

E-Leadership In Virtual Workforce

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Abstract

In today's market place, companies are increasingly turning to a virtual workforce to get the job done. Given the benefits of connectivity and effective information sharing among stakeholders, many industries have continued to seek its application and implementation. Therefore, the success of coordinating work among a virtual workforce depends on “effective indirect communication” between the leadership and the virtual workforce. This article will address the importance of effective communication as a necessary tool for the success of e-leadership in virtual work environment.

Introduction

The virtual workplace in which employees operate remotely from each other and from managers is a reality now and will become even more prevalent in the future (Cascio & Shurygailo² 2003). Many organization are now benefiting from harnessing virtual work to increase productivity, efficiency, quality, and reduction in reliance on “labor force” skills, to give more strength to “service” strategies and approaches in contemporary industrial workforce. Obviously, the application of modern technology has made it possible to redefine where work is done (Davenport & Pearlson³, 1998) and facilitates virtual work arrangements (Cascio² et al., 2003). Communicating effectively with the virtual workforce requires a paradigm shift from the traditional way of communicating face-to-face with employees. Virtual workforce constitutes employees that operate remotely from each other and from managers. Therefore, managing this emerging workforce successfully depends largely on effective communication between managers and the employees that constitute the virtual workforce. This article will address the importance of effective communication as a necessary tool for the success of e-leadership in virtual work environment.

What is Virtual work?

Virtual work has been defined by many scholars in different ways and their views are sometimes based on perspectives such as team, organization and community. For some companies, virtual workers are those who work in truly remote offices, across the country or the globe. For others, virtual workers spend most of their time on the road (Turek¹⁰ 2005). Since distributed work is enabled by information and communication technologies, virtual workforce has also been defined as teams that rely upon electronic communication to accomplish their work. According to Turek¹⁰ (2005) virtual work is defined as “employees who are physically separated from their managers, co-workers and/or immediate reports, even if they themselves work at a headquarters or large satellite corporate office.”

Need for Virtual work

In today's global economy, enterprises have continued to scan the globe to garner the best and effective approach of utilizing human resource with contribution to the total value chain through virtual work. The increased efficiency of virtual workers has enhanced productivity, flexibility of thinking more creatively and the freedom of commuting to work daily. However, as the number of remote workers increases globally, assumptions are often made about their work habits, behaviors and preferences (Gillis⁴, 2003). Most importantly, many virtual employees are concerned of being isolated and are not sure if they are valued by their companies like their colleagues that are non-virtual workforce. It behooves graduates of Industrial Technology programs to be aware of this new workforce. Therefore, the knowledge of the challenges that this workforce may pose and how to manage them is essential to help minimize the negative impact of virtual work on productivity.

What is e-Leadership?

According to Avolio, Kahai, & Dodge¹ (2000), [e] “-leadership is defined as a social influence process to produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behavior, and/or performance with individuals, groups, and/or organizations. Notably, e-leadership in an organization can occur at any hierarchical level. It may involve one-to-one and one-to-many interactions within and across large units and organizations or it may be associated with one individual or shared by several individuals as its locus changes over time. Most important is to equip graduates of our programs with the knowledge of effective communication skills to enhance a successful e-leadership in virtual work environment. However, an important component that will make such leadership work is trust.

E-leadership and trust-building in virtual teams

Leading a geographically dispersed workforce from an e-leadership perspective may pose several unique challenges if the virtual workforce has no trust in the e-leadership (Avolio¹ et al., 2000). Trust is defined by Avolio¹ et al., (2000) quoting (Mayer, Davis, & Schoorman⁷, 1995, p. 712) as “the willingness of a team member to be vulnerable to the actions of other team member(s) based on the expectation that the other(s) will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control other team member(s).”

Trust is critical in virtual work since direct supervision, similarity in backgrounds, and experience and a common form of social control in traditional workforce are not feasible. Hence, leadership in virtual workforce should facilitate the formation of trust building in a virtual workforce context. As a result, the effects of leadership on trust should not be underestimated. Since this approach is transformational, such leadership should instill confidence among virtual workforce team members about the ability of individuals in their team through (a) individualized consideration, whereby the leader considers and encourages consideration of input provided by every member of the team, and (b) inspirational motivation, whereby the leader expresses confidence in team members' collective ability to accomplish a task all members identify with (Avolio¹ et al., 2000).

