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Leadership in Virtual Organizations: Influence on Workplace Engagement

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Leadership in Virtual Organizations: Influence on Workplace Engagement

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Abstract

This chapter will present the concept of a virtual organization and the role, responsibilities, and practices for leaders in these organizations. Corporations operate globally. Small- to medium-sized companies residing in a single country still rely on international suppliers and markets, among other things. As technology improves, develops, and advances, globalization will become more pronounced for all companies. Considering this technological trend, the virtual structure will likely become more prevalent. This chapter will also present models of leadership and how practical and effective they can be in a virtual platform. From a performance standpoint, employee engagement will be investigated, specifically considering how it functions under the “virtual” condition. Virtual organizations are highly suited to globalization and an international perspective will also be addressed. Finally, suggestions and recommendations will be offered to help virtual companies energize employee engagement.

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Introduction

People have been gathering for a common purpose for a long time, prior to the formal concept of societies. From a broad perspective, organizations can be formal or informal. They can be for business, leisure, profit, or non-profit. They can be religious based or politically oriented. Organizations represent a collective effort by individuals striving to attain a desired outcome. Phillips and Gully (2014) offer a standard perspective for the current practice of joining together in a business context, “An organization is a group of people with formally assigned roles working together to achieve common goals” (p. 4).

The early formation of a business “organization” essentially evolved from a person’s livelihood or trade when entrepreneurs transitioned from individual to collective productivity or operations. Tailors informally or purposefully joined and established garment factories. Bakers coalesced to form a bakery. Cabinet makers came together and created a furniture factory and so on. As organizations were established and the industrial revolution evolved, business took the form of factories, plants, institutions, or often retail establishments. They became the proverbial “brick and mortar” structures. Organizations served as a focal point of operations, business, and commerce. Expansion resulted in more of the operation at the original location or similar operations created at another location to better drive distribution or serve customer needs, as an example.

The first aspect of business operations that ventured away from a “home office” was likely depicted by “salesmen” who traveled geographic territories managing accounts or selling products. The Fuller Brush Man (2018) from the 1920s or Willie Lohman (Miller 1949) went door-to-door using their car as an office. These traveling sales representatives set the stage for virtual organizations of the future where operations could succeed from locations away from the formal or primary business site.

Employees assigned to positions in a virtual environment may face a type of workplace isolation, compared to workers in a traditional office setting or facility where physical structures typically serve as the center of activity. The virtual worker will have no breakroom, cafeteria, or opportunity to visit a co-worker in the adjoining cubicle. The traditional social aspect of a workplace evaporates in the virtual organization.

The lower employee engagement is within a virtual organization with virtual leaders raises a concern for employee well-being. It is critical that employees working in virtual organizations experience meaningful levels of engagement to the degree that their counterparts receive in traditional organizations with physical offices and structures. Employee well-being cannot be sacrificed in the virtual context. What impact does decreased opportunities for engagement have on employees? How can engagement be maintained? These questions will be examined and addressed.

This chapter will introduce the concept of a virtual organization and the role, responsibilities, and practices for leaders in these organizations. Corporations operate globally. Small- to medium-sized companies residing in a single country still rely on international suppliers and markets. As technology evolves, globalization will become more pronounced for all companies. Considering this technological trend, the virtual structure will become more prevalent.

The chapter will also present models of leadership and how practical and effective they can be in a virtual platform. From a performance standpoint, employee engagement will be investigated, specifically considering how it functions under the “virtual” condition. Virtual organization are highly suited to globalization, so an international perspective will also be addressed. Finally, suggestions and recommendations will be offered to help virtual companies energize employee engagement.

Virtual Organizations

One perspective of the external business environment encompasses society, the economy, legal/political influences, and technology, in a global/international context. Of these factors, technology has been the most important to the rapid development of virtual organizations. A popular notion for success in virtual organizations is that technology would drive results. This is accomplished through an extensive global information society that is rapidly expanding and becoming extremely sophisticated (Deresky 2014, pp. 28–32). With a virtual platform, appropriate technology is certainly essential for effective communication, accurate planning and scheduling, relevant delineation and allocation of resources, accounting and financial management, and various other control systems and operational endeavors. Virtual organizations rely on technology to enable operational activities among workers and departments that occur face-to-face in traditional “brick-and-mortar” companies. Discussions take place over telephone. Meetings are through Skype. Files and reports are distributed and edited in the “cloud” by all stakeholders. The growth of information technology has been the impetus for the expansion of virtual organizations (Zafar et al. 2015).

