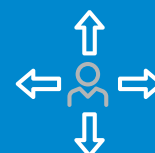
### TECHNOLOGY

Leverage communication & collaboration tools to help make meetings feel less virtual.



### TIME ZONES

Recognize meeting scheduling can be tricky with geographically dispersed team members.



### TEAM STRUCTURE

Know that the more teams that members are on, the less they can commit to any one.





## Technology: A Real-Time Team Connection Helps Teams Feel *Less Virtual*

Communication and collaboration technologies impact a wide range of virtual team processes including, but not limited to, leading, planning, decision-making, work monitoring, and execution. Technology also poses challenges to virtual teams. Technological glitches on calls, connectivity issues, and team members' different expectations about comfort and use of technology can lead to frustration.

- **Reduce team virtuality with a strong real-time team connection.** Teams that use technology to stay close to one another helps teams feel less virtual. Our research found that the more team members meet face-to-face and use information-rich, synchronous technology (e.g., videoconferencing, which can provide enough information to interpret non-verbal communication), the lower the level of virtuality and the higher their odds of success.
- **Provide training in technologies and tools.** The range of digital collaborative tools is large and ever expanding. Yet, few organizations provide proper training. A survey of 440 professionals across 8 different industries found over 60% of organizations did not provide training for virtual team leaders or members. Of the organizations that did offer some training, over 80% of these respondents indicated virtual training was not a priority nor strongly supported by top management. And training is especially important for unusual or new work activities and to help members get off on the right foot from the beginning, especially for teams with few existing relationships.
- **Prioritize collaboration tools.** In particular, detailing which tools will be used for what purposes is vital for streamlining communications, minimizing multi-channel overload (where the same information is sent via multiple mediums), and avoiding work falling through the cracks in between members.



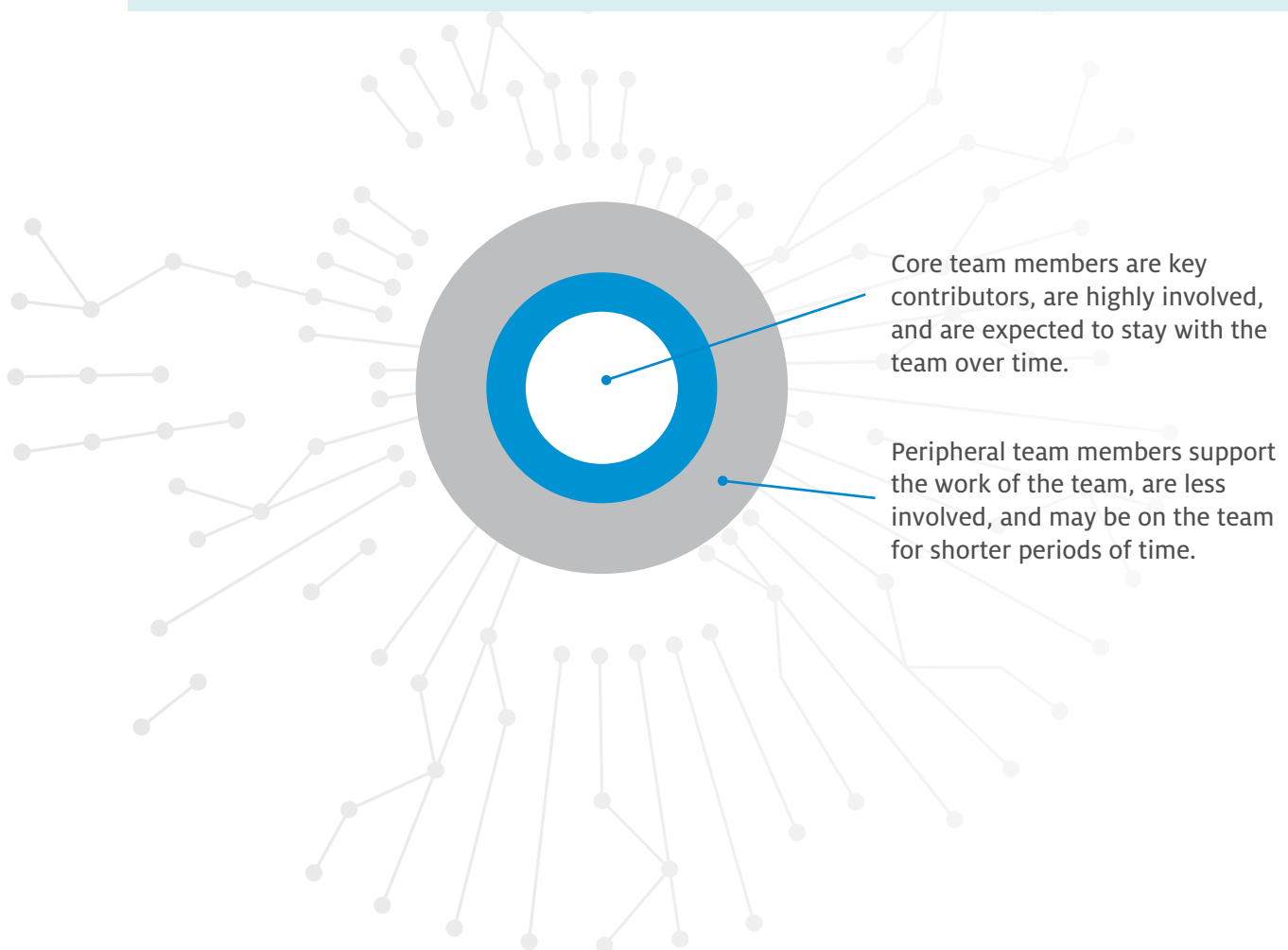
## Time Zones: Physical Distance Can Lead to Long Hours and Burnout

