5 ACTIONS YOU CAN TAKE TO BECOME A MORE EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL CONTACT CENTER LEADER
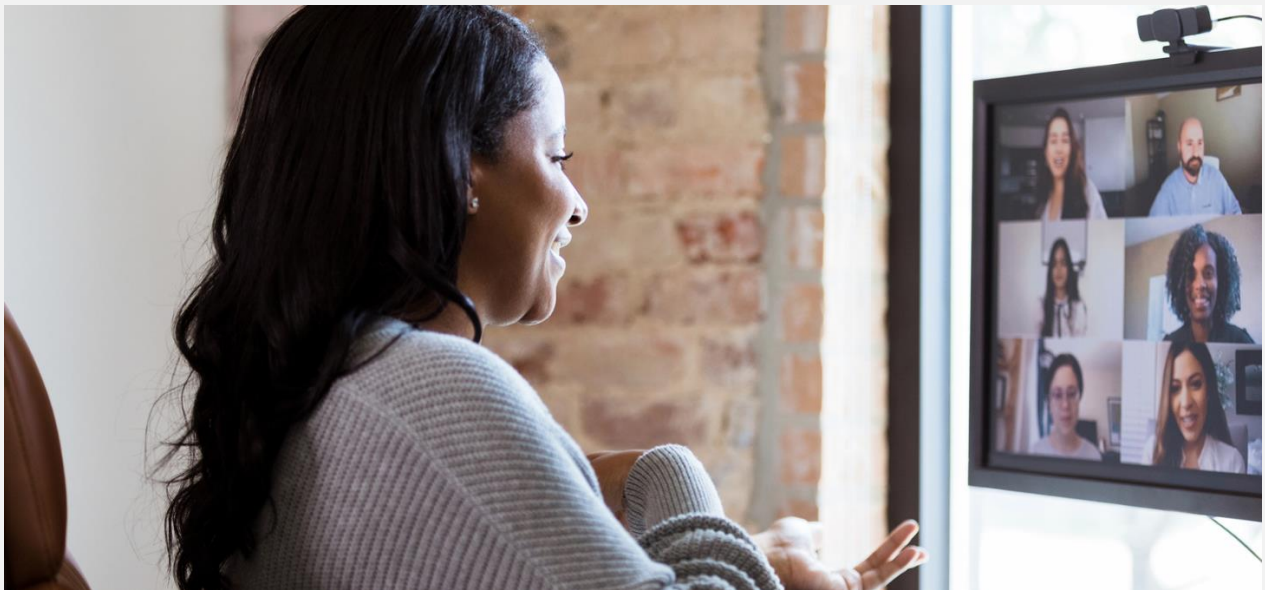
By Afshan Kinder | Published in ICMI: October 28, 2020

Being an inspirational leader was challenging enough in the past. However, new challenges have surfaced with the transition to virtual teams.

For example, "Tom" (not his real name) led and coached his virtual team the same way he did when his team was onsite. He simply used the phone or a web conferencing as the medium to connect. He assumed it was just the communication channel that changed and not the relationship. So, he fired off a spontaneous web conferencing meeting request to a team member. Upon connection, he was surprised by his team members' reaction of, "What now?," forced smiles and feigned well-being.

The problem was his focus was on virtualizing the workplace, with little forethought on the implications. Now, we know the transition to a virtual workplace had a huge ripple effect. It was a silent tsunami. Work-life balance became blurred. Significant parental challenges arose for those with school age children. Web conferencing technology required increased patience. On top of that, we left many team members to emotionally fend for themselves at home. As a

result, team members felt disconnected, isolated, and some struggled with their mental well-being.

People are social creatures. Lifetime friendships and bonds are often forged in the workplace. When I raise this as a pressing issue, my clients agree. Their questions are, "So, what should I do to change this trend? and "How do I lead and coach a virtual or a hybrid team?"

The short answer is past office behavior no longer works in a virtual environment. We must be thoughtful and deliberate as we create this new virtual environment. Here are five ways to get you started in building healthy and vibrant virtual teams.

1) Build Relationships with Personalized Interaction

In a typical day at the office, team members helped customers and interacted with colleagues. They saw friends around the lunchroom. They could celebrate a colleague's birthday or go for drinks after work to decompress. Now, remote team members only see colleagues during scheduled videoconferences.

