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DEVELOPING A STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP MODEL FOR INCLUSIVE VIRTUAL WORK TEAMS: A RESPONSE TO COVID-19 AND THE CHANGING NEEDS OF THE GLOBAL WORKFORCE

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the useful strategies that will help leaders effectively lead members of virtual work teams. Research suggests that the greatest challenges for work team leaders are in the areas of cultural awareness, clarity of group roles and the choice of communication technology. Effective leaders might better prepare their team members for success when working in virtual teams by training them in each of these three areas and by encouraging a shared understanding of cultural differences, the clear communication of member roles and expectations, and by utilizing the most appropriate communication technology based on specific team member needs. Encompassing each of these elements, The Strategic Leadership Model for Inclusive Virtual Work Teams is presented as a viable strategic approach for virtual team leaders.

Keywords: Strategic Leadership, Culture, Virtual Teams.

INTRODUCTION

With the increased need to work remotely during the COVID-19 global pandemic, leaders have recognized the importance of implementing effective strategies for managing virtual work teams (Guazzini et al., 2020; Bagga et al., 2023). This new work environment allowed

organizations to, more effectively, organize specialized workers across geographical and cultural barriers but has come at a great cost. Whether in the context of business or remote learning, the task of successfully managing virtual work teams has proved to be a continuing challenge for corporate leaders and educators alike (Norback & Espinosa, 2019; Fan & Moen, 2023). This challenge is all the more difficult when the team consists of members who have not had extensive experience working with diverse groups (Thomas & Peterson, 2016). With this in mind, leaders across industries must reevaluate the strategies they are implementing when leading virtual work teams, to ensure that teams are inclusive and positioned for success within the changing work environment.

Conceptual Background

When first examining this issue in the 21st century, Kayworth and Leidner (2000) found that the greatest challenges for work team leaders were in the areas of culture, communication of team member roles and technology use. These assertions are supported by more recent examinations offered by Norback and Espinosa (2019), Feitosa and Salas (2021), Freeman, Park and Middleton (2020) and Shaik and Gouda (2020). It has also been argued that culture, team member roles and technology were identified as playing a role in group success, based on the studies conducted by Gupta and Pathak (2018) and Maduka, Edwards, Greenwood, Osborne and Babatunde (2018).

These previous studies identified factors that included the roles of culture, clarification of team member roles and communication technology use as key factors in the determination of team success. The diagram in Figure 1 illustrates these factors in relationship to team success.

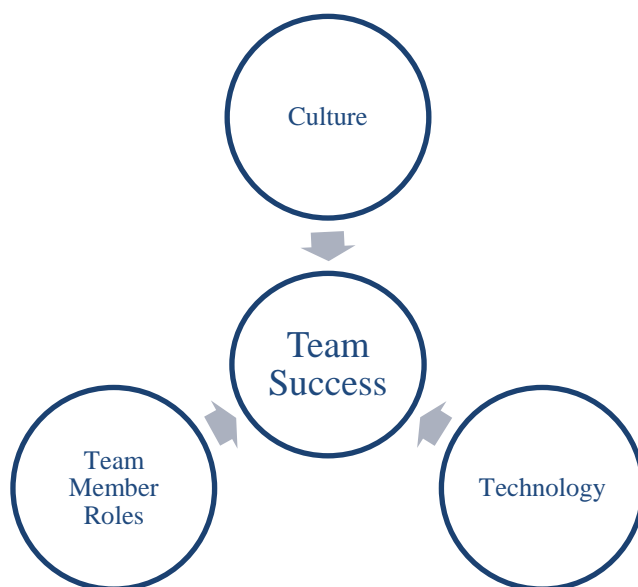


Figure 1. Factors Contributing to Virtual Work Team Success

Further studies have suggested that team success is directly tied to the inclusive culture of a team (Khan et al., 2020; Feitosa & Salas, 2021; Shave, 2022). The existing research related to the concepts of culture, team member roles, and technology will be examined to discover the leadership strategies that should be utilized in order to create and maintain successful and inclusive virtual teams.

Trust as Antecedent

Before attempting to address the issues of culture, team member roles, and technology, it is

important to first build a sense of trust, as this has been identified as a contributing factor to team success and influences the leadership strategies implemented in virtual work teams (Ford, Piccolo & Ford, 2017). Trust influences the communication practices team member roles and responsibility and helps to create the overall culture of the team (Feitosa & Salas 2021). Trust plays a pivotal role in virtual work teams due to the unique challenges presented by the absence of physical proximity and face-to-face interactions (Breuer et al., 2016). In a virtual work environment, team members rely heavily on trust to foster effective communication, collaboration, and productivity. Trust enables team members to have confidence in each other's abilities, work ethic, and commitment to the team's goals (Ford et al. 2017).

