

An aerial photograph of a city street with white grid lines on a light-colored pavement. In the upper left, a black street lamp stands near a small group of people. A solid purple horizontal band covers the middle of the image, containing the title and subtitle. In the lower right, there is a cluster of colorful, stylized arrowheads pointing upwards and to the right, in shades of blue, purple, red, and teal. A single purple dot is positioned above this cluster.

Virtual Presence

How to Help Virtual Teams
Create Authentic Connections

Ariel

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Virtual Presence

Virtual presence is the ability to authentically connect and lead with true influence without the luxury of in-person communication.



In a survey of business leaders at the Global Leadership Summit in London, 34% said **more than half** of their company's full-time workforce would be **working remotely by 2020**.

Technology is changing the way businesses operate. More and more employees are working and collaborating from different locations—across time zones and countries, or even just across town. Telecommuting, working from home, remote workers, virtual teams—whatever you call it, this reality presents an entirely new set of challenges for leaders and employees alike.

After all, just because the technology exists to make virtual teams possible doesn't guarantee it will be successful. Within many organizations today, meetings are unproductive, collaboration and communication are suffering, and remote employees feel disconnected, unengaged, and undervalued. Help your leaders develop the leadership, communication, and relationship-building skills and habits they need to connect with their virtual teams.

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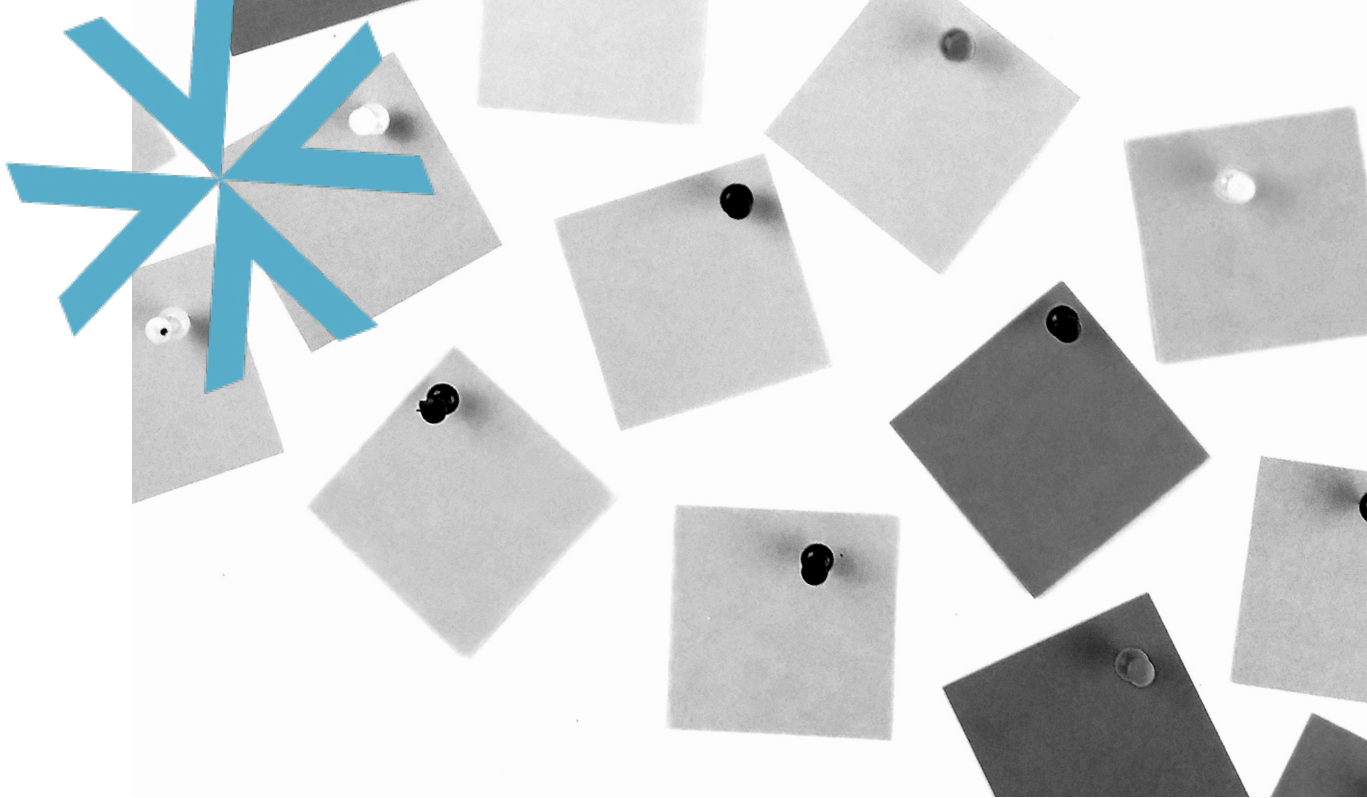
1. Understand the Importance of Allowing Employees to Work Remotely

