

Chapter 6.2

Concepts and Challenges of E-Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Technology increasingly allows one to work from anywhere, altering the mode and style of communication. Videoconferencing, online collaboration software, cell phones, e-mail, Wi-Fi, and other technological tools are contributing to a growing number of virtual companies and teams. Some larger companies have made portions of their workforce virtual, allowing employees to simply work out of their homes. These changes in work force dynamics require additional skill sets for leaders. What follows is a description of e-leadership and the unique leadership challenges associated with this field.

BACKGROUND

E-leadership has been defined as a social influence process mediated by technology to produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior,

and/or performance with individuals, groups, and/or organizations (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2001). A more anecdotal definition is provided by Chan (2002), where e-leadership means challenging the accepted belief that running a business means bringing the staff under one roof from 9-to-5 every day; measuring success differently than in the past; and finding new ways to be a leader, new ways to motivate when you do not see every employee everyday.

E-leadership can include one-on-one, to one-on-many interactions within and across large units and organizations. It has been suggested that technology will become so ingrained in business practice that soon it will not occur to anyone to add an “e” in front of the word leadership. However, organizations are currently struggling with integrating technology into the management process. This is further complicated by the steep technology learning curve that many employees face (Avolio et al., 2001).

E-LEADERSHIP

Often, e-leaders have two employee populations they serve. E-leaders have to balance relationships with “online” versus face-to-face followers. A simple “I’ll get back to you” to an e-employee’s idea without accompanying verbal cues may be alienating. Frequent communication may offset the lack of non-verbal cues (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). Several factors impact the quality of e-leadership including the degree of face-to-face interaction, media richness, and team composition.

Face-to-Face

Examining the level of face-to-face interaction associated with e-leadership, Hart and McLeod (2003) categorized the content of communication exchanges between 126 pairs of teammates. The communications were divided into task oriented and social-emotional categories. Summarizing the findings, the study indicated that leaders should encourage a variety of task-related communication to foster closer relationships in geographically dispersed teams. Leaders must provide virtual team members with a reason to work together, by promoting interdependence and reliance on one another, by taking such steps as dividing members by tasks or assigning mentoring duties. Hart and McLeod (2003) conclude that the results are consistent with a growing body of research that close personal relationships are possible in virtual settings. Leaders can aid in fostering these relationships.

Media Richness

In addition to the level of face-to-face interaction, media richness plays a role in the quality of e-leadership and subordinate relationships. Media richness refers to the capacity of the technology to provide immediate feedback, the number of cues and channels used for the personalization of messages, and the language variety. In the context

of e-leadership, media richness becomes a key factor of interaction (Avolio et al., 2001).

E-leaders have many opportunities, or channels, to be in touch with stakeholders. For example, anonymously clicking into either an employee or a customer related chat room may provide information needed for a same day global tele-conference. Leaders need to learn the vividness and interactivity of media to make their presence felt in a positive way (Avolio et al., 2001).

In a study involving online youth and language style, emergent leaders demonstrated collaboration, sociability, and persuasiveness in the absence of face-to-face interaction (Huffaker, Tversky, & Ferriman, 2006). The adolescent talk may be an index of what is to come in the future. A quick look at a text messaging session between teenagers shows that communication takes place in a very truncated style. Given that the frequency of messages, not length, was found to be important for establishing closer relationships, the leader of the future may be better able to form virtual bonds.

Virtual Teams

A large portion of research on e-leadership has involved virtual teams (Combe, 2006; Kerber & Buono, 2004; Kikrman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004; A survey of e-commerce, 2004). A virtual team uses information technology and telecommunications to facilitate collaboration between geographically dispersed members who work on the same project. A virtual team can consist of other workers outside of an organization but is usually made up of employees working for the same company (Combe, 2006). E-teams and traditional teams share many characteristics; what distinguishes e-teams is their frequent geographic dispersion and their time-limited mission or task. E-leaders need to act as liaisons, set and convey team directions, and coordinate team operations in an environment of limited and mediated communication. The strain of dispersion requires e-team

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