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Virtual International Leadership Within Organizations: Overcoming Cultural, Language, and Physical Barriers

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Virtual International Leadership Within Organizations: Overcoming Cultural, Language, and Physical Barriers

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ABSTRACT



Advances in technology are allowing members of a team to collaborate while being geographically and spatially apart. These new teams, known as virtual teams, have benefits for both the organizations to which they belong and to the individual members. Organizations are able to utilize highly-skilled experts without the associated relocation costs. Team members are able to contribute to projects in their field of expertise without having to leave their homeland. These teams require a leader whose interactions build trust and loyalty without the benefit of face-to-face contact with other team members. Although virtual teams are rapidly growing, research is lacking in how these team can communicate effectively to build interpersonal relationships which will lead to trust within the team and loyalty to the organization. As with face-to-face teams, the leader's style will affect the team's response to loyalty and trust. This research explored the effect that Authentic Leadership had on a virtual team and participation by virtual team members. Participants, who are currently or have previously been part of a virtual team, were interviewed. The participants were asked to reflect up whether certain styles of leadership and communication, as well as expressions of empathy, either by a leader to the team members or between team members, significantly impacted their performance and feeling of belonging.



RESEARCH QUESTIONS

How does geographical separation impact the team? Would varying times and days for meetings help to increase participation and provide a feeling of inclusion or exclusion for team members? When meetings are held at different times, team members may feel that consideration is given to their location. According to Zaccaro and Bader (2002), since each member of the team contributes differently, full participation would contribute to the efficiency of the team.

Additionally, active and accurate participation would require accurate comprehension of the primary language the team uses in communication. It would be interesting to note how differences in educational requirements in different countries contribute to the understanding of tasks. Would possible differences in interpretation be due to educational differences or be caused by language barriers?

How does the leader's style of leadership affect the team in bonding and resolving conflict? The leader's ability to empathize and assist team members in their areas of deficiency may help in creating feelings of trust among team members. Also, a leader, who is willing to acknowledge his lack of knowledge may make her more approachable.



METHOD

Ten participants have been identified and are being interviewed. Participants include both followers and leaders. These virtual teams will consist of members, who work together virtually for business organizations. At least one member will need to be spatially separated from the other members of the team.

Participants are being virtually interviewed, preferably using a method which will allow visual contact. Participants have read and signed the consent form and are aware that their participation is completely voluntary, and the interview may be terminated by the participant at any time. The interviews are recorded, coded to protect the identity of the interviewee, then transcribed by the researcher. Upon completion of the research, the taped interviews will be destroyed and all data will be reported in an aggregate format.

RESULTS

How does geographical separation impact the team?

All participants agreed that working virtually allows them to more fully and actively contribute to the team. Since they are not required to be in the same physical location, they are able to continue with their life responsibilities and effectively contribute to the team. One respondent stated,

- “I would not be able to work for a company in Maryland and complete my Graduate Studies in Maine, if it were not for working virtually.”

Another replied,

- “It's like I got a raise. I gain 2 hours a day that I use to commute and I save on car expenses. I feel grateful that I am trusted to work on my own.”

All participants agreed that geographic location did not negatively impact their interactions with the team. Most felt that it had a positive impact, as team members were more at ease knowing that they could efficiently work and full fill their personal obligations.

What types of communication are most effective?

All participants agreed that the most effective type of communication was dependent on the information being presented. Email or Instant Messaging assist when English is not the primary language of all team members. The written communication allows members more time to comprehend the contents and respond appropriately. However, for certain situations where more than 2 or 3 messages (or emails) are required, either telephone or audio/visual communication is preferred to answer detailed questions. The main concern with web-based audio/visual communication was with connectivity issues in remote areas.

What leader qualities affect the team?

Empowerment and availability were unanimously the most important qualities for a leader to effectively create an environment of trust and efficient work production. In the words of one participant,

- “Empowering, more than anything, can create an environment where the leader helps others succeed.”

Routinely checking in with the team and knowing that he/she is available,

- “Hey, what's going on? Is there anything I can do? Offering resources or suggesting someone who is skilled in an area. When you're stuck, this makes it feel like you haven't been abandoned.”

A leader who instills trust in the team needs to balance empowering individual team members to work alone, yet be available to offer guidance when needed.



CONCLUSION

Virtual teams are quickly growing in today's global environment and there is a need for further investigation on how a leader's style can assist in making the team more efficient, while building trust within the team and the organization.

This research contributes in identifying behaviors in leaders and followers, which affect team performance and loyalty within the virtual team. Ten members from five different global companies are being interviewed regarding their experiences in communication and how leader behaviors influence team dynamics. The current data suggests that followers are more receptive and loyalty increases within the virtual team, when the leader displays qualities of empowering others, availability, self-awareness, respect, and accountability. These leader qualities appear to generate trust, respect, honesty, and open communication within the virtual team.

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