

# Chapter XVIII

## Collective Identity and Learning in a Virtual Team

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### ABSTRACT

*This chapter introduces Media Synchronicity Theory as a means to examine the influence of technology use on the relationship between a multidimensional model of collective identity and its impact on the multidimensional team learning in virtual teams. The study was conducted in an educational setting over an academic semester. Hypotheses testing suggest that the basis for a team's collective identity does impact team learning. The authors believe that a clearer understanding of the underlying relationships will enable academicians to improve their course offerings to provide more realistic representation of existing team tasks, technology use, and work-groups presently found in organizations.*

### INTRODUCTION

Due to the increased competitiveness and complexity of today's global business environment, there appears to be two developments that are increasing in popularity. The first trend is the use of collaborative teams that span functional, geographic, temporal, and cultural boundaries (Biggs, 2000; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002). These *virtual* teams enable organizations to leverage

their employees' unique skills and experiences regardless of where workers are located. The second trend is a heightened awareness of the importance of fostering learning in organizational settings. Of particular interest with regard to fostering learning is creating an environment that encourages teams to adapt to market changes by altering their current routines (i.e., improving efficiency) or by experimenting with new procedures (i.e., employing innovative ideas). Since Van der Vegt

and Bunderson (2005) found that *learning* teams are more efficient, have higher quality output and superior overall achievement, it is expected that these positive team outcomes might also be associated with teams that must discover new routines or processes to meet team and organizational goals. These types of team outcomes are critical to organizations, since they are fundamental to an organization's success and they are believed by some to be a catalyst that leads to a firm's competitive advantage (Senge, 1990).

These relationships are not the sole domain of for-profit organizations. They can also be found in academic settings. For instance, institutions of higher learning, whose students are more efficient, have high quality standards and who have higher levels of overall achievement, might have a competitive advantage when compared to other academic institutions in terms of attracting high caliber students, securing funding sources for teaching and research, and increasing recruiting from top businesses. These same universities emphasize that their use of advanced technologies will provide students with a world-class education. However, are these students better prepared to function effectively in situations that require widespread use of technology? Furthermore, will these students have the ability to adapt current processes and/or to develop new routines? For several reasons, this is not necessarily true. First, new entrants into the workforce may be ill-prepared to operate successfully within teams that interact primarily through Information and Communications Technology (ICT). Although group projects are commonly used in many college and university courses, their focus has been limited to traditional face-to-face interactions and not on the use of multiple ICTs that are prevalent in today's firms. While this approach may facilitate course delivery, it does little to introduce students to the "new way" of working in modern organizations. Second, the tasks (i.e., student assignments) that are being performed tend to be limited in scope and are designed to

facilitate assessing objective outcomes (e.g., presentations, reports, and examinations). Given the current complexity of the marketplace, these tasks may not challenge students to extend themselves beyond rote learning.

To meet this need, some institutions are enhancing their current curricula to include an integration of traditional course material and online technologies. This combined approach is designed to expose students to the two "new realities" of organizational life mentioned above (i.e. working in virtual teams and team learning). In fact, interest in using complex collaborative team activities combined with extensively applying technology within course offerings appears to be rising (Andres, 2006; Clark & Gibb, 2006; Dineen, 2005; Gavidia, Mogollon, & Baena, 2004). For instance, van Genuchten, Vogel, Rutkowski, and Saunders (2005) provide concrete evidence that students and faculty experience positive team processes and outcomes when they are exposed to working with new technologies, complex tasks and individuals having diverse cultural backgrounds. Moreover, research stresses the benefits of technology-mediated collaborative learning. Virtual teams that engage in collaborative learning adapt well to using ICT to facilitate their communication and interaction (Bigelow, 1999), experience increases in the quantity and quality of communication (Arbaugh, 2000), and are exposed to more ideas (Dineen, 2005). Despite the potential benefits of offering courses that emphasize technology and collaborative team learning, scholars have yet to determine answers to some underlying questions. Namely, is it possible for technology-based teams to possess many of the features of a traditional face-to-face team, such as a common sense of purpose or belonging, or a concern for the well-being of the team? And, what, if any, impact does this have on the team's ability or inability to learn? Accordingly, the present study seeks to inform the debate on these new educational offerings by examining the effect of a team's identity on its learning. Furthermore, it seeks to determine how

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