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Clear-to-Climb: Brain-Based Leadership Framework for Virtual Teams

Introducing models of structured communication to promote openness, active listening, and constructive team conversations in virtual spaces.

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Executive Summary

In the post-pandemic era, virtual teams are essential, bringing both opportunities and challenges. Traditional leadership struggles with the absence of social cues in digital work, leading to brain-based leadership, which merges neuroscience and dialogue to improve psychological safety and communication.

CLEAR-to-CLIMB is a **brain-based leadership framework** designed for improving virtual leadership by combining leader readiness practices (**CLEAR**) with a dialogic communication process (**CLIMB**). The framework addresses various team climate issues that affect trust and performance, enabling leaders to enhance adaptability, resilience, and creativity in remote settings. This white paper identifies gaps in current leadership practices and introduces two frameworks: **CLEAR** practices focus on clarity, listening, engagement, adaptability, and resilience to boost team dynamics. **CLIMB Ladder of Dialogue**: A structured communication approach promoting openness, active listening, and constructive conversation.

Introduction

Brain-based leadership redefines virtual leadership by emphasizing the stewardship of our nervous systems and the art of crafting meaningful conversations. This perspective underscores that leadership is not merely about setting a course or making decisions; it involves nurturing the neural, relational, and cultural conditions that foster trust, creativity, and coherence. In a world increasingly driven by technology, the primary threat is not just physical distance but the potential for disconnection. Dialogue becomes essential, bringing humanity back into digital collaboration.

By applying brain-based insights to enhance their presence (**CLEAR**) and structure conversations effectively (**CLIMB**), leaders transform every interaction into an opportunity to cultivate empathy and collective intelligence, transcending the barriers of screens and time zones. This approach ensures that relationships remain vibrant in virtual workplaces, emphasizing the importance of intentional dialogue for team alignment and psychological safety.

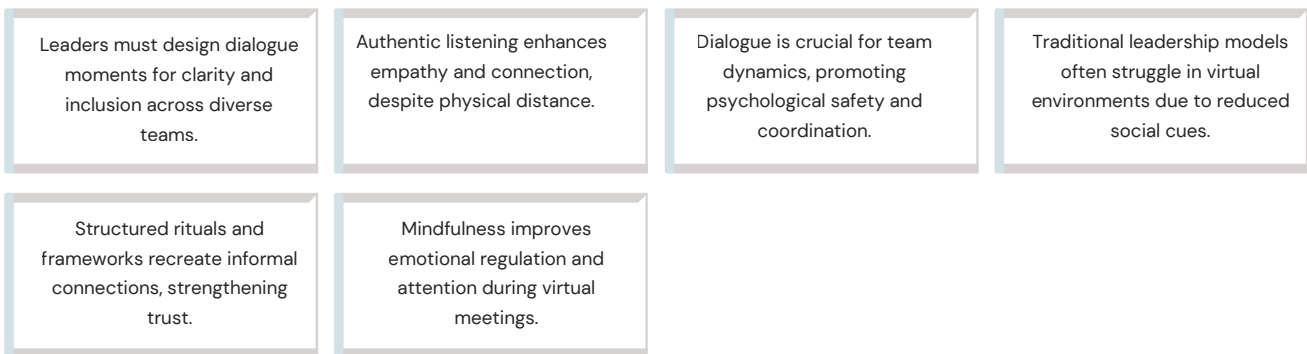
The frameworks presented draw on adult development, systems thinking, motivational science, dialogic theory, and neuroscience to offer a holistic approach to virtual leadership—one that emphasizes clear communication, intentional dialogue, and the conditions that support human flourishing in complex, distributed environments.

Virtual Teams: Navigating New Challenges

Virtual work has surged over 300% since 2019, turning distributed teams into the norm but introducing neurological and relational challenges. Reduced sensory cues and constant digital stimulation can lead to heightened stress and impair creativity, learning, and trust. Unlike co-located work, virtual collaboration lacks stabilizing signals, resulting in emotional contagion and misunderstandings.