Bejleri and Fishta (2017) provided a perspective on organization evolution in the context of “brick-and-mortar, click-and-mortar, and virtual organization” (p. 275). Click-and-mortar representing the online interface with customer sales and service, and virtual representing an organization that is free of traditional (brick-and-mortar) parameters. This sequential change captures the concept (phenomenon) of conducting business in an environment where technology, as a resource, not only enables companies to enhance operations and success but drives companies to change in order to be more successful. We do not imply that click-and-mortar and the virtual organization configuration subsequently replace a previous configuration but merely that one step in the development enhances the prior stage.

Virtual organizations are generally comprised of teams or individuals that operate in separate locals with some degree of autonomy. The key component that enables productivity is technological connectivity, often asynchronous (Burma 2014). Virtual organizations can certainly enhance a company’s success. However, challenges to effective leadership may arise, and employees can become disenfranchised when traditional levels of engagement erode.

It appears that virtual teams/organizations will continue to be more common in the future, yet still face issues that may be less pronounced than in traditional organizations. Purvanova (2014) suggests that the virtual configuration is more cost efficient and more flexible when compared to traditional organizations. However, his review does acknowledge that some studies have produced contradictory results (i.e., face-to-face is more effective). The critical component that seems to fuel the difference depends on the actual worker, the person-job fit. So, it appears that individual differences must be addressed when determining an appropriate organization configuration. The author even believes that highly successful virtual organizations will still need to accommodate employees who dislike the mode of communication or extent to which it must be used, in comparison to employee satisfaction with communication organizations in traditional organizations.

Regardless of how appropriately aligned technology is in a virtual organization, the individuals working in the organization are the fundamental resource that ultimately enables organization success (Makarius and Larson 2017). Of course, this holds true in standard organizations, too. Since individuals are especially important to performance in virtual organizations, it is paramount that workers possess appropriate knowledge, skills, abilities, and other factors (KSAO) required for performing in a virtual environment. In addition to finding people best suited for jobs in a virtual environment, the company must offer relevant training and development opportunities so that workers can grow. It is also critical that managers provide appropriate leadership to facilitate individual success.

An extensive review of published material on virtual teams acknowledges that technology has created the framework and reinforces the notion that individual workers are the critical resource for virtual success (Gilson et al. 2014). A point emphasized by the authors was that technological development and advances will continue to create opportunities and challenges for virtual team success. They urged more investigation as to how companies can support and lead workers in virtual teams.

Many face-to-face practices in traditional organizations are incompatible with a virtual organization configuration. These differences may be problematic (Serrat 2017). Visiting a co-worker in the next office or cubicle down the hall, meeting for lunch, impromptu gatherings in the conference room or breakroom, and supervisors walking around seeing how and what people are doing in the traditional structure are not possible and are different in the virtual organization. The type and level of workplace engagement varies greatly.

The hallmarks of the modern organization [virtual] are satellite offices, remote offices, home offices, virtual offices, hoteling facilities, and the electronic mail that underpins—and promotes—these. Today, knowledge workers receive few telephone calls and electronic mail is their communication vehicle of choice. (The use of videoconferencing is growing too.) After all, why should they walk around if they can type, point, and click? At the receiving end, managers are known to collect more than 150 messages each day. Yet, as knowledge workers on the rise tote up electronic status, they also distance themselves from colleagues. (p. 321)

Quisenberry (2018) champions the value of virtual organizations, though points out issues that could derail success. Some problems mentioned were poor communication, failure to share knowledge, and a simple lack of motivation. Of no surprise, these also tend to create problems in any type of organization. He does promote the value of emotional intelligence as a factor to bolster success for virtual teams. Again, employees high in emotional intelligence likely help any type of organization succeed.

As reported by Quisenberry (2018), emotionally intelligent employees appear to foster success in virtual teams. It also seems that trust is an important factor that fosters success with these types of groups (Lukić and Vračar 2018). The concept of trust for the authors pertains to honesty and fairness, along with the quality of interpersonal relationships among employees.

Interpersonal trust and employee trust in the organization are extremely valuable conditions for any business. DuBrin (2013) sadly stresses that many people, in general, distrust business leaders, often without any specific, concrete reason. He highlights that effective leaders or managers “walk-the-talk” (p. 35). This practice, though not always, could literally mean a physical presence in the office, plant, store, etc. In a virtual organization a literal walk-around is impossible. Daft (2015) states that “Leaders who model their ethical convictions through their daily actions command admiration, respect, and loyalty. Honesty and integrity are the foundation of trust between leader and follower” (p. 40). Again, under many conditions, not all, “modeling” is an in-person display or action. From another or contrary perspective, employees who are assigned to virtual positions or are members of virtual organizations must certainly have gained the trust of managers or leaders of their business. This potentially could foster reciprocal employee trust of management.

