

How telecommuting can cause leadership issues for your company

August 25 2016



When leaders are remote, problems arise in the team. Credit: BYU

Google "telecommuting" and you'll find business articles like:

"Four reasons why telecommuting is bad for business" or: "Is

telecommuting an effective way to work" and, of course: "Four reasons telecommuting is good for employees"

Clearly, the jury is still out on the practice. Some companies do it, some don't. Others, like Yahoo, used to do it but have now said no more.

Wherever your organization falls on the spectrum of telecommuting and virtual teams, new research out of Georgia Southern University and Brigham Young University reveals something about leadership and telecommuting that everyone should take into consideration.

"We found that people are biased toward the people they are physically located with," said Cody Reeves, assistant professor of Organizational Leadership and Strategy at BYU. "People who are working remotely on a team can be at a disadvantage when it comes to being seen as a leader."

In other words, if a company has a supervisor at headquarters communicating virtually with the rest of a team physically located together, it's more likely to have leadership problems. We're talking power struggles, confusion, communication issues—all the things execs don't want when they're trying to get work done.



Telecommuting can be problematic when your team leader is remote. Credit: BYU

The researchers' advice is simple: If you want an effective leader when you have telecommuters on the team, make sure the leader is either physically located with the majority of the group, or make sure everyone is telecommuting.

Reeves and colleagues at Georgia Southern, Iowa and Oklahoma State tested their theories of [leadership](#) by setting up 84 four-person teams of college students, then randomly assigning them team configurations: Some were physically together, some were partially co-located and partially virtual, and others were completely virtual (interaction only through technology).

The researchers then had the teams complete a decision-making activity (in this case, act as top management for a fictional Hollywood studio tasked with green-lighting the production of one or more screenplays) and then answer a survey about the experience wherein they rated other team members.

"We learned that if you want to have a clear leader emerge, you are better off having them all located face to face or all working remotely," Reeves said. "It's when you start mixing and matching—some on site, some virtual—that's when the real confusion comes into play."

If anything, Reeves thinks the research should give companies pause when considering telecommuting policies. That's something that didn't happen enough 10 years ago when telecommuting became all the rage.

"They were so concerned about whether or not they could do it, they never stopped to think if they should," Reeves said, invoking the famous Jurassic Park quote. "Fortunately, many companies now appear to be taking a more deliberate approach when deciding whether and when [telecommuting](#) makes sense for their operation."

Steven Charlier, assistant professor of management at Georgia Southern University, is the lead author of the study, which published in *The Leadership Quarterly*. Greg Stewart (University of Iowa) and Lindsey Greco (Oklahoma State University) are also coauthors.

More information: Steven D. Charlier et al, Emergent leadership in virtual teams: A multilevel investigation of individual communication and team dispersion antecedents, *The Leadership Quarterly* (2016). [DOI: 10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.05.002](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.leaqua.2016.05.002)

Provided by Brigham Young University

Citation: How telecommuting can cause leadership issues for your company (2016, August 25)
retrieved 25 April 2024 from

<https://phys.org/news/2016-08-telecommuting-leadership-issues-company.html>

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