Effective virtual leadership requires regulating team dynamics through intentional dialogue, which fosters neural synchrony and emotional stability. Traditional leadership methods often fail to meet the neurobiological needs of virtual teams. Leaders must create psychological safety and use dialogue to promote clarity and connection.

KEY INSIGHTS to EFFECTIVE VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP



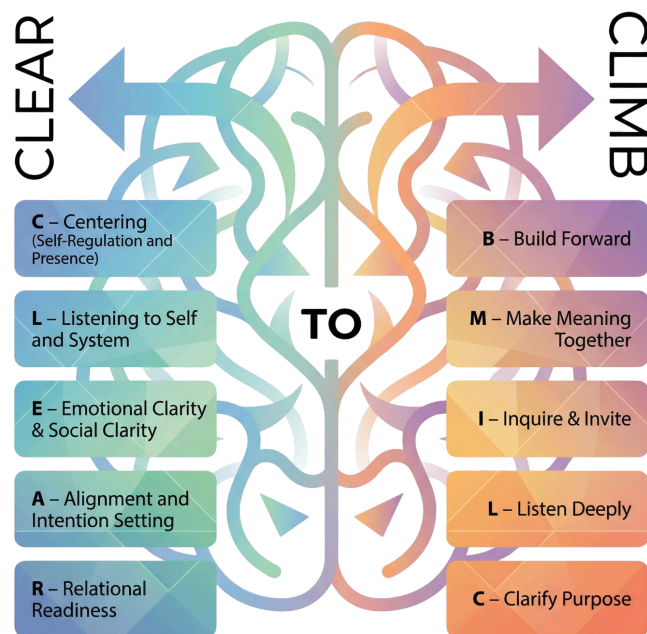
The CLEAR Framework aids in reducing ambiguity and enhancing psychological presence.

The CLIMB framework promotes high-quality dialogue and coordinated action, ensuring clarity and inclusion.

Key Insight: In virtual work, the absence of rich social cues places a greater cognitive and emotional load on individuals, making leadership less about control and more about actively shaping the conditions that support regulation, sensemaking, and collective coherence.

THE CLEAR-to-CLIMB Virtual Leadership Framework

The **CLEAR-to-CLIMB** Virtual Leadership Framework presents two brain-based leadership models. This framework integrates leader readiness (**CLEAR**) with a dialogic communication process (**CLIMB**) to address challenges in digital collaboration. It enhances communication through evidence-backed strategies and observable behaviors. By leveraging neuroscience, the models within this framework offer a five-step dialogic map, enabling leaders to effectively navigate complex or emotionally charged situations.



To improve virtual leadership, organizations, leaders, and their teams should focus on clarity, connection, and meaning-making using the **CLEAR** and **CLIMB** models within the **CLEAR-to-CLIMB** framework.

Key Strategies to Consider

- Establishing predictable meeting structures
- Reducing cognitive load
- Utilizing verbal cues
- Incorporating practices for attention and emotional balance

Preparing for CLEAR-to-CLIMB



The **CLEAR** model within the framework provides practices for leaders to enhance their mindset and presence in virtual teams:

The **CLIMB** model within the framework provides practices for leaders to enhance team communication in virtual settings:

C — Centering (Self-Regulation & Presence): Grounding micro-practices before engaging with others.

L — Listening to Self and System: Awareness of personal state and team dynamics.

E — Emotional Clarity & Social Clarity: Clarify emotional goals for interaction.

A — Alignment & Intention Setting: Ensure alignment in purpose and values.

R — Relational Readiness: Prepare for effective relational interactions.

C — Clarify Purpose: Reduces confusion and helps the brain make sense of information.

L — Listen Deeply: Deep listening promotes trust, increases neural synchrony, and reduces defensiveness.

I — Inquire & Invite: Generative inquiry fosters creativity and reduces rigid, threat-based thinking.

M — Make Meaning Together: Meaning-making creates coherence in the brain's predictive models.

