

Chapter 22

Leading Global Virtual Teams: The Supporting Role of Trust and Team Cognition

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ABSTRACT

Given the recent focus on team process and outcome improvements, shared leadership is a promising avenue of research for Global Virtual Teams (GVTs) in terms of its potentially mitigating effects on performance decrements often associated with virtual teamwork. However, effective shared team leadership can be difficult to achieve in global and virtual environments because the geographic distribution of members reduces the ability of individuals to exhibit such influence. Therefore, understanding the factors that may improve the likelihood of successful shared team leadership in these environments is critical. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss how shared leadership in GVTs can improve team performance. In doing so, the authors define GVTs, discuss how shared leadership can be implemented in a GVT setting, address specific challenges GVTs might encounter in the implementation of shared leadership, and present recommendations for practice drawing on team cognition models and trust research.

INTRODUCTION

Due to technological advances in the 21st century that have enabled small businesses and multinational companies alike to increase revenues through globalization, the competition to find new revenue streams, identify additional consumer markets, lower distribution and overhead costs,

and develop innovative products and services has become exceedingly fast-paced and complex. Global organizations are no longer the exception, but the norm (Burke, Shuffler, Salas, & Gelfand, 2010). Organizations, small and large, are finding ways to maximize their global talent and resources in order to maintain their agility in this increasingly competitive environment. One way of achieving these goals has been to implement global

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virtual teams (GVTs), comprised of geographically dispersed and culturally diverse workers in order to develop innovative solutions to complex problems without losing momentum. Projects are continuously managed in a 24/7 environment as workers from one time zone hand over the project to team members in another time zone. From a technological perspective, many computer-based tools have been developed such as email, Skype, Dropbox, Google Docs, Facebook, Doodle, Go-To Meeting (to name a few) which have more easily supported the formation and operation of these virtual teams.

While there are many advantages to utilizing GVTs in the workplace, there are also numerous challenges in maximizing global virtual team processes and outcomes as individual differences, cultural diversity, trust and team cognition issues are addressed. Luckily, effective leadership can improve teamwork and facilitate the benefits of virtuality and cultural diversity. Leadership is a very important aspect of all teams, and has been argued to play a pivotal role in determining team effectiveness (Burke, Shuffler, Salas, & Gelfand, 2010). Within GVTs, leadership actions become even more important given that leaders can help set the direction of the team as well as serve to provide the necessary social climate needed for effective team communication (Zaccaro, Rittman, & Marks, 2001). One leadership form that has gained popularity within the last several years, but whose examination has been relatively neglected within GVTs, is shared or collective leadership (e.g., leadership distributed throughout the team; Pearce & Conger, 2003).

Given the recent focus on team process and outcome improvements due to effective leadership, shared leadership is a promising avenue of research for GVTs in terms of its potential mitigating effects on performance decrements often associated with virtual teamwork (Connaughton & Shuffler, 2007). However, effective shared team leadership can be difficult to achieve in global and virtual environments. The core of leadership is the social

influence of others, yet distribution of members reduces the ability of individuals to exhibit such influence due to fewer social cues and decreased opportunities to interact (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). Therefore, understanding the factors that may improve the likelihood of successful shared team leadership in these environments is critical. Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to discuss how shared leadership in GVTs can improve team performance. First we define GVTs and examine some benefits and challenges of their formation and development. Next, we discuss the concept of shared leadership and how this can be implemented in a GVT setting. We then move to addressing specific challenges GVTs might encounter in the implementation of shared leadership. Finally, we present best practices and recommendations for using shared leadership that draw on team cognition models and trust research. It is hoped that this chapter will provide both practical guidance as well as outline future research needs that can encourage our understanding of GVTs and how their operations can be best facilitated, particularly in terms of shared leadership.

BACKGROUND

Defining Global Virtual Teams (GVTs)

The definition of virtual teams has varied in previous research. In terms of the virtuality aspect, GVTs should not be viewed in a dichotomous manner in which a team is fully operational in a virtual setting or a team is fully operational in a face-to-face setting, but rather should be viewed on a continuum whereby teams may range in their degree of virtuality (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). Additionally, the extent to which technology is used for communication during team processes is a factor in determining team “virtuality.” Purely virtual teams must use technology to communicate (Gibson & Cohen, 2003). Kirkman and Mathieu (2005) define virtuality as “the extent to which

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