

Chapter 6.8

E-Leadership Styles for Global Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

With time, an increasing number of organizations deploy global virtual teams (GVTs) in an effort to respond to the demands and the competitive nature of the global business arena. Leadership, a factor that is arguably central to the successful functioning of collocated teams, is much altered in view of the virtual backdrop, and thus, management practices, when referring to GVTs' operation and effectiveness, have to be re-addressed. This chapter explores the contribution of a leader-coordinator in GVTs and – by drawing upon interviews with staff that participate in intra-organizational virtual

teams of an eminent global operator – it discusses leadership approaches suitable for those teams. In addition, this chapter attempts to unveil and discuss the personal values that drive ordinary virtual actors to emergently lead their teams. Ultimately, the chapter suggests e-leadership styles which could be of foremost value to current and future virtual teams and virtual organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) have attracted an overwhelming attention and popularity among both academics and practitioners. GVTs are often viewed as a means to accomplish an or-

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ganizational task by breaking any geographical or time constraints (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997), whilst enabling organizations to gain advantage of globally dispersed expertise and knowledge (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Hargrove, 1998). The forenamed consider GVTs to be organizing units of work which stem from technological advances, respond to the need for product and service differentiation, and create horizontal organizational structures due to their far-flung nature. In spite of the numerous advantages that the virtual milieu can implicitly offer, researchers and practitioners posit an oxymoron when virtual team working comes into practice (Handy, 1995; Kaboli *et al.*, 2006).

Goodbody (2005), for instance, argues that less than 30% of virtual teams are led successfully, and this could be attributed to virtual actors considering themselves a substitute, rather than an evolution of face-to-face communication (Caulat, 2006). Not surprisingly, cultural diversity, lack of trust and face-to-face communication, insufficient training and time difference represent some of the novel hurdles that companies have to deal with. Therefore, while exploring GVTs' nature, potential and efficiency, one needs to question what constitutes the role of a leader is within a virtual arrangement, and what their contribution to the success of these teams could be. Though as we argue – virtual leadership, or e-leadership as we will refer to it here, has attracted a lot of attention in the literature – it still necessitates investigation.

This study questions the use of traditional leadership styles and explores new models of shared leadership, while identifying the values which may motivate virtual team members to emerge as leaders. In doing so, we discuss the gaps in the existing literature and, with the use of an empirical study, we explore different e-leadership styles that may be appropriate for GVTs. Specifically, the study commences with a definition of GVTs and a brief description of their challenges and opportunities, while thereafter we continue with

a synopsis of leadership approaches and styles employed in collocated or virtual settings.

What makes this issue topical and interesting for study lies in the fact that information technology is continuously transforming organizational arrangements by adding new variables, and affecting the way people work, the tools they use, the relationships amongst themselves, and ultimately the quality of their performance. Therefore, our aim here is to bridge the lacuna between traditional and virtual leadership, and produce a number of applicable recommendations that will amplify GVTs' potency and effectiveness. Overall, this chapter discusses different emergent e-leadership styles in GVTs, which could be of foremost value to current and future virtual organizations that operate internationally and wish to improve their management styles. Finally, the implications for research and practice will be explored in the chapter.

BACKGROUND

Global Virtual Teams

Virtual teams comprise individuals who are geographically, organizationally and time dispersed, and are brought together via technological means of communication in order to accomplish a certain organizational task (Alavi & Yoo, 1997; DeSanctis & Poole, 1997; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Townsend *et al.*, 1998). In the literature, it is unanimously acknowledged that virtual teams are different from normal teams in that they are flatter environments with high degree of physical separability – in other words they are intact workgroups – guided by a common purpose and facilitated by technologically advanced communication channels (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Henry & Hartzler, 1998; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997). In addition, Bal *et al.* (2000) summarized some common characteristics assembled in GVTs, such as goal orientation, geographical dispersion, deployment

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