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## Virtual Leadership: A Qualitative Study

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### ABSTRACT:

This research explores how Leaders in various industries are adapting to becoming Virtual Leaders, it is inevitable that there are going to be challenges. As person-to-person leadership lurks in the darkness these days; Virtual Leadership is a crucial aspect of how we are having to conduct business today. Are you a Virtual Leader? Are you up for the challenge of entering into a whole new realm of leadership that has no shortage of stumbling blocks?

*Keywords:* Virtual leadership; Remote; Communication; Workforce; Leadership Theories

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### 1 INTRODUCTION

According to Barnard (2020), the current global situation has accelerated the trend towards remote working, however many businesses and leaders are struggling to adapt to this new way of life. In addition, remote collaboration will continue for the foreseeable future, with Gartner (2020) reporting that 74% of companies plan to shift some of their employees to remote working permanently after COVID-19. Many organizations have already shifted to long term or permanent remote working, with more companies joining the list each month. In this study, the researcher looks at the importance of Virtual Leadership in these uncertain times, as well as essential skills a Virtual Leader should have to manage remote teams.

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### 2 PURPOSE STATEMENT

This study is lunched to afford an unbiased perspective on the topic of a fairly new leadership style; Virtual Leadership.

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### 3 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND RESEARCH DESIGN

This study was conducted by utilizing a quantitative approach. Although the induction of case studies is not visibly stated in research, the approach has existed for quite some time. According to Castillo (2020), case studies are used in various disciplines; for example, psychology, education, social sciences, and business to name a few. Case studies are also known as a source of recollection of data; record and observation analysis (Cooper & Schindler, 2011). This case study uses a collective approach. Because the approach used in case studies is to examine situations as they occur; case studies are typically socially constructed and structured between the researcher, and the respondent (participants) to provide a deep understanding of a situation, or in this case subject matter. Crowe, Cresswell, Robertson, Huby, Avery, and Sheikh (2011) argue that case studies are often used to understand events and their effects and processes by emphasizing on contextual analysis of the event(s) or condition(s), and their interrelations when there is a need to obtain a comprehensive appreciation of a concern of interest in its natural every day setting.

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### 4 SOURCES OF INFORMATION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review consists of present virtual leadership and research and findings associated with common practice leadership styles, many dated back to early 1800s leadership theories. The works reviewed for the purpose of this study encompass the core foundations and theories relevant to leadership styles solely. These methodological approaches have greatly influenced research and theory in the field of leadership.

### DATA COLLECTION PLAN

The purpose of the study was to gain a better understanding of how the participants perceive Virtual Leadership in an organizational setting.

### ***SIGNIFICANCE AND POTENTIAL CONTRIBUTIONS***

Awareness of the significance of Virtual Leadership is essential for building a well-developed understanding of this new style of leadership which in its totally can be somewhat difficult, as one is relying on technology and no personal connection.

### ***ETHICAL CONSIDERATIONS***

This research concentrated on Virtual Leadership. In this study, the researcher was aware of the possibility of demonstrating an uncomfortable, personal, and private experience.

### ***EXPECTED OUTCOME***

This study was intended to afford its audience with the lived experiences of the participants.

### ***SETTING, POPULATION, SAMPLE***

The sample size for the study consisted of 6,713 participants nationwide. The intent of the study was to examine Virtual Leadership through the eyes and hands-on experiences of the participants who are actively working remotely. Participants were acquired via the use of SurveyMonkey and monitored continuously for a period of one year (April 2020 – April 2021) to ascertain saturation. Saturation was met at 3,135 responses.

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## **5 MATERIALS AND INSTRUMENTS**

The material and instruments used were SurveyMonkey and the NVivo 12 software. NVivo 12 is software that supports qualitative research by allowing the researcher to collect, organize, and analyze survey content. NVivo (2021) facilitates advanced analysis that leads to new knowledge and wider publishing. The following steps were taken to ensure proper handling of data and analysis.

1. First step consisted of labeling of each question as it was answered.
2. Second step involved reviewing the data.
3. Third step entailed that the data be reviewed a second time and compared with the survey output for accuracy.
4. Last, themes were created; these themes were analyzed and compared to find commonalities through the use of NVivo 12.

