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61

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Remote Leadership

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ABSTRACT

Increasingly, organizations are making use of information technology to enable employees to work at a distance from their managers, their work groups, and/or their offices. Implementation comes in a variety of configurations virtual teams, flex time, telecommuting, and other remote working arrangements and, despite the great hopes for improved employee satisfaction and productivity, many of these arrangements are not considered to be successful by either the manager and/or the employee. This research-paper explains the range of factors unique to the remote environment, discusses the challenges these factors present and notes the significant gaps in understanding this phenomenon. It discusses the importance of trust and of how behaviours inherent in transformational leadership style build trust, increasing the effectiveness of leadership, even at a distance. The research-paper concludes with some suggestions based on both scholarly and practitioner thought on how to effectively implement some of the transformational leadership behaviours in a remote relationship, as well as a list of suggestions for further reading.

62



Keywords: Styles of Leadership, Manager vs Leader, Autocracy, Business ethics.

Introduction:

Traditional working arrangements in which the leader and his or her direct reports are located physically in the same place are called "proximal." Working arrangements in which the leader and his or her direct reports are separated by distance are referred to using several different labels; for example, remote leadership, virtual leadership, and e-leadership have all been used in practitioner and scholarly writing. While they all mean approximately the same thing, there are slight nuances and ambiguities that require clarification when conducting research in this area. For example, virtual leadership could include the concept of emergent leadership and/or leadership substitutes, as well as leadership via electronic means. E-leadership has been defined as referring to situations in which the leader-member relationship as well as the collection and dissemination of information required to support organizational work takes place via information technology. In this research-paper, the term remote leadership is used to connote leader-member relationships in which members are at a physical distance from their leaders; specifically not collocated in the same building, causing face-to-face interaction to be reduced. In this definition, the form of interaction with the leader, generally dictated by the physical collocation arrangement, defines the condition. There are varying degrees of remote leadership, depending on the amount of face-to-face contact that occurs. Some workers have never met their leader face-to-face, while others may see their leader occasionally such as once per week or less. Despite this continuum, in this research-paper, remote leadership will be used to refer to all relationships in which the majority of interaction between the member and the leader is conducted by means of technology rather than face-to-face.

Theory:

The theoretical development of a model of leadership in which the leader and the follower do not interact on a face-to-face basis is in its preliminary stages (Schiller & Mandviwalla, 2007). The existing research and theory in the field of organizational behaviour is based on a proximal model in which individuals interact with their leaders and group members on a face-to-face basis and aspects of this traditional context have



been researched extensively. Studies have consistently demonstrated the importance of leadership to group and individual outcomes in a proximal arrangement. However, there is little empirical data to suggest that the findings of research conducted in a proximal leadership situation are applicable to the remote model. To date, there is not even a consensus that the two environments are different enough to require differing models of leadership. By examining applicable pieces of disparate theories, this research-paper attempts to integrate what is known about the remote context with a theory of effective leadership based on a proximal model.

The Remote Context:

It has been observed that it is impossible to understand behaviour in organizations without an explicit consideration of the organizational context and this has been largely overlooked in organizational behaviour research (Porter & McLaughlin, 2006). Indeed, three major models of leadership path-goal theory, contingency theory of leadership, and the leadership substitutes model give consideration to context, either as a moderating influence as in path goal or as a pivotal factor as in contingency theory. However, the effect of contextual factors specifically on the leader-member relationship has gone relatively unexplored in both the proximal and remote settings. Previous generations of experience in proximal settings contribute to the perception of this context as natural and familiar, and hence, it is generally unexamined. Remote work settings, however, are unfamiliar, unnatural environments in which to develop and conduct a relationship. The remote work environment has been characterized as one of isolation, exclusion, increased flexibility, and perceptions of autonomy. Despite the fact that, for the most part, differences between the remote and proximal contexts have been neither inventoried nor explored empirically, consideration of the remote environment suggests several factors that might define the context within which remote leader-member relationships are conducted and which may influence leader and member behaviours.

Distance:

Remote working arrangements are generally characterized by physical distance between the individual and/or group members or leaders. Physical proximity is important to relationships; for example, it has been shown to enhance attraction through increased



accessibility and familiarity (Moon, 1999). Also, proximity increases the likelihood of future interaction, which makes people more responsive to individuals who are nearer geographically (Latane, Liu, Nowak, Bonavento, & Zheng, 1995).

