Addressing Team Dynamics in Virtual Teams: The Role of Soft Systems

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ABSTRACT

Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) is providing businesses with the means of assembling virtual teams comprising of members in diverse locations. However research shows that virtual team dynamics are different from face to face dynamics. Recent research adds force to the view that conflicts are more prevalent within virtual teams since participants are less likely to change their initial points of view when discussions are held virtually. This insight has implications for IS development since many IS are developed by virtual project teams. It is relevant to systems analysis since according to systems thinkers the process should include a discussion about alternative points of view leading to a group level shared view of the situation under analysis. If recent research is taken into account then conflict resolution in virtual teams is difficult which raises doubts about whether a group level view of a situation can be reached during systems analysis. In this paper, the authors strive to identify challenges associated with the application of soft methods in synchronous virtual teams since a review of literature shows that soft methods have not been used previously in synchronous virtual teams. The authors also explore if concerns about conflicts in synchronous virtual teams can be overcome through the use of soft systems methods.

KEYWORDS

Action Research, Appreciative Inquiry Method, Computer Mediated Communication, Field Research, Outsourcing, Requirements Definition, Shared Understanding, Systems Analysis, Trust

INTRODUCTION AND PURPOSE

Information Systems (IS) development is increasingly conducted by geographically dispersed virtual teams due to the rise of trends such as outsourcing and globalization. Although researchers have explored dynamics in face to face teams (Larson and La Fasto, 1989; Jewel and Reitz, 1981; Tuckman, 1965) research has also shown that the behaviour exhibited in virtual teams is different
from the behaviour in face to face teams (Sarkar and Valacich, 2010; Sassenberg and Boos, 2003; Sia et al, 2002; Montoya Weiss et al, 2001). For instance recent research (Sarkar and Valacich, 2010) has demonstrated that participants in virtual teams are more unlikely to change their initial values, biases and preconceptions which hinder the process of conflict resolution. In this paper we explore the use of a method of inquiry based on soft systems thinking as a means of ameliorating the effects of conflict in synchronous virtual teams (Stowell and Welch, 2012 pp116-117; Champion and Stowell, 2001). Since there is a dearth of literature on the application of soft methods within virtual teams we also discuss the challenges faced when implementing soft methods in globally dispersed teams. We describe the results of an Action Research (AR) project undertaken between two educational institutions geographically separated by several thousand miles and provide insight on the use of soft methods in synchronous virtual teams and its effect on conflict.

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

The Organization and Management of Virtual Teams

Furst et al (1999) tells us that teams are the elementary units of an organization and Zenun (Zenun et al, 2007; p 701) defines them as “a small number of people with complementary skills who are equally committed to a common purpose, goals, and working approach for which they hold themselves mutually accountable”. Experience tells us that we form teams in order to combine the diverse views and talents of individuals to achieve objectives. Traditionally, teams worked in close physical proximity because of the high levels of interdependencies inherent in group work. However, due to the globalization of businesses, organizational managers are beginning to implement projects over distance, with teams based in dispersed geographical locations. Mason (2014) points out that three quarters of organizations want to introduce a mobile video-conferencing solution, and 61 per cent want to integrate video-conferencing. These teams referred to as virtual teams, use computer mediated communicating (CMC) to collaborate on tasks.

The idea of using CMCs to communicate with stakeholders is popular in IS development especially since IS project members and clients can be located in different places taking advantage of outsourcing and globalization (Reed and Knight, 2010; Xue et al, 2005). As a result IS project team members frequently use virtual means to collaborate during the Software Development Life Cycle (SDLC) including the systems analysis and design phases. Researchers argue that systems analysis is best approached from a systems perspective (Checkland and Holwell 1997; Alter, 2013) and that it should result in a shared systemic understanding of the situation before a problem is defined or solution is identified (Checkland and Holwell, 1997; Champion and Stowell, Stowell and Cooray).

In virtual IS development teams the systems analysis process is dependent on the effectiveness of the CMC’s used since faulty technology or virtual team dynamics (e.g. power, trust, conflict) can derail the process of attaining a group level shared understanding of the situation under analysis. Recent research adds force to the view that the way individuals act as part of a virtual group is different from behavior in face-to-face meetings (Sarkar and Valacich, 2010; Sassenberg and Boos, 2003; Sia et al, 2002; Montoya Weiss et al, 2001). Specifically, researchers have discovered that conflicts are more prevalent within virtual teams as opposed to face-to-face teams (Sarkar and Valacich, 2010). Sarkar and Valacich argue participants are more likely to change their initial points of view (shaped by personal values, biases and experience) and accommodate others views when discussions are held in a face-to-face environment rather than virtually. This insight raises doubts upon the effectiveness of CMCs as an instrument of creating shared understanding during the systems analysis phase of SDLC. Given the rising importance of virtual collaboration technology to the success of an IS project
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