New leaders emerge as organizations go to virtual work spaces, says study

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Research from BYU shows new leaders emerge when work teams go virtual. Credit: Brigham Young University

When work meetings shifted online this spring, some may have noticed new standouts among their colleagues. According to new research,

members of virtual teams identify leaders in significantly different ways compared to members of in-person teams.

The brand new study looked at "emergent leaders"—those who lack formal authority but are recognized as leaders by team members—in teams with varying levels of virtual interaction. Researchers found that in face-to-face gatherings, team members value those with "classic" leadership characteristics, such as extroversion and intelligence, but in virtual settings, those qualities take a backseat.

Online, perhaps because there are fewer cues available for human interaction and more opportunities for miscommunication, team members gravitate toward those who take concrete steps to ensure achievement, rather than toward those with charismatic personalities.

"On a virtual team, it's more important than in a face-to-face meeting to stand out as the one who helps others," said study coauthor Cody Reeves, an assistant professor at the Marriott School of Business at Brigham Young University. "Those who take the time to pause and assist others with tasks are more likely to be viewed as leaders."

Perceived differences between virtual and in-person leaders were "stark," according to Reeves. While it remained essential for leaders in virtual teams to connect socially, successful leadership online was driven primarily by small actions like monitoring timelines, providing feedback, and coordinating teamwork.

For the study, researchers observed 220 student teams at two Midwestern universities who met to work on assigned projects mostly virtually, mostly in person or in a mix of the two. The students completed surveys about their own and their team members' characteristics and behaviors, as well as whom they considered to be team leaders. Combining that data with transcripts of the students' virtual

interactions, the researchers identified patterns in how leaders emerge across the spectrum of virtual to in-person teams.

As virtual work becomes more common for organizations, managers and team members alike would benefit from understanding that leadership traits and behaviors impact leadership perceptions differently in different virtual contexts, authors said. For example, organizations should not automatically promote individuals who have distinguished themselves as emergent leaders from a more in-person (and low virtual) context to leadership roles in a highly virtual context.

"In virtual environments, our actions speak loudly," said fellow study author Steven Charlier, a professor of management at Georgia Southern University. "The 'soft' skills that traditional managers rely on might not translate easily to a virtual environment."

Reeves agreed, noting that "a 'natural leader' who doesn't usually engage in these specific leader-like behaviors but always kind of 'has it' needs to be extra careful—because those are the types that are at the highest risk of no longer being viewed as a leader in virtual contexts."

With the "new normal" of work online, "now is the time for organizations and employees to gain virtual leadership competencies," said study lead author Radostina Purvanova of Drake University. "These are the skills of the future. Those companies that have already embraced virtuality are now reaping the benefits—and the rest of us must catch up quickly, or else we will simply be left behind."