Because of the complexities that come with having remote workers, many companies avoid offering this option. Here's why they shouldn't be so quick to write off remote working.

This is a job perk that helps with employee hiring and retention.

A 2017 state of the American workplace report found that **“flexible scheduling and work-from-home opportunities play a major role in an employee’s decision to take or leave a job.”** Even if it’s only for a few days a week, the “work from home” or “remote working” option is appealing for a number of reasons. It allows employees to:

- stay home with kids
- skip the commute
- concentrate in a quiet place (and avoid today’s popular open-office environments that come with their fair share of noise and distractions).



Higher employee engagement is linked to working remotely.

While it may seem scary to lose the ability to see and meet with your teams in the office, research has shown that there's nothing to fear. [Gallup's State of the American Workplace report](#) identified that working remotely is directly tied to engagement: employees who spend at least some of their time working remotely have higher engagement than those who don't ever work remotely. It's clear that having a flexible work location is a major factor in employees' overall satisfaction—consider allowing your employees to work remotely a few days a week, even if they live close to the office. Allowing your teams to choose their space shows them you trust them and eliminates small stresses that can come with commuting to an office.

Working remotely actually increases productivity.

According to a 2016 survey of American remote workers, 91% of people who work from home feel that they're [more productive than when they're in an office](#). In the State of Workplace Productivity report, 65% of survey respondents think that [a flexible and remote work schedule would increase their productivity](#).

If you're convinced that this option will make your business more productive, more diverse, and more appealing to job candidates, you're halfway there! The next step is to make sure that your team leads are prepared to effectively manage these employees from afar. Unfortunately, but not surprisingly, [it's easy for remote workers to feel left out](#). The “out of sight, out of mind” concept is valid, so leading these teams means being intentional, strategic, and empathetic when communicating. Here are some tips to help your organization build their virtual presence skills and keep your virtual teams engaged.



2. Plan Virtual Meetings for Collaboration and Inclusion

Be respectful of different time zones.

Many businesses make global and satellite offices bend to North American hours. While this is often done for valid reasons, it can be very trying for virtual employees. Instead, find times that work best for all parties involved. It's important to make sure that one person or team doesn't feel like they're the ones having to sacrifice every time. This may mean occasionally having to set meetings outside your normal business hours, but this gesture will go a long way in making these team members feel valued and building social capital. Try to plan meetings with teams in other time zones further out in advance than you normally would. This will ensure that your calendar doesn't fill up and knock out the only times that work for them.

Use video conferencing whenever possible.

According to the Social Science Research Network, [65% of people are visual learners](#). Modern video conferencing technology provides the perfect way to connect face-to-face and look at the same screen from afar. Using video immediately improves engagement on a variety of levels:

- allows participants to put faces with names
- helps easily convey and understand meaning through facial expressions and body language
- discourages multi-tasking.

Use agendas as strategic communication tools.

Agendas should be more than just a list of itemized topics; they should be strategic tools that set the tone of a meeting, help you share your vision, and encourage participation. To achieve this, include desired outcomes, key decisions to be made, and a list of attendees in addition to topics of discussion. Sending your agendas in advance of meetings, while requiring a little more forethought, will allow your team to better prepare responses, contributions, and updates. This will also help quieter, more reserved colleagues find their opportunities to speak up.

Take a moment before starting to get present and focused.

Log in a few minutes early in case you encounter unexpected snags with your technology. Review your agenda. As you reach for the phone to join the call, take a deep, steadying breath. Having a moment to breathe before dialing in will help clear your head and allow you to stay flexible and focused on the call. Taking a minute to make yourself truly present before a call also shows others on the call that you recognize their time is valuable and want to be the most productive version of yourself.