Most scholarly work involving distance has focused specifically on its impact on leadership effectiveness, although much of the writing is based on conjecture rather than research. Several authors have argued that physical distance between a leader and member has negative effects on both the relationship and the outcomes, in terms of member performance and satisfaction (Napier & Ferris, 1993). Other researchers have gone so far as to observe that distance renders leadership impossible (Howell & Hall-Merenda, 1999). In addition to these generalized opinions, some specific effects of remote working arrangements have been identified. For example, when members can interact with the leader in person, they can assess the leader's actions and performance directly, rather than relying on potentially flawed attributions (Antonakis & Atwater, 2002). As well, members more strongly identify with a leader they can see (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002). Identification with a leader increases the degree of influence the leader can exert. Finally, physical distance may make it difficult for a leader to monitor and rate follower performance, forcing them to rely on single indicators (e.g., objective results) or erroneous cues, without the benefit of context.

Reduced Face-to-Face Interaction:

Generally, reduced face-to-face interaction is the result when the leader and the member are physically distant. When face-to-face interaction is minimal, most communication is conducted using some form of media. Throughout human history, significant personal relationships have been based on some amount of face-to-face interaction. It is yet unknown whether relationships without this face-to-face component can be effective or how they can be developed and sustained. Findings on the effect of this substitution of technologically mediated communication for face-to-face communication have been mixed. Preliminary studies with groups suggest that some measure of face-to-face contact is associated with superior virtual team performance, but there is no consensus on when or for what duration that face-to-face contact is required. Is it better for groups to meet in person at their formation or later at critical points in their tasks? There is no



conclusive evidence to answer this question. The leader-member relationship is different from relationships among group members in ways that affect the relationship itself. For example, in a leader-member relationship, power is usually unequal. This can add to inaccurate interpretations of communication on both parts; inaccurate interpretations, as explained later, are more apt to result in situations devoid of nonverbal cues. Therefore, it may be that face-to-face contact is even more important in a remote leader-member relationship than it is in virtual team relationships.

Communication Quality:

In technologically mediated communication, the quality of the communication is different than in face-to-face communication. Some studies suggest that the medium used to communicate does not impact communication quality. Specifically, according to Walther's (1996) social information processing theory, computer-mediated communication transmits as much social information as face-to-face communication, the only difference being a slower rate of transfer. In fact, Walther found that social discussion, depth, and intimacy were greater in virtual groups than in face-to-face groups, even for groups with geographically dispersed and culturally diverse partners who had never met face-to-face. However, these results should be interpreted cautiously, since individuals have a tendency to resort to overattributions on minimal social cues in virtual groups, and as well, this research dealt with groups rather than the specific remote leadership relationship. There is a consensus, despite Walther's (1996) findings, that e-mail and computer conferencing are often perceived as less "warm" than face-to-face communication, and some research suggests that e-mail messages contain higher levels of negativity than other forms of communication do (Berry, 2006; Kurtzberg, Naquin, & Belkin, 2005). This is important because better communication correlates with higher levels of trust and increased team performance (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998; Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998; Ross, 2006). One obvious drawback to technologically mediated communication is the loss of nonverbal cues that are available in face-to-face communication. It has been estimated that these cues convey as much as two thirds of the content of a message. For example, the telephone is capable of transmitting only about 37% of the sound frequency emitted by the human voice, making it difficult to detect nuances and differentiate among emotions



(Workman, Kahnweiler, & Bommer, 2003). This loss of information can impact both leader and member performance and satisfaction, through, for example, misinterpretation of facts, greater role ambiguity, lack of trust, cue substitution, inaccurate perceptions of self and others, lowered leader influence, and underdeveloped group cohesiveness. Studies suggest that this decrease in nonverbal cues may have various other negative effects: for example, teams in a remote environment may take longer to make decisions (Hollingshead, McGrath, & O'Connor, 1993) and there may be reduced levels of interpersonal relations between individuals (Weisband & Atwater, 1999). Furthermore, nonverbal cues act as devices to regulate interaction. Gestures such as head nods, quizzical looks, and eye contact provide direction to the course of the communication, as well as feedback as to whether the message was understood, or requires further explanation or repetition, reducing ambiguity and error (Straus & McGrath, 1994). In the absence of nonverbal cues, conversational flow may become difficult and communication clarity may be negatively affected. Finally, it is more difficult for leaders to be charismatic when there are no nonverbal cues on which to rely; charisma is not solely a function of textual content but rather is projected through voice, body language, and other nonverbal cues.

