Chapter 14

Online Networks Can Support the Rise of Virtual Leaders: An Actor–Network Theory Analysis

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ABSTRACT

The actor network theory (ANT) as first proposed by Latour (1984) describes the emergence of socio-technical systems through interaction patterns between network participants as a means of harnessing technological and human factors. This research extended ANT to investigate how self-selected leaders spontaneously emerged in a virtual environment, using the online medium to gain legitimacy and coverage. Thematic analysis of online postings and interviews outlined how participants: 1) tested and developed virtual leadership competencies for the first time; 2) seized the opportunity to raise their personal profile even when geographically isolated; 3) made purposeful process and content contributions and; 4) developed online networking competencies. Since emergent leadership is simultaneously enabling of and enabled by acts of virtual communication, it is important for organisations to learn to identify virtual leaders. Virtual leaders may rise and contribute to the organisation through communication channels other than those typically used by conventional leaders – hence potentially requiring a different set of communication and network building skills.

INTRODUCTION

This research investigated how self-selected leaders spontaneously emerged in a virtual environment using the online medium to gain legitimacy and coverage. While conventional leadership has been studied extensively, ‘virtual leadership’ is a novel phenomenon, developing alongside technology. The questions of how virtual environments may be used to grow constructive participation, and the motives for so doing, are increasing in significance for a broad range of contexts. This research extends the Actor–Network Theory (ANT) propounded by Latour (1987) to account for virtual network development.

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and describe the online behaviours of their actors. This chapter aims to characterize how ANT processes may be ‘virtualised’. The virtual leadership building model is proposed to explain how these processes were carried out, and collaboration and trust fostered early on in online relationships. The chapter also illustrates what the contribution of technology may be in facilitating the development of novel types of leadership.

BACKGROUND

Virtual Leadership

The eighties saw a flurry of research reporting conflicting results as to the ability of computer mediated communication channels to support meaningful interaction (Wellman, Quan-Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001), covering aspects of both technical and people capabilities of systems. The role of existing key leadership figures (for instance managers, group owners, facilitators) was theorized as critical because of their ability to direct action aimed at shaping communication patterns in their organizations.

Identified leaders were studied in virtual community research. Blanchard and Markus (2002) noted that participants’ sense of community fluctuated with the level of their involvement within the community and the perceived benefits from participation and contribution. For instance participants in health related support groups that reported receiving informational support, also exchanged emotional support in an ongoing manner. In such instances, the roles of community managers included some clear boundaries of responsibilities, with the long term survival of the online community identified as a direct function of their contribution. On the other hand, their motivations for contributions were shown to be intrinsically related to their roles. One such established leader, for instance, characterised her feeling as a need to “give back” to a group that had contributed so much to her (p.6).

In the work organizational context, it is virtual teams, rather than general online groups or communities that were studied. The role of existing leaders such as managers of ‘virtual’ organisations was viewed as fundamental in building trust and mutual understanding (Van der Smagt, 2000) thus generally reinforcing online group cohesion to improve virtual group functioning (DeSanctis & Monge, 1999). Studies of virtual team facilitators involving participants enrolled in a virtual facilitation programme, crossing boundaries of time, space and culture (Pauleen & Yoong, 2001a) described the facilitators’ use of information and communication technology to build effective team work relationships. Pauleen and Yoong (2001b) concluded that training needs be aimed at helping virtual facilitators gain the necessary experience and understanding to work in various online and offline environments. Pauleen and Yoong (2004) further outlined relationship building as the key social process at work in virtual team facilitation and concluded that their Action Research design promoted learning and reflection for the virtual facilitators. These results support previous findings that emphasise the quality of online facilitation as a potential enabling factor, with the group leadership and its skill at online communication under study (Durnell Cramton & Orvis, 2003; James & Rykert, 1998; Klein & Kleinhanns, 2003). The latter view the role of the facilitator as maintaining the social dynamics of the discussion and as moderating content to increase and encourage online participation, together with its leadership connection (Gibson & Manuel, 2003).

Studying the email use-patterns of emerging leaders in virtual teams, Yoo and Alavi (2002) concluded that contemporary leaders need to master the art of online communication if they are to extend their sphere of influence in their organisations. The authors note that this is a paradigm shift as most management development programs emphasise conventional communication modes and little attention, if any, is given to computer mediated communication. Special