Shepherd and Hagstrom (2015) provide another perspective on converting to or creating a virtual organization. They proclaim that without physical structures the virtual company is left with people and culture, the heart and soul of an enterprise. To preserve, develop, or maintain these important aspects of the organization, the following five steps are recommended. First, design your culture. Second, shout it out: recognize individual achievements and successes. Third, train management to motivate and inspire. Fourth, plan the metrics. Finally, assess the benefits. The authors believe that careful planning, designing, and implementation are basically what it takes to succeed in becoming virtual.

Leadership and the Virtual Context

The term E-leadership was first coined in response to the new working environment where human interactions are mediated by information and communication technology. In this type of environment, leaders lead organizations and projects from a distance (Avolio et al. 2001). The transition to a global economy has required changes in organization and significant adaptation on the part of leadership (Avolio and Kahai 2003), along with a new leadership approach. E-leadership is viewed as a response and solution to global changes necessitated by technological development. E-leadership may also be a result of change due to a fluid global economy. These changes are creating virtual and flexible work options, and they continue to evolve requiring employers to formalize their virtual work policies and better manage their virtual workforces (Leonard 2011).

Innovations in information and communication technology, such as the internet and e-commerce, have revolutionized the way organizations operate today. Therefore, new forms of organizations (e-business or virtual organizations) and a modern, new leadership form (e-leadership or virtual leadership) are taking place in this evolving business environment. The main feature of E-leadership and virtual leadership is the manner of interaction and relationship between leaders and followers. These leaders communicate via electronic mediums through the internet (Renu 2014), which may be asynchronous. Meyer (2010) found

evidence that virtual managers need a broader skill set than those managers working with co-located traditional teams. Virtual managers must have the ability to switch between skill sets, based on the diversity of their team members and the distance between them. The new virtual world of business requires managers who are flexible and embrace diversity.

According to Renu (2014), a virtual leader directs people from a distance to complete required work that accomplishes the mission and objectives of the organization. E-Leaders or virtual leaders are primarily found in E-business. E-business means doing business through electronic medium especially through internet. E-leadership is also called distance leadership or virtual leadership, and it is replacing traditional leadership because of advancements in technology.

Lee (2014) postulates that leadership and communications are inseparable elements and the ways in which we communicate have evolved. Today there are more global-virtual teams than ever before, and this trend continues to grow. Organizations must utilize virtual team members from across the globe to meet the challenges of a global economy. These teams must communicate virtually through videoconference, telephone, and email to save money and time when resources are limited. This management challenge requires skills for running global-virtual teams that are different than what is needed for teams located in a common place.

Meyer (2010) presents four ways in which leadership in a virtual environment differs from that in a traditional work setting. First, virtual team leaders must more extensively formalize roles and responsibilities of employees along with their own. Detail is important. Second, leaders of global teams must recognize that their styles of decision-making may be deeply rooted in the cultures of traditional teams, which could hinder virtual team performance. For example, global teams must develop very clear descriptions of how decisions will be made, and in more detail than with standard teams. Perhaps the best global team leader is one who is willing to try different decision-making processes at different times. Third, some aspects of trust are different in virtual teams than in most co-located teams, as trust is measured in terms of reliability. Leaders of virtual teams must create well-defined processes where team members must deliver specific results in a repeated sequence. Over repeated work cycles, trust is built. Fourth, a key to exceptional leadership is effective communication, including the message and how it is delivered. A written message often lacks important emphasis that spoken words convey. Adding a visual component enhances a simple auditory delivery. However, even leaders who sit attentively at a desk throughout a virtual meeting may lose a degree of persuasion because physical gestures commonly made in face-to-face meetings are not displayed as emphatically over a computer monitor.

These four key elements are core to driving and positioning virtual organizations to succeed in the ever-increasing presence of virtual work. A strong concern for the human element combined with inspiration and motivation, trust, clear and frequent communication, and career enhancing training is a leadership characteristic that supports the elements that define the successful virtual organization. These elements are employee productivity, employee retention, employee attendance, employee development, and employee promotions (Meyer 2010).