B — Build Forward: Action planning boosts motivation and reduces uncertainty.

Why Dialogue Matters

Dialogue has a rich history in various civilizations, evident in Sumerian texts, the Mahabharata, and Plato's works, serving as a tool for inquiry and collective learning. Scholars like David Bohm and William Isaacs promote dialogue to challenge assumptions and encourage coherence through skills like listening and respect. Bushe and Marshak emphasize its role in transformative organizational development via new conversational patterns. Overall, dialogue fosters creativity and capacity in groups, especially in virtual settings, by establishing clear rhythms, purposes, and spaces for deep listening.

Integrating historical, philosophical, and scientific perspectives, dialogue emerges as a foundation for inquiry, learning, and organizational transformation. Through dialogic practice, groups transcend habitual patterns of thought, unlocking deeper creativity, understanding, and collective capacity for change.

KEY COMPONENTS OF DIALOGUE

Shared
Meaning

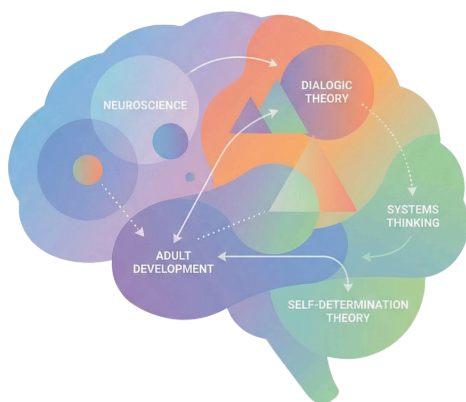
Suspension of
Assumptions

Recognition of
Microcultures

Ongoing
Emergence

Impersonal
Participation

In virtual work, dialogic foundations become even more critical: with fewer sensory cues, dialogue must be more intentional, structured, and neurologically informed.



“In true dialogue, we are not trying to win; we are trying to create a field in which we can think together.” — Isaacs

Integrating Theory into the Frameworks

Leadership is a meaning-making practice grounded in how we interpret experience, regulate emotion, and engage with complexity, within ourselves and with others. As leaders develop, so does their capacity to pause, reflect, and take perspective, allowing for more intentional, adaptive responses rather than reactive ones. From a brain-based lens, emotions and social interactions are constructed and predictive, shaping how safety, trust, and motivation are experienced in real time. Leadership, therefore, is not simply directive—it is regulatory, relational, and deeply dialogic. Through intentional dialogue, shared meaning emerges, enabling teams to move from individual interpretation to collective understanding. Within this, environments that support clarity, autonomy, growth, and connection foster the conditions for sustainable engagement, learning, and performance; creating the foundation for leaders and teams to move from clarity to meaningful action.

THEORY IN PRACTICE

Adult development theory, particularly Kegan's constructive-developmental theory, explains why some leaders handle complexity better by refining knowledge for uncertainty management.

Organizations function as dynamic systems shaped by emotional exchanges, with leadership promoting alignment through sensemaking and dialogue.

Neuroscience shows that leadership occurs in brains that constantly predict and respond to social cues. When individuals feel psychologically safe, their nervous systems shift from survival responses to reflective thinking, enhancing dialogue, meaning-making, and collaboration. Thus, leadership is fundamentally neurobiological and relational, rooted in the balance of regulation, perception, and shared understanding.

Self-Determination Theory explains three psychological needs: autonomy, competence, and relatedness, which are essential for thriving. Leaders can boost intrinsic motivation by setting clear expectations, allowing autonomy, and fostering belonging.

Barrett's theory of constructed emotion underscores the need for awareness and emotional regulation, as the brain interprets intentions through physical cues. In virtual communication, reduced cues may lead to misinterpretations and emotional fatigue unless leaders promote psychological safety.

Through intentional dialogue, shared meaning emerges, enabling teams to move from individual interpretation to collective understanding.

