Chapter III

Understanding Composition and Conflict in Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT
Drawing from several years of empirical research, in this chapter, we look at the impact of the personalities of individual team members on the performance and process outcomes of virtual teams. Our studies showed that both too few and too many extroverts in a virtual team may result in low performance. While conventional wisdom says that teams should be set up on the basis of expertise, we argue that the resulting interaction styles of the members must be considered when establishing a virtual team. We offer suggestions for managers on assessing the potential for constructive interaction styles.

INTRODUCTION
The virtual team is an increasingly common strategic work unit of many organizations. Though research is still developing, at this stage, it is not clear whether virtual teams deliver the level of performance that their face-to-face (F2F) counterparts typically do. Do factors that drive conventional team
performance also exist in the virtual environment? Rooted in the personalities of individual team members, a team’s interaction style was shown to have a great effect on a conventional teams’ ability to achieve solution quality and solution acceptance when faced with problem-solving and decision tasks (Hirokawa, 1985; Hirokawa & Gouran, 1989; Watson & Michaelsen, 1988; Cooke & Szumal, 1993). Group interaction styles affect communication and thus team performance by facilitating or hindering the exchange of information among group members. The interaction style of conventional teams can be reliably assessed, and from that assessment, performance problems can be identified. In addition, when forming new teams, managers can identify constellations of personality types that are likely to yield a constructive group interaction style and perform well together.

Methodologies and instruments originally developed at the University of Michigan’s Institute for Social Research are commercially available to organization development professionals, consultants, and researchers, who wish to assess a number of vital dynamics of groups and teams. These include group interaction style, influence and leadership, and organizational culture. The authors recreated a variety of these instruments for use with virtual teams, with rigorous validation on hundreds of real-life teams (e.g., Balthazard, 1999). Results show that the dynamics of F2F group interaction styles are also evident in virtual teams. In addition, the effects of the interaction styles are similar to those in conventional F2F teams. However, there are a number of interesting and powerful effects that are a result of the communication mode.

Our research is now at the level of the personalities of the individual team members. Many studies documented the existence of five basic personality types. Our more recent studies focused on one of these, extroversion. Extroversion is considered the most robust and stable of the five types and also received previous attention from information systems and communications researchers. Our novel approach documents the effects not only of the relative amount of extroverted team members but also of the effects stemming from the ratio of extroverts to nonextroverts in the team’s composition. These two measures of the personality trait have profound and different effects that drive the formation of the team’s ultimate characterization of its interaction style, with the styles’ resulting effects on performance and process outcomes.

This chapter draws from several years of empirical research by the authors and their colleagues, much of it presented at academic and consultant conferences and published in a number of information systems, team management, and international management academic journals. Our aim is to introduce readers to this fascinating research and to illustrate how virtual team composition by personality and interaction style drives performance and process outcomes. Common managerial wisdom, along with expense and convenience consideration, dictates that virtual teams be composed strictly on the basis of complimen-
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