

Distanced Leadership and Multimedia

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INTRODUCTION

At the dawn of the 21st century, more and more organizations in various industries have adopted geographically dispersed work groups and are utilizing advanced technologies to communicate with them (Benson-Armer & Hsieh, 1997; Hymowitz, 1999; Townsend, DeMarie & Hendrickson, 1998; Van Aken, Hop & Post, 1998). This geographical dispersion varies in form. For example, some organizations have adopted “telecommuting,” in which members may work at home, on the road and/or at the office (Hymowitz, 1999). Other organizations have created teams that are globally dispersed. A leader located in Palo Alto, California, for example, may be responsible for coordinating employees in Belgium, China and Mexico.

This article examines the role of communication and multimedia in leading people across time and space. To do so, I first note the significance of distanced work relationships; then, outline various conceptualizations of “distance” evident in the literature; next, discuss the role of multimedia in those relationships; and conclude by forecasting future trends. Throughout the article, the term “distanced leadership” is used to refer to leadership in geographically dispersed contexts.

THE PROLIFERATION OF DISTANCED LEADERSHIP

New organizational forms have become increasingly prevalent in recent years. Indeed, many contemporary organizations and teams span time and space. Physical separation of organizational and/or team members is a defining characteristic of virtual organizations and teams (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998; Majchrzak, Rice, King, Malhotra & Ba, 2000; Warkentin, Sayeed & Hightower, 1997; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 1999), geographically dispersed teams (Connaughton & Daly, 2003, 2004a, 2004b;

Shockley-Zalabak, 2002), dispersed network organizations (Rosenfeld, Richman & May, 2004) and telework operations (Hylmo & Buzzanell, 2002; Leonardi, Jackson & Marsh, 2004; Scott & Timmerman, 1999). In these forms, the organization or team is constituted in its interaction and formal and informal networks. By 2005, 20% of the world’s work force is expected to work virtually (Prashad, 2003). Indeed, scholars have called on leadership scholarship to “stretch its boundaries to match the elastic nature of global work” (Davis, 2003, p. 48).

Geographical dispersion affords organizations both opportunities and challenges to both business and communication. Table 1 summarizes these issues as they often appear in the literature.

On the one hand, geographically dispersed teams present organizations with many opportunities. They can help organizations maximize productivity and lower costs (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998). And, they can enable organizations to serve international customers and capitalize on globally dispersed talent (Majchrzak, Rice, King, Malhotra & Ba, 2000; Zaccaro & Bader, 2003). Ideally, this geographical dispersion is designed to foster productivity from, and cooperation among, organizational members, just as if they were co-located with one another (see Handy, 1995; Upton & McAfee, 1996).

Yet geographical dispersion also poses some challenges, specifically with regard to leadership. Previous research indicates that (a) a leader’s “social presence” may be more difficult to achieve in distanced settings (Kiesler & Sproull, 1992; Warkentin, Sayeed & Hightower, 1997); (b) trust among leaders and team members may be swift yet fleeting (Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner, 1998); (c) members’ identification with the team, organization, and leader may be challenged over distance (Connaughton & Daly, 2004b); and (d) communication among leaders and team members may be complicated by diverse ethnic, communication and organizational backgrounds (Cascio, 1999; Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003).

Table 1. Opportunities and challenges of globally dispersed teams

Opportunities	Challenges
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Reduce Costs • Serve International Customers/Clients • Integrate Global Talent 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Time Zone Differences • Varied Communication Norms • Language Differences • Limited Face-to-Face Contact

These challenges are put into perspective when one compares what may take place in physically proximate offices to what often happens in distanced work relationships. It has been suggested that co-located office settings provide more opportunities for organizational members to communicate frequently and spontaneously with each other; they allow for potential to interact immediately for troubleshooting; they foster a forum in which to directly access information; and they enable the development and maintenance of relationships (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998). Often, leaders who are co-located with their team members develop and energize relationships with their team through informal as well as formal interaction. In globally dispersed organizations, however, there may be fewer opportunities to informally communicate, leaving some distanced employees feeling isolated from their leaders and from events that take place at the central organization (Van Aken, Hop & Post, 1998; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram & Garud, 1998).

CONCEPTUALIZATIONS OF “DISTANCE”

Research on distanced work relationships, including that related to leadership, defines “distance” in different ways. Some scholars examine physical distance, when individuals and leaders are separated by geography (see Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Kerr & Jermier, 1978). Other scholars investigate social or psychosocial distance, which often refers to perceived differences in status, rank, authority, social standing and power among leaders and followers, all of which may affect the intimacy and social interactions that take place between leaders and followers (see Antonakis & Atwater, 2002; Napier & Ferris, 1993).

Some researchers conceive of physical distance and social distance as related constructs, functioning in a similar manner (see Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999). Others argue that physical distance and social distance are distinct and should be considered as separate constructs in research. Among them, Antonakis and Atwater (2002) also add a third dimension of distance, perceived interaction frequency, which they define as the perceived degree to which leaders interact with their followers. They propose that physical distance, social distance and perceived interaction frequency are measurable and are separate dimensions, each of which describes an element of “distance” in dispersed work relationships.

Other research examines how individuals perceive distance in geographically dispersed work contexts. For example, in a study of 46 teleworkers in a variety of industries, Leonardi, Jackson and Marsh (2004) argue that these individuals *manage* distance in various ways. The authors conclude that dispersed individuals do not all perceive distance similarly, and that they manipulate the fact that they are geographically distant from others in order to satisfy individual needs. In the authors’ words, “... distance is much more than a mere outcome of the use of ICTs; it is rather a tool virtual team members can use to manage their relationships with their coworkers and their organizations” (p. 169).

MULTIMEDIA AND DISTANCED LEADERSHIP

The published work on multimedia, communication technologies and dispersed leadership can be grouped into two broad categories: that which discusses effective practices for using media to forge connections across time and space; and that which addresses key assumptions in previous research, particularly with respect to the perceived necessity of face-to-face interaction and to the impact physical distance has on work relationships.

Effective Practices

Some published work advances effective practices, highlighting various ways that leaders can utilize multiple media to foster connections with distanced

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