Leader–Facilitated Relationship Building in Virtual Teams

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INTRODUCTION

How do virtual team leaders assess and respond to boundary crossing issues when building relationships with virtual team members? Virtual teams are a new phenomenon, defined as groups of people working on a common task or project from distributed locations using information and communications technology (ICT). With rapid advances in ICT allowing alternatives to face-to-face communication, virtual teams are playing an increasingly important role in organizations. Due to their global coverage, virtual teams are often assigned critical organizational tasks such as multi-national product launches, negotiating global mergers and acquisitions, and managing strategic alliances (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). Their use, however, has outpaced the understanding of their unique dynamics and characteristics (Cramton & Webber, 2000).

Virtual team leadership remains one of the least understood and most poorly supported elements in virtual teams. Virtual team leaders are often the nexus of a virtual team, facilitating communications, establishing team processes, and taking responsibility for task completion (Duarte & Tennant-Snyder, 1999), and doing so across multiple boundaries. Recent research (Kayworth & Leidner, 2001-2002) has begun to look at virtual leadership issues and suggests that the trend toward virtual work groups necessitates further inquiry into the role and nature of virtual team leadership.

This article begins by briefly looking at the key concepts of virtual team leadership, relationship building and boundary crossing. Then, drawing upon the author's research, it examines the complexity inherent in building relationship across boundaries, and concludes with suggestions on how virtual team leaders can mediate this complexity.

BACKGROUND

Virtual Team Leadership

There has been extensive research on leadership in collocated teams and groups. Typically, leadership can be viewed in a number of ways, from a structured authoritative role to the ability of individuals to intrinsically or extrinsically motivate followers. It is generally agreed that leadership involves social influence and the use of communication activities in motivating teams to achieve goals. Barge proposes leadership as mediation in order to overcome the variety of task and relational problems that may be encountered by a group and explains that leadership "entails devising a system of helping the group get its work done, that is simultaneously stable and flexible and assists in managing the information shared among members and between the group and its external audience" (Barge, 1996, p. 319).

A key leadership skill in Barge's concept of leadership as mediation is that of relational management, which refers to the ability of leaders to "coordinate and construct interpersonal relations that allow an appropriate balance of cohesion, unity, and task motivation with a group" (Barge, 1996, p. 325). Cohesive teams tend to perform better and are more motivated to complete tasks. Of concern here is how team leaders can coordinate and construct interpersonal relations in a virtual environment to overcome the difficulty of multiple boundaries that do not exist in traditional collocated teams.

The Importance of Relationship Building in Virtual Teams

The link between team effectiveness and team member relationships is an important but underdeveloped area of study in virtual teams. Usually defined implicitly rather than explicitly, relationships develop over time through a negotiation process between those involved (Catell, 1948). While face-to-face meetings are the preferred way to build relationships and to deal with sensitive and complex situations, it is possible with the skillful and thoughtful application of virtual communication channels to effectively lead a completely virtual team. Research has found that computer-mediated teams do share relational information and are likely to develop relational links over time (Chidambaram, 1966; Warkentin, Sayeed & Hightower, 1997).

The role of the team leader is to move the team towards its objectives by encouraging collaboration. This is done

through a sustained process of relationship building, idea generation, prioritisation and selection. The particular challenge to virtual team leaders is to manage this process through ICT. In virtual team research stronger relational links have been associated with higher task performance, more effective information exchange, enhanced creativity and motivation, increased morale, and better decisions (Warkentin & Beranek, 1999; Warkentin et al., 1997). The building of relationships with virtual team members has been shown to be a fundamental concern of virtual team leaders (Pauleen, 2003-04).

Boundary Crossing in Virtual Teams

Boundary crossing is a defining characteristic of virtual teams. Contemporary organizations have highly permeable boundaries allowing substantial communication across boundaries (Manev & Sorenson, 2001). Boundary crossing is an important organizational activity that enhances the flow of information from the external environment. The role and activities of virtual teams leaders make them natural and strategic boundary crossers.

While traditional co-located teams may have members from different functions and cultures, sophisticated new synchronous and asynchronous ICT make it ever easier to form teams consisting of members from different functions, offices, organizations, countries and cultures. Furthermore, virtual teams must function across time and distance, often with team members having never met. These conditions present significant challenges to team leaders and members, team processes and ultimately team outcomes. Because virtual teams are still relatively new, outdated organizational HR and IT policies, which do not support virtual team performance, may be compounding the challenges (Jackson, 1999; Vickery, Clark & Carlson, 1999).

Boundary crossing in virtual teams can affect relationship-building efforts. Maznevski and Chudoba (2000) showed that deliberately addressing relationship building to develop shared views and trust across all types of boundaries could help virtual team performance. The more boundaries between leaders and team members at the start of a virtual team, the more likely higher levels of relationship with team members as well as more intensive relationship-building strategies will be needed.

MAIN THRUST OF THE CHAPTER

The Effects of Boundary Crossing on Relationship Building

The practical effect of working across distance means that teams can and do comprise members from different depart-

ments, head and branch offices, and organizations, as well as different countries and cultures. Indeed, access to different organizational, functional and cultural perspectives is a key reason for using virtual teams. These differences represent important conditions that team leaders will probably need to assess and accommodate before commencing a virtual team. According to team leaders, the development of personal relationships between themselves and team members is an important prerequisite in establishing and maintaining virtual working relationships across three conceptual boundary-crossing categories: (1) Organizational Boundary Crossing, (2) Cultural/Language Boundary Crossing and (3) Time/Distance Boundary Crossing (Pauleen, 2003-04). While organizational and cultural/language barriers exist in co-located teams, they are more likely to be found in virtual teams and to a have a more significant impact. Time and distance boundaries are unique to virtual teams.

Organizational Boundary Crossing

Organizational boundary crossing includes intra- and inter-organizational boundaries. Different functions, departments, and organizations may have diverse work cultures as manifested by deeply held core beliefs and assumptions (Kayworth & Leidner, 2000). Wiesenfeld, Raghuram and Garud (1998) suggested that organizational identification would be the psychological tie that binds virtual workers together into an organization, preventing workers from thinking of themselves as independent contractors, operating autonomously.

A strong organizational culture might influence the level of relationship building necessary in a team composed of members from within the same organization, even if they are located in different countries. Strong organizational cultures are exemplified by institution-based trust relationships (Nandhakumar, 1999; van der Smagt, 2000) and an anticipation of future association (Pauleen, 2003-04). The degree of relationship building necessary and the strategy for going about it are likely to be quite different when a team starts with a strong intra-organizational culture. Conversely, virtual teams with members from different organizations will need to be aware of and navigate the different organizational cultures.

Another aspect of organizational boundary crossing is the particular preferences of certain organizations for certain technologies, for example, communication channels such as e-mail or voice mail when leaving messages. Team leaders may experience difficulties trying to agree on common communication platforms with team members outside of the organization.

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