Leadership Behaviors and Virtual Teams

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Virtual teams have been proliferating in recent years in all sectors -- commercial, government, public, and private. This shift from the traditional face-to-face (FTF) team structure presents some of the greatest challenges for a team leader, but paradoxically, the underlying dynamics of a virtual team can provide opportunities to outperform a traditional team. Our investigation is focused on the leadership behaviors that can meet these challenges and consequently fuel these opportunities.

The format this paper will follow has four parts. Initially, we will present an image of the virtual team. This image will not only seek to identify the prevailing structure, but will also discuss the reasons these teams have become so ubiquitous. Additionally, we will present some of the extended attributes of virtual teams – attributes which contribute significantly to the valence or degree of "virtualness." The second part will investigate the contribution social network theory makes in understanding the interpersonal and inter-organizational dynamics that complicate the leadership needs within the virtual team. Part three will present the proposed leadership behaviors that contribute to our model of Ambassadorial Leadership™. Finally, we will present some of the opportunities that emerge as a direct result of the interactions of the virtual team dynamics with those of the Ambassadorial Leadership behaviors. These consequences can elevate the virtual team from a strain on intra-organizational relations to a competitive advantage.

Virtual Teams

One element that obviously differentiates a virtual team from a traditional team is the lack of face-to-face engagements. The question arises as to whether this is the only consideration. Our first consideration, one that separates a team from a group, is that virtual teams must have a degree of interdependence in order to be considered a team. Without the interdependence, it is simply a workgroup, with the output the collective sum of the individual efforts. The second component concerns the distribution of members. Some researchers have limited these teams to those that are globally or geographically dispersed, even to the extent of indicating that members must represent at least two distinct nations. Consequently, they often use the name "globally distributed" rather than virtual to describe these teams. The third factor that is prevalent in the literature is the need for technology-assisted communication in order for these teams to overcome the barriers that exist. While each of these factors can be debated, we have chosen to utilize the most common subset for our definition of virtual teams:

A virtual team: has minimum or no FTF interactions and is dispersed geographically, organizationally, socially, and/or culturally; uses communication that is technologically facilitated; uses communication modes that are frequently asynchronous and temporally displaced.

Virtual teams have been adopted by today's organizations for a multitude of reasons. Those that are most frequently cited in the literature include: technology, economics, diversity, human capital, and market positions.

Technology: The advent of the computer and the subsequent changes in telecommunication has served to turn the world into a global neighborhood. Technology has enabled communications to reach across the globe instantly and simultaneously.

Technology thus serves as an enabler for organizations to bring these teams together.

Economics: The economics involved are a direct result of the technology and the climate of the times. Organizations can establish sophisticated communication channels using the newer technologies. These channels require minimum investment as they usually utilize the infrastructure already deployed for IT purposes. This reduces the need for travel expenses and the losses in productivity that can be attributed to the logistics of travel.

Diversity: We should not be surprised that with the growth of these teams, today's organizations have had a greater opportunity to diversify their membership. Simply by the fact that the physical constraints have been removed, teams can span multiple geopolitical and socio-economic communities. This diversity has potentially enhanced the richness of these teams by bringing additional perspectives into view.

Human Capital: Human capital speaks to the centrality of an individual. An effort to increase the centrality or human capital of subject management experts is of critical importance for any organization. In the past, physical constraints imposed a limit on the availability of those experts that might be engaged by the team. With the expansion of virtual teams, these experts may be engaged by multiple teams without ever leaving the confines of their normal workplace.

Market Position: Finally, the market place has provided an incentive for organizations to engage virtual teams as a strategic initiative. Virtual teams provide support for decentralizing. Through this decentralization process, the modern organization has been able to establish a presence in more markets. As a consequence, within these new markets, they may have the benefit of being perceived as a member of the community.

Extended Attributes

Although we have defined virtual teams as having minimal FTF interaction, there is still a question as to whether this restriction is due to physical constraints or other factors. It is essential to realize that "virtualness" is not a dichotomous value. "Virtualness" exists along a continuum and is influenced by a number of different factors. In previous research, Karen Sobel-Lojeski and Richard Reilly (2005) have presented this continuum as a measure defined by Virtual Distance™. Some of the primary contributors to this distance are identified below:

Relational Histories: These histories may involve individuals or groups. In the individual cases, the history may reflect either direct or indirect relationships. An indirect relationship may be evident when two parties both have a relationship with a third actor. A group history might, as an example, involve functional or corporate relationships. These relationships may be influenced either positively or negatively by these previous histories.

Cultural Factors: These factors may include socio-economic, racial, religious, corporate, or any other culturally diverse perspective.

Infrastructure: The underlying support that exists for each member individually in pursuit of the technologically facilitated medium being used by the virtual team.

Isolation: The level of separation that exists between team members and also between individual members and their supporting environment can contribute to the sense of isolation.

Task Interdependence: Greater interdependence between members decreases the perception of distance between those members.

