Chapter 29
Leveraging Diversity in a Virtual Context:
Global Diversity and Cyber–Aggression

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ABSTRACT

In this chapter, the authors present a model for understanding the context and determinants of aggression within an on-line environment, known as cyber-aggression. They propose that the heterogeneity of global virtual teams along with other key individual characteristics such as Social Dominance Orientation, Identification Threat, and past experience with aggression/harassment will lead to greater likelihood of cyber-aggression occurring or being perceived by group members. Additionally, the use of lean communication media, as well as the distance between team members and the social and professional isolation that goes along with global virtual team work also contributes to greater likelihood of cyber-aggression occurring. Lastly, without any way to build meaningful trust in a virtual setting and a lack of cross-cultural competence, members of global virtual teams are more likely to engage in behaviors that do not demonstrate cultural sensitivity or cohesion on the team, resulting in poor communication which can lead to more aggressive behaviors. The authors conclude their chapter with recommendations on how to best combat these pitfalls of working in a virtual environment.

INTRODUCTION

When members of a global team experience conflict, they often have difficulty communicating with one another (Korac-Kakabadse, Kouzmin, Korac-Kakabadse, & Savery, 2001; Von Glinow, Shapiro, & Brett, 2004), particularly if they are connected virtually. These global teams have to rely on emergent team culture because they do not have a pre-existing identity, as few commonalities exist among team members (Matveev & Nelson, 2004) due to their distance and differing cultures. This exacerbates the obvious barrier of language. When people do not communicate face-to-face, it is often not possible to detect tone or body language, which hinders the ability to correctly interpret what another person is saying. Further, individuals tend to use and interpret language culturally, so even what appears to be a straightforward comment can result in misunderstandings. Depending on the scope and pervasiveness of these misunderstandings, conflict can emerge.

These problems are exacerbated when the source of conflict has an emotional component (Von Glinow, et al., 2004). In situations such as these, when emotions are running high, the messages that team members need to communicate effectively with one another should be information rich. Unfortunately, Global Virtual Team (GVT) members are often limited to lean communication media (Daft & Lengel, 1984), which decreases the likelihood that messages will be properly conveyed between team members. As a result, conflict, both task related and emotional/relationship related seems inevitable. Understanding the sources of such conflict is essential to limiting it and thereby promoting global diversity and organizational effectiveness.

GVTs are by definition separated by vast distances and are limited in their ability to communicate face-to-face. While new forms of communication enable individuals to send information rich messages across large distances (e.g., video-conferencing); these communication modes assume that individuals are synchronous in time. GVT members are often asynchronous, separated not only by distance, but also by time (Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001). Additionally, Von Glinow et al. (2004) note that virtual actions, such as not responding promptly to an e-mail, will be interpreted differently by team members from different national cultures. Such differences can lead to friction and conflict, or if a conflict already exists, can escalate it. Similarly, one person may consider a particular statement innocent or even a complement, but another person may interpret the same statement as harassing (Berkley & Kaplan, 2009).

The purpose of this chapter is to present a model for understanding how structural factors (e.g., media richness) and interpersonal factors (e.g., trust) moderate the relationship between team heterogeneity (focusing on cross-cultural differences) and aggression, while also acknowledging the role of individual characteristics (e.g., past experience). Further, we will take the model a step beyond understanding the heterogeneity-aggression relationship by proposing how heterogeneous global teams can be rife for manifesting cyber-aggression, ranging from simple name-calling to threats of harm. Finally, the chapter will address how organizations can promote harmony and effectiveness. Implications for training and team member selection are also proposed.

TEAM HETEROGENEITY AND AGGRESSION

While team heterogeneity can be measured along multiple dimensions, given the emphasis here on global diversity, the proposed model and associated discussion will focus on cross-cultural differences. Specifically, the model uses the typology developed by Hofstede (2001) to define these differences. Included among these dimensions are individualism-collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, power distance, masculinity-femininity, and

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