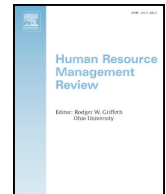




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Leadership in virtual teams: A multilevel perspective

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ABSTRACT

Understanding leadership functioning in virtual teams becomes critical as organizations increasingly use dispersed teams for talent acquisition. In the current article I present a preliminary model that explicates how task- and relationship-oriented leader behaviors influence team and individual processes and outcomes in virtual teams. Further, I discuss cross-level relationships between virtual team and individual processes, as well as the boundary effects of contextual factors (i.e., task complexity, task interdependence, and virtuality) in virtual leadership functioning.

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1. Introduction

“Virtual teams are here, and they are here to stay.”—Bell and Kozlowski (2002, p. 45)

The Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) conducted a survey of 379 HR professionals, revealing that nearly half of the polled member firms use virtual teams in their organizations (Minton-Eversole, 2012). The popularity of virtual teams in modern organizations is attributed to successes of structuring work around teams, advancements of information and telecommunication technology, globalization and increasing pressures to compete for talent around the world, desires to maintain flexibility and agility while reducing operating costs, and the need to share knowledge and information efficiently (Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998).

Virtual teams can benefit both employees and the employer (Maruping & Agarwal, 2004). Employees may enjoy the flexibility of conducting their work in far-flung locations, ranging from their employer offices to client sites and from hotel rooms to their homes. Such flexibility may facilitate the balance of employees' work and life and potentially increase their satisfaction with the job. While employees may find it flexible in a virtual work environment, the employer tends to benefit from the enhanced ability to work with experts from around the globe. Thanks to the advanced communication technology, the employer may bring subject matter experts from another part of the world to work in a virtual team, which may be unrealistic in traditional face-to-face teams (Maruping & Agarwal, 2004). Even co-located teams have increasingly incorporated technologies that facilitate virtual communication in team member interactions (Moser & Axtell, 2013). Almost every team has some elements that allow it to be considered partially virtual (Al-Ani, Horspool, & Bligh, 2011; Cheshin, Kim, Nathan, Ning, & Olson, 2013; Hardin, Fuller, & Davison, 2007; Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005; Zigers, 2003).

All the aforementioned benefits are based on the assumption that virtual teams are well managed. Indeed, leadership effectiveness plays a pivotal role in the success of virtual teams (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Morgeson, DeRue, & Karam, 2010; Zigers, 2003).

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Researchers agreed that it is more challenging to lead virtual teams than traditional face-to-face teams (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Cohen & Gibson, 2003; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). While relationship development among members in a traditional team can be organic and natural, virtual leaders might need to proactively guide the relationship building process, given the reduced richness of social information through computer-mediated communication tools. Virtual leaders are expected to invest more time and effort to help coordinate virtual team tasks, build relationships among distributed members, and facilitate team processes (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Purvanova & Bono, 2009; Tyran, Tyran, & Shepherd, 2003; Zigurs, 2003). It is not surprising that Gilson, Maynard, Young, Vartiainen, and Hakonen (2015) have identified leadership as one of the most pressing themes in research on virtual teams and considered leadership an opportunity in future research.

However, gaps exist in our understanding of leadership effectiveness in virtual teams. First, with only a few exceptions (Hill & Bartol, 2016; Joshi, Lazarova, & Liao, 2009), we know very little about through what processes leadership impacts virtual team effectiveness. As Hoch and Kozlowski (2014, p. 399) suggested, "... the next increment should turn attention to the mediating mechanisms that link the input factors with team performance." Many questions remain unanswered. Are there team processes that are unique to a virtual context? How do traditional team processes and emergent states impact team outcomes under virtual leadership? What are some leader behaviors that can facilitate the development of such processes and emergent states to enhance virtual team effectiveness? Second, despite the acknowledgement of the importance of leaders building relationships in virtual teams, the current literature is silent about how the team leader develops and maintains relationships with each individual member within a virtual team. Meanwhile, while interacting with each team member, how do leader behaviors impact the follower's cognition, affection, and motivation? Third, we lack understanding of how virtual team processes and emergent states at the unit level influence individual experience and performance within the team. Do members perceive and experience team processes if they are not located together? Fourth, there is a dearth of research on boundary conditions of virtual leadership effects. Are there any other contextual factors that may strengthen, weaken, or nullify the effect of leadership in virtual teams? How does individual functioning differ based on different virtual leadership? There are many questions that deserve a closer examination. It is paramount to address the aforementioned gaps in order to realize the benefits of using virtual teams. Together, providing answers to these questions warrants a multilevel perspective as variables residing at the team and individual levels as well as cross-level relationships are involved.

