Chapter 5
Managing in the Time of Virtualness

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ABSTRACT

Virtual teams are increasingly being utilized by organizations in order to bring together far-flung expertise using collaborative technologies rather than physical relocation. While many organizations have been quick to utilize technology to enable this new virtual team structure they have been slower in recognizing the needed complementary shifts in management practices surrounding such teams. This chapter seeks to offer advice to managers in this new time of “virtualness.” Interviews were conducted with a variety of individuals engaged in virtual team activities asking about communication practices, performance, change management, and leadership. The authors further probed about what technologies were in use by teams and what areas of the team processes could be improved. Finally, they asked the participants to draw distinctions between their views on effective practices of face-to-face teams and effective practices of virtual teams. From this interview data, insights are offered into social and managerial issues that drive virtual team performance.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams are becoming significantly more common and important in this increasingly global business environment. Organizations have recognized that in order to respond quickly to market needs, it is necessary to have teams of experts to collaborate – regardless of their locale. There are a plethora of communication and collation technologies currently available to enable a virtual team structure: E-mail, web-based knowledge repositories, group calendars, instant messaging, chat, electronic whiteboards and videoconferencing tools. Moreover, telephone, audio conferencing and fax are still commonly

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used communication technologies especially with small to medium sized organizations utilizing virtual teams.

In the past, technological barriers were seen as the greatest obstacle to virtual team success. With technology advancements and the proliferation and wide-spread availability of internet technologies, this barrier has been reduced. The most prominent barrier to virtual team success now is the extension of appropriate social and management methods to the virtual team structure. This challenge has not gone unnoticed; many have recognized that if organizations do not foresee and respond appropriately to this potential barrier, virtual teams are likely to fall short of expectations (DeSanctis and Poole, 1997; Handy, 1995; Victor and Stephens, 1994).

There is little current theory to guide research on the leadership and management of virtual teams (Bell and Kozlowski, 2002). Recent studies suggest that successful technology-mediated leadership is likely different from leadership in face-to-face teams. For instance, successful virtual leaders are likely to coach (O’Connell, et al, 2002) or facilitate (Cascio, 1999) rather than direct team members’ behavior because virtual teams rarely meet face-to-face (Kirkman, et al, 2004), and more “hands on” styles of management are untenable in this distributed setting. Some previous research has focused on the link between communication behaviors of leaders and team outcomes (c.f., Klaus and Bass, 1981). This focus may be particularly salient for studies of virtual teams. While leadership in the more traditional face-to-face context may emerge using a variety of mechanisms, in the virtual context it likely relies largely on the communication effectiveness of the leader. Barge and Hirokawa (1989) propose “communication competency” as an alternative conceptualization of leadership.

Within a virtual context, communication competency is often closely related to technology competency. Managers in the new virtual age must master an assortment of communication and collaboration technologies to facilitate effective communication. There is little research to support this effort. Various theories of “fit” suggest that effective technology use can be facilitated by a fit between the task characteristics and the capabilities of the technology (Zigurs and Buckland, 1998) or the media (Menneke, et al., 2000). However the technology employed has to do more than “fit” the task, it also has to fit team norms, organizational expectations, and user preferences. In addition to facilitating downward communication (i.e., from leader to member) technology must also facilitate horizontal communication (i.e., from member to member). Unfortunately, even when the available technology fits the task, virtual teams can often experience difficulty building rapport. Studies have shown that this rapport is so difficult to build across virtual team members because communication is less efficient and often it is difficult for team members to remain aware of other team member’s presence (McGrath and Hollingshead, 1994; Olson and Olson, 2003).

The purpose of this chapter is to explore a number of factors within a manager’s control that can lead to different performance outcomes for virtual teams. We interviewed team leaders as well as team members to describe communication practices, evaluation processes, and leadership effectiveness exhibited in their field-based teams. The interview data suggest managers who understand how to use technology to effectively communicate are more likely to facilitate positive team processes and outcomes. Synthesizing the interview data with contemporary academic research we offer guidance to managers about technology best practices.

**BACKGROUND**

Effective virtual teams require competency in computer-mediated communication. Collaborative technologies can have a positive impact on group behavior and group efficacy resulting in
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