

Fault Lines in Virtual Team Leadership and Team Performance in Undergraduate Virtual Team Short-Term Projects

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ABSTRACT

This article provides a literature review on virtual team leaderships impact on project quality, team effectiveness, and team commitment to short-term projects. The authors summarize several negative findings related to virtual teams and posit that these negative outcomes contribute to the negative impact of organisational fault lines. The article concludes by exploring a theoretical model on the relationship between fault lines in virtual teams and team performance. The authors specifically propose that transformational leadership in virtual teams will positively moderate this relationship.

KEYWORDS

Commitment, Database Management Systems, Fault Lines, Leadership, Project Quality, Team Member Relationships, Virtual Environments, Virtual Teams

INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams now play an integral role in helping businesses achieve their organisational goals and objectives, Akhras (2015). Virtual teams, however, like many organisational groupings of workers such as by department, role, or geographic region are susceptible to the negative effects of organisational fault lines. Lau and Murnighan (1998) define fault lines as any factor that splits a group's members from other groups based on one or many attributes. These attributes can be anything from demographics such as age, gender or race and or attributes such as department, geographic location, and/or culture. Our conceptual study explores a theoretical model on the relationship between fault lines in virtual teams and team performance. We specifically propose that transformational leadership in virtual teams will positively moderate this relationship.

BACKGROUND – VIRTUAL TEAMS

The advent and rapid development of telecommunication technology has created an environment in which information is now communicated and shared faster than ever. Zivick (2012) added that these telecommunication technologies provide an additional advantage for organisations: the ability to

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rapidly assemble human resource (HR) expertise, regardless of physical location, for both short and long-term projects. These teams assembled together via telecommunication technology have been labeled virtual teams. Zivick (2012) defined these virtual teams as:

A group of individuals dispersed in time, geography or culture that collectively produce a deliverable via inter-dependent work tasks and primarily use computer and telecommunication technology for individual and team communication. (p.19)

Virtual teams can be physically separated by great distances: city-to-city, state-to-state, or even country-to-country or separated departmentally within the same organisation. Lee-Kelly and Sankey (2008) stated that virtual teams are useful for projects that require either cross-functional or cross-boundary skills when they have a clear plan to overcome problems generally associated with teams that are separated by space, time, language, culture or other demographic differences.

For example, Lee-Kelley and Sankey (2008) reported findings that are well known in the virtual team's literature: global virtual teams (GVTs) provide organisational successes in terms of time, budget, and value delivery in virtual team projects. In terms of inter-organisational virtual teams, Majchrzak, Rice, Malhotra, King, and Ba (2000) demonstrated that an organisation that was willing to adapt organisational structures and work groups to support virtual teams using a new collaboration technology could successfully create a new highly innovative product.

Virtual teams also offer organisations an opportunity to tap into highly dispersed "pockets" of organisational knowledge. Alavi and Tiwana (2002) acknowledged that one of the primary reasons for virtual team formation is founded on the need for knowledge sharing, knowledge application and knowledge exploitation for organisational gains. With so many organisational benefits that come with virtual teams, their use will continue to play an important role, well into the future, in how businesses organize units of work to meet their goals and objectives. Perhaps Bell and Kozlowski (2002) said it best: "...virtual teams are here, and they are here to stay." (p.45).

FAULT LINES IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

Leadership required for virtual teams faces many kinds of challenges. Many of these hurdles are often overlooked because leaders make the incorrect assumption that employees in virtual teams, as in the traditional work settings, adopt similar work behavior. One significant area of disconnect in these assumptions has been identified as fault lines. Lau and Murnighan (1998) define fault lines as a factor that "divides a group's members on the basis of one or more attributes". There are many fault lines in an organisation based on demographics, gender, company politics and corporate sub-culture. Fault lines are, in short, invisible boundaries in organisations that determine how work behaviour occurs.

These fault lines, while invisible, can be observed over periods of time in a more conventional (and more closed) work environment like the office. In a virtual setting, where work networks are wide and open, often having unobservable emotive aspects of work, fault lines may be less visible. Thus, to better manage the organisation, a leader would have to employ new strategies to unearth these fault lines. Despite this reality, many leaders often continue using existing leadership styles and strategies on virtual teams resulting in a weak understanding of fault lines (DeRosa, Hantula, Kock, and D'Arcy, 2004). Such leadership decisions often lead to a characterization of virtual work teams as being difficult to manage, organize, allocate resources for and measure outcomes. Therefore, there is an acute need to bridge this gap to ensure new methods of leadership are made available for virtual teams.

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