Mindfulness Practices as Neural Preparation

Leaders must prepare their nervous systems for the demands of virtual communication before implementing **CLEAR** practices. Research shows that a leader's physiological and emotional state influences team climate even before interaction begins. In virtual settings, the lack of sensory cues increases the risk of misinterpretation, making it essential for leaders to attune to their internal state to foster openness rather than defensiveness. Stress and uncertainty can impair cognitive functions, leading to reactive cycles that impact team dynamics.

Neuroscience highlights the neurobiological nature of leadership interactions, where hormones like oxytocin and dopamine play roles in trust and motivation. Properly regulating one's internal state enhances collaboration and psychological safety. Neural preparation is foundational for leadership, shifting from automatic reactions to intentional presence, and encompasses practices like centering, active listening, emotional clarity, intentional alignment, and relational readiness.

In virtual teams, where communication relies on voice and presence, prepared leaders create conditions for meaningful dialogue, trust, and safety, making **CLEAR** practices effective.

LEADER BENEFITS

Improved Emotional Regulation

Reduced stress and reactive cycles.

Increased Empathy

Greater openness to team perspectives.

Enhanced Decision-Making

Cognitive clarity under pressure.

Neurodivergent Support

Strengthened connection and inclusion.

Combining leader readiness (CLEAR) with a dialogic communication process (CLIMB).

Brain-based leadership redefines virtual leadership as stewardship over emotional climates and psychological safety, rather than just task management. In diminished sensory environments, leaders become emotional architects and co-regulators of stress.

Micro-Practices Leaders Can Implement Right Away

CLEAR micro-practice: The 3-breath RESET

CLIMB micro-practice: Start meetings with questions rather than solutions

Integrated micro-practice: Conduct a one-minute energy check

Early Virtual Leadership Adjustments

- Camera-neutral policies
- Structured turn-taking
- Inclusivity in chat and voice discussions
- Sensory-friendly slides for neurodivergent accessibility
- Equitable consideration of time zones

Embracing individual differences with flexible communication and sensory-friendly meetings is vital. Training in brain-based facilitation and accessible tools fosters trust and collaboration. Leaders encounter challenges like cognitive load and misalignment; the **CLEAR** framework aids in reducing ambiguity and enhancing psychological presence. The **CLIMB** framework promotes high-quality dialogue and coordinated action, ensuring clarity and inclusion. Implementing these models enhances collaboration and decision-making across distances and cultures.

These practices shift virtual communication from transactional to collaborative, combating relational drift and enhancing empathy and trust. By embracing **CLEAR** and **CLIMB**, leaders create conditions for thriving teams where individuals feel safe, connected, and able to collaborate effectively. Ultimately, successful virtual leadership is about understanding the human need for safety and connection, leading to resilient and innovative teams.

CLEAR Practices

These practices help leaders prepare their mindset and presence for effective dialogic interactions.

C

C – Centering (Self-Regulation & Presence): Grounding micro-practices before engaging others:

- 2-minute breath reset before meetings
- Morning somatic check-in for energy and tension
- Set a daily leadership intention (e.g., curiosity)
- Moment of stillness before decision-making
- Identify the emotional tone for the day

L

L – Listening to Self and System: Awareness of personal state and team dynamics

- Reflect on your inner narrative
- Observe the team’s emotional climate
- Evaluate communication tone
- Conduct a bias check on assumptions
- Monitor team energy and offer support

E

E – Emotional Clarity & Social Clarity: Clarify emotional goals for interactions

- Define psychological safety for meetings
- Identify and release assumptions before entering the interaction
- Perform an empathy scan for team struggles
- Set emotional boundaries for the day
- Engage in acts that promote team connection

A

A – Alignment & Intention Setting: Ensure alignment in purpose and values

- Write daily intention for key conversations
- Reaffirm alignment with team objectives
- Revisit the team’s shared purpose weekly
- Connect proactively with a team member
- Reflect on potential misalignments

R

R – Relational Readiness: Prepare for effective relational interactions

- Send a morning check-in to a team member
- Address any team dynamics needing attention
- Assume positive intent before responding
- Ensure clarity and manageability for neurodivergent inclusion
- Reflect on trust-building at day’s end



CLEAR “5-Minute Morning Routine”

Breathwork

Bodyscan

Emotional labeling

Intention setting

Relational readiness check

CLEAR “30-Second Pre-Meeting Reset”

State your intention and desired emotion.

