Chapter 11
Leading Virtual Teams:
Conflict and Communication Challenges for Leaders

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ABSTRACT

Virtual teams are increasingly common as marketplaces become more global. They offer advantages to employers, including increased time and travel savings, decreased real estate costs, and larger applicant pools. Yet, conflict is inherent in virtual teams, and leaders within virtual teams must confront debilitating conflicts due to technological issues, cultural miscommunication, and restructuring their communication. Though some elements are similar to handling conflict in any team situation, five group factors are especially subject to conflict and manifest differently in effective virtual teams: strategically selecting team members, building effective relationships, fostering trust, facilitating communication, and achieving team goals. Managing any team presents leaders with challenges regarding building relationships, facilitating communication, overcoming barriers and achieving team goals. However, adding geographic distance, cultural differences, and a lack of continuous face-to-face interaction exacerbates these challenges.

INTRODUCTION

Virtual teams are increasingly common as marketplaces become more dynamic, as well as global. Virtual teams offer advantages to employers, including increased time and travel savings, decreased real estate costs, and larger applicant pools. However, with these benefits come new challenges. Conflict is inherent in virtual teams, and leaders within virtual teams must confront debilitating conflicts due to technological issues, cultural miscommunication, and restructuring their communication to include both local and distanced staff. Though some elements are similar to handling conflict in any team situation, five group factors are especially subject to conflict and manifest differently in *effective* virtual teams: strategically selecting team members, building effective relationships, fostering trust, facilitating communication, and achieving team goals.

This chapter melds together several traditional elements of team-building, leadership and group communication/dynamics, as well as emerging elements pertaining to how technology impacts each of these traditional elements within a virtual team milieu. Managing any team presents leaders with challenges regarding building relationships, facilitating communication, overcoming barriers and achieving team goals. However, adding geographic distance, cultural differences, and a lack of continuous face-to-face interaction exacerbates these challenges. Virtual team leaders must do everything traditional leaders do, but at a distance. If leaders are going to succeed in virtual environments, they must learn to anticipate the needs and potential problems of the virtual employee and act accordingly. The technological advances of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries have made the global community more accessible, expanding the sphere of influence, and bringing together diverse groups. The geographically-situated workplace became non-essential through computer networking, the Internet and other communication aides. Managers are exploring new ways of organizing and efficiently running their companies as a result. Virtual teams are rapidly becoming a commonplace reality by facilitating various groups of people into uniform factions sharing common goals. The key to leading virtual teams, however, is to effectively formulate the groups and then practice routine maintenance to ensure their success.

BACKGROUND

A "virtual team" can be defined as "a collection of individuals who are geographically and/or organizationally or otherwise dispersed and who collaborate via communication and information technologies in order to accomplish a specific goal" (Zigurs, 2003, p. 340). Organizations benefit greatly from the use of virtual teams by enjoying a larger applicant pool, lower real estate costs

(e.g., smaller office space to lease), as well as savings from time and lower travel costs (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). Conversely, virtual employees receive greater flexibility in work schedules. Although there are benefits for both parties, with increased geographic distance come unique challenges for virtual teams and traditional team leadership (Maruping & Agarwal, 2004).

In order to look at how to *lead* virtual teams, one must first look at definitions of "leadership:" "Leadership is a process used by an individual to influence group members toward the achievement of group goals, where the group members review the influence as legitimate" (Howell & Costley, 2001, p. 4). Clawson (2002) defines "leadership as the ability and the willingness to influence others so that they can respond willingly" (p. 34). These definitions can help delineate "leaders" from "managers," who hold specific organizational positions and help coordinate resources. Clearly, an individual could be both a leader and a manager, but group leaders are not always found in an organization's management positions. With that said, in order to meet the demands of leading teams in virtual environments, virtual team leaders must have a clear understanding of not only how to lead others effectively, but also the unique circumstances associated with communicating in a computer-mediated environment. In this new environment, leaders must overcome typical challenges such as building group cohesion, facilitating communication and achieving team objectives. However, they must accomplish these feats at a distance.

Member Selection

Leading an effective virtual team begins with careful member selection (Bradley & Vozikis, 2004). Blackburn, Furst and Rosen (2003) compare a virtual leader selecting team members to a basketball coach recruiting her/his players. Continuing with this analogy, a coach recruits the most talented players, who have the ability, knowledge, and

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