Critical Leadership Characteristics in the Virtual Workplace

Roy (2012) stated that leaders in today's virtual environment need to be strong in relationship building founded on trust, built to be sustainable, enhance team spirit, and motivated by achieving form and functionality. Leaders must also have well-developed technical skills along with superior leadership skills. Furthermore, they must be empathetic enough to handle the frustration faced by their staff members (Roy 2012). According to Walker (2010), leadership is the key single factor that drives and determines the success of the organization. Gladys (2014) categorized leadership characteristics and the elements for a successful virtual organization and Table 1 summarizes these findings.

Table 1

Leadership characteristics and elements of the successful virtual organization

Elements of the successful virtual organization

Leadership characteristic	Productivity	Retention	Attendance	Development	Promotions
Concern for the human element	Virtual employees are more productive when acknowledged, empowered, and treated as individuals (Nauman et al. 2009)	Virtual employees are more likely to remain with an organization when leadership respects and cares about their well-being (Fisher and Fisher 2001)	Considering the virtual worker as an individual positively influences attendance (Solomon 2000)	Development of virtual employees rests with leadership providing assignments that offer professional growth (Fisher and Fisher 2001)	Leadership that cares about virtual employees creates an environment that is receptive to upward mobility in the organization (Clemons and Kroth 2011)
Inspiration and motivation	Inspirational leadership is correlated with virtual employees' focus on achieving organizational goals (Joshi et al. 2009)	Leadership that is inspirational and motivational tends to result in commitment and loyalty from the employee (Bass 1999 , p. 11)	Emphasis on well-being in a virtual team influences the commitment demonstrated in areas such as attendance via technical connectivity (Hunton and Norman 2010)	It is important to motivate virtual employees by assisting them to rise to their potential performance (Clemons and Kroth 2011)	Inspiration and motivation of transformational leadership in virtual teams lays the ground work for upward mobility (Kanter 2001)
Trust	Leaders' trust is positively related to virtual team performance (Joshi et al. 2009)	It is incumbent upon leadership to foster relationships of trust to retain the virtual workers in the knowledge community (Morello and Burton 2006)	The trust associated with teleworking results in a flexibility that leads to less absenteeism (Gibson et al. 2002)	A virtual leader must lead and build relationships of trust where everyone develops through shared ideas and expertise (Malhotra et al. 2007)	An attitude of trust on the part of the virtual leader needs to be aligned to ensure the empowerment and potential of virtual employees (Peters et al. 2010)
Communication	Virtual employees require extensive feedback and information to enhance productivity (Fisher and Fisher 2001)	Communication feedback encourages virtual employees to feel a part of the organization and reinforces a connection to the organization (Leonard 2011)	Virtual teams led with appropriate communication and fewer interruptions see productivity increases correlated with decreased in absenteeism (Gibson et al. 2002)	Informal communication with employees aids in development and overall expertise, (Cooper and Kurland 2002)	Communication and inclusion in succession planning is critical so that employees see recognition for their work in the context of career advancement (Leonard 2011)
Training	A productive virtual organization requires a gap analysis of virtual employees is conducted for both IT and non-IT (Yu 2008)	Leaders who ensure appropriate training to virtual employees experience long term retention of employees (Otfinoski 2010)	Developing virtual employees via collaborative training is core to their engagement; this level of engagement influences attendance (Busch et al. 2011)	Leadership must ensure virtual workers have opportunity to grow and thrive through virtual training and online communities of practice (Nafukho et al. 2010)	Professional development and advancement of virtual employees is integral to change management and implementation of virtual organizations (Yu 2008)

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Management must operate in a world shaped by globalization and the information revolution (Grove 1995). Organizations downsize, right size, outsource, reorganize, and reengineer to optimize the workforce size to an everchanging business environment. These adjustments demand the creation of more virtual work environments (Drew 1994). It is necessary to move from managing a twentieth century work environment to one in today's virtual, digital, and global work environment. Successful virtual managers are becoming more important and necessary to manage virtual human resources. Table 2 presents a comparison of traditional teams and virtual teams.

Table 2

Comparison of traditional teams and virtual teams

Traditional teams	Virtual teams
Team members are in same location	All team members are in different locations
Team members use face to face communication	Team members use asynchronous communication
There is synchronous communication	Tasks are very structured and certain
Team members coordinate the task in a mutually reconciling manner	

Note: Kratzer et al. (2004, p. 2)

Perry (2008) stated that in 2008 nearly 80% of companies with more than 10,000 employees considered or employed digital forms of work collaboration. Society of Human Resource Management (2012) reported that 46% of human resource professionals from global organizations used some form of virtual teamwork. Considering the ongoing globalization and digitalization of work processes, collaborating in digital and virtual teams has become an important aspect of work in many organizations and in various occupations (Krumm et al. 2016).