Keep attendee numbers appropriate for your meeting purpose.

People tend to be more alert and productive when there are fewer people on a call, and this makes it easier for them to contribute. Conference calls that require more than five or six participants should be reserved for “push” calls, where the message is communicated directly rather than being open for discussion. If you really need more people participating, make sure the moderator clearly sets the agenda and focuses on facilitating a discussion that engages all participants. If you’re using meeting software, take advantage of all the tools available, including polling, Q&A, chat boxes, and hand raising to keep the meeting interactive and ensure everyone stays tuned in and can play an active role.

Create a visual reminder of who’s on a conference call.

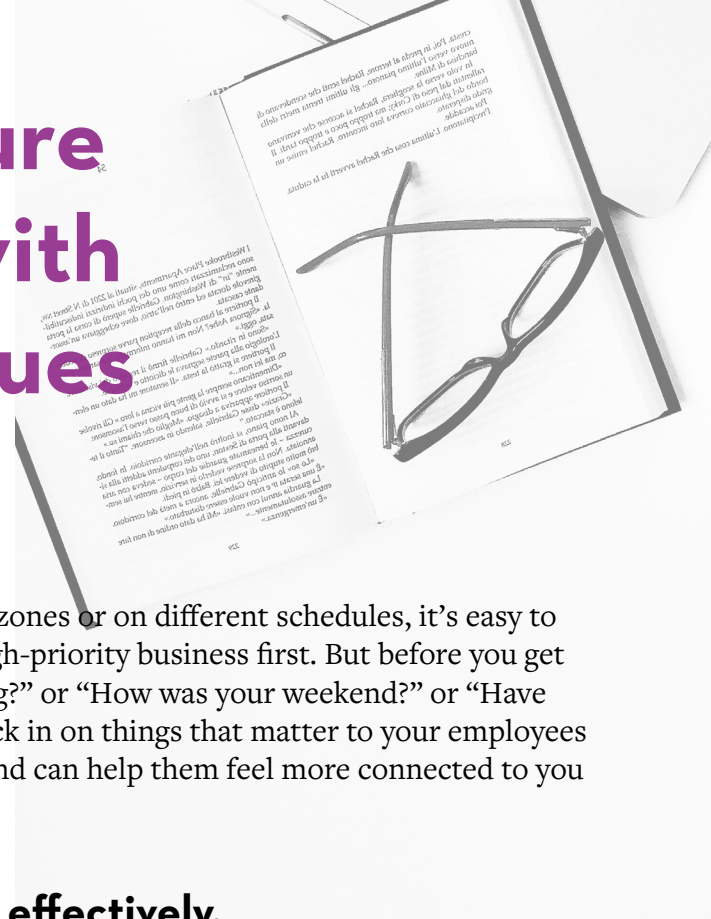
There are times when you might have a mixed group of in-person and virtual meeting participants. Video conferencing is a great way to encourage engagement and cohesiveness in such a situation, but if you don’t have access to video, write the names of call participants on a whiteboard or type them and share your screen so everyone can see the list. The visual reminder will help you include all participants, not just the ones you can see, and keep everyone feeling connected as a unit.

Answer the “Who, What, Where, How, and By When” at the conclusion of a meeting.

It’s safe to say that most of us have fallen victim to terribly ineffective meetings. In fact, [the global epidemic of unproductive meetings wastes an average of \\$37 billion per year](#). Make yours more effective by clearly communicating expectations, responsibilities, and timelines to help ensure that everyone is on the same page. End calls and meetings with clear, explicit instructions so team members understand who’s responsible for what and the specific tasks on their to-do lists. Most importantly, never assume that expectations are clear.



3. Build and Nurture Relationships with Virtual Colleagues



Check in on personal matters.

When you're managing employees who are in different time zones or on different schedules, it's easy to feel that you need to squeeze in time or rush to get to the high-priority business first. But before you get down to it, start the conversation with “How are things going?” or “How was your weekend?” or “Have any fun plans for the summer?” Taking a few minutes to check in on things that matter to your employees outside of work lets them know that you care, builds trust, and can help them feel more connected to you as a boss—even from miles away.

