Chapter VII
The Language of Leaders: Identifying Emergent Leaders in Global Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Virtual teams and their leaders are key players in global organizations. Using teams of workers dispersed temporally and geographically has changed the way people work in groups and redefined the nature of teamwork. Emergent leadership issues in computer-mediated communication are vital today because of the increasing prevalence of the virtual organization, the flattening of organizational structures, and the corresponding interest in managing virtual groups and teams. This chapter examines the communication behaviors of participants in two different case studies to determine if number, length, and content of messages are sufficient criteria to identify emergent leaders in asynchronous and synchronous environments. The methodology used can be embedded in collaborative virtual environments as a technology for identifying potential leaders in organizational and educational environments.

INTRODUCTION

Identifying competent leaders is a crucial component in building high performing teams that operate in global, cross-functional, and cross-cultural environments. During the different phases of team development, leaders may need to take different roles (Kolb, 1999). For instance, in an early stage, leadership skills may involve understanding individual differences, work styles, and cultural nuances. In later stages, leaders may assume a peer relationship with team members. In any of the roles, leaders communicate with the other team members. If a team collaborates over
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the Internet, then we can observe that communication. Our assumption is that emergent leaders can be identified through their communication patterns. We address our assumption focusing on communication behaviors of participants in two different case studies to determine if number, length, and content of messages are sufficient criteria to identify emergent leaders in both synchronous and asynchronous environments. We pose the following research questions:

- How will leadership be reflected in communication patterns and communication style among team members; in other words, what is the language of leaders?
- Are there differences in these patterns/trends in different scenarios?
- Can we facilitate technologically the identification of leaders in virtual teams, based on the patterns of their communication?

In this chapter, we initially provide background research that frames the context of the problem. Then we present our approach, based on a complementary explorative data analysis (CEDA) research methodology developed by the authors for conducting Internet research (Sudweeks & Simoff, 1999). We examine the patterns of communication of leaders in two different case studies of online teamwork. The case studies complement each other in terms of activity scenarios and text-based communication modes. One case study is a group of autonomous and diverse individuals using an asynchronous communication medium over a relatively long period of time, while the other case study is a group of individuals using a synchronous communication medium and bound by the communication network for a short period of time. Finally, we present technological solutions for enabling leader identification in virtual environments along with some concluding discussions.

BACKGROUND

The formation of global virtual teams has changed the way people work in groups and redefined the nature of teamwork (Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; Mabry, 2002; Meier, 2003). A global virtual team is defined as teams of workers dispersed temporally and geographically which are assembled using a combination of telecommunications and information technologies to accomplish an organizational task (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998). Members of such teams work and interact in various modes, using a diverse set of computer-mediating technologies (Maher, Simoff, & Cicognani, 2000). In the climate of enterprise globalization, such virtual teams are essential components in the enterprise “toolbox” to remain competitive (Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000). Research on communication in virtual teams is less well documented (Furst, Blackburn, & Rosen, 1999). However, understanding the elements of group dynamics of virtual teams is of crucial importance in facilitating and managing these teams.

Leadership is acknowledged as a key element in virtual team dynamics and is well researched (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003; Zigurs, 2003), yet less is studied about how leadership activities influence group collaborative processes (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2000; Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003; Pauleen & Yoong, 2001; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003; Zigurs, 2003). Emphasizing the paucity of research on leadership in virtual teams, Misiolek and Heckman (2005) provide a broad and up-to-date overview of the literature on virtual teams in organizational context.

Addressing leadership in virtual teams is an essential part of an in-depth study of virtual team dynamics and analysis of their development (Sudweeks, 2004). Leadership issues in virtual teams remain vital today because of the increasing prevalence of the virtual organization, the flattening of organizational structures, and the
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