ABSTRACT

With support from the research literature, this paper argues that to lead effectively in a virtual environment, the leaders of virtual teams need relationship building, technical, and leadership skills, as well as the ability to defuse the frustrations of virtual team members. Relationship building skills include the ability to establish trust, embrace diversity, skill in fostering a team spirit, and motivating team members. Technical skills include the ability to use video conferencing software, instant messaging, e-mail, virtual worlds, avatars, and communication skills. Leadership skills needed by leaders in virtual environments include emotional intelligence, the ability to create an open and supportive environment, and to lead by example.

Keywords: Leadership Skills, Online Communication, Relationship-Building Skills, Technical Skills, Virtual Leadership, Virtual Teams, Web-Enabled Leadership

INTRODUCTION

The next major challenge facing leaders is the ability to lead effectively in the virtual realm, because in many organizations, internet technologies (e.g., e-mail, instant messaging, chat rooms, video conferencing, etc.) are replacing face-to-face interactions, and leaders must adapt in order to succeed in this new context (Institute for Corporate Productivity, 2010; McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; Morris, 2008; and Voss, 1996). Consequently, because virtual communications are becoming the norm in many organizations, this paper argues that in order to succeed in the virtual context, leaders need relationship building, technical, and leadership skills, as well as the ability to defuse the frustrations of their subordinates in order to accomplish organizational goals in a virtual team (VT) environment. In the subsequent paragraphs, the author supports these arguments with information obtained from scholarly journals.

THE NEED FOR VIRTUAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS

Many organizations are using VTs because they have the ability to cross geographical boundaries (Zhang, Tremaine, Egan, Milewski, O’Sullivan, & Fjermestad, 2009), are cost effective because VTs do not require travel, and they are independent of time and space (Eom, 2009; Fruchter, Bosch-Sijtsema, & Ruohomaki, 2010; Kahai, Fjermestad, Zhang, & Avolio, 2007; McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; and Suduc, Bizoı,
& Filip, 2009). Other benefits of VTs include greater knowledge sharing and communication (Cottone, Pieti, Schiavinato, Soru, Martinelli, Varotto, & Mantovani, 2009), faster, more innovative, and better informed decision-making (Muntean, 2009), and are more efficient and effective (Muntean, 2009; and Voss, 1996), than face-to-face team meetings. The use of VTs by organizations is growing (Brake, 2006; Kahai et al., 2007; Voss, 1996), thereby creating a need for virtual leadership skills, since it is more challenging to lead in a virtual environment, than in a face-to-face environment because of the lack of nonverbal communication (Brake, 2006; McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; Muntean, 2009; and Voss, 1996).

**RELATIONSHIP BUILDING SKILLS**

The first type of skills that are needed by the leaders of VTs are relationship building skills, because the members of the VT must work together in order to accomplish organizational goals (Suduc et al., 2009), and virtual teams cannot succeed without good leader-follower relationships (Robert, Dennis, & Ahuja, 2008; Shriberg, 2009). Strong relationships between the leader and the members of the VT can help to overcome the feelings of isolation experienced by the members of the VT (Pyoria, 2009; Hambley, O’Neill, & Kline, 2007), and good relationships enhance the ability of the VT to share information and knowledge with their fellow team members (“Distant unity,” 2010; Hastings, 2009; Muntean, 2009). Relationship building skills are also important, because it can help the leaders of VTs to defuse conflicts (Brake, 2006; Robinson & Rose, 2007), embrace change (McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; Van Velsor, McCauley, & Ruderman, 2010), and enable better communication among the members of VTs (Morris, 2008).

**Trust**

Without trust, strong relationships cannot exist in a VT (Robert et al., 2008; Robinson & Rose, 2007; Van Velsor et al., 2010), therefore, it is vital to the success of a VT, that the leader creates an environment that is conducive to trust (Brake, 2006; Shriberg, 2009). A leader can create trust in a VT by having an initial in-person meeting with the team (Brake, 2006; McCallum & O’Connell, 2009). However, if this is simply not possible, then the leader should encourage participants in the VT to post a picture of his or her self and their biographical information, in order for each person to see the human face behind the user name (Brake, 2006; Eom, 2009; Voss, 1996). Other ways that leaders can establish trust in VTs are by delegating tasks (Fruchter et al., 2010; Zhang et al., 2009), and encouraging open and honest communication by creating a safe non-critical environment (McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; Voss, 1996). VT leaders can also foster trust by, fulfilling the promises made to the VT constituents (Robinson & Rose, 2007; Van Velsor et al., 2010), focusing on legitimacy and credibility with followers (McCallum & O’Connell, 2009), and checking in on each member of the VT in order to see how they are doing via a private chat (Brake, 2006).

**Embracing Diversity**

One of the principal advantages of VTs is that they are able to connect diverse experts from around the globe in an efficient manner (Brake, 2006; “Distant unity,” 2010; Hastings, 2009; McCallum & O’Connell, 2009; Muntean, 2009). Therefore, in order for the VT to function at maximum effectiveness, the leader must embrace the diversity of the team (Robinson & Rose, 2007; Van Velsor et al., 2010) by creating a culture of information sharing, cooperation, and working together based on mutual trust and respect (David, Chand, Newell, & Resende-Santos, 2008; Fruchter et al., 2010; Hastings, 2009). Leaders can also embrace diversity by encouraging input from all team members (Muntean, 2009; Pyoria, 2009), building a shared VT context, and establishing a common language in order to ensure that each team member defines terms in the same
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