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Telecommuting Can Challenge Leadership Efforts

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Researchers from Georgia Southern University and Brigham Young University have found an "in-person" bias whereby workers are inclined toward people within the same physical location.

"People who are working remotely on a team can be at a disadvantage when it comes to being seen as a leader," said Dr. Cody Reeves, assistant professor of Organizational Leadership and Strategy at Brigham Young University.

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.

Researchers discovered common management problems associated with telecommuting include power struggles, confusion, communication issues — all the things execs don't want when they're trying to get work done.

Investigators have the following advice: 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, the University of 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.

The configurations included matching teams physically together, creating teams that were partially co-located and partially virtual, and having teams that were completely virtual (interaction only through technology).

The researchers then had the teams complete a decision-making activity, then answering 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.