


# Chapter 4

## From Distance to Connection: Engaging Leadership Development in Virtual Settings

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter explores the practical and pedagogical strategies for engaging students in virtual teams within management education to prepare future leaders for an increasingly digital and distributed workplace. Drawing on empirical research and original assignments developed from over 15 years of teaching and 5 years of serving as the director of online and in-person MBA programs, the chapter provides instructors with evidence-based, hands-on learning assignments. Assignments are designed around three core learning outcomes: leading effectively, analyzing critically, and acting strategically. The chapter describes specific exercises, including a Media Analysis, Leader Interview Project, Group Dinner, and a Virtual Case Study to illustrate how students can build relationships, share knowledge, and practice leadership in virtual contexts. By embedding real-world relevance and engagement strategies into course design, educators can support the development of impactful leaders who are equipped to thrive in the evolving digital landscape of modern organizations.*

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## INTRODUCTION

Designing a modern online course, particularly one focused on virtual teams and leadership, requires an intentional, interactive framework that integrates theoretical learning with hands-on practice and real-world application. This combination is essential for developing and refining the core leadership and collaboration skills students need to succeed in virtual environments. Research consistently underscores that engagement in virtual teams is not something that can be passively assumed; it requires deliberate and sustained efforts, especially when managing the various stages of the virtual team (Purvanova et al., 2021).

To promote sustained engagement, course designs must consider the challenges inherent in virtual teams, such as communication barriers, differing time zones, and varying levels of participation across team members. A well-structured virtual course should not only provide content and assignments but also continuously involve students through regular interaction and feedback loops. Interactive components, such as synchronous and asynchronous discussions, peer feedback, and reflective journaling, provide multiple opportunities for students to engage meaningfully with the course material, their peers, and the practical application of leadership concepts. This constant engagement ensures that students are not just passively absorbing information but are actively involved in a process of learning and development that extends beyond the theoretical to the practical. Engagement in virtual team settings is a dynamic process that must be carefully cultivated from the beginning to the end of the team and projects lifecycle (Panteli, Yalabik, & Rapti, 2019).

To keep students engaged throughout the phases of the course, instructors must employ strategies that facilitate active participation and prevent disengagement. This includes clear and frequent communication, offering flexibility in how students contribute to group work (for example, providing options for synchronous or asynchronous participation), and ensuring that all students feel their voices are heard. Additionally, research shows that the effectiveness of engagement is heavily influenced by the leadership behaviors exhibited within the virtual team. Leaders must be trained to recognize signs of disengagement and employ techniques to bring team members back into the fold, whether through setting clear expectations, fostering trust, or using inclusive decision-making processes (Purvanova et al., 2021). The role of the online instructor becomes that of a virtual team leader, providing ongoing encouragement and guidance to maintain high levels of participation, motivation, and accountability.

Like many online courses, my online MBA Leadership course was developed around the time of the COVID-19 pandemic and has since undergone a great deal of thoughtful revision. The rapid shift to digital learning in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the stark differences between Emergency Remote Teaching

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