In virtual work teams, trust is essential for building strong relationships and rapport among team members who may have never met face-to-face. Trust may also encourage autonomy and empowerment, as team members need to rely on each other to complete tasks and make decisions independently. By cultivating trust in virtual work teams, organizations create an environment of mutual respect, accountability, and support, leading to increased cohesion, engagement, and ultimately, successful team outcomes (Alves et al., 2022). It is trust that is the antecedent to any form of team success and trust must be present in all aspects of virtual work teams.

The Role of Culture

Preparing team members for successful work within virtual teams, also requires that team members be encouraged to move beyond any previously formed opinions or biases about other cultures (Smart, 2000; Feitosa et al., 2018). Smart (2000) argued that to truly understand and adapt to another culture, one needs to suspend their earlier developed cultural biases. This is a strategy that might prove to be useful to virtual team leaders who have had difficulties relating to the culture of their team members. This may also be a desirable method for those members of a virtual work team who might be reluctant to adapt to the work style used by team members from other cultures (Peters & Manz, 2015). Team members must therefore be willing to acknowledge the differences between their cultures and learn to appreciate the differences.

Along with encouraging the acknowledgment of cultural differences, group members should also encourage the development of shared understandings of culture among the members of the virtual work team and find some common ground (Peters & Manz, 2015). Virtual team leaders are confronted with the challenge of managing people who may represent a diverse collection of cultures and this diversity of cultures, according to Abramson and Moran, (2017) has a high probability of creating a difficult work environment if shared knowledge cannot be achieved by all those involved in the work team. Encouraging the formation of these shared knowledge structures should be the focus of the virtual team leader, as a shared understanding is needed among the members of any work team (Thomas & Peterson, 2016; Feitosa & Salas 2021). It is therefore important for team members to acknowledge cultural differences while also attempting to find some common ground.

Culture and Communication

The interrelationship between culture and communication, in virtual teams, means that it may be difficult to maintain effective communication without also understanding each of the team members' cultures (Shachaf, 2008). The cultural backgrounds of those individuals taking part in the communication process and the culture where the communication is taking place create the context of the communication (Hall, 1989). Hall explained that having a contextual

understanding of a culture provides a filter that helps one sort through the information about that specific culture. A true understanding of all of these components allows for a deeper understanding of the shared meaning of a message for all of the members of the virtual team (Carbaugh, 2007). By implementing strategies that emphasize this relationship, virtual team leaders may be able to encourage their cross-cultural team members to each adapt to the cultural context of their fellow team members (Freedman, 2008; Shaik & Gouda, 2020).

When approaching the issue of cross-cultural communication, clarity is key (Shachaf, 2008; Feitosa & Salas, 2021). By encouraging clear and open communication, team leaders can help create an environment that fosters mutual respect and cultural understanding. In such an environment, the virtual team leader would need to be explicit in the implementation of communication strategies that would promote clear and open communication between all virtual team members (Baraldi, 2006).

Communicating Team Member Roles

In addition to promoting open communication between team members, virtual team leaders, should also be able to effectively maintain clear communication with their team members (Braga, 2008). As has previously been established, clear communication between leaders and their followers, as well as between individual team members, is necessary to create a successful work environment (Thomas & Peterson, 2016; Feitosa & Salas, 2021). What must also be noted, is that a critical aspect of this process is the clarification of team member roles and responsibilities (Norback & Espinosa, 2019). This clarification of roles helps to ensure that the leadership and individual responsibilities of team members are clearly understood before the team begins work tasks.

Clarity in member roles not only helps to ensure that all necessary tasks are being addressed, but it also helps to establish a work environment where tasks are fairly distributed between the various members of the team. (Guazzini et al., 2020). To create such an equitable work environment, virtual team leaders must make sure that they are in constant contact with their team members and that they ensure that each team member clearly understands their individual role in the team (Cascio & Shurgailo, 2003; Guazzini et al., 2020). This process, of creating this work environment is made possible, once again, by the leader establishing a sense of trust among members of the virtual work team (Breuer et al., 2016).

Team Member Autonomy

When leading virtual work teams, granting team members some level of autonomy is also vital to team success (Shave, 2022). Because many virtual teams operate in geographically dispersed environments, navigating different time zones and culturally diverse schedules, a degree of autonomy isn't just a convenience, it is a necessary for the success of the team (Feitosa & Salas, 2021). Providing a degree of autonomy in virtual work teams can enable individuals to adapt their work schedules based on their most productive working hours; this approach, if managed properly, can help foster a healthier work-life balance among team members (Winkler et al., 2022). When team members are empowered to oversee their own work tasks, they may also develop a sense of ownership and accountability.

