Leading for Team Adaptation in Global Virtual Teams

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INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams have become ubiquitous in most sectors and have attracted both scholarly and practitioner interest (e.g., Lipnack & Stamps, 2000). They comprise dispersed individuals who work together toward common goals using computer-mediated communication (CMC) systems (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). Though relatively recent, the virtual team literature is rich with researchers in this field offering insightful findings on how they can be best managed, given their unprecedented challenges. For example, traditional leadership styles (e.g., centered leadership) or hierarchical leadership styles (e.g., Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014) may not be suitable in a virtual team environment; as Chamakiotis and Panteli (2010) argue, leadership in virtual teams, or e-leadership, as they refer to it, may take the form of shared or collaborative leadership at different stages of the virtual team lifecycle.

Despite this and some other accounts on leadership in virtual teams, there exist significant theoretical gaps in the field. For example, scholars are agreed on the fluid and dynamic character of virtual teams (e.g., Wageman, Gardner, & Mortensen, 2012), as well as on the fact that their members are expected to adapt to change more frequently, compared to traditional, face-to-face (F2F) teams (Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen, & Hakonen, 2015), given the increased cultural heterogeneity and also the discontinuities that characterize them (Watson-Manheim, Chudoba, & Crowston, 2012). However, we do not know how virtual teams should be led in order accommodate change and the rather frequent need to adapt to different cultures, technologies and circumstances (Gilson et al., 2015).

This chapter aims to cover part of this gap by improving understanding of the role of leadership for team adaptation and change in the context of global virtual teams (GVTs) in particular. In this regard, a case study with a global, UK-headquartered, financial services organization is hereinafter presented. Being the first one on this topic, the study presented here is qualitative and exploratory in character, and draws on 10 in-depth, semi-structured interviews with virtual team members, leaders and non-leaders. GVTs provide a pertinent context within which leadership behavior can be examined and it is hoped that this chapter will add to debates in the literature on the changing nature of leadership in view of globalization and virtuality, which have been found to impact on the way in which individuals, teams and organizations perform (Panteli, 2009). The ensuing findings are expected to be of value to both, academics and practitioners—considering the rise in the deployment of GVTs in industry—as well as to educators who aim to educate learners on the benefits and challenges of leading and managing teams that do not operate traditionally, but which are globally dispersed and whose members collaborate via CMC.

BACKGROUND

Leadership in Virtual Teams

Despite the abundance of studies on leadership in the traditional literature—that is, based on teams operating F2F—empirical research on leadership in the context of GVTs is limited (Hambley, O'Neill, & Kline, 2007). Leadership in GVTs differs because of the challenges and the discontinuities of the distributed character of work. Though some traditional leadership theories—such as the centered leadership approach—may still be relevant in the virtual context (Kerber & Buono, 2004), there is consensus among researchers that leadership in GVTs is often shared (Chamakiotis & Panteli, 2010; Hill, 2005; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014) and also emergent, rather than prescribed or appointed (Carte, Chidambaram, & Becker, 2006; Misiolek & Heckman, 2005; Yoo & Alavi, 2004). It has moreover been found that emotional, social and transformational forms of leadership styles are more likely to enhance performance in virtual team contexts (Purvanova & Bono, 2009). In order, however, to understand *why* leadership in the virtual context might be exercised differently, an understanding of the unique characteristics of GVTs is essential.

Virtual teams refer to individuals who are geographically, temporally and/or organizationally dispersed and work together via the use of CMC systems to accomplish their goals (e.g., Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). The main drivers of virtual teams have been predicated on an organizational need to capitalize on global expertise, initiate cross-cultural collaborations, and utilize time differences (Cascio, 2000; Ebrahim, Ahmed, & Taha, 2009). Virtual teams can be classified with regard to:

1.   Their relationship to the organization as inter- vs. intra-organizational;
2.   Their level of continuity as permanent vs. temporary; and
3.   Geography as local vs. global (i.e., GVTs) (Panteli, 2004).

The focus of this chapter is on GVTs which, according to the literature, experience additional challenges, mainly owing to the discontinuities created by geography, time and culture (Watson-Manheim et al., 2012).

Given these challenges and their dynamic and fluid character, scholars agree that there is an expectation for GVTs to adapt to change regularly (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Ebrahim et al., 2009; Gilson et al., 2015; Marks, Zaccaro, & Mathieu, 2000; Qureshi & Vogel, 2001; Wageman et al., 2012). To further stress this, Marks et al. (2000) state that in dynamic work environments—such as GVTs—it is this ability for teams to adapt that determines the degree to which a virtual team project will succeed. Moreover, in their article on the added challenges that an e-leader has to address, Cascio and Shurygailo (2003) note that "[leaders] will need to analyze the impact of the virtual work arrangements on [their] own leadership style, and adapt accordingly" (p. 363).

The Notion of Team Adaptation

Team adaptation has received some attention, mainly by scholars in the fields of organizational psychology and management. It has been asserted that the notion of team adaptation has diverse meanings and, thus, has been used broadly and inconsistently in the extant team literature (Baard, Rench, & Kozlowski, 2014; Wiedow & Konradt, 2011). In this chapter, the adopted definition of team adaptation comes from Klein and Pierce (2001) who view adaptive teams as "teams that are able to make the necessary modifi-

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