As Ehrlich (2005) suggests, these measures permit a strict method of data collection and data analysis, which was indispensable in obtaining thorough, reliable, and authentic information from participants.



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## 6 WHAT IS VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP

Barnard (2020) describes Virtual leadership as a form of leadership in which teams are managed via a remote working environment. Like traditional leadership roles, virtual leaders focus on motivating employees and helping teams accomplish their goals. Virtual leaders must take a different management approach compared to leading in an office, as team communication is not done in person, but rather through online and virtual mediums. As such, virtual leaders need a different skill set to leaders in an office setting.

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## 7 IMPORTANCE OF VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP

Many would concur that the pandemic has forced much of the workforce into remote working, and for many employees, this is the first time they have tried working from home. However even before the pandemic, working from home was an increasing trend with many saying the pandemic just sped up this process (Barnard, 2020):

- 4.7 million people were already working remotely from home before the COVID-19 pandemic (FlexJobs, 2021).
- 74% of companies plan to shift some of their employees to remote working permanently after COVID-19 (Gartner, 2021).
- Before the pandemic, 52% of global employees work remotely once a week, and 68% do so at least once per month (Owl Labs, 2021).

As shown in the above stats, companies were already starting to embrace remote working before the pandemic. As more and more teams become remote, the need for strong virtual leadership skills has grown (Barnard, 2020).

Subsequently, the way leaders interact with employees has changed. Virtual leaders cannot check in with workers the same way in-office managers/supervisors do, so they have to put their trust in workers' capabilities. This new type of leader needs to focus more on setting clear expectations and goals, as well as creating a culture of accountability.

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## 8 SURVEYMONKEY QUESTIONS AND FINDINGS

There were 6,713 participants in the study. Note: Saturation was met at 3,135 responses.

The following are the Research Questions and their findings:

1. Are your communications clear and concise?

This question focused on establishing the participants' communication abilities:

41 % expressed that they were not communicating clearly and concisely

9% expressed that they were not communicating clearly and their subordinates were confused

12% expressed that they were not communicating clearly, concisely, or effectively and their subordinates were frustrated

38 % expressed that they were communicating clearly and concisely

2. Are you encouraging open dialogue?

67 % expressed that they were encouraging open dialogue

33 % expressed that they were not encouraging open dialogue; they felt they dominate the conversations due to time restraints, technical issues, or lack of communication medium knowledge

3. Are you accessible enough?

87 % expressed they were accessible

13 % expressed that they were not accessible enough

4. Is the organization (are you) using the right communication methods?

72 % expressed that they have no choice in regard to the method used (e.g., MS Teams, Skype, WebEx, Azure, etc.).

18 % expressed that their organizations did not have the appropriate communication resources

10 % expressed that their organization is in the process of upgrading their communication platform

5. Are you being strategic enough in your Virtual environment?

This question was fundamental, the overall consensus was that:

47 % expressed that they were being strategic enough

53 % expressed that they were not strategic enough

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## 9 CHALLENGES OF VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP

According to Pragmatic Thinking (2021) communication is arguably one of the most important (and most challenging) aspects of virtual leadership to get right. In a traditional office environment, there's plenty of opportunity for face-to-face conversation to occur, including those off-the-cuff conversations that build rapport and provide opportunities for creative solutions to be uncovered. Here are areas of communication that virtual leaders need to keep in mind when managing remote working teams (para. 3):

- Communication with direct reports
- Communicating feedback
- Communication between team members
- Differences in communication styles

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## 10 RECOMMENDATIONS TO BOOST VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP SKILL SETS

Many would argue that leading a virtual team requires the same leadership skills and attributes as leading a traditional team, but is that really the case? According to the Center for Management & Organization Effectiveness (2021) while the key fundamentals of leadership hold true in both cases, virtual leadership scenarios offer unique and significant challenges.

Following are key areas where virtual leaders need to focus energy in order to lead effectively.