Communications within virtual work groups

Roebuck, Brock, & Douglas⁹ (2004) in their study titled “Using a Simulation to Explore the Challenges of Communicating” asked participants of the study to write collaboratively a two- to three-page memo reflecting on the team’s communication process. Within the memo, the teams discussed what they did well, what they could improve, and what they would do differently if given another opportunity to work virtually. From this study, some of the lessons learned that were recorded are:

- We learned that effective communication is the key for achieving team objectives and success. A common understanding is necessary. We learned that distance is not important as long as you have an effective way of communicating between virtual team members.
- We feel that we have benefited from this experience in that we received a practical, hands-on, and realistic view of a virtual teaming experience. We were forced to adapt to situations and develop real solutions that provided a winning situation for all. We noted the two most important tools needed to accomplish any virtual business goal are communication and technology.
- One of the critical aspects of effective virtual teaming is the full participation of all of the team members. For optimum performance, it is imperative that the team members establish an organizational structure from the very beginning.
- It is important that team members build relationships with each other. Trust comes from performance and virtual performance is still somewhat limited. It is easy to send data by e-mail and other electrical means, but it is harder to send “parts of your heart” and to motivate team members.
- Regardless of the specific means of communication used in virtual teams, the use of good, sound, basic project management techniques can provide a means to clarify the objectives, milestones, plans, and progress toward the objective. Virtual teams by their nature involve very little face-to-face time; therefore, fundamental project management techniques can minimize stress and clarify the process in what is already an extremely challenging environment.

Based on the lessons learned from the study conducted by Roebuck⁹ et al. (2004), the following three challenges were identified and should be addressed by e-leaders in order for a virtual workforce to be able to accomplish their goals:

- The first challenge is compensating for the lack of face-to-face interaction. When meeting in person, team members can depend upon voice levels, smiles, and raised eyebrows to determine whether they are being understood; however, virtual teams do not have these nonverbal cues and can fail without communication strategies to manage the lack of face-to-face communication or silence
- A second communication challenge for virtual teams is building relationships. Virtual teams are confronted with the challenge of establishing trusting working relationships through technological interaction alone.
- A third challenge is accessing and leveraging the unique knowledge of each member to successfully achieve the team’s goal. Helping virtual team members learn to address

these differences in ways that will support full, open, and complete communication is also a fundamental teaching objective in preparing people for virtual teaming.

Forms of Virtual Teams

Virtual workforce and related teams vary from one organization to the other. Fig. 1 below illustrates this graphically by classifying virtual teams with two primary variables, the number of locations (one or more) and the number of managers (one or more). Each factor in fig. 1 is a determinant of the types of issues that are likely to arise and what techniques to be used to manage them. There are four categories of teams:

- Teleworkers: A single manager of a team at one location
- Remote team: A single manager of a team distributed across multiple locations
- Matrixed teleworkers: Multiple managers of a team at one location
- Matrixed remote teams: Multiple managers across multiple locations

		Managers	
		One	Multiple
Locations	One	Teleworkers	Matrixed Teleworkers
	Multiple	Remote Team	Matrixed Remote Teams

Figure 1. Forms of Virtual Teams (Cascio² et al., 2003).

From the information in fig. 1, it is likely that a company may use different combinations among the methods and actual situations will probably be more complex hybrids of these abstract classifications.

The impact of virtual work on productivity

It is evident that virtual workforce team will have less face-to-face communication than a traditional workgroup. Since there is greater reliance on indirect communication mechanisms, such as voice-mail, e-mail and fax, members of virtual workforce are well advised to learn to use these effectively. Potential managers and supervisors of virtual workforce should possess the necessary skills to navigate the virtual workforce successfully. “As remote workers become the

norm and companies expand their reach nationally and globally, tracking employee performance and costs is increasingly difficult-and critical to the bottom line” (Goodridge , 2001). Otherwise, its implementation may constitute waste rather than fulfilling its anticipated outcome of increasing productivity. Therefore, it is imperative to improve the effectiveness of communication with the virtual workforce. The implication for educators is to identify the characteristics of each team and prepare graduates on how to manage each team of the alternative virtual-work arrangements (fig. 1) in any organization that implements virtual work. Therefore, the designed curriculum should address issues that are relevant to each of the alternative virtual-work arrangements, characteristics, communication challenges, and how to select the best indirect communication mechanisms. Most important is the acquisition of the necessary skills to manage effectively this emerging paradigm by the industrial technology graduates to be gainfully employed upon graduation.

Summary

The increased efficiency of virtual workers does not only results in enhanced productivity, but the added flexibility of virtual work. However, if this workforce is not well managed, its implementation may constitute waste rather than fulfilling its anticipated outcome of increasing productivity. Therefore, it is imperative to educate graduates of our programs with the skills necessary to manage and overcome many of the difficulties typically encountered in virtual settings.

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