

Implications of Electronic Communications and Collaborative Systems on Leader - Follower Relationship in Virtual Organizations

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Background

Because of pressures of globalization on economies around the world, organizations have become less hierarchical and more decentralized. Organizational members can be found scattered across time and space, creating what has been called the “virtual organization.” Central to the changes supporting these virtual organizations are the advancements of electronic communications and collaborative software systems. What impact does this phenomenon, and the infrastructure used to support it, have on the leader-follower relationship as organizations continue to morph into this “virtual” structure? Globalization is a rapidly growing trend, with leaders being separated from the followers in these organizations. Most of the early leadership research has not focused on the combination creating this phenomenon (Avolio & Kahai, 2001). Leader-Member Exchange Theory (LMX) has been used to describe the dyadic relationship between leaders and followers in co-located organizations (Graen & Uhl-Bien, 1991). It also describes how different exchange relationships are developed over time with different subordinates. Leader-Member Exchange Theory will serve to inform the work guiding this proposed dissertation research to understand the dynamics behind this growing organizational phenomenon and if LMX theory is consistent in the virtual context. This research attempts to address this gap in literature as we are faced with a paradigm shift in 21st century leadership.

In recent years, research has begun to focus on this new form of organizational structure known as “virtual teams.” However, much of this research compares traditional and virtual teams (Powell et al., 2004). Although there are a number of sociological issues related to virtual teams (e.g. trust, relationship-building, cultural diversity, etc.), very little research has been conducted to examine how leaders can effectively use technology to maintain or enhance the leader-follower relationship in accomplishing the goals of the organizations through the follower. It is plausible that planning, decision-making, and motivating may be approached differently in a virtual team context as opposed to what might happen in a traditional team.

In this context, technology connects leaders to their geographically dispersed team(s). Understanding the importance and impact of electronic communications on the follower is vitally important to leaders in these new organizational arrangements. One of the goals of this research is to explore the role of electronic communications on the leader and follower relationship.

Two fundamental questions regarding the issue of using technology in virtual teams seem particularly crucial in getting a better understanding of what leaders must know in order to effectively utilize technology as a tool. First, given that task processes in organizations center on communications, the question arises, how is this process changed by the technologies that now connect leaders to geographically dispersed teams? Second, given that traditional forms of communications have been replaced by electronic technology in virtual organizations, how do leader go about analyzing the role of communications within virtual teams, to select the right technologies?

Methodology

Because the proposed research question addresses social behavior, a qualitative research approach is proposed. In order to be as comprehensive as possible, this research project will involve a combination of data collection methods and target groups. The purpose of this data collection strategy is to collect data that can be compared across organizations to examine the robustness of the findings across a variety of organizations. Data will be collected primarily through a modified questionnaire based on the Leader-Member Exchange questionnaire (LMX-7). The questionnaire will be modified to focus on how leaders interact and communicate with members of the organization, the methods of communication and collaboration used, and the effectiveness of both. A survey instrument will be designed to collect data regarding these three points.

In order to get a deeper understanding of the results of the survey, two additional methods of data collection will be used in follow-up to the questionnaire. Participant observation and face-to-face interviews will be used to help expand on the data collected from the survey and triangulate the results of the survey. The observations will involve video recorded observations and notes of both leader and followers in their respective virtual environment. Face-to-face interviews will be conducted to address important information that was not included in the survey to clarify responses in the survey, and to clarify and explain observations.

Implications

Similar to the how the personal computer transformed work in the traditional office setting, virtual organizations are changing the nature of the leader-follower relationship. As organizations become more multi-national, leaders face challenges involving working across time and space. New theory must be developed to address this growing phenomenon and to explain the changes taking place with the leader-follower relationship. As global advancements in technology and changes in world economies continue to pressure organizations to take on this “virtual” structure, more research in this area should be conducted as we move further into the 21st century.

References

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