

Chapter 4.30

Virtual Team Identity Construction and Boundary Maintenance

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports the results of a multiple case study which investigated how virtual teams appropriated multiple media to facilitate the construction of group identity and manage group boundaries. It focuses on relationships within and between virtual teams. The study found five processes that shaped group identity, including clarification of goals and mission, developing regularized pattern of interaction, group norms for media use, and negotiation of task jurisdiction with interlocking groups. The study discovered that groups managed boundaries in terms of clarity distinctness, and permeability. It indicated that group boundaries were blurred and

maintained simultaneously through purposeful use of communication technologies.

INTRODUCTION

The virtual team has become a “default” component of today’s organizations (Pauleen, 2004). Several factors contribute to the increasing use of virtual teams (VTs), including the globalization of the economy, the advance of information technology, the rise of new organizational forms, and the emergence and growth of telework (Lipnack & Stamp, 1997; Poole & Zhang, 2005). Not surprisingly, there has been a dramatic increase in research on VTs in recent years (e.g., Aubert & Kelsey, 2003; Connaughton & Daly, 2004; Cramton, 2001, 2002; Dube & Pare,

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2004; Gibson & Manuel, 2003; Gluesing et al., 2003; Massey, Montoya-Weiss & Hung, 2003).

There are still some gaps in our current knowledge of virtual teaming (Poole & Zhang, 2005). For the most part, existing studies have tended to focus on internal group processes and the challenges that virtual work and diverse membership pose in terms of social cognition (e.g., Cramton, 2001), relational communication (e.g., Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner, 1998; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999), conflict management (e.g., Montoya-Weiss, Massey & Song, 2001), leadership styles (e.g., James & Ward, 2001; Kayworth & Leidner, 2001/2002; Leonard, Brand, Edmondson, & Fenwick., 1998), and other internal team processes (Poole & Zhang, 2005). Less attention has been paid to how VTs function vis-à-vis external teams and individuals or considered how VTs sustain themselves in dynamic environments. The current study focuses on external aspects of virtual teaming by focusing on how VTs develop and sustain a sense of group identity and manage group boundaries when dealing with other groups and individuals in complex and dynamic environments.

Initially the focus of our research was neither on external linkages nor on group identity and boundaries, but on the role of communication in VT effectiveness. However, the importance of group identity and boundary management issues became apparent as we conducted four in-depth case studies of virtual teams in context. Our observations suggested that boundary maintenance and identity constitution were major challenges for all four teams, though for the most part the teams did not explicitly acknowledge them. Hence, we took advantage of an opportunity to add to the literature on external relations of VTs.

In this study, we define group identity as the reflexive understanding members have of the group as an entity (Giddens, 1984). In a group with a clear and well-defined identity, members perceive the group to be (a) a coherent entity with a clear boundary between itself and its environment and other small groups (b) with its own

unique purpose, culture, and history. A coherent and positive group identity gives members a clear reference point that helps members understand the place of the group in the organization, gives them something to identify with, and encourages them to act as a collective whole.

Scholars such as Bormann (1980) have contributed greatly to our understanding of the role of culture in developing convergence around a common sense of values. However, we have much less understanding of group identity and boundary processes and how they relate to culture, purpose, and history. This study specifically focuses how VTs constitute themselves as coherent entities. VTs can be seen as systems that are constantly skating the edge of existence in producing and reproducing an identity and boundary that lends them coherence.

In this study we focused on how VTs structured themselves as coherent entities and maintained their boundaries in interacting with internal and external members and with other groups. We identified several processes that contributed to the construction and maintenance of group identity and several more related to boundary management group boundaries. We conceptualized boundaries in terms of their clarity, distinctness, and permeability. *Clarity* is defined as the degree to which members perceive the group to have a clear demarcation from its environment and other groups. *Distinctness* is the degree to which boundaries are presented to outsiders as clear demarcations. Boundaries may be blurred by groups in order to signal to outside groups that they are part of the group or that the group is open to them. *Permeability* refers to the ease with which things outside the group—information, new members, material artifacts, ideas—can pass into the group. Clarity refers to how the members perceive the group themselves, while distinctness refers to how they present it to others outside the group (and thus indirectly, to themselves), and permeability is an objective property of the group that we as observers can assess.

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