Virtual Teams and Communities of Practice

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INTRODUCTION

Interdisciplinary research is being supported by universities and funding agencies, which in turn require a collaborative approach by researchers with complimentary yet different sets of expertise. Communities of practice are also facilitated by a collaborative approach, with groups of researchers investigating an area of common interest.

It is important to note that collaborative research is not an extension of the single researcher approach. Goode (1973) originally suggested that collaborative research may be depicted as a delicate balance of collegiality and bureaucracy. Bradley (1982) supported this idea and further suggested that to increase the probability of group success, it is important to reach, as early as possible, a mutually acceptable and explicit agreement about group members' responsibilities.

BACKGROUND

McGrath, Arrow, and Berdahl (2000) present a very thorough review of research about groups. Their Theory of Groups suggests "that groups are complex, adaptive, and dynamic systems" (p. 97). Their definition relates to systems theory, and in this light they consider groups to be open, complex systems interacting with other systems through fuzzy dynamic boundaries.

An important factor that contributes to the complexity of groups is location of individual team members. That is, if team members are geographically dispersed, the group dynamics (interaction for instance) will be affected. Barczak and McDonough (2003) suggest that the challenge for leaders of geographically dispersed teams is to integrate and coordinate team members. The importance of communication becomes important. Kayworth and Leidner (2002) also determined that leadership becomes even more important when physical separation is introduced into group projects. They found that effective leaders were able to display empathy and assert authority in dealing with team members. Also, as above, they were good communicators able to define the roles of team members and provide useful feedback on performance.

Another important factor in collaborative research relates to the background of the individual researchers. Gelfand, Meyers, and Ross (2002) determined that indigenous researchers were able to approach the investigations with more of an understanding of the culture. Korabik, Lero, and Ayman (2003) addressed the issues of *emic* and *etic* (Pike, 1954; Berry, 1990; Headland, Pike & Harris, 1990) approaches in a large-scale international study. An emic approach suggests a framework developed from within a culture and based upon criteria from that culture. An etic approach develops a universal framework by assessing and comparing universal criteria. Triandis (1972) has suggested an extension of these concepts with the term "pseudo-etic" which employs criteria from a limited number of cultures to develop a universal framework. The most effective research approach will be one that incorporates both emic and etic elements. As Early and Mosakowski (1995) suggest, "the most useful approach…is to focus on the pseudo-etic approach to develop quasi-universal constructs which may be subsequently challenged to more universal tests of validity" (Earley & Mosakowski, 1995, p. 9). This may be accomplished by starting from an emic base and then conducting emic studies in other cultures from which it might be possible to evolve an etic model of universal constructs based on the similarities and differences which emerge from the emic data.

CONCLUSION

The above factors represent important considerations for communities of practice involved in research situations requiring the establishment of virtual teams.

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KEY TERMS

Emic: A framework developed from constructs identified from within a specific culture.

Etic: A universal framework developed from universal constructs.