I urge you to replicate and heighten team camaraderie. Act with intent and regularity when initiating contact with your team. Reach out through text messages, phone calls, or videoconferencing. Whatever the message, personalize it and make it relevant to your team member. A group email congratulating the whole team works well once or twice but does not replace authentic one-on-one conversations with each team member.

Always start with what is working well! Create spontaneous interactions by recognizing individual positive contributions. For example, an instant message could be, "Chantal, I appreciated the empathy you demonstrated with this customer. The customer thanked you and said, 'Thank you for understanding and going the extra mile for me!" Well done in making this customer feel special!" Make your feedback count by being prompt, specific, personalized, and relevant.

2) Heighten Your Observational and Emotional Intelligence (EQ) Skills

In face-to-face conversations, it's easy to build rapport. In a virtual setting, technology can create distractions due to video buffering or freezing. As a result, leaders must heighten their observational skills. Do not just listen to what is being said, analyze how it is being said. Notice your team member's vocal tone, posture, and eye contact. Do they seem happy? Are they anxious or upset?

We are in the fourth Industrial Revolution, and sharp EQ skills are essential as we convey authentic acknowledgment, empathy, and concern for our team members' wellbeing. Be curious. Go beyond the cursory, "How's it going today?" Ask more revealing questions such as, "What are you hearing from your customers today?," "How does that make you feel?," and "What can I

do to support you with that?" As they respond to each question, paraphrase their answers to ensure you understand their viewpoint. This will validate and support their feelings.

3) Be Accessible to Your Remote Team Members

In addition to reaching out to team members on a regular basis, be accessible to them! Here are three techniques to make your team feel supported and connected.

- First, schedule an hour every week for an A.M.A. ("Ask Me Anything") session. That means having an "Open Door" time slot when they can call or videoconference with you to discuss anything.
- Second, be transparent by making your daily schedule visible to your team. This also lets them know when you are not available. That way, they can turn to your backup for help.
- Third, have virtual coffee breaks with each team member. It builds trust and injects energy, which has a trickle effect right down to your customers.

4) Use Coaching to Drive Change

Remember my example of Tom? He connected spontaneously. That may have worked in an office setting. In the virtual world, all meetings need a clear agenda and a set of expectations. Every coaching session should be personalized based on your team member's needs. The question I always ask is, "What am I solving for my team member?" If I do not solve something for my team member, and for the business, then coaching has not been effective.

In addition, set technology expectations. Prior to your first call or videoconference, outline HOW you will conduct a virtual coaching session. As a best practice, both the team member and you should have webcams on during coaching. That way, you can see each other's facial expressions and body language. Ask them to take live calls while you listen via your contact center's call quality software. After each call, have a conversation where you lead them to self-discovery about their strengths and how to build that skill to mastery. If you want your team member to maintain any gains, you must coach once a week, at a minimum.

5) Leverage Live Calls for Immediate Feedback

Why do I advocate coaching to live calls? It has the highest rate of return when it comes to behavioral change. Think of it this way: If you are doing something new, like creating pivot tables in Excel, would you prefer instant help? Or would coaching given two weeks later make any difference? By providing instant feedback, your team members can practice on their next call while you listen. This creates instant accountability.

On the other hand, recorded calls also have a purpose. They work well for specific issues. That includes rare customer scenarios or specific actions, like generating a merchandise return. It can also be used to coach communication skills, such as tone, pace, and articulation. In addition, playing back recorded calls creates self-awareness, since the team member is listening to the

conversation as an observer, rather than as an active participant in the call. The choice of live calls or recorded calls during a coaching session always depends upon your performance goal.

While technology helps us communicate with people remotely, it is what you say and do during those interactions that creates a team. Heighten your observational and emotional intelligence skills, build relationships with personalized interaction, be accessible to your remote team members, use coaching as your instrument of change, and leverage live calls to gain the greatest return on coaching time.

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Start with these five techniques on a regular basis to lead and coach your virtual team. Do this well and you will be the one that other leaders talk about!

Afshan is a sales, service and contact center guru. Her superpower is her unique approach of inspiring clients to embrace fresh ideas, concepts, and cutting-edge strategies to spark and sustain organizational change. Her strategies have been successfully used by her Fortune 500 clients to simultaneously improve customer experience, revenue, and productivity. Clients have sustained these gains by building a foundation for all levels to be inspirational leaders and exceptional coaches by using her Elevate to Great strategies.

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