- **Protect members from burnout.** Teams spread across multiple time zones face the risk of working long hours to accommodate one another's schedules. Ensure members are able to get the bulk of their work done during their normal working hours, while minimizing the number of early morning or late night meetings needed for team connection and continuity. In situations where team members span many time zones, consider providing tools for scheduling. It's also important for organizations to have policies in place that offer guidelines on "connectivity." Global virtual teams especially need clarity on when they should (or should not) be available, including on off hours, on weekends, and local holidays.
- **Provide extra organizational support and formalize team norms.** We found that more geographically dispersed teams tend to have lower levels of team commitment and experience more challenges in leveraging polarities. These teams may benefit from additional opportunities to meet face-to-face throughout a project at key times. Ensuring that successes are visible and celebrated can also help build team commitment.



## Team Structure: Consider Who's Involved and How Committed They Are

- **Ensure teams are of optimal size, with dedicated members.** Teams with over-committed members (who are members of multiple teams) don't leverage polarities as well, and their team effectiveness suffers. Optimally functioning teams have 5-9 members, so limit the number of team members to 7 (plus or minus 2), as well as the number of teams on which they simultaneously work.
- **Determine whether team members are *core* or *peripheral*.** Core team members are key contributors who are highly involved, and stay involved over a longer time. Peripheral team members support the team's work, but may be involved in a lesser way, or for a shorter time. Avoid overloading high performers with too many team assignments and limit the roles they play (particularly if they are core team members), to prevent them from becoming overwhelmed and burning out.





