Chapter 4

Group Processes in the Virtual Work Environment: Evidence for an Alliance-Building Dimensionality

Andrea Roofe Sattleight
Innovative Strategies, LLC., Miami, USA

Sungu Armagan
Florida International University, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter explores an alternative approach to group processes in the virtual environment as a system of alliances, encompassing leader, member, and group. The purpose of this research is to determine if a system of alliances encompassing leader, member, and team exists in the virtual environment. The authors explore the applicability of alliances to a 21st century management environment by testing a conceptual model using 20,000 bootstrapped samples of 96 employed professionals and students studying in an online environment. They find evidence that group processes in a technology-mediated environment can be defined by a three-way-system of alliances in which the leader plays a less dominant role than in traditional groups. The authors find that the individual’s relationship with the group may be built through a trust relationship with other members rather than a direct relationship with the leader. Directions for future research and implications for management practice are also discussed.

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INTRODUCTION

The tools [technology] were important, but they clearly weren’t enough to create an effective connection between people when they were distant (Kostner, 1996, p. 54).

Cyberspace, also known as the virtual environment, is a critical component of the 21st century business environment. The virtual organization may consist of people, application and other service providers, and software and equipment-heterogeneous modules (Bauer & Köszegi, 2003; Mowshowitz, 1997). Bauer and Köszegi argue that the final output of the virtual organization is the result of a trust relationship among the providers. That is, trust is a social ‘coordination mechanism’ of which technology is the physical agent. A major challenge for virtual team leaders is the development of a cohesive unit of members ‘building mutual trust and cooperation’ (Araujo, 2004; Cohen & Gibson, 2003; DeRosa, Hantula, Kock, & D’Arcy, 2004; Kasper-Fuehrer & Askanasy, 2001; Malhotra, Majchrzak, & Rosen, 2007; Mitchell & Zigris, 2009) to accomplish the mandate of the team. As distance among members hinders the establishment of interpersonal relationships and communication modes that promote trust, the leader in the virtual environment, also referred to as the e-leader, is challenged to facilitate team building for successful task accomplishment (Kostner, 1996; Malhotra, et al., 2007; Scales, 1998). Trust is the foundation of alliances and team building (Scales, 1998).

Alliance building is a means by which a group achieves cohesiveness. Burlingame, Fuhriman, and Johnson (2002) define cohesion as a system of alliances spanning leader-group, member-group, member-leader, and member-member alliances. In this chapter, we apply the alliance-building paradigm identified by Burlingame et al. to an examination of team processes in the virtual or technology-mediated environment. Leadership roles are devolved to team members in the form of shared leadership in the virtual environment. As the distinction between leader and virtual team members become blurred, the four-way system of alliances may be translated into the team action, transition and interpersonal processes defined by Marks, Mathieu, and Zaccaro (2001), and the e-leader’s team building and task accomplishment roles identified by Hertel (2004). Team action processes as defined by Marks et al. consist of planning and evaluation, while transition processes consist of coordinating, monitoring, and support. Interpersonal processes consist of conflict management, motivation, and confidence building and affect management.

The purpose of the current study is to determine if the four-way system of alliances identified by Burlingame, Fuhriman, and Johnson (2002) is applicable in the virtual environment. In this study, we translate conventional elements of group processes to the virtual environment in the form of a system of alliances, spanning leader, member, and virtual team members. The virtual team is a flexible organizational form arising from the use of technology-mediated processes (Piccoli, Powell, & Blake, 2004; Powell, Piccoli, & Ives, 2004). The theoretical relevance of the present study lies in its extension of current management literature on cohesiveness to the virtual environment. Its practical relevance is highlighted by the need for managers to improve their understanding of the characteristics of group processes in the virtual environment. Managers will need to adapt to an environment of reduced face-to-face interaction while retaining motivation at the team and individual levels, and taking advantage of the synergies created by task interdependence (Hertel, et al., 2004). According to Powell et al. and Piccoli et al., the virtual team offers the opportunity for companies to operate with greater flexibility by harnessing resources regardless of time and spatial distance. This chapter contributes to practice by helping virtual team managers identify areas of focus for team building and task accomplishment.