



Influence tactics in virtual teams

Marla B. Wadsworth^a, Anita L. Blanchard^{b,*}

^a University of North Carolina Charlotte, Organizational Sciences, United States

^b University of North Carolina Charlotte, Department of Psychology, 9201 University City Boulevard, Charlotte, NC 28223, United States



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ABSTRACT

Most current studies of influence tactics in virtual teams assume that these constructs operate in a similar manner as they do in the face-to-face (FtF) environment. However, important differences between these contexts may alter how influence tactics are expressed in virtual teams. Using status characteristics as the theoretical lens, this study intensively examines how influence tactics are manifested in virtual teams and which are most successful. Twenty-three members of different virtual teams were interviewed about their previous attempts to influence team members. The main findings are that while some influence tactics are present in both FtF and online environments, there is a tendency to use harder (i.e., more assertive) influence tactics in virtual teams. Second, some influence tactics used in both FtF and virtual environments are enacted in novel ways in virtual teams. Further, virtual team members have developed a new technique which reduces the ambiguity of virtual communications in order to influence their team members. Finally, status affects influence success in novel and unexpected ways.

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1. Influence tactics in virtual teams

Influence is ubiquitous in social interactions (Kemper & Collins, 1990) and, therefore, is ubiquitous in virtual team interactions. Influence may, however, be *different* in virtual teams. The information and communication technology (ICT), the dispersion of members around the world, and the relationships between team members of different status may affect the use and effectiveness of influence tactics in virtual teams. We are in the beginning states of understanding the use of influence tactics in virtual teams and how they succeed.

The purpose of this study is to understand the influence tactics that are manifested and enacted within virtual teams. We will identify virtual teams influence tactics and compare their similarities and differences to face-to-face (FtF) influence tactics. Guided by status characteristics theory (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Wagner & Berger, 2002), we will identify which influence tactics are most effective as virtual team members seek to influence members with less, equal, and more status than themselves. This study adds to the nascent research of influence in virtual teams by providing insights into the complexity of virtual team influence.

1.1. Research

Influence tactics are how people enact power over others (cf., Lines, 2007; Yukl & Tracey, 1992). Influence tactics are used in formal and informal groups by people with and without formal power. Much research continues to examine how people with formal power influence others (Lines, 2007; Barbuto, Fritz, & Marx, 2002; Pierro, Kruglanski, and Raven (2012)). However, using influence tactics, power can be asserted in multiple directions (i.e., upward, downward, and lateral) (Yukl, Chavez, & Seifert, 2005; Yukl & Falbe, 1990); that is, influence tactics can help individuals have power over others. Although both the formal and personal bases of power are relatively stable (Bass, 1960), influence tactics enable all individuals, regardless of whether they have formal power, to influence others.

In their original work, Yukl and Falbe (1990) identified eight influence tactics: pressure tactics, personal appeals, exchange tactics, coalition tactics, ingratiation tactics, rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, and consultation tactics. In 2005, Yukl and his colleagues identified two additional influence tactics: collaboration and apprising (i.e., explaining how the target person will benefit by complying). The most commonly used tactics in the FtF context are rationality, ingratiation, and coalition (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Yukl & Falbe, 1990). These tactics are also divided into hard, assertive approaches (e.g., pressure, exchange, and coalition) and softer approaches (e.g., personal appeals, exchange, ingratiation, rational persuasion, and consultation) to influence others.

* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 (704) 687 1321.

E-mail addresses: Marla.B.Wadsworth@gmail.com (M.B. Wadsworth), Anita.Blanchard@unc.edu (A.L. Blanchard).

The choice of a tactic depends on individual differences, the expected success of their influence attempt and the relationship between the team members (Steizel & Rimbau-Gilabert, 2013). For example, Pierro et al. (2012) examined how leaders' need for cognitive closure affects the use and success of their influence tactics. They define cognitive closure as an individual's desire to firm up decisions and clarify ambiguity. They found that a need for closure was positively related to the use of harder influence tactics even though softer influence tactics were more effective overall. Van Knippenberg and Steensma (2003) found that influencers are likely to use softer techniques when they expect to have a prolonged relationship with their influence targets.

While our understanding of influence in FtF environments remains important, the growth of ICT, the challenges of communicating through ICT, and the ubiquity of influence in interactions suggest that we should also explore influence tactics in virtual teams.

