Chapter IV

Leading from Afar: Strategies for Effectively Leading Virtual Teams

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ABSTRACT

Leadership is central to effective virtual teams. Yet leading people from afar constitutes a challenge to practitioners and an underinvestigated research area to scholars. Based on a series of in-depth interviews with project leaders, senior managers, and executives of global organizations, this chapter advances 13 propositions about effective virtual team leadership. These propositions aid leaders of dispersed teams in overcoming leadership challenges they face.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams afford organizations many opportunities. They can maximize productivity and lower costs (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998). And, they can enable organizations to serve international customers and capitalize on globally dispersed talent (Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). Despite these benefits, virtual teams
also exacerbate challenges that traditional teams face and create new ones. One challenge relates to leadership. In a recent study of 500 virtual managers, 90% of them perceived managing from afar to be more challenging than managing people on-site. Furthermore, 40% of these virtual managers perceived team members to produce less when physically separated from each other than when colocated (Hymowitz, 1999).

Leadership of virtual teams is more complex than that of colocated teams for several reasons: a leader’s “social presence” may be more difficult to achieve in distanced settings (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Warkentin, Sayeed, & Hightower, 1997); trust among leaders and team members may be swift and fleeting (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998); members’ identification with the team, organization, and leader may be challenged over distance (Connaughton & Daly, in press); and communication among leaders and team members may be complicated by diverse ethnic, communication, and organizational backgrounds (Cascio, 1999; Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003).

The purpose of this chapter is to advance 13 propositions about how successful leaders of dispersed teams meet these challenges. These propositions are based on a series of semistructured interviews with leaders who manage teams globally. These individuals operate from an organization’s headquarters and have worldwide or regional responsibilities for leading people in distanced locations. They also have limited physical access to their team members. Most of the individuals interviewed for this project led a number of distanced teams, in various industries, over the last decade.

Following Cascio and Shurygailo (2003), we define “dispersed teams” as teams that are separated by some degree of time and distance, and we conceptualize “distanced leadership” as leadership in those contexts. In our work, we found it critical to conceive of distanced leadership as being a function of both physical distance and perceived access to the leader. Leaders who successfully shape the perception that they are accessible can overcome many of the challenges of distanced leadership. We also recognize that there are varying degrees of virtuality (Zigurs, 2003) and various types of virtual teams (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). In this chapter, we examine global virtual teams in which a designated team leader is located in the United States and team members are scattered across the globe. Thus, although we believe there are similarities among leadership in various types of virtual teams, we acknowledge that our chapter looks specifically at leadership in remote teams. To do so, we first present background on our topic and examine some of the leadership challenges in dispersed contexts; next, we explain the methods used to conduct the study; then, we offer 13 propositions based on our research; and, we conclude by discussing future trends in this area.
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