Create a safety cue for the interaction.



RECOMMENDED

CLIMB Practices

The framework for effective, clear, team communication in a virtual setting.

CLIMB

C—Clarify Purpose: L—Listen Deeply:

Reduces ambiguity—triggered threat responses and primes the brain's predictive systems for coherence.

Leaders should clearly state the purpose and desired outcomes, define scope, and ask how to make the conversation useful.

Teams should share needs and expectations upfront.

Provide agendas in advance to reduce ambiguity.

Promotes trust, increases neural synchrony and reduces defensive posturing.

Leaders facilitate sharing, reflect without judgment, and notice emotional cues.

Teams should listen to understand and acknowledge contributions.

Allow alternative participation methods and normalize silence.

I—Inquire and Invite:

Generative inquiry fosters creativity and reduces rigid, threat-based thinking.

Leaders ask open questions and invite dissent.

Teams offer respectful alternative views and ask clarifying questions. Provide written prompts and use unstructured turn-taking.

M—Making Meaning Together:

Creates coherence in the brain's predictive models.

Leaders identify patterns, use visuals, and confirm shared understanding.

Teams co-synthesize ideas and highlight resonant or unresolved topics.

Utilize shared documents for clarity.

B—Build Forward:

Action planning boosts motivation and reduces uncertainty.

Leaders define actions, owners, timelines, and debrief conversations.

Teams commit to responsibilities and share constraints.

Provide written next steps and accommodate time zone differences.

Team-Based Practices

Team-based practices enhance **CLEAR** and **CLIMB** for effective virtual dialogue, promoting clarity and psychological safety.

Co-Regulate the Space: Start meetings with grounding pauses, use camera presence intentionally, signal when needing clarity, and address confusion early.

Practice Shared Clarity: Restate goals, check alignment, provide structured updates, and name assumptions.

Listen for the System: Focus on patterns, invite missing voices, track group meaning, and clarify intent.

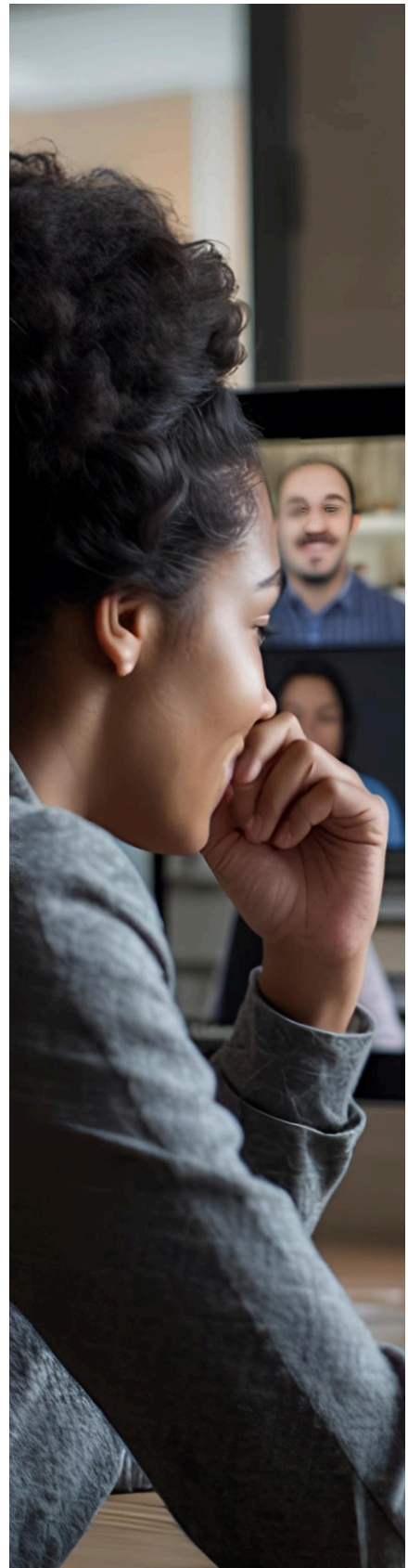
Reframe Questions: Use open questions, invite perspectives, and explore constraints and opportunities.

