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ARTICLE

Building trust in the leader of virtual work teams

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Abstract   In recent years, due to the development of new technologies, virtual work teams have arisen as a new organizational form that offers businesses greater flexibility and adaptability in coping with new market challenges. The departments that manage high value-added projects are more susceptible to implementing virtual teams; the area of marketing and market research being one of them. However, the peculiarities of these teams present a real challenge for building trust within the team, with trust being one of the key factors for their success. Accordingly, this study considers various antecedent factors of trust toward leaders of virtual teams grouped in two blocks: the physical attributes (attractiveness) and the behavioral characteristics (justice and empathy) of the leader. Furthermore, the paper discusses how leadership style (transactional or transformational) can moderate the relationships between some of the previously mentioned variables. The results suggest a greater capacity for attractive, empathetic and just leaders to build trust. These results have interesting implications for management which are discussed along with the principle lines of future research.
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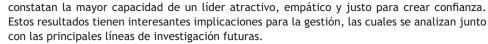
Generación de confianza en el líder de equipos de trabajos virtuales

Resumen   En los últimos años, gracias al desarrollo de las nuevas tecnologías, han surgido los equipos de trabajo virtuales como una nueva forma organizativa que ofrece a las empresas una mayor flexibilidad y capacidad de adaptación de cara a hacer frente a los nuevos retos del mercado. Los departamentos que gestionan proyectos de alto valor añadido son los más susceptibles de implantar estos equipos, siendo el área de marketing e investigación de mercados uno de dichos departamentos. Sin embargo, las particularidades de estos equipos suponen un verdadero reto para el desarrollo de la confianza en el seno del equipo, que representa un factor fundamental para su éxito. En este sentido, la presente investigación considera diferentes factores antecedentes de la confianza hacia el líder de los equipos virtuales agrupados en 2 bloques: características físicas (atractivo) y comportamentales (justicia y empatía) del líder. Asimismo, se analiza cómo el estilo de liderazgo (transaccional o transformacional) puede moderar las relaciones entre algunas de las variables anteriormente mencionadas. Los resultados

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constatan la mayor capacidad de un líder atractivo, empático y justo para crear confianza. Estos resultados tienen interesantes implicaciones para la gestión, las cuales se analizan junto con las principales líneas de investigación futuras.

Introduction

Changes in the competitive environment, as well as the enormous advances in the development of information technologies, have favored the emergence of new organizational forms that endow companies with greater flexibility. Especially noteworthy among the new organizational models are the so-called ''virtual work teams'', characterized by the temporal and spatial distribution of its members and the use of technology as the fundamental medium for communication (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). These teams have contributed to the emergence of a new paradigm in human resource management where it is possible to work anytime and anywhere through technologically mediated communication (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). On the other hand, thanks to technology, it is possible to have access to the best talent for any given task regardless of their geographical location, thus, as previously mentioned, endowing organizations with greater flexibility and encouraging the creation of knowledge and the development of skills among employees.

The growth of virtual teams has been a constant since the end of the decade of the '90s. A study carried out by the consulting firm OnPoint Consulting (2013) affirms that more than 1.3 billion people work virtually and that 25% of the teams worldwide are virtual, data that gives an indication of the importance of virtual teams in organizations. This new form of organization is used especially in high value-added projects, where efficient knowledge management is required. Consequently, the area of marketing and market research is one of the functional areas of the organization in which the use of virtual teams can have a more positive impact. An example of this is the area of sales, where the use of CRM (Customer Relationship Management) tools allows the various members of a sales force to share different customer management strategies and optimize the sales effort without them having to share the same physical location, thereby improving their flexibility and responsiveness (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). Another clear example is found in the area of product development where, through the use of virtual teams, it is possible to relocate the different phases of the process (design, production, etc.) while keeping all of the involved workers permanently connected, regardless of their geographical location.

However, these new teams bring with them a series of management challenges. Previous literature emphasizes that traditional leadership patterns cannot be used in the new virtual environment (Cascio, 2000; Santos, 2013), therefore it is necessary to adapt the management of the teams to the new virtual reality, where team leadership plays a fundamental role in the team's success. In this regard, the importance of trust in the team leader, recognized as a critical success factor in traditional settings, now takes on a new dimension. Patterns of leadership must be adapted to a new environment where communication becomes a significant barrier in the development of relationships among the members of a team. In fact, trust has been proposed as the primary challenge facing virtual teams today (Bullock & Tucker Klein, 2011).

While previous studies have analyzed trust from an organizational perspective, as well as the role that the leader plays in the creation of a trusting environment, there is currently no consistent theoretical and empirical body of knowledge regarding the study of trust in the leader in virtual settings and the variables that influence it (Zhang & Fjermestad, 2006). Thus, previous literature has not proposed a model that allows the factors that influence the building of trust in a virtual team leader to be accurately understood. This study seeks to reduce this shortcoming in the literature by analyzing some of those factors that may influence trust in a virtual leader.

This paper proposes two types of antecedent factors of trust in the leader of a virtual team: the physical attributes of the leader (degree of attractiveness) and the behavioral attributes of the leader (degree of empathy and justice). On the other hand, it should be noted that some of the relationships between the antecedent factors and trust may be moderated by other aspects, such as leadership style. With regards to this, theory points to two basic styles of leadership: leaders with a transformational style (Pillai, Schriesheim, & Williams, 1999), and leaders with a transactional style.

The paper is organized in the following manner. First, a review of the literature related to the variables used in the study is performed and the different research hypotheses are formulated. Later, the processes of data collection and the validation of the measurement scales used are explained. Subsequently, the hypotheses are tested and the results are discussed. Finally, the study's findings, key management implications, limitations and lines of future research are presented.

Literature review and the formulation of hypotheses

Trust in the leader

Trust is a key ingredient in social and economic relationships and it is also one of the most determinant factors of performance within an organization. Previous literature has extensively addressed the study of organizational trust,