



Chapter X

Prelude to Virtual Groups: Leadership and Technology in Semivirtual Groups

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Abstract

A study of 76 more and less virtual investment clubs examines the relationships between communication technologies used for club business (from face-to-face to more highly technologically enabled), group leadership role behaviors, and club portfolio value. The results are interesting, with more and less virtual clubs benefiting from different forms of leadership behaviors. Clubs using fewer technologies seem to benefit from a greater focus on socioemotional role (communication) behaviors, while the opposite is found in clubs using more technologies. The effect for procedural role behaviors (agenda setting and the like) appears to run in the opposite direction: clubs using more technologies seem to benefit from a greater

focus on procedural role behaviors, while the opposite is found in clubs using fewer technologies. Managers take into account obvious and subtle differences between more and less virtual groups.

Introduction

Virtual groups, groups that use technology to navigate the physical or temporal separation of their members, are expected to increase as markets expand globally and communication technologies proliferate. However, research on virtual groups is still in its infancy (e.g., see the brief reviews in Griffith & Neale, 2001; Warkentin, Sayeed, & Hightower, 1997), even though almost one third of 100 sampled Fortune 500 firms report they have virtual work in place (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998). Not surprisingly, of this same sample of Fortune 500 firms, only a “few” addressed the skills needed for managing in a more virtual environment.

In the last few years, the research landscape has begun to change. Across the range of traditional and more virtual groups, there are theoretical considerations of information processing (Griffith & Neale, 2001), group identification (Pratt, Fuller, & Northcraft, 2000), and conflict management (Mannix, Griffith, & Neale, 2002). There is also empirical work focused on trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999), the formation of group norms (Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 2000), communication dynamics (Tidwell & Walther, 2002), and the development of relationships (Walther, 1995). However, field-based research (versus laboratory, often student-based research) forms the minority of the empirical studies (though see Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Hinds & Kiesler, 2002; Majchrzak, Rice, Malhotra, King, & Ba, 2000; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000, for some current examples of field-based research). Our purpose in this chapter is to examine, in the field, the most prevalent form of work group—semivirtual groups—to describe certain important leadership dynamics in these groups. In particular, we aim to answer these questions:

- What role does leadership play in the success of more virtual groups?
- Which leadership behaviors have which impacts?
- Why do these behaviors have the impacts they do?

We draw the answers from a study of investment clubs that vary in their internal communications across the continuum of traditional interaction (face-to-face) to semivirtual interaction (both face-to-face and electronically mediated interaction; Wiberg & Ljungberg, 2001). These clubs allow their members to pool their

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