Make Meaning Together: Build on ideas, identify blind spots, and reflect shared insights.

Build Forward as a Unit: Summarize commitments, clarify expectations, identify risks, and use accountability tools.

Honor Neurodiversity: Normalize varied communication speeds, allow multiple modes, and clarify cultural references.

These practices foster trust and psychological safety, enhancing virtual collaboration.



Practice Spotlight

Healthy team dynamics are cultivated through the intentional design of dialogue moments, especially in complex, diverse, and virtual teams. Leaders must actively structure when, how, and why dialogue occurs. This approach reduces cognitive overload, mitigates social threats, and fosters shared understanding—crucial for psychological safety and collaboration.

Clarify Purpose: Before any conversation, clearly articulate the dialogue's intent. This could involve exploration, sensemaking, alignment, learning, reflection, or decision input (distinct from decision authority).

Add Structure for Inclusion: Structured dialogue methods do not restrict conversation; they enhance participation. Techniques like silent reflection, round-robin sharing, and timed turn-taking can increase cognitive equity and reduce performance pressure.

Separate Dialogue from Decision-Making: Avoid collapsing dialogue and decision-making into the same moment. Design conversations in phases:

1. **Dialogue phase:** Surface perspectives and assumptions.
2. **Decision phase:** Clarify criteria and next steps.

This separation builds trust and maintains psychological safety.

Embed Micro-Rituals: Incorporate small, consistent practices into everyday work. These rituals, such as check-ins and reflections, stabilize attention and normalize ongoing dialogue.

Examples: Opening check-in (“What’s occupying your attention right now?”), end-of-week reflection (“What did we learn that changes how we move forward?”).

Design Inclusive Prompts: Use prompts that invite diverse insights, acknowledging that understanding comes from various experiences and emotions. **Examples:** “What are you noticing that others might not be?” “What question should we be asking next?”

Model Dialogic Leadership: Leaders influence dialogue quality through behaviors like pausing before responding, reflecting what is heard, and inviting dissent. **Cue:** “I want to slow us down—what perspectives haven’t we heard yet?”

Practice Takeaway:

Dialogue is a leadership responsibility. By intentionally designing dialogue moments, leaders can enhance clarity, inclusion, and adaptability within teams. Over time, these designed moments become cultural signals, reinforcing how the organization thinks, learns, and collaborates.

CLEAR-to-CLIMB in Virtual Work

Neuroscience indicates that the brain uses embodied cues like tone and posture to interpret intent and manage threats. In virtual environments, these cues are reduced, increasing cognitive load and complicating safety assessments. This sensory reduction can lead to vigilance, emotional fatigue, and defensiveness, impacting psychological safety and team cohesion. Digital collaboration also disrupts communication rhythms due to fragmented attention and overstimulation. Leaders of virtual teams must deliberately shape their communication by regulating presence, tone, and pacing to enhance clarity and connection.

How Leaders can Shift to Brain-Based Practices:



Build Certainty

Share timelines, repeat key messages, use “next steps” language.



Create Psychological Safety

Invite questions, acknowledge contributions, use supportive language.



Activate Reward Circuits

Celebrate small wins and frame progress positively.



Harness Mindfulness

Begin meetings with breathing, identify emotions, and promote breaks.



Tap Social Connection

Pair for peer support, share victory stories, foster casual interactions.



Practice Predictive Leadership

Anticipate concerns and use “if-then” scenarios. Share the change narrative.