1.2. Influence in virtual teams

Virtual teams are teams whose members are mediated by time, distance, or technology and whose members are interdependent, working together on a common task (Driskell, Radtke, & Salas, 2003). Members of virtual teams communicate through various ICT including telephone, video and audio conferencing, chat rooms and instant messaging, file and application sharing, and other virtual reality options (Olson & Olson, 2000). These technologies vary as to how much they incorporate the media dimensions of co-presence, visibility, audibility, contemporality, simultaneity, sequentiality, reviewability, and revisability (Clark & Brennan, 1991). These dimensions are consequential because they are associated with the richness of the media (i.e., the capabilities of the technology and how much information it conveys).

Virtual teams exist on a continuum in which some teams are completely virtual and have never met FtF. Others are slightly virtual in which team members primarily interact FtF, but also spend time working with each other through ICT. ICT has become so pervasive that it is hard to imagine any team in which the members do not have some level of virtuality. In our paper, we focus on teams in which ICT represent the primary way in which they communicate and organize their work.

Within the context of these virtual teams, we are interested in how members influence each other. Influence tactics are the methods people use to translate power into action. One example of an influence tactic would be when employees use their expertise to lay out facts and statistics in order to persuade others to accept their solution. Another is when a manager threatens an employee who then does the manager's bidding.

Theory and research indicate that influence tactics and influence processes do not work in exactly the same way in virtual teams as they do in FtF teams. Avolio and Kahai (2003) point out that ICT provides everyone with the ability to reach out and touch everyone (e.g., through email), thus increasing opportunities for communication. However, geographically distributed team members can also easily withhold information from one another (Rosen, Furst, & Blackburn, 2007). Thus, ICT allows virtual team members to both argue their case to others and, alternatively, easily withhold information without detection to make their case more valid. In what other ways do influence tactics differ in the virtual environment?

In new virtual teams, limited familiarity with other team members is related to fewer and softer influence tactics (Elron & Vigoda-Gadot, 2006). Membership in the virtual team is also less central to participants' organizational identification and performance than membership in collocated teams, which Elron and Vigoda-Gadot

suggested made influencing members of the virtual team less pressing than influencing members of FtF teams.

However, as virtual team members get to know each other better, power relations may become the same online as FtF (cf., Walther, 1995). Once a team's history is established and members are more comfortable communicating with one another, the use of stronger influence tactics may become more common. Indeed, given the ambiguous nature of authority in the virtual environment (cf., Zhang & Fjermestad, 2006), influence may occur more frequently than in FtF teams (i.e., ambiguity may make influential behavior more acceptable or less prone to sanctioning).

Steizel and Rimbau-Gilabert (2013) are some of the few researchers who have studied influence tactics and specific status characteristics in virtual teams. They examined influence tactics of lower status virtual team members primarily influencing superiors in different countries. Their results show that lower level virtual team members are likely to use rationality, intermediation, and coalition building to influence upper status members. They identified intermediation as a new influence technique. In intermediation, a lower level team member contacts someone physically and socially closer to the higher status team member, who then successfully influences the target.

Like Elron and Vigoda-Gadot (2006) and Steizel and Rimbau-Gilabert (2013), we conduct an intensive examination of influence tactics in virtual teams. An intensive examination of the use of influence tactics allows us to identify which tactics are being used *in situ* and compare their similarities and differences from FtF influence tactics and previous research. We build upon their research by intensively examining influence in established teams and between members at higher, equal, and lower status. Therefore, our first research question is to identify influence tactics unique to the virtual environment.

RQ1a: What influence tactics are available to individuals who interact in virtual teams?

RQ1b: How are these similar or different to those available to individuals who interact FtF?

We ground our study in status characteristics theory. Status characteristics theory is a foundational sociological theory which governs human interactions. As we discuss below, we perceive an inherent tension between status characteristics theory and ICT, which makes this theory fruitful to use in virtual team research.

1.3. Status characteristics theory

Status characteristics theory addresses how initial status differences result in expectations for interactions (Wagner & Berger, 1997). A status characteristic is a socially established attribute, such as hierarchical level or ethnicity, on which people are differentially evaluated (Berger et al., 1972; Wagner & Berger, 2002). A key component of status characteristics theory is that status characteristics highlight status inequalities.

Status characteristics can be either diffuse or specific (Berger et al., 1972). Diffuse status characteristics (e.g., race, gender, and ethnicity) are generalized assumptions about a specific population (Berger et al., 1972). They create initial status differences that are stable and pervasive (Wagner & Berger, 2002). Specific status characteristics (e.g., math ability or occupation) also exist (Berger et al., 1972). These characteristics are used to evaluate people on their ability to succeed. Both diffuse and specific status characteristics determine which group members participate, have influence, and have prestige (Berger et al., 1972).

Status characteristics interact with influence tactics to affect an individual's ability to obtain and maintain power. However, the

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