Challenges of Leading Virtual of Organizations

Leadership is influencing others to successfully complete a collective undertaking (Yukl 2006) and tends to fall into either a directive or participative approach in most organizations (Avolio and Kahai 2003). Additionally, Bass (1997) discovered that true transformational leadership knows when to use behaviors from each dimension. Effective leadership is good for all organizational stakeholders, but ineffective leadership negatively impacts stakeholders making subordinates miserable, harming employee morale, lowering productivity, and irrevocably damaging the organization (Cascio 2000; Hogan and Kaiser 2005; Padilla et al. 2007). For better or worse, in virtual organizations technology accelerates leaders' positive or negative organizational impact locally as well as globally (Avolio and Kahai 2003).

The complexities of leadership in virtual organizations create challenges that interact with social influences and practices, making it difficult to successfully manage these types of organizations (Zofi 2011; Barczak et al. 2006). Language barriers can hinder clear and precise communication, along with inaccurate interpretation in high-context cultures (e.g., Asian, Arabian, Southern European) compared to low-context cultures (e.g., Swiss, German, American, Australian). Differences in perceptions of what cannot be seen during virtual communications (those without visual) dictate that team members are only able to perceive what is directly in front of them. Imagination must create the picture. In addition, the differences in organization status of a manager versus team members, namely, hierarchy within the team membership, can influence effectiveness of virtual interaction, though this condition also influences in-person situations. Cultural differences among different companies also comes into play, such as when working between global vendors or consultants. Though certainly obvious, consideration of time zone differences to avoid confusion is always a challenge with virtual communications, further creating complexities in leading virtual organizations. Additionally, research found that problems with communication are a recurrent thread among the challenges encountered in virtual program and project management endeavors (Hambley et al. 2007; Eisenberg and Krishnan 2018).

Additional demands placed on leaders and employees to constantly interact and collaborate when working virtually increasingly overloads them and strategically managing these new challenges is necessary (Cross et al. 2018). Some of these challenges relate to technology, equipment expense, support, and infrastructure needed for virtual communications along with Internet and connectivity issues. Leaders must also face the greater challenges of motivating virtual employees being, sensitive to potential employee disengagement. Virtual leaders must also balance the needs of the organization's service and quality expectations with employee expectations in order to align with the organization's vision and mission.

Engagement in the Workplace

One perspective on this topic is that employees with a willingness to be engaged are essentially (self) motivated (Daft 2015). An important aspect of this view is that engaged employees value their work and find meaning in what they do. Engaged employees are active on the job, freely interact with coworkers, are enthusiastic with a sense of belonging, and are committed to their work and the organization. Daft believes that the key to helping employees become engaged is leadership. Leaders who support and inspire workers provide the foundation for productive engagement. Leaders (managers) who are controlling and excessively directive rarely inspire employees to become engaged.

A slightly different view suggests that the employee experience will drive engagement, a desirable condition (ITA 2019). Central to this notion is a direct link between experience and employee satisfaction, which is bolstered by opportunities, tools, and programs. Basically, engagement in the workplace will not occur if employees are not satisfied. Plus, it is suggested that engaged employees with favorable work experiences are important to help create favorable customer experiences. What seems to foster a good work experience are all the collective interactions and support the employee has on the job from initially being hired to the present. Companies that consider how and what employees see and experience on the job, and create conditions favorable to the employee's perspective, are consistent with an engaged work environment. "When fully realized, employee experience encompasses an integrated approach to building an engaged, enjoyable and productive workplace environment" (p. 15).

Consistent communication, decision-making, and treatment of employees are essential for a company to establish favorable employee experiences (ITA 2019). It is also very important to understand and value diversity. A company that understands and responds to reasonable employee wants and needs will likely create an engaged environment. Taken collectively, the employee experience that is established in a traditional company may be more difficult to create in a virtual organization. Regardless, companies that create virtual organizations should strive to embrace and implement conditions and actions that reflect what appears to work well in ground-based companies.