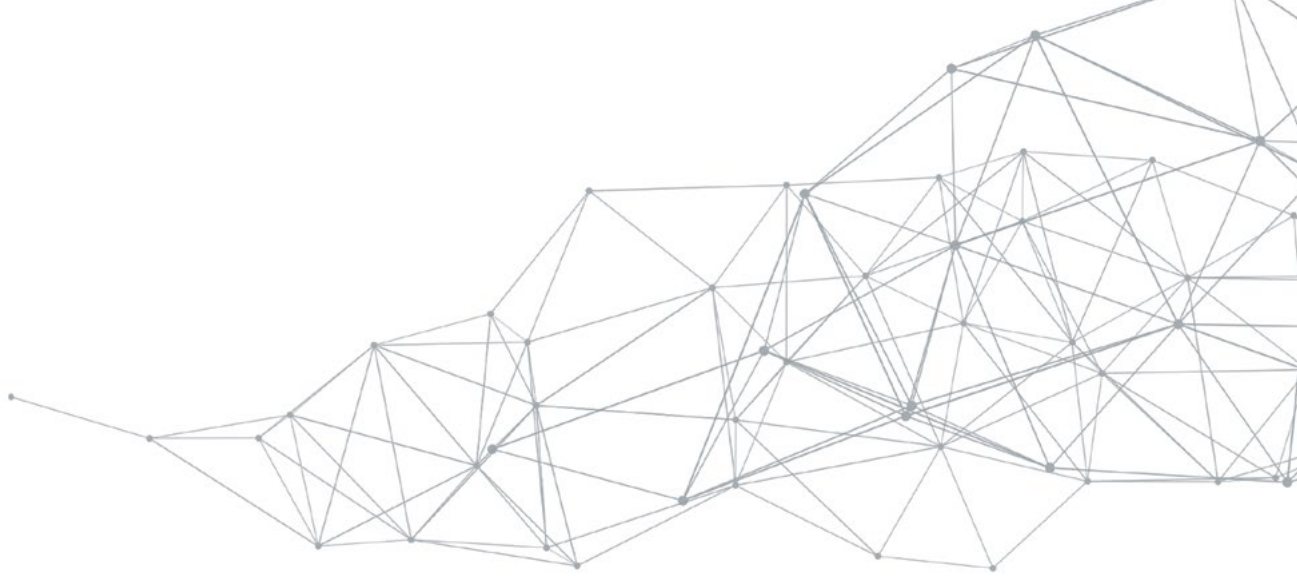
## CONCLUSION

# What Organizations Can Do to Support Virtual Teams—A Checklist

Teams need to be able to thrive in a world of polarities. Organizations should provide them with increased education about polarity management, coupled with increased emphasis on information-sharing between team members. This is particularly important for teams where members are spread out across time zones (more geographic dispersion), who use asynchronous virtual tools (such as email and online collaborative websites) to coordinate and execute team processes, or are members of multiple virtual teams. Specific actions to take:

### Use Polarity Thinking™

- ❑ Help team members integrate polarity management into their practice. Tie action plans and efforts to manage polarities to broader organizational outcomes (e.g., strategy, culture).
- ❑ Provide increased education about polarity management, coupled with increased emphasis on information-sharing between team members.
- ❑ Identify polarity management champions on teams and in the organization.
- ❑ Integrate polarity management as a teamwork leadership competency.
- ❑ Foster a culture that supports the use of polarity management.
- ❑ Pay attention to the critical virtual team polarities:
  - Tasks *and* relationships
  - Formal *and* informal communication
  - Leveraging each member's unique skills, talents, perspectives, *and* having a unified team goal and purpose.



### Supply the Right Technology

- ❑ Select and provide technological tools that will work for all team members and are aligned with the team's tasks.
- ❑ Look for virtual tools that enable both formal and informal communication.

### Provide Training and Support to Virtual Teams

- ❑ Train team members on which virtual tools are best suited for which task and how to best use them.
- ❑ Educate managers about the possible performance impacts (both positive and negative) of scheduling a person simultaneously in too many or too few project teams. Renegotiate members' commitments to other teams when possible.
- ❑ Assist individual employees in their time management because multiple team memberships put employees under considerable time pressure in each team context.
- ❑ Establish norms regarding work hours and team member availability throughout the course of the team's work.
- ❑ Confirm team members have a solid foundation concerning how they will operate as a team (e.g., team charter, team-building).

