Chapter III
Virtual Teams:
The Role of Leadership in Trust Management

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ABSTRACT

This chapter analyses how to build and maintain trust in virtual teams. Based on literature on trust and leadership in virtual teams, the purpose of this chapter is to identify e-leaders' roles and behaviours related to trust management and development. The authors argue that trust is qualified as swift in virtual context and that it relies heavily on leaders' contribution to be established and maintained. E-leaders have to adopt new roles and build strategies to manage task achievement, individual team members' needs, and team cohesion to face problems related to distortion of the communication processes, member diversity, technology problems, and time pressure that inhibit trust management.

INTRODUCTION

Trust in virtual environments becomes an increasingly important and accepted topic in both computer-supported cooperative work (CSCW) and in e-business research. In *virtual collaboration*, trust is identified as a key factor for successful interactions and is associated with cooperative behaviours, coordination, and high performance of *virtual teams* (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Kanawattanachaï & Yoo, 2002). However, the specific characteristics of the virtual context inhibit its establishment and development. This derives from virtual team members' reliance on computer-mediated-communication (CMC) that eliminates the face-to-face interactions, physical proximity, verbal cues, and facial expressions that contribute to interpersonal relationship development (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Dubé & Paré, 2002; Handy, 1995; Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). This is why most studies consider the virtual context to be a barrier to trust building and attempt to face this problem by identifying factors facilitating trust building in virtual teams.

Current literature on the topic shows that leadership plays an important role in fostering trusting relationships between remote members. Many studies have revealed that effective leaders develop high levels of trust, which in turn results in high performance in teams (Jarvenpaa et al., 1998; Kayworth & Leidner, 2001, 2002). Yet, less is known about how e-leaders build and reinforce trust in virtual teams, as well as the mechanisms helping them to do so. Previous studies state strategies and determinants for establishing trust without specifying leaders' contributions, despite their important role in dealing with challenges facing virtual teams.

In addition, e-leaders do not take into account the characteristics of different virtual teams' configurations, instead considering them as a single type. On the other hand, they neglect the specific form of trust that develops in virtual teams, which

is swift and *ex ante* (Iacono & Weisband, 1997; Jarvenpaa et al., 1998).

Our purpose is to identify e-leaders' roles and behaviours related to trust management and development based on the current literature on both trust and leadership in virtual teams. To serve this purpose, this chapter will begin by clarifying the concept of virtual teams through identifying their specificities and their implications on various forms and dynamics of trust. The second section will analyse characteristics of trust in the virtual context. It will be primarily a question of swift trust, a specific form of trust that develops in temporary systems (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996). We then shall explain how e-leaders implement mechanisms and strategies for building and maintaining trust in their teams through their functions, roles, and behaviours. A body of relevant managerial practices for trust management will be presented simultaneously with these developments. The conclusion will sum up our findings and present some limits and potential future extensions.

BACKGROUND

Towards a Better Understanding of Virtual Teams

A critical literature review on virtual teams reveals noteworthy limits concerning their definition and the identification of their characteristics and specificities (Bell & Kozlowsky, 2002; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999; Larsen & McInerney, 2002; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001; Montoya-Weiss, Massey & Song, 2001; Townsend et al., 1998). These limits result from the confusion existing between virtual teams and other virtual work forms, as well as from considering virtual teams monolithically, different from traditional teams yet with similar characteristics.

In addition, virtual teams are different from virtual groups, virtual communities, virtual

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