In remote communication, social context cues are also absent. Social context reflects how the people around someone relate to that person and how they interpret that person's actions or words. Social context influences how a person is viewed. In face-to-face communication, social context cues provide information about leader legitimacy, expertise, and status. For example, if everyone grows silent immediately when a leader speaks, this conveys a very different message than if everyone keeps talking. An absence of social context has been found to lead to the use of more negative tone, more assertive and hostile language, and an increased sense of depersonalization, which hinders the development of relationships and, ultimately, trust (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002). As well, leader influence may be reduced because it is more difficult for a leader to convey expert or referent power in the absence of these social context cues.

In contrast, there is some preliminary evidence that loss of nonverbal and social context cues may be beneficial in certain ways. Virtual communication may eliminate bias toward others because individuals tend to be substantially influenced by source cues



unrelated to content, such as physical attractiveness, age, ethnicity, or speaking style. In the remote environment, these elements are not accessible. Further, without nonverbal information to process, there is less chance of cognitive overload, and it is easier to evaluate others' contributions accurately (Weisband & Atwater, 1999). Again, these findings refer to members of virtual groups rather than the participants in a specific leader-member relationship.

Communication Quantity:

Another potential consequence of reduced face-to-face contact is the reduction in the amount of communication between a member and a leader and among group members (Straus, 1997). Communication frequency itself is important in a remote environment; merely communicating more improves working relationships and job satisfaction among team members (Hart & McLeod, 2002). It has been suggested that a higher frequency of communication by the leader in the remote environment may increase members' perceptions of trust (Staples, 2001). The decrease in communication frequency that characterizes many remote relationships may be partially accounted for by the difficulty in engaging in serendipitous communication when face-to-face interaction is limited. Serendipitous communications refers to chance encounters that provide an opportunity for casual information sharing of both a task-related and a social nature. In a remote environment, chance encounters do not occur and many members would understandably be reluctant to e-mail or telephone their leaders for a lengthy "around the water cooler" chat. In the remote environment, most of the contact is task related, with little social content. This is unfortunate because social communication is important in all relationships and is particularly difficult to enact spontaneously in remote working arrangements. Previous research suggests that virtual teams in which members send more social communication achieve higher trust and better social and emotional relationships (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1998). Length of social interaction is also important and in the remote environment, length may be constrained by the technology itself. For example, there is evidence suggesting that when social interaction does occur using computer mediated technology, it is often limited in length due to the physical effort involved with typing what are perceived as nonessential words (Straus, 1997).

**Task:**

A large body of research, dating from the mid-20th century examines various elements of the relationship between task and leadership. In traditional work situations, the degree of task complexity, routineness, and interdependence suggests various approaches to managing followers, depending on moderating factors such as member characteristics and organizational culture. In the remote environment, however, these variables have been only minimally considered, and largely within the context of choice of media.

Task type has been consistently found to moderate the effects of remoteness on team outcomes (Daly, 1993). Prior studies suggest that task type is critical to the success and speed with which virtual groups make decisions and the level of intragroup conflict (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2007; Straus & McGrath, 1994). For instance, with an ambiguous task, the greater the degree of technologically mediated communication used by a group, the longer the group took to reach a shared goal. For negotiation and intellectual tasks, initially face-to-face teams performed significantly better, but this difference decreased over time, suggesting the existence of a learning curve effect. For decision-making tasks, there were no differences found. Other studies suggest that idea generation tasks are performed by computer-mediated groups more effectively than by face-to-face groups (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). Finally, evidence exists that computer mediated communication is particularly inappropriate for groups facing highly interdependent tasks requiring significant levels of coordination and judgment (Hedlund, Ilgen, & Hollenbeck, 1998). Beyond these relationships between task type and choice of communication media, there is little known about the influence of task type in the remote environment.