While autonomy is important within virtual work teams, it must be balanced with a culture of team collaboration and inclusion. It has even been suggested that autonomy within virtual teams may have a negative impact, potentially affecting the connection to team roles and identity (Winkler et al., 2022). Team members need freedom but also need to feel connected to the

shared goals and identity of the team (Feitosa & Salas, 2021). Autonomy may therefore still need to be accompanied by some level of supervision.

Team Member Supervision

Effectively leading virtual teams involves a balance between member freedom and supervision. The leaders of virtual work teams are tasked with the responsibility to establish a sense of connection within the team by providing each team member with necessary supervision (Choi & Cho, 2019). Creating a supportive culture where supervision and autonomy naturally coexist can help to give virtual team members a sense of freedom while also helping them feel connected to the team (Winkler, 2022). This is the foundation of a collaborative and inclusive team.

Establishing a collaborative and inclusive work environment is made possible by the team leader establishing a sense of trust among members of the virtual work team (Breuer et al., 2016). Trust must first be established before team members are prepared to collaborate on team tasks. It is this sense of trust that fosters an environment that leads to overall team success (Alves et al., 2022).

Communication Technology

Maintaining effective communication within the virtual team requires that the team members use the form of communication technology that will allow all team members to exchange information clearly and efficiently (Rosen & Blackburn, 2007). This preferred form of communication technology needs to be established, by the team leader, early in the development of the virtual team so that all team members can stay connected (Bradley, 2015).

The success of virtual teams also hinges on the team leader's ability to strategically choose the most effective communication technology to be used by the team. This is a strategy that will allow the team to begin working immediately after the team's formation and will limit the waste of valuable work time. Though this strategy may be desirable, there is no perfect strategy, as the virtual team leader must determine the most appropriate communication technology to be used based on the complexity and urgency of each individual message (O'Neill et al., 2015).

Selecting the appropriate communication technologies requires that the team leader be current in their knowledge of the latest developments in technology and that they willing to incorporate this technology into the team's routine communication practices (Bradley, 2015). Team members must have a working knowledge of, and be proficient in, the use of the preferred technology of the other members of the virtual work team (Cuevas, et al., 2004). This may require that they each adapt to the communication technology used by their fellow team members. It is for this reason that the technical aptitude of every team member needs to be carefully evaluated by team leaders and that appropriate training be provided before any work is assigned to the team.

Technology Disparity and Accessibility

The knowledge and aptitude of all team members must be noted because the communication technology that is used by many virtual teams can present challenges for some team members that may not be familiar with, or have access to, the latest communication technology (Winkler, 2022). Technology inequalities are somewhat inevitable as emerging technologies are not often accessible to those regions with less economic development (Milanovic, 2016). Because of this, the adoption of any new or emerging technology is always somewhat negative, as it may not be accessible to everyone. Acknowledging this technology divide is crucial for fostering inclusion within a virtual team and mitigating any negative impact on team members (Valenzuela-Levi,

2020).

Along with an overall lack of infostructure that supports broadband service in many areas of the world, some team members may have additional obstacles that may limit their ability to use some technology (Freeman et al., 2020). Team leaders should be aware that choosing the best form of communication technology to fit the team’s needs may necessitate an understanding of each team members’ access to technology and even their individual culture, as some cultural restrictions may also prevent members from utilizing technology at certain times (Shachaf, 2008).

Additionally, some team members may have disabilities that could make some forms of communication technology less accessible (Scanlan, 2022). Understanding these factors will enable the team leaders to better diagnose the technology needs of the team. It is the responsibility of the team leader to ensure that all members are adequately prepared for their work in the virtual team and that any technology used is inclusive in nature (Chataway et al., 2014).

STRATEGIC LEADERSHIP MODEL

Leaders of virtual teams might better prepare their team members for success by training them in each of the areas addressed and by encouraging a shared understanding of cultural differences, the clear communication of member roles and expectations, and by utilizing the most appropriate communication technology based on specific team member needs. Encompassing each of these elements, The Strategic Leadership Model for Inclusive Virtual Work Teams, illustrated in Figure 2, offers a strategic approach for virtual team leaders. For each of the three areas previously addressed, (culture, team member roles, and technology) several leadership strategies are suggested.