Team Size: The larger the team, the more likely that sub-groups will emerge. These sub-groups may present a challenge to the shared mental model that is needed for a team to overcome the differences that may exist.

FTF Interaction: The frequency and quality of any FTF interaction can serve to either reduce or promote the distance perceived between members.

Multi-Tasking: It is the rule, rather than the exception, that individuals are involved in multiple activities simultaneously. The greater the demands placed from outside the team, the greater will be the separation from the team.

Technical Skills: This aspect may inhibit the relationship between members in two areas – team task and team communication. Team members may find themselves isolated: first, if the team task is technically oriented; second, if they are not adept at using the communication medium that is supporting the team.

Collectively, these items determine the level of virtualness that exists within the team. They also provide focal points for the team leader to address when trying to unify the team in their pursuit of the assigned tasks.

The Social Network

In spite of the fact that virtual teams are not actively engaged in face-to-face interaction, they must be considered a social network. Social network analysis is concerned with the relationships among individuals and groups. In a virtual team these relationships might be direct or indirect. They might also have varying degrees of relative strength.

We are by nature social beings. In any social situation there is a natural tendency to congregate with those with whom we share the greatest affinity. This process of joining others with shared characteristics, traits, interests, etc. serves to reduce the uncertainty presented by any novel environment (Fiol and O'Connor 2005). The characteristics that are shared represent the faultlines (Lau and Murnighan 1998) that separate the group from others. The more similarities shared by the individuals within the group, the stronger the faultline.

Traditional teams frequently divide along functional lines. Virtual teams present additional complexities. The faultlines that develop are magnified because the distances from the others are more pronounced. While functional differences might exist, they may be secondary to geographical, social, cultural, or other differences. These faultlines, which can divide the team into multiple sub-groups, each with their own unique social identity, present a significant challenge to the team's purpose and therefore to the team's leader. Conversely, as we mentioned earlier, if managed well, the challenge may also present a significant opportunity.

The Ambassadorial Leadership Model

How, given all of the factors that contribute to distance between the members of a virtual team, is the team leader to surmount these obstacles? We propose a series of behaviors that are specifically directed at reducing the virtual distance that exists between members. These behaviors address some of the social network issues as well as those cultural and social aspects that add to the general distance that is perceived by the members.

It is important to understand that the ambassadorial leadership behaviors are not meant to be an extensive list of all the leadership behaviors that must be evident in a virtual team. Instead, they are a set of behaviors that complement the current prevailing leadership models. These behaviors emerged from the study of the challenges presented by virtual teams and are offered as a means to overcome those challenges and enable a more collaborative environment. Ambassadorial leadership specifically includes the following behaviors:

1. Internal boundary spanning
2. External boundary spanning
3. Shared/delegated leadership
4. Recognition
5. Advocacy

Internal Boundary Spanning

For a virtual team, internal boundary spanning is defined by the activities that bridge the faultlines within the diverse team. The needs that drive the interdependence between team members dictate the level of boundary spanning that must occur; the more diverse the team, the greater the need to actively exchange information. This boundary spanning exists at both the individual and sub-group levels. As the team engages in collaborative effort, the members perceive it to be more effective and there is a positive effect on team cohesion (Cohen, Ledford and Spreitzer 1996).

External Boundary Spanning

Teams, whether traditional face-to-face or virtual, do not exist in vacuums, and part of their effectiveness may hinge on the relationship between the team and external sources.

External boundary spanning addresses the issues that exist between the team and these outside sources. Some of these issues include: resource acquisition, information gathering and feedback, and establishment of a channel for communication (Ancona and Caldwell 1992a).

Resource acquisition is concerned with the ability of the team to secure those resources that may not exist internally. These resources may include time, finances, information, or even additional team members. Information gathering and feedback is specifically focused on the perceived value of the team's offerings. It is meant to ensure that the team remains current with the needs of the outside stakeholders. Communication channels serve as a foundation for the team to also release information that they deem important. It is also one of the vehicles that may be used in recognition and advocacy.

Shared Leadership

Shared leadership and delegation involves a division of the leadership roles based upon the situation and skill sets needed. It is a recognition that in a diverse and dispersed team environment one individual may not be able to fulfill all the leadership roles that may emerge over the life of the team's existence. This may particularly be evident within the sub-groups that emerge as a result of functional faultlines. Shared leadership confers additional status and responsibility on selected team members resulting in further cohesion within the team.

Recognition

Recognition is a special behavior that adds to the cohesion that can develop within the virtual team. It reinforces the feeling of self-worth of an individual team member or a sub-group within the team. Simultaneously, it may also serve to promote the individuals as models to the other team members. This behavior serves to both motivate and reward team contributions.

Advocacy

Advocacy is an extension of the behaviors that exist within boundary spanning. It will utilize those communication channels that

are developed internally and externally. Within the team, advocacy refers to the leader or other team member actively promoting, pleading, or arguing in support of a sub-group or member's efforts. Externally, advocacy is designed to secure external support for the team and individual members. Advocacy together with recognition may serve to build an esprit de corps and in so doing, it will reduce virtual distance between members.

