Chapter IX
Exploring the Virtual Team Leaders' Perspective:
Efficient Work Roles and Leadership Functions

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ABSTRACT

In this study we examined the perceived importance of line managers and middle managers in virtual teams, and what work roles and leadership functions are necessary to promote virtual team success and performance. Using Quinn's (1988) competing values framework it was found that control-related roles of directors and producers were perceived to be most important. With years in a leading position, the repertoire of leadership roles needed to successfully lead virtual teams declined. Additionally, middle managers compared to line managers perceived people oriented leadership functions (i.e., mentor and facilitator roles) and flexibility-related work roles (i.e., innovator and mentor roles) as more important whereas line managers compared to middle managers perceived stability leadership functions (i.e., monitor and coordinator roles) as more important. Limitations, implications for virtual team leadership, and suggestions for future research are discussed.

INTRODUCTION

In virtual teams, team members are geographically distributed and coordinate their work predominantly via electronic information and communication technology (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Gibson & Cohen, 2003). The lack of face-to-face interaction in virtual teams and the impact of electronic communication media exert a strong influence on social processes and effective collaboration (Hertel, Geister, & Konradt, 2005; Hinds & Kiesler, 2002; Hollingshead & Contractor, 2002; Wegge, 2006). With regard to the leader he/she has less information to assess the team's situation and instances to recognize necessary modifications. As a consequence, managing the dynamics of social behavior in virtual teams and the development of adequate practices and critical team processes is impaired, i.e. to uncover conflicts, to motivate team members who are working at disparate sites, and to develop trust and team cohesion (Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge, 2001). Moreover, it has been argued that due to the physical distance between the vertical leader and the team members, the amount and quality of dyadic leader-member exchange (Gerstner & Day, 1997) is reduced and the leadership process is shared by team members, which spread across units and organizations (Pearce & Conger, 2003). Consequently, the changing role of leadership in virtual teams has been discussed (Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Hinds & Kiesler, 2002) and management concepts have been proposed that shift parts of managerial functions either to situational substitutes, e.g., task interdependence or incentives (Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 2003), or that is directed to empower the team members to make decisions by themselves in self-managing teams (Conger & Kanungo, 1988; Manz & Sims, 1993). Within empowered teams leadership functions, which were formerly in the responsibility of the team leader are delegated to the team members.

Referring to leadership in dispersed organizational structures, several scenarios have been suggested (e.g., Avolio et al., 2001; Murphy & Jackson, 1999; Shamir, 1999). A prominent scenario assumes leadership tasks to be broadly distributed among and shared by a set of team members in ad-hoc arrangements. Shared leadership (Pearce & Conger, 2003) occurs when there is no formal authority, all leadership responsibilities are distributed and collectively enacted among the members and decisions are made collectively. Scholars on virtual teams, however, have argued that leadership in virtual teams generally needs more structure and procedural assistance than leadership in conventional teams (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Gibson & Cohen, 2003; Hinds & Kiesler, 2002). Support for this argument is provided by field studies with computer-supported teams. For example, team members who were allowed to communicate in written form were shown to be less satisfied than those with face to face contact and teams with a formal team leader were more efficient and more satisfied than those without (Fjermestadt & Hiltz, 2000; Hollingshead & Contractor, 2002). In addition, meta-analytic findings demonstrate that physical distance was negatively related to subordinate's performance (Podsakoff et al., 1996).

While past research on leadership in virtual teams emphasized the impact of communication on team performance and member satisfaction (Hofner-Saphiere, 1996; Maznevski & Chudoba, 2000), work roles and leadership functions have received comparatively little attention in the empirical literature (e.g., Zigurs & Kozar, 1994). In the present study, we thus examined roles and functions of virtual teams leaders related to effectiveness in virtual teams. Additionally, we investigated whether virtual leadership experience and organizational position moderate the way in which leaders interpret their leadership behavior in virtual teams.