### *Communication*

Although leaders and team members are not in the same geographic location and cannot have a face-to-face conversation, effective communication is a key to success. The virtual world offers many different means of communication. These can include phone calls, emails, text messages, instant messaging, and video conferencing (Center for Management & Organization Effectiveness, 2021).

### *Trust*

According to Center for Management & Organization Effectiveness (2021) developing trust in a virtual environment is not as easy as walking down the hallway or going out to lunch to chat, with your team. When building virtual relationships with team members, relationships are built at the individual level. Remember the special needs of each person. It will be vitally important to have an open and honest relationship with a lot of feedback. A virtual leader must be willing to make themselves accessible and available to their team members.

### *Clarity*

Team members must have a clear understanding of what is expected of them.

### *Support*

The Center for Management & Organization Effectiveness (2021) website urges that Virtual leaders need to understand that working in a virtual environment can be isolating at times for team members. They do not have the energy and excitement that is created from working in an office with other team members. As a virtual leader, it will be very important to know how team members are doing emotionally. Share your support.

### *Empowerment*

Team members must feel they have the ability to exercise authority to ensure they can complete their assigned responsibilities. There could be quick decisions to be made without time to go through the communication challenges that virtual teams inherently face. Leaders must allow team members to make decisions and support the decisions that are made (Center for Management & Organization Effectiveness, 2021).

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## 11 CONCLUSION

The Virtual Leader should be a self-starter, be able to use technology, and hold the ability to increase communication frequency and balance the regularity and richness and depth of understanding. Be capable of establishing stronger personal relationships among team members, support virtual team performance, and facilitate the creation of these personal and social connections. The end result is that the Virtual Leader have the ability to recalibrate a team into action and increase performance, efficiency, and cohesiveness.

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**BIOGRAPHY**


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Dr. Giselle A. Castillo is a former AT&T service professional with 18 years' experience providing stellar telecommunication, customer service, leadership, financial analysis, and project and record management in diverse business settings. Dr. Castillo received a B.S. in Business Management and an M.B.A from the University of Phoenix (UOP), and was awarded a dual PhD in Organization and Management from Capella University for her studies in Emotional Intelligence (EI).

Dr. Castillo is a Subject Matter Expert (SME) in Leadership Styles, Organization and Management. She has authored a book; Emotional Intelligence and Non-Management Employee Reaction: A Qualitative Phenomenological Study, and has published numerous Leadership works in journals such as: The International Journal of Economics, Business, and Management Research (IJEEMR), the International Journal of Creative Research Thoughts (IJCRT), and the International Journal of Novel Research in Education and Learning (IJNREL), and three articles outside of her expertise related to Renal Cancer, and COVID-19, in the International Journal of Novel Research in Healthcare and Nursing (IJNRHN) for Higher Education purposes.

On her personal time, Dr. Castillo enjoys contributing and advocating higher education and professional growth through mentor and academic programs. Since 2008, Dr. Castillo has volunteered her time and knowledge, as an Academic Mentor for UOP. She is the former UOP Alumni Association, Los Angeles Chapter President (2013-2016), and the founding President for the Southern California Alumni Chapter (2016-2017).

Dr. Castillo is actively pursuing committee responsibilities with UOPs School of Advanced Studies (SAS) Special Interest Group, Center for Workplace Diversity and Inclusion Research, Women and Leadership Research Group, and Renal Cancer advocate opportunities with local cancer research organizations.

Dr. Castillo is dedicated and passionate about assisting individuals achieve their academic and personal objectives and is proud to be a life-long learner, educator, and researcher. One of her most prized possessions is a letter of academic excellence and recognition for having ascertained her doctoral degrees; this recognition was from The White House, President Barack Obama dated December of 2016.

She believes that knowledge is essential and takes great pride in supporting such regardless the subject matter. You can read more about Dr. Castillo and her endeavors in UOPs Research Hub, as she is a recognized figure in academia (<https://research.phoenix.edu/news/alumni-spotlight-giselle-castillo>) and <https://research.phoenix.edu/users/giselle-castillo>), and (<https://uphoenix.academia.edu/DrGiselleACastilloPhDMBABSBM>).