Employee engagement in the workplace is important for all organizations and more so for a virtual organization where unique challenges exist. Establishing an organizational environment where engagement flourishes requires conditions such as involvement, support, and commitment. To achieve a fully engaged workforce, employees would first need to be involved, which would foster support, and then lead to commitment, if everything goes as planned. Engagement should be thought of as what employees do in an active way to help the organization succeed. Essentially, employee engagement is "a heightened emotional and intellectual connection that an employee has for his/her job, organization, manager, or coworkers that, in turn, influences him/her to apply discretionary effort to his/her work" (Gibbons 2006, p. 5).

People who are involved in an endeavor generally support it. For work, involvement could be straight forward, like sincerely asking for someone's opinion or suggestion on improving a process or making a better decision. It may also be more active, like assigning an employee to a project team. Involvement should foster support, but it doesn't guarantee support and only serves as an avenue to it. In organizations, especially work groups and teams, support is essential. If people don't support the mission, goals, or tasks, success will be illusive, and if initially achieved, success will likely be fleeting.

Support means that as an employee, I am willing to promote and advocate for initiatives or actions taken by colleagues or the organization. Employees who display support are typically passive when it comes to acting, though. Support is most often demonstrated verbally, and employee opposition is generally absent during initiatives or action. As involvement does not guarantee support, support does not guarantee commitment, the next step toward engagement.

Commitment is the final precursor to engagement. With commitment, employees develop an intellectual and emotional state that compels them to embrace a cause or initiate action. Commitment is a condition where employees are ready and begin to act for a cause, work toward a goal, or start to fully participate, and thus become engaged.

A review into (a) what comprises employee engagement, (b) why engagement is important to companies, and (c) identification of considerations for implementing it found applicable factors for both the organization and individual. Chandani et al. (2016) looked at 30 studies to identify areas related to employee engagement. From their review, 20 factors were identified, which if implemented favorably, would enhance engagement. They were (a) career development; (b) effective management of talent; (c) leadership; (d) clarity of company values, policies, and practices; (e) respectful treatment of employees; (f) company's standards of ethical behaviors; (g) empowerment; (h) fair treatment; (i) performance appraisal; (j) pay and benefit; (k) health and safety; (l) satisfaction; (m) family friendliness; (n) talent recognition; (o) communication; (p) nature of job; (q) organization politics; (r) emotional factors; (s) productivity; and (t) personality factors. Various points of interest that emerged from the factors, many obvious, will now be summarized. Companies with an engaged workforce were more likely to offer training and development opportunities to employees. These organizations typically emphasized talent development and the growth of workers. Career planning was often part of the development process, too. Effective management of employees (i.e., tailoring management styles to the workforce) and strong leadership, with respect to support, creating a vision, and nurturing individuals, were also important for engagement. Clear company values and a relevant fit of organization values with worker values led to higher

engagement. Not surprisingly, respectful and fair treatment of employees were other conditions associated with engaged workers. Company ethical standards, the application of ethical practices, and the absence of organization politics help to establish an environment that encourages engagement. In addition, empowered employees and those with autonomy generally show a higher level of engagement. Employees who work in organizations where performance is objectively reviewed, and timely feedback is provided with constructive direction, foster engagement. Related to this are pay and benefits, where fair compensation fosters engagement. Also, employees who believe their company earnestly creates safe and healthy work conditions are often more highly engaged. Organizations with frequent, clear, and informative communication, and open to employee feedback, are likely to have more engaged workers. As one might guess, satisfied employees and those whose talents are recognized are more likely to be engaged. Finally, a few specific individual characteristics are more common among engaged employees. Extroverted workers, as opposed to introverts, and those with an internal locus of control with high self-esteem tend to become more engaged. Those with a sincere interest in their job and work are more likely engaged, which would be expected.

From a theoretical perspective, Dagher et al. (2015) were interested in how an employee's personal belief in an ability to successfully perform on the job was related to engagement. To test this notion, the authors examined the degree to which self-efficacy influenced engagement on a sample of men and women working in the service industry. The concept of engagement used in their research relied on measures of vigor, dedication, and absorption. Vigor was depicted by the intense energy employees would put into work activity. Dedication encompassed the broad devotion and attention employees gave to completing work responsibilities. Finally, absorption referred to how extensively employees became immersed in their jobs and were actively involved in work. Results of their analyses indicated an employee's self-efficacy greatly influenced engagement, as defined by vigor, dedication, and absorption. For the virtual leader, the recommendation from this study would be to hire competent employees who possess abilities to complete work assignments or thoroughly train workers so that they can accomplish tasks. Both actions would enhance self-efficacy, which should bolster engagement.