Given that the extant literature is limited and fragmented in providing a comprehensive understanding of leadership in virtual teams, it is imperative that we have a theoretical framework that systematically examines how leadership functions at different levels in virtual teams. This article seeks to address the above described gap in the current literature. Its goal is to promote the understanding of effective leadership in virtual teams by: 1) increasing virtual team researchers awareness of the importance of a multilevel approach; 2) proposing a model of leadership in virtual teams that takes into account the multiple levels at which leaders may influence teams, cross-level influences, and specific variables that are expected to play key roles in impacting leadership in virtual teams given the unique challenges faced by such teams; and 3) providing general theoretical propositions that suggest future research directions. The proposed theoretical framework is presented in Fig. 1.

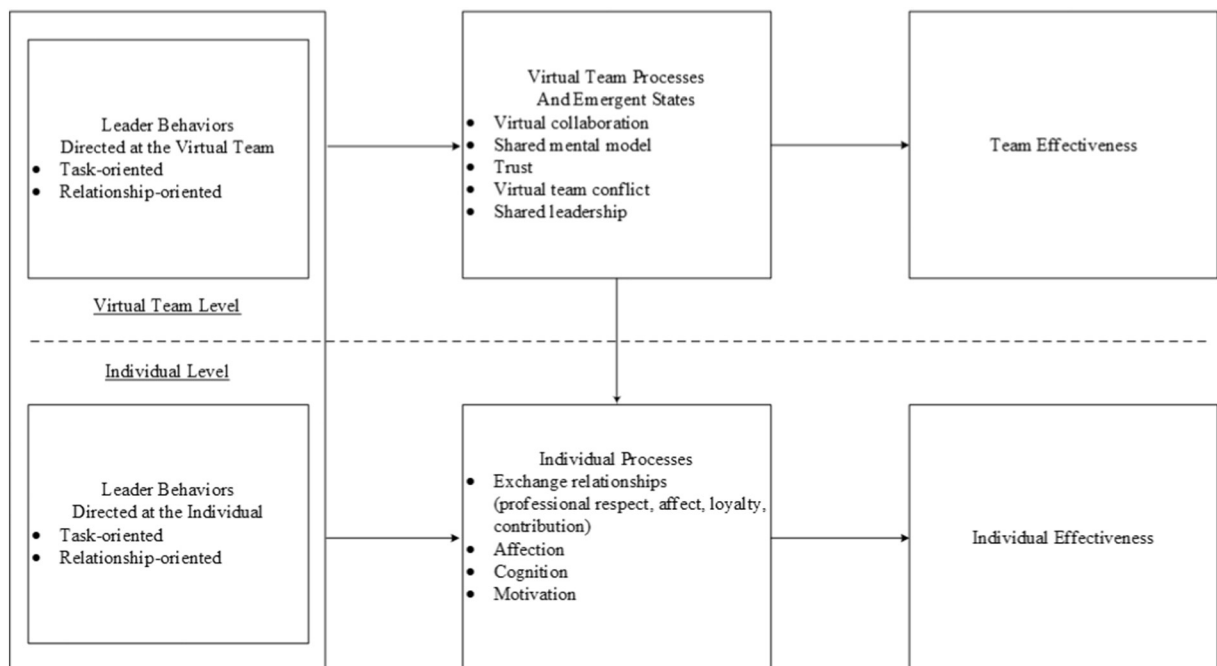


Fig. 1. A multilevel model of leadership in virtual teams.

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