Chapter 14

The Virtual Coffee Break:
Virtual Leadership – How to Create Trust
and Relations Over Long Distances

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ABSTRACT

A large number of studies show that trust is crucial to success as a virtual leader. The purpose of this chapter is to provide a theoretical and practical perspective on the challenges of creating trust and strong relationships to the virtual leader. The chapter presents the consequences of virtual collaborations if trust is low or high. Next, it points out how the virtual leader can work to create trust. The chapter presents “The Circle of Trust,” which consists of several important behavioural attitudes for the virtual leader. The meaning of metacommunication in the form of clear agreements on the use of communication is outlined. Several communication forms—e-mail, videoconferencing, and online informal communication—are examined, focusing on how these forms of communication can consciously promote trust in virtual collaborations. The chapter provides a collection of the most important solutions and recommendations for the virtual leader.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual leadership can be defined as a form of leadership in which “individuals or groups are geographically dispersed, and interactions are mediated by technology” (Avolio et al, 2009, p. 440). Studies on how virtual leaders work show that most of them focus primarily on clarifying goals, results, milestones, and frameworks. These items are essential, but the main challenges of virtual leadership lie elsewhere. Researchers Rosen, Furst and Blackburn (2006); Weisband (2008); Mitchell and Zigur (2009); and Nyström, and Asproth (2013) suggest that traditional leadership tools rarely have a decisive influence on whether virtual leadership succeeds, and that organizations should focus on the ability to:
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1. Establish trust and ensure good relationships
2. Ensure communication quality
3. Ensure common values and goals on the virtual team
4. Work with different cultures and personalities

These are essential qualities in all effective leaders--virtual or not. When these qualities are highlighted as specific challenges for the virtual leader, it is because physical distance requires virtual leaders to avail themselves of alternative methods to ensure that these basic qualities for successful cooperation are present.

A virtual leader uses several forms of communication and technologies, including e-mails, video conferencing, phones, and other collaborative software. The leader consciously chooses the right communication forms for different messages and tasks, based on the situation. This chapter will explore how online leaders in general can work to create trust and good relationships in an online collaborative context for which the leader is responsible.

An important part of building trust concerns creating spaces for informal communications that enable knowledge and understanding to increase. It is one of the challenges the virtual leader faces, as virtual communication often is characterized by efficiency and formality (Bradley & Vozikis 2004). Therefore, this chapter focuses on how the virtual leader can use various communication technologies -- especially e-mail and online meetings -- to support building trust and good relationships.

WHY TRUST IS SO IMPORTANT IN VIRTUAL COLLABORATIONS

Trust in online teams and collaborations is crucial to the success of virtual teams, according to Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999); Greenberg, Greenberg and Antonucci (2007); Weisband (2008); and Hoch and Kozlowski (2014).

There are several different definitions of trust. For example, Gibb (1991) believes “trust is freedom from fear.” Butler (1991) defines trust as “a willingness to risk being exposed to another person whose behavior is beyond control” (Butler, 1991, p. 650). The last definition is perhaps the one that best fits into a working context because both leader and employee lack control over the other person, and at the same time, the other person is acting in a way that is important to the team. This is particularly true when talking about virtual leadership, in which the leader has little power to control people concerning anything other than results.

Stephen Covey has researched trust, and he says, in his book *Speed of Trust* (2006), that trust is important for two parameters in organizations -- speed and price:

- When trust decreases, speed also will decrease, and costs will increase.
- When trust increases, speed also will increase, and costs will decrease.

Thus, trust is fundamental to leaders’ ability to create and nurture growth, innovation, collaboration, and better execution by a team or the organization as a whole, Covey (2006) says.

Trust becomes so central in virtual collaborations because human imaginations, or what could be called “self-created images,” more easily come into play in virtual collaborations (Schramm & Lønsted,
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