Phillips and Gully (2014) bring some clarity to the concept by drawing a distinction between engaged and disengaged workers. According to their view, engaged workers want to perform well, be valued in their organization, and invest extra effort to succeed. Disengaged workers may be as well-qualified and competent as engaged workers, yet they view work as something that must be done, as opposed as something they want to complete. Engaged workers want to do their best. Disengaged workers do what is necessary, but not much more. Companies with engaged workers typically excel. To enhance engagement, it is suggested that employees:

1. 1.

Have clear goals and roles

2. 2.

Have the resources needed

3. 3.

Get meaningful feedback on their performance

4. 4.

Are able to use their talents

5. 5.

Are recognized for doing a good job

6. 6.

Have positive relationships with coworkers

7. 7.

Have opportunities to learn and grow

8. 8.

Have supportive leadership (p. 146)

A study in Denmark explored what four organizations did to foster engagement of “distance” workers and the results (Poulsen and Ipsen 2017). Interviews were conducted to determine what actions were taken by virtual leaders and how they were received by employees. Leaders made a concerted effort to maintain high levels of communication, so employees did not feel so isolated from company operations. They also worked on developing trust and giving authority to workers. The authors found that leader “activities included planning, newsletters, and surveys, and the capabilities were to listen, create and show trust, and give authority to the employees” (p. 47). Though employees felt the work was challenging in a virtual environment, their sense of belonging and well-being was enhanced by the actions of their leaders. It appears that employees who became engaged through assignments or increased responsibility felt higher interest in working toward organizational success.

Layng (2016) was interested in the role communication played in establishing a path to engagement by examining several studies of virtual teams and organizations. The review sought common themes for how communication was used, an important component to achieving success. Not surprising, trust was a critical factor that led to successful performance, being predicated in part on engagement. From a functional standpoint, communication was essential in fostering engagement, including frequency, method of delivery, specificity, and who received the communication (e.g., few or many), among other variables. Another interesting point that emerged was “ensuring engagement through accountability” (p. 205). This suggests that responsibility may help to solidify engagement. That is, employees receive relevant information and they then must act on it to complete tasks and meet expectations.

An insightful study by Ho and Astakhova (2018) further examined engagement through its connection to employee passion for working. The authors acknowledged that passionate workers were engaged workers and they wanted to learn the nuances between the two conditions. With respect to the detail, they relied on person-environment fit theory for their research. Specifically, Ho and Astakhova examined “the mediating roles of perceived demands-abilities (D-A) fit and person-organization (P-O) fit in the relationships between passion and job engagement, and between passion and organizational engagement, respectively” (p. 973). Results indicated that *trust* was the key contingency component to effective engagement and there were two facets to it. In one, extremely passionate workers who trust their organization demonstrate high *organization* engagement. For the other, workers who have trust for their immediate supervisor and co-workers show high levels of *job* engagement. The ramification for virtual leaders suggests that employees who are already highly passionate about work should be the primary candidates selected for virtual jobs. However, since passion for work is very difficult to instill and if it does arise, the passion, like love, often fades. The second area to address is developing trust, which typically comes about through favorable experiences. Practicing inclusive leadership will enhance employee well-being, a condition that helps to establish trust (Choi et al. 2017). Additionally, establishing a culture of servant leadership is a powerful way to foster trust and employee engagement (Kohntopp and McCann 2018).

Schulze and Krumm (2017) also focused attention on individual worker characteristics with respect to factors that would encourage engagement within a virtual organization. The authors stated, “In spite of the increasing demand for virtual cooperation, still relatively little is known about the knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) individuals need for virtual teamwork” (p. 66). They attempted to synthesize a wide range of research from many sources and conjectured that successful workers in virtual organizations would likely possess certain profiles as derived by KSAOs. To complicate matters, it was acknowledged that virtual teams and organizations varied greatly on (a) level of interaction (e.g., some degree of face-to-face interaction to none), (b) different facets of virtual operation (i.e., with respect to reliance on and implementation of technology, as well as the nature of operations), and (c) the ever-present interaction among KSAOs, level of interaction, and facets of operation. The complexity of the many possible perspectives would certainly make it difficult to grasp and cleanly define the role of effective engagement. Regardless, the authors identified factors that would help drive engagement and effective performance in a virtual context, including (a) personality characteristics like openness and trust and (b) experiences with technology, cultural diversity, and working in a dispersed environment (p. 73). The authors conclude that “the ‘virtual team player’ needs the knowledge and skills and be motivated to handle the challenges of technology use, cultural differences, and geographic dispersion” (p. 85).

