

# Chapter 11

## Promoting Critical Thinking in Virtual Teams: A Dialogic Approach

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### ABSTRACT

*Effective decision-making in a virtual environment is becoming increasingly important as more and more organizations introduce virtual teams into their global businesses. Critical thinking is a reflective practice that has been suggested to enhance the quality of group decision-making in organizations (Natale & Ricci, 2006). However, little is known about the value of critical thinking in a virtual team environment and the ways in which it can be promoted. This chapter provides a conceptual model of informed decision-making based on critical thinking. It further outlines how critical thinking can be promoted in virtual teams through an active shift towards a dialogic learning culture, constituted by collaborative communication behaviors, authentic leadership, and the use of social Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs).*

### INTRODUCTION

Critical thinking has recently been identified as a means to promote more sustainable, ethical and collaborative decisions in organizations (Cuncliffe, 2004; Meisel & Fearon, 2006; and Natale & Ricci, 2006). However, the significance of critical thinking has not yet been examined in a virtual

team context. While this context has been found to pose distinct coordination, communication and collaboration challenges (De Sanctis & Monge, 1999; DuFrene & Lehman, 2012; Pauleen, 2004; and Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004), it remains unclear what role critical thinking can play in improving virtual team decision-making and how it can be promoted.

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In today's networked and globally distributed organizations, virtual teams are increasingly common forms of organizing (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). For instance, a survey conducted among 1,764 North American 500+ companies found that 23% of the companies surveyed used virtual teams to cut costs, and 57% were planning on using more virtual teams in the future (ChronosConsulting, 2011). In another recent survey including 45,000 participants from 102 different countries, 61% of the participants reported that they were involved in virtual work with individuals based both domestically and internationally (RW<sup>3</sup>, 2012). These changes in the organization of work relate to a range of factors, including the emergence of virtual communication and collaboration technology; continuing pressures for organizations to cut costs and remain competitive in the global marketplace; a more distributed and diverse workforce with flexible and mobile work arrangements; and an increasingly project-oriented business culture that operates across functional, spatial, temporal and cultural boundaries.

Virtual teams often come into existence as an organizational response to innovation pressures, promising greater flexibility and diversity of perspectives (Townsend, DeMarie, & Henrickson, 1998). However, these benefits are precluded by the blinkered decision-making that is often practiced in teams characterized by groupthink (Janis, 1982) and low levels of trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Thus, if virtual teams are to fulfill the promise of an organizational form that delivers innovation, their members need to find ways in which they can foster critical thinking and uncover a broader range of decision-making options.

The overall purpose of this chapter is, therefore, to facilitate a deeper understanding of the value of critical thinking and the ways in which it can be promoted to improve virtual team decision-making. The chapter consists of three parts. Part one provides background information on the concept of critical thinking and outlines a model

of informed decision-making that is grounded in critical thinking theory. Part two highlights the value of critical thinking by offering a discussion of the typical constraints on virtual team decision-making. Drawing on organizational learning and dialogue theory, it is recommended that virtual teams make an active shift towards a dialogic learning culture to promote critical thinking and improve the quality of their decision-making. Specifically addressed are the communication behaviors that are required from team members and virtual leaders, as well as the role of social ICTs in supporting critically informed decision-making. Part three provides a conclusion and directions for future research.

## **BACKGROUND**

The concept of critical thinking has a long tradition that can be traced back to the roots of Western philosophy in the work of Socrates, Plato and Aristotle. Common to classic Greek philosophy was the thorough validation of ideas through critical analysis. Over more recent centuries, the concept of critical thinking has been used and developed by a range of intellectual traditions, including analytic philosophy and logic, natural science, pragmatism, psychoanalysis, and critical theory. These traditions have shaped a number of definitions of critical thinking (Brookefield, 2011).

This chapter defines critical thinking as a reflective practice that allows organizational members to identify more readily the validity of decisions in particular contexts. Critical thinkers are seen to rely on a combination of cognitive skills and affective dispositions that help them to determine *intersubjectively* valid knowledge. Cognitive skills include the ability to interpret, analyze and evaluate information, make reasonable inferences, explain the criteria upon which our decisions are based, and, finally, to continuously question and self-regulate our reasoning. Affective dispositions refer to general

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