Leadership:

There is no widely accepted prescription for how to lead effectively in a remote environment. Obviously, organizations ignore the findings that suggest remote leadership cannot be effective and continue to implement remote working arrangements, some of which are successful. At the time of writing, most of the explanations for these successes



are purely anecdotal. Research has yet to conclusively demonstrate whether leading effectively in a remote environment requires different behaviours than leading proximally, let alone what those behaviours might be. It is possible that practitioners in this situation continue to manage as they always have, without specific consideration of the unique contextual elements that comprise the remote environment. Significant, however, is the finding that individuals do not need to be face-to-face with a leader to discern and to be influenced by leader behaviours. Followers can actually perceive differences in leadership styles in computer-mediated communication.

Suggestions for Effective Remote Leadership:

Researchers have been investigating leadership for more than 80 years and there are still significant questions that have not been answered. Remote leadership is a relatively recent phenomenon and therefore there are few answers and many questions. What advice can be given to individuals tasked with leading remotely? Preliminary research, theoretically based arguments, and common sense can all be leveraged to provide direction in the absence of solid empirical findings. Leading is a sophisticated and sometimes difficult task; leading at a distance appears to be even more so because of the extra complexity introduced by the remote context. This is both a good news/bad news situation. The "good" news is that preliminary research has demonstrated that it is possible to establish perceptions of transformational leadership from a distance and that, once established, positive outcomes result. The "bad" news is that theory and common sense, as well as some research, suggest that establishing this perception takes significant effort. In remote leadership, the mantra should be "communicate, communicate, and communicate."

The goal of a remote leader's communication efforts should be to replicate that serendipitous two-way contact that so easily occurs with collocated followers. To achieve the beneficial effects of transformational leadership style, it is necessary that leaders build rapport, trust, perceptions of support, and a social bond with their followers. To accomplish this in the remote environment, leaders must communicate with followers on a frequent basis (Powell, Galvin, & Piccoli, 2006). Leaders should avoid the pitfall of having more frequent communication only with those with whom it is easy to communicate—the proximal followers. Proximal followers naturally have more opportunities for interaction but managers

70



must manufacture similar opportunities for remote followers. A regularly scheduled time for communication such as a given time slot every 2 weeks, for example, may facilitate achieving an optimal frequency of interaction. This has an added trust-building benefit-as managers adhere to the schedule, followers will perceive them to be reliable and consistent. In addition to frequency of communication, remote leaders must consider the choice of media and content of messages. Organizational and national culture, group norms, individual characteristics and aptitudes, at a minimum, must be factored into this process. Communication with followers should not be solely focused on task. In order to enact both the individualized consideration and inspirational motivation components of transformational leadership, leaders must engage in social interaction with their followers. A leader cannot demonstrate customized care for the follower as an individual and his or her development if all of their interaction is work related. Similarly, in order to build the confidence of remote followers and assist them in achieving higher levels of performance, the leader must understand the individual follower's unique characteristics, concerns, and abilities. To achieve this understanding requires communication of a social nature. The remote leader-follower relationship should be characterized by open, honest communication in which individuals feel free to initiate casual interaction through various media. If followers feel that they will be negatively viewed because they initiate contact in the absence of a serious problem, they will perceive a lack of control and trust in both directions; there will be motivational consequences. Creating a reciprocal perception of trust mitigates remote followers' feelings of isolation and powerlessness.

Conclusion:

To enact both intellectual stimulation and idealized influence, leaders must share information with their remote followers. Remote followers are often in danger of being left out of the information loop. This has several negative consequences: They are unable to contribute fully, they feel marginalized, and they perceive a lack of control. These outcomes can damage the trust relationship and render transformational leader behaviours ineffective. Explaining corporate drivers, the rationale behind decisions, and current organizational issues enables remote leaders to more convincingly present a vision of the



future, role model ethical and transparent decision-making processes, and seek constructive input from the followers.

An important step in the establishment of trust is a face-to-face meeting occasionally, particularly at the beginning of a leader-follower relationship. In fact, in selection, a pre-existing relationship might be one of the attributes that leaders factor into their favourable evaluation of a candidate.

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