Ask questions, solicit opinions, and listen effectively.

A lot of relationship building and ideation can occur during coffee breaks or passing conversations in the hallway. Virtual employees are often accidentally left out of the loop both socially and around important project discussions. Not only does this hurt engagement, but you might also miss out on valuable information or insight they could offer. Make a habit of reaching out to virtual colleagues for their opinions, and encourage them to also reach out proactively. If you have an impromptu meeting with part of your team in the hallway, circle back with virtual team members to update them or see if they have anything to add.

Virtual leaders must make themselves available, be intentional with starting conversations, and constantly be honing their listening skills. Without the benefit of “seeing someone around” in person and the body language and eye contact that comes with it, it can be challenging to truly understand how remote workers are feeling. Ask questions to get them to articulate what's on their mind, listen for their values, and then use what you learn to tailor your approach.

Extend opportunities for social connection and celebration to your virtual colleagues.

Relationships frequently come down to the little things. When company milestones are reached and remote employees aren't able to physically participate in the celebrations, try video chatting them so they can be there virtually. If you can't reward their hard work by taking them out to lunch, send them an eGift card to show your praise and appreciation. Depending on budgets, offer to fly them into town for the company holiday party. These little connections form the foundation of strong, trusting relationships, which in turn make a big difference later on when there's organizational change or projects get tough.



4. Communicate Expressively for Clarity and Engagement

Make sure your voice is congruent with your message.

In the virtual medium, it's easy to be misconstrued since nonverbal social signals are limited. Reading between the lines can be hard and people may be hesitant to clarify your intentions. Pay close attention to word choice and tone. Ask yourself, "What do I want my audience to think or feel? Is the way I'm communicating aligned with my intention?" For high-stakes communications, it's a good idea to practice with a colleague over the phone. Tell them your intention and ask them to give you feedback on the tone of your delivery. Is your inspirational message coming across as preachy? Your energy as agitation? Better to know in advance.

Slow down, use pauses, and pay attention to vocal tone and variety.

We've all been in virtual meetings or webinars where the presenter drones on in a flat, monotone voice over a PowerPoint, speaks so quickly or quietly that you have to strain to hear, or has what you might call a—unique—vocal quality that inspires you to download the slides and log off. Slowing down, using a warm vocal tone, and embracing pauses will allow others to truly listen and understand your presentation. Remember that your physical demeanor can seep into your vocal tone. For example, smiling while speaking will add a measure of friendliness to your voice, while standing up and walking around will add energy. Conversely, slumping in your chair compresses your diaphragm and adds undertones of stress.

Don't underestimate the value of email.

[According to a 2017 survey by Hubspot](#), 86% of professionals prefer to use email when communicating for business purposes. It's undoubtedly ingrained in today's business culture, and it can be extremely convenient if paired with strategic writing. When communicating via email, make sure you focus on providing only what your reader needs to know, use headlines to increase readability, and put your bottom line on top—in fact, if you can, decide your #1 takeaway and make it the first line of your email. Remember these two words: clear and concise. Lastly, proofread before you hit send! There are few things more frustrating than reading a typo-ridden email, knowing the person who sent it doesn't think you're worth the time of a second read-through.



We Can Help

Did you know that **79% of professionals** work on virtual teams, yet **84%** do not feel prepared for today's virtual work requirements?



Ariel's experienced facilitators can help your employees develop an awareness of their strengths and challenges relating to virtual presence—and give them practical tools and coaching to improve. Our highly experiential approach to virtual presence is grounded in our vPRES model:

Present

- Focused on the now
- Flexible and adaptable
- Aware of what is happening in the virtual room
- Structures a meeting environment for others to be virtually present

Reaching Out

- Builds trusting relationships
- Asks questions and solicits opinions
- Uses strong listening skills
- Shows empathy and understanding

Expressive

- Voice, body, facial expressions and message are congruent
- Communicates with energy and passion

Self-Knowing

- Self-confident and prepared virtual interactions
- Has an awareness of strengths and challenges in communicating virtually and the courage and focus to keep working on them



Want to see how Ariel can help your virtual team thrive? Explore our Virtual Presence program or contact us today to learn more.