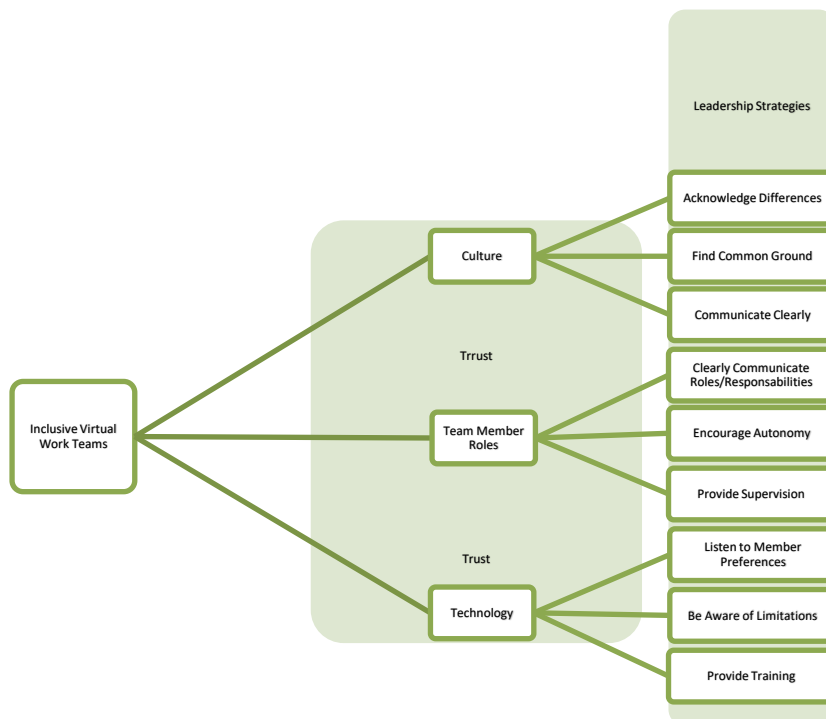


Figure 2. Strategic Leadership Model for Inclusive Virtual Work Teams

Model Application

The leaders of cross-cultural virtual teams must ensure that their team members are properly prepared and trained before beginning to work in the virtual team. Virtual team members need to be given the tools that will allow them to be happy and successful within a cross-cultural context (O'neil, et al, 2008; Feitosa & Salas 2021). Recognizing the presence of cultural obstacles means virtual team leaders may be able to develop effective strategies to respond to their team members' individual needs as they prepare them for work with the cross-cultural virtual team. The leaders of global organizations need to understand and respond to these aspects of culture, to create a virtual environment that fosters, cultural awareness, open communication and the implementation of effective communication technology.

The key to successful virtual team leadership may lay in ensuring team members have a sense of autonomy while also feeling connected to and accepted by the team. They need the freedom to work on their own while also have some level of guidance and supervision (Feitosa & Salas 2021). They need clearly defined Roles and expectations that connect them to the group while also allowing them to be viewed as individuals (Norback & Espinosa, 2019).

CONCLUSION

The implementation of this model provides opportunities for the exploration of essential strategies for building inclusive virtual work teams. Addressing the issue of culture within these teams requires a multifaceted approach that includes acknowledging and valuing individual differences, seeking common ground, and encouraging clear communication. Recognizing and embracing the diverse cultural backgrounds of team members can lead to enhanced collaboration and a more inclusive work environment.

The issue of team roles within virtual work teams necessitates deliberate efforts to establish clarity and transparency. Effective strategies involve clearly communicating roles and responsibilities, empowering team members with a sense of autonomy, and providing appropriate supervision. When team members understand their roles and feel supported in their responsibilities, it cultivates a sense of ownership and motivation, which can positively impact team performance.

The effective utilization of communication technology is also a crucial aspect of virtual work team success. Acknowledging individual team members' preferences and listening to their needs when it comes to technology choices promotes a sense of inclusivity and consideration. It is equally important to be aware of the potential limitations of certain technologies and address them proactively. Providing adequate training and support for all team members ensures that everyone can fully utilize the chosen technology, thus enhancing overall team productivity and collaboration.

The examination of the complex issues of culture, team roles, and technology use within virtual teams, highlights the importance of the establishment of trust between the leader and team members, as well as among the team members themselves. In the wake of the COVID-19 crisis, it has become even more apparent that trust serves as the foundation for building inclusive virtual work teams. The inclusion of trust in the Strategic Leadership Model for Inclusive Virtual Work Teams illustrates the importance of trust in all elements of virtual team leadership. It allows a pathway for leaders to begin addressing the issues of culture, team roles, and technology use, thus allowing for the development and implementation of meaningful leadership strategies.

By addressing the issues of culture, team roles, and technology use, leaders can create an inclusive virtual work environment that values diversity, encourages effective collaboration, and improves team performance. These strategies serve as a foundation for meeting organizational goals in an increasingly interconnected and globalized world. As virtual work continues to evolve, embracing inclusion and leveraging these strategies will be vital for the success of modern organizations.

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