Challenges and Opportunities

Earlier in the discussion, we stated that the challenges that were inherent in virtual teams also might be considered opportunities if they were properly managed. If we consider the virtual team from the social network perspective, we have a collection of individuals and sub-groups that are loosely held together by a single individual, the team leader.

In the discussion of faultlines earlier, we presented the case that faultlines occurred because of differences that existed within the population. In fact, if there were no differences, there would be a single homogenous group. The problem with a homogenous group is that there is no opportunity to learn. Everyone knows what everyone else knows.

So this presents us with a conundrum. Which is the more ideal scenario? Is a virtual team that is a loosely associated group with little in common preferable to a homogenous team that has no opportunity to learn? How might we reconcile this problem and create an effective team?

The first objective then of ambassadorial leadership is to build the team into a more cohesive structure. In social network theory, whenever two nodes (individuals or groups) exist without a shared or common member, we consider that vacancy to represent a structural hole (Burt 2004). Structural holes when filled create a bond between the two nodes that previously did not exist. This bond then serves as a channel across which information may be exchanged. It is in the process of exchange that the opportunities present themselves. This is the same concept that is proposed within the theory of diffu-

sion. Diffusion can occur only when a group is bridged to an outside source that can then introduce something new to the group.

The potential strength of a virtual team lies in its diversity. Recent studies have shown that by embracing the diversity rather than trying to eliminate it, teams are significantly more effective (Ely and Thomas 2001; Derek and Kecia 2004). Quite simply put, teams that learn from each other can create solutions that otherwise might remain hidden. Team leaders that use the ambassadorial leadership behaviors create an environment in which diversity can be embraced and the free exchange of information can be promoted within the team and between the team and those entities that lie outside of it. While the team leader may be successful in promoting these behaviors within the extended team, it is also incumbent upon the parent organization to provide support in the efforts. If the organization views diversity only as a challenge, it may undermine even the most zealous efforts of the ambassadorial team leader.

Table 1 summarizes the challenges faced by the leaders of virtual teams, the general ambassadorial behaviors required to respond to these challenges, the specific actions leaders can take, and the resultant opportunities or benefits accruing to the team and team members.

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Table 1

The Challenge	Ambassadorial Behavior	Actions	The Opportunity
Building a shared mental model when there may be a lack of unified core values Maintaining individual core values while participating within the team	Internal Boundary Spanning	Promote relationship building between close and distant team members by encouraging sharing of personal information. Educate local team members on differences in cultural values and communications styles of remote members. Establish key relationships with members at remote locations who can serve as mentors and coaches	Team: Embracing diversity provides a means to introduce multiple perspectives; builds team cohesion and trust. Team Members: Elucidating and explaining the differences to team members from other cultures, builds team trust and extends the personal social network. Key Member: Serve as liaison between team and remote members; can work as a cultural translator.
Aligning team goals with various external entities Maintaining skills within original discipline and relationship with actual business unit/functional group	External Boundary Spanning	Establish communication channel to ensure information is freely exchanged. Formulate strategic plan with distant members to develop liaison relationships with their close external groups. Develop understanding of resources available from external groups.	Team: External entities become partners –exchanging information and resources to secure best results. Team: Communication channels ensure that team goals remain viable. Team Members: As liaisons are better able to judge what resources might be beneficial (in both directions) and opens communications to support skill retention/development.
Providing active leadership across dispersed team and diverse disciplines Conveying unique requirements of the discipline or culture to a leader with a different background	Shared Leadership	Create conditions for shared leadership at distant locations. Establish key relationships with members at remote locations who can serve as mentors and coaches.	Team: Brings the best talent to bear as dictated by the situation, promoting trust and building greater collaboration. Team Members: Actively presenting unique viewpoints and representing the sub-groups as viable collaborators.
Motivating dispersed team members and sub-groups Establishing individual's value to functional group	Recognition	Depending on the core values of the individual's culture; provide open recognition of personal performance or sub-group performance. Privately recognize the contributions made by an individual. Privately or publicly (depending on core values) provide recognition of performance to the individual's functional group.	Team: Reinforces the self-worth of the individuals and/or groups that are recognized. Team: Provides a role model for other team members. Team Members: Recognizing the contributions of others may add to the group cohesion.
Resolving conflicts that result from differences in core values Ensuring team contributions are viewed favorably Adjusting to changing demands of external entities	Advocacy	Monitoring conflicts and problems between close and distant members. Serve as a mediator in cases of conflict. Acknowledges team's contribution to organizational strategy externally. Monitor expectations (internal and external) and ensure alignment with reality.	Team: Conflicts stemming from diversity provide opportunity for creative solutions. Team: Linking the team accomplishments to strategic goals elevates individual and team status and reflects favorably on contributing functional groups. Team: Frequenting checking with the stakeholders ensures that the end product will still have value.