It has been acknowledged that engaging employees and keeping them engaged is extremely difficult in traditional organizations (Imperatori 2017). This concern will surely apply to virtual organizations. Technological advances and enhanced methods of communication allow companies to operate on a virtual platform, which generally increases the challenge to engage employees. As technology continues down an increasingly sophisticated path of development, at some point could it eclipse the capacity of virtual leaders and workers to be engaged at optimal levels? A study by Weber and Kim (2015) in a multinational organization addressed this question. One area they examined was engagement between peers and how technology could hinder collaboration among virtual workers. In response to this concern, the authors state, “understanding interactions in virtual organizations requires a more nuanced approach to virtuality and active management of technology implementation. Moreover, the findings demonstrate that managers need to actively manage the deployment of new collaborative technology by focusing on specific characteristics of work groups” (p. 385). In this context, more of a good thing (e.g., new technology, advanced software) isn’t necessarily better for virtual workers or the organization.

To better establish and foster employee engagement, a strategic approach would be prudent (XpertHR 2019). It is recommended that organizations follow a four-step process to succeed. First, a company should promote its mission, vision, and values. Work roles, responsibilities, and relationships should also be clarified. Metrics for determining levels of engagement also should be established. Second, managers and supervisors need to learn about engagement and receive training on how to foster employee engagement. Sharing pertinent information and company expectations would also be necessary. Third, employees need support. Clear and relevant communication for employees is essential. Regular employee performance feedback is necessary. Support through training and applicable personal development are required along with appropriate rewards for success. Fourth, progress and achievement need to be measured. Survey feedback, performance reviews, and even exit interviews are ways to collect pertinent feedback. Data from these sources will help determine integration with the engagement path the organization desires. The strategic approach proposed here seems relevant to foster engaged employees. Since the concepts are crafted for a traditional face-to-face organization, extra attention and time would likely be needed for a virtual environment.

The importance of employee engagement to organization success appears to be established. With that in mind, most investigations and reviews of engagement research are based on traditional organizations (i.e., bricks and mortar). However, the factors important to engagement in ground-based companies should also apply to virtual organizations. Just like with all challenges for virtual organizations, though, it will take more dedication and attention for smooth performance, along with appropriate identification of employee willing and able to adapt to virtual life.

International Perspectives

Modern virtual organizations are possible because of technological advances. These same advances make global collaboration possible between countries and governments, as well as with businesses and commerce. It should come as no surprise then that the examination of virtual leadership has also been prominent on the international stage (e.g., Poulsen and Ipsen 2017).

Hammonds (2006) found that the “Starbucks effect” is the hallmark of the global economy. Essentially, this pertains to the continuous emergence of new competitors with superior business models designed to surpass the industry’s leader. As a result, it forces organizations to reconsider and question the viability of what they have always done and make appropriate improvements. Capitalizing on continuous change has been the basis, in part, of the national competitive advantage. Competition creates pressure on the global organization to do more with less, to do it faster, and cheaper, and that customers have choices. A global organization may utilize a competitive strategy of production costs by manufacturing in the lowest cost country and then exporting to the global market. It may choose to license foreign companies to act on its behalf or to franchise and to create alliances and partnerships in order to strengthen its participation in global markets.

Thuermer (2006) reported that global supply chain management yields significant benefits for organizations that move products in the global economy. Considering the overall supply chain, logistics is the cost center where savings and competitive advantages can be achieved. An organization can gain a competitive advantage in global markets by exploiting and spreading its value chain functions among nations in the most efficient and effective manner. An additional way an organization can gain this advantage is to transfer competitively valuable competencies from its domestic base to foreign markets. A global organization may able to deepen its strength and capabilities based on the fact it has more options than the domestic company does. Business activity of all types is moving in the direction of globalization (Acs and Preston 1997).

Organizations can find competitive advantage in the world market in many ways. The factors of competition in the global market will drive the organization to satisfy customer demand and differentiate itself from its competition. Global organizations have many opportunities and risks in today’s business environment. Consequently, to gain in the global economy companies must learn to exploit competitive advantages using virtual teams and virtual leadership.

Nigerian Construction Industry

Odubiyi and Oke (2016) examined virtual teams in the Nigerian construction industry from the perspective of virtual teams, using mixed-method research design. They determined that virtual teams are a type of team where members operate from different geographical regions and function primarily with and through the aid of information and communications technology media. Nigeