So why don't leaders deal with performance issues? One of the most common reasons leaders fail to hold team members accountable is that they don't effectively communicate expectations—or for that matter, what "good" behaviors or deliverables even look like.

In addition, when leading a team of people who are geographically distributed, timely feedback also poses a challenge. Time zone differences or infrequent contact can increase the "lag time" between when the problem occurs, when the leader becomes aware of the problem, and when the opportunity to provide feedback arises.

Conflict avoidance is another reason. Many leaders would rather attempt to wait out a problem than risk getting into a potentially contentious conversation with a team member.

And dealing with poor performers is particularly difficult when you can't regularly observe your team members. How can virtual team leaders regularly monitor team members' work when they have limited or no physical contact? To make matters worse, how can a virtual team leader provide timely feedback and/or hold team members accountable when leading a team whose members do not report directly to him or her?

Raygen Company Slump: How Would You Handle It?

Before we introduce the factors that separate the best virtual team leaders from the rest of the pack and provide some practical tips for enhancing your effectiveness, take a few minutes to assess how you would deal with a virtual team that is having performance problems.

Read the following case study and think about how you would handle it. Write down how you would approach each situation. After you complete that process, use the scoring guidelines to evaluate how you did. Then when you've reviewed the tips and guidelines for leading from a distance, revisit the case study to determine what you might do differently.

Case Study: Raygen Company

Raygen Company is a global professional services firm that provides consulting services to its clients. One key to Raygen's success is its innovative marketing strategies.

Three years ago, the SVP of marketing formed a cross-functional virtual team made up of ten geographically dispersed employees from marketing, sales, consulting, and finance. Throughout this three-year period, the team was extremely successful in generating and implementing new marketing strategies.

However, it appears as though the team has hit a plateau in terms of its performance. Both the quality and the timeliness of the team's deliverables seem to have declined over the past several months. While performance isn't currently below standard, it *is* mediocre—something that this team never seemed to tolerate in the past.

Ted Jones, the current team leader, has announced that he will be leaving the organization next month and has asked that you step in, at least on an interim basis, to fill his role. In addition to describing the team's current performance issues, Ted explains that its members are busy with other job responsibilities and do not seem to be fully engaged with the team.

In order to prepare for your new leadership role, you'll be meeting with Ted to review your initial ideas for enhancing the team's performance. What ideas do you have?

Evaluating Your Response

Check each of the factors listed below that you considered as possible solutions:

❑ Conduct a face-to-face (ideally) or telephone interview with each team member to solicit their opinions on what factors are currently supporting or inhibiting teamwork.

❑ Distribute a brief, anonymous survey to all team members to collect data on what factors support or inhibit team work—summarize data and distribute it to team members to facilitate a discussion around key strengths and areas for improvement.

❑ Solicit input from team members about how to measure and monitor progress against goals (ideally during a face-to-face meeting).

❑ Review and prioritize shared goals with the team.

❑ Clarify performance expectations for each team member. Ensure individual goals and priorities are aligned with team goals and supported by all team members.

❑ Acknowledge the team's track record for success and express confidence that performance will improve in the future.

❑ Review how team and individual performance are being recognized and rewarded to ensure alignment with desired behaviors.

❑ Proactively manage the change associated with a new team leader—create forums for team members to express their concerns, ask questions, and share information.

Use the guidelines in Table 5.1 below to determine how effectively you evaluated the case.

Table 5.1 Evaluating Your Responses

Number of Items Checked	Interpretation
6 to 8	You have considered the majority of the factors required to successfully lead a virtual team.
5	You have considered most of the factors required to successfully lead a virtual team.
4	You have considered some of the factors required to successfully lead a virtual team.
3	You have considered a few of the factors required to successfully lead a virtual team.