## About the Research

This study employed a multi-treatment pretest-post-test quasi-experimental research design to explore the role of managed polarities in virtual teams' effectiveness. Teams were randomly assigned to a control or three treatment groups. All treatment groups completed a pre-survey assessment; they differ in terms of the treatment received (feedback, feedback with mid-point check-in, feedback with mid-point check-in and action planning). Approximately 6 months after the initial assessment, each team (treatment and control) was assessed again and asked to complete a measure of team effectiveness. Surveys were administered to all team members and the team leaders. Measures of team performance and task interdependence were collected from the team leaders, all other variables were collected from the team members and aggregated to the team level.

These teams were from 32 different organizations, which included for-profit, nonprofit, and government organizations. They represented a wide variety of industries (e.g., manufacturing, education, technology, healthcare, philanthropy/humanitarian aid) and geographic regions. The majority of team members included were originally from the North American region (45.2%), Western Europe (20.4%), Latin America (10.4%), Asia Pacific (12.7%), South Asia (7.7%), with remaining few members being from the Middle East, Eastern Europe, Africa, and Oceania. The sample average was 41.19 ( $SD = 10.12$ ) with an average team tenure of 2.99 years ( $SD = 2.92$ ). 43% of the sample was male and 57% female. The sample was generally well-educated with 14.5% having doctoral-level degrees, 37.1% master's-level degrees, 34.4% bachelor's degrees, 6.3% with some college, and only 7.7% with only a high-school diploma or equivalent.

## Resources and Suggested Readings

Leslie, J., Luciano, M., Mathieu, J. & Hoole, E. (2018). Challenge accepted: Managing polarities to enhance virtual team effectiveness. *People + Strategy*, 41(2), pp. 22-29. Retrieved from: [http://www.nxtbook.com/ygsreprints/HRPS/hrps\\_41\\_2\\_2018/index.php?startid=22](http://www.nxtbook.com/ygsreprints/HRPS/hrps_41_2_2018/index.php?startid=22)

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*Polarity management: Identifying and managing unsolvable problems.* Barry Johnson, 1992.

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## About the Authors

**Jean Brittain Leslie** is a senior fellow and director of Strategic Initiatives at the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®). Jean has published more than 90 pieces on leadership, assessment, and feedback in the form of peer-reviewed articles, popular-press articles, book chapters, and books. She can be reached at [lesliej@ccl.org](mailto:lesliej@ccl.org).

**Emily Hoole** is CCL's Client Solutions director—Middle East Region. Emily has published numerous articles and book chapters related to evaluation and organizational learning. She can be reached at [hoolee@ccl.org](mailto:hoolee@ccl.org).

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+1 800 780 1031 +1 336 545 2810 [info@ccl.org](mailto:info@ccl.org)



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**Greensboro, North Carolina**

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[info@ccl.org](mailto:info@ccl.org)

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+32 (0) 2 679 09 10  
[ccl.emea@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.emea@ccl.org)

**Addis Ababa, Ethiopia**

[ccl.ethiopia@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.ethiopia@ccl.org)

**Berlin, Germany**

[ccl.dach@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.dach@ccl.org)

**Johannesburg, South Africa**

[southafrica.office@ccl.org](mailto:southafrica.office@ccl.org)

**London, United Kingdom**

[ccl.uk@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.uk@ccl.org)

**Moscow, Russia**

[ccl.cis@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.cis@ccl.org)

**Asia Pacific**  
[www.ccl.org/apac](http://www.ccl.org/apac)

**Singapore**

+65 6854 6000  
[ccl.apac@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.apac@ccl.org)

**Gurgaon, India**

[cclindia@ccl.org](mailto:cclindia@ccl.org)

**Shanghai, China**

[ccl.china@ccl.org](mailto:ccl.china@ccl.org)

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