Leader Insight

Leaders can adopt brain-based practices by fostering psychological safety, clarity, and connection. By pausing to regulate their responses and encouraging perspective and shared meaning, they can shift from reactive behaviors to relational practices. This approach builds trust and supports learning, engagement, and performance through small, consistent actions that reduce threats.

Applying CLEAR-to-CLIMB Across Levels

Self (Leader as Regulator & Meaning-Maker)

Focus: Internal awareness, emotional regulation, intentional presence

- Regulate before you relate (pause, breath, grounding)
- Identify internal narratives and release assumptions
- Set clear intentions for how you want to show up
- Cultivate emotional and social clarity before engagement
- Anchor to purpose rather than urgency

Impact: Reduces reactivity, increases clarity, strengthens presence

Team (Relational Dynamics & Dialogue in Action)

Focus: Shared meaning, psychological safety, coordinated interaction

- Design conversations with clear purpose and structure
- Practice deep listening and inclusive participation
- Invite multiple perspectives and normalize dissent
- Co-create meaning before moving to action
- Build forward with shared accountability

Impact: Strengthens trust, improves collaboration, enhances decision quality

Organization (Systems, Culture, and Conditions)

Focus: Environment, norms, and scalable practices

- Embed dialogue into meeting structures and workflows
- Normalize rituals that support reflection and connection
- Reduce cognitive load through clarity and consistency
- Support diverse communication styles and neuro-inclusion
- Align leadership behaviors with values of safety and learning

Impact: Creates coherence, reduces friction, enables sustainable performance

When these levels are aligned, **leadership becomes a coherent system**—where **individuals are grounded**, **teams are connected**, and **organizations are designed for clarity, learning, and meaningful action**.

Conclusion

Virtual leadership is no longer defined by proximity, but by the ability to create clarity, connection, and shared meaning across distance. As this paper has shown, leadership is not simply a set of behaviors—it is a neuro-relational process shaped by how individuals regulate themselves, engage others, and make meaning together in real time.

In environments where social cues are reduced and ambiguity is amplified, the role of the leader becomes increasingly intentional: to design for dialogue, to stabilize emotional and cognitive load, and to cultivate conditions where trust and understanding can emerge. When leaders move from reaction to regulation, and from control to conversation, they enable teams to shift from fragmentation to coherence.

Ultimately, effective virtual leadership is not about managing work; it is about stewarding human experience. By integrating brain-based practices with structured dialogue, leaders can create environments where individuals feel seen, heard, and able to contribute, unlocking not only performance but sustainable, human-centered collaboration.

Used well, **CLEAR-to-CLIMB** can help leaders and organizations regulate emotional and cognitive dynamics, enabling teams to shift from threat-based reactivity to connection, coherence, and adaptive performance—building psychologically safe, high-functioning teams that communicate clearly and collaborate effectively across distance.

Key Takeaways

Brain-Based Leadership Redefines Virtual Work

Leaders are emotional architects and co-regulators of stress, rather than merely task managers.

CLEAR Prepares the Leader

Centering, Listening, Emotional Clarity, Alignment, and Relational Readiness create the conditions for meaningful dialogue.

CLIMB Guides the Conversation

Clarify, Listen Deeply, Inquire, Make Meaning, and Build Forward together transform virtual meetings into collaborative experiences.

Dialogue Is a Leadership Responsibility

Intentionally designed dialogue moments build trust, inclusion, and resilient teams that feel safe, connected, and able to thrive.

Conceptual Disclaimer

The CLEAR Practices and CLIMB Ladder of Dialogue presented in this paper are emergent, theoretically informed, and practice-based conceptual frameworks. They synthesize existing research across neuroscience, dialogic practice, adult development, and organizational psychology to offer a novel integrative lens for leadership and team development in virtual settings. These frameworks are not empirical instruments, not psychometrically validated, and are intended as theory-in-practice contributions. They are designed to translate interdisciplinary scholarship into applied leadership practice. Future empirical research is recommended to examine the validity, reliability, and outcomes associated with CLEAR and CLIMB across virtual team contexts.

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