

# Precursors to engaged leaders in virtual project teams



Josh Iorio <sup>a,\*</sup>, John E. Taylor <sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup> *Myers-Lawson School of Construction, Virginia Tech, 315 Patton Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061, United States*

<sup>b</sup> *Charles E. Via, Jr. Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering, Virginia Tech, 113-B Patton Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24061, United States*

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## Abstract

Virtual project teams are becoming common organizational structures because firms seek to leverage geographically distributed, specialized knowledge to execute work. Performance in virtual teams can be increased through effective leadership. Although a growing body of research exists that identifies how effective leaders engage in interactions with their teams, we know less about how to strategically identify candidates for leadership positions who have high potential to become engaged leaders. Our research fills this gap by exploring how prior experiences can be used to predict engagement in interactions associated with effective leadership. Our research is based on analysis of 20 graduate students in four simulated virtual project teams executing a construction design and planning task. Results suggest that in virtual teams, engagement is conditioned by the technological context in which the work is executed. Our findings have implications for existing leadership training programs and contribute to theories about the appropriateness of shared leadership models for virtual project teams.

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## 1. Introduction

Complex project work in the Architecture, Engineering and Construction (AEC) industry is being outsourced more frequently (Messner et al., 2007) due, in part, to an increase in the quality of design work worldwide (Bryant, 2006). Not surprisingly, it is becoming increasingly common for AEC projects to be executed by teams from different countries (Mahalingam and Levitt, 2007). In many cases, these teams work virtually to reduce travel costs (Baskerville and Nandhakumar, 2007) and downtime (see Lee-Kelley and Sankey, 2008 for an example), maximize human resources (Hertel et al., 2004) and respond dynamically to shifting project demands (Cascio, 2000). Well-functioning global virtual teams are synergistic, working both independently and interdependently toward an overall project outcome (Bell and Kozlowski, 2002; Chinowsky and Rojas, 2003; Driskell et al., 2003; Dundis and Benson, 2003).

However, geographical distribution and technological mediation can pose challenges to effective work coordination and execution in global virtual teams (Bergiel et al., 2008). For instance, cooperative decision-making in global virtual teams can be challenging (Kirchmeyer and Cohen, 1992) as conflict (Hinds and Mortensen, 2005) is common and trust is difficult to establish (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999). However, as in traditional, face-to-face project contexts, many of these challenges can be addressed through effective leadership (Avolio et al., 2001) as leadership, interpersonal relations and technology are all factors that significantly contribute to communication breakdowns in global virtual teams (Diam et al., 2012).

A large body of research has examined leadership in traditional teams (e.g. Antonakis et al., 2003; House and Aditya, 1997; Shamir and Howell, 1999) and a growing body of research has extended the study of leadership to virtual teams (see Powell et al., 2004 for an overview). Although existing research has identified behaviors exhibited by effective virtual team leaders (Malhotra et al., 2007), we know relatively less about the characteristics of workers or their prior experiences that make them more likely to

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 512 983 4166.

E-mail addresses: [iorio@vt.edu](mailto:iorio@vt.edu) (J. Iorio), [jet@vt.edu](mailto:jet@vt.edu) (J.E. Taylor).

exhibit these behaviors. A notable exception is research by Balthazard et al. (2009), which examines the role of personality in predicting effective virtual team leadership. Aside from this research, we do not know whether effective leaders in traditional, co-located work contexts will be effective leaders in global virtual contexts or whether workers with distributed team experience are more likely to exhibit effective leadership behaviors in virtual teams. Thus, we know how effective virtual leaders engage with their followers, but we lack much of the knowledge required to identify potentially effective candidates for leadership roles in virtual project teams. To this end, our research explores the relationship between workers' previous experiences and the likelihood that they will become engaged and effective leaders.

## 2. Background

The study of leadership is multifaceted, as researchers have focused on a variety of leadership qualities, behaviors, processes and structures in order to better understand effective leadership. In our study, we focus narrowly on how and to what extent leaders engage with followers in the execution of virtual project work. Different types of engagement by leaders in a variety of interactions provide a range of benefits for virtual project teams. Because leadership is fundamentally social by nature (DeRue and Ashford, 2010), engagement can increase social influence (Bonito, 2000). However, effective leaders must balance their own influence with their followers' influence in order to manage team power dynamics because followers can (positively or negatively) shape the behavior of leaders (Oc and Bashshur, 2013). Engagement can also strengthen team members' intra-team identification (Postmes et al., 2005) and can span inter-team boundaries (Reicher et al., 1997). Effective leaders must be engaged with followers throughout the life-cycle of a project (Kayworth and Leidner, 2002) because lapses in engagement can lead to task and role confusion, decreased motivation, and ultimately, lack of engagement by other team members. Active and sustained engagement by leaders is particularly challenging in virtual teams, because in many cases, presence and participation can only be signaled verbally, whereas in traditional settings, they can be signaled non-verbally, e.g. by using eye contact during a discussion to indicate engagement.

Research on effective leadership in organizations that employ traditional, face-to-face teams has focused on a distinction between transactional leadership styles (Bass and Avolio, 1990; Thite, 2001) and transformational or charismatic styles (Avolio and Yammarino, 2013; Podsakoff et al., 1990). *Transformational leadership* is described as centered on managing the interpersonal relationships between people while *transactional leadership* is focused on facilitating the execution of tasks in the creation of products. In Tyssen et al.'s (2013, n.p.) terms, "transactional leadership focuses on the task-related exchange of actions and rewards between follower and leader [while] transformational leadership emphasizes a person-orientation by aligning followers' needs with the organization's (higher) tasks and goals". For example, effective leaders who adopt a transformational style may engage in interactions that support rapport building (Kayworth

and Leidner, 2002; Zaccaro and Bader, 2003) while those who adopt a transactional style engage in interactions that may assign tasks and roles to individuals (Cordery et al., 2009; Huang et al., 2010).

Although these two styles of leadership are often studied in isolation, other work views them as complementary. For example, Kayworth and Leidner (2002) argue that effective leaders engage in interactions that both support the execution of the task and that foster and support the relationships between members of the team. Yang et al. (2011, p. 265) demonstrate that "project managers who adopt transactional and transformational leadership may improve team communication, team collaboration and team cohesiveness". Tyssen et al. (2013, n.p.) argue that "both transactional and transformational leadership have a positive influence on followers' affective commitment to a project".

Because technology plays such a central role in facilitating virtual project team work, we argue that in addition to engagement in transactional and transformational interactions, effective leaders must also engage in *technological* interactions. In a virtual context, Nauman et al. (2010, p. 644) found that "both [concern for task and concern for people] are significantly positively related to [an] empowerment climate in project[s] with varying degree[s] of virtuality". In virtual work settings, engagement in technological interactions (e.g. troubleshooting) facilitates engagement in the transformational and transactional interactions. For instance, leaders cannot engage in rapport building interactions in a virtual setting if they are not competent in using the technology through which the interactions are occurring. Like effective facilitators (Iorio et al., 2012), effective virtual project team leaders must modify the ways that they interact in order to manage the transfer of knowledge and information across technological boundaries.

Our goal with this research is to examine the types of prior experiences that potential leaders have had that can increase their engagement in virtual project team interactions. Although research has identified a number of ways that effective leaders engage in virtual project team interactions, as Hertel et al. (2005) note, there is still a lack of research that allows talent evaluators and human resource personnel to identify existing workers or new hires for leadership roles in these settings. Thus, our research responds to this gap by exploring associations between the prior experiences of potential leadership candidates and their level of engagement in transactional, transformation and technological interactions that support execution of virtual project team work and relationships.

## 3. Hypothesis development

Our hypotheses are based on examining the associations between a set of dependent variables that capture engagement in transformational, transactional and technological interactions with a set of independent variables that capture the prior experiences of potential leaders. We focus on three aspects of a leadership candidate's previous experiences: 1) leadership training for traditional project teams, 2) experience working in distributed teams, and 3) experience working through the

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