Chapter VI

Trust in Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Discussed in this chapter are the role and importance of trust in virtual teams. It is suggested that the nature and degree of this trust are related to the culture and management philosophies of a firm, the interpersonal skills of management and team leaders, and the psychological characteristics and prior experiences and expectations of the team members. Trust and trust building are examined at three different levels: the firm level, the manager or team leader level, and the individual member level. A better understanding of the dynamics of trust in virtual teams will assist management in developing more efficient and effective virtual collaborative teams.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams can be identified by several characteristics. The teams make extensive use of information and communication technology (ICT) systems. They typically use a computer-mediated communication (CMC) system. They often use technology enablers, such as Lotus Notes/MS Exchange and Groove, and may use video- and audioconferencing and group decision support systems (GDSS). In some cases, the team has its own dedicated virtual workspace. The team members rarely, if ever, meet face-to-face, and the individual team members may represent different cultures, languages, and organizations. Frequently the teams are temporary, being formed and dissolved over a short period of time. Occasionally, virtual teams will be semipermanent. However, even in semipermanent teams, members frequently move on and off the team. Virtual teams are usually charged with interdependent tasks that have common goals.

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In order to achieve these goals, team members may have different competencies and different technical specialties (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998; Picolli & Ives, 2000; Bos, Olson, Gergle, Olson, & Wright, 2002; Bell & Kozlowski, 2002).

In this kind of environment, it is difficult for managers to supervise employees and to assess individual employee behavior. For employees, typical factors contributing to team cohesion, such as close physical location and common backgrounds and experiences, are often absent. In this self-directed, sometimes isolated environment, trust becomes a pivotal element of success. Without trust, or with low levels of trust, virtual workers may engage in dysfunctional behavior designed to avoid interaction with other team members, such as low commitment to a project, lack of information sharing, and unilateral alterations of task structure and sequence. These behaviors limit the overall efficiency and effectiveness of a virtual team. Furthermore, customers dealing with virtual teams may perceive a lack of trust among team members as a lack of reliability or lack of concern for the customer’s needs.

Management can ill afford dysfunctional geographically diverse teams that operate in cyberspace with a minimum of supervision. It is generally agreed that trust and trust building are essential if an organization is committed to virtual teams. Management has a vested interest in creating an environment that is conducive to the development of high trust levels among virtual team members. Several researchers suggest that trust is perhaps the most important determinant of success for virtual teams (O’Hara-Devereaux & Johansen, 1994; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997).

This chapter begins with a brief background review of the topic of trust. This review includes definitions of trust, briefly discusses some research findings from F2F studies that have implications for virtual team trust, and presents research findings from several empirical studies on trust in virtual teams. The background review is followed by additional discussion of building and maintaining virtual team trust. This additional discussion describes some of the roles that management philosophy, manager/team leader behavior, and individual characteristics and behavior play in virtual team trust and trust building. We conclude with a short summary and suggestions for future research.

**BACKGROUND**

Trust has been defined in variety of ways. Trust has been framed in terms of an employee’s belief that the organization’s management and fellow workers will interact honestly and fairly and in a reliable and predictable manner (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). Trust has also been defined as a willingness on the part of organizational members to allow themselves to be vulnerable and undertake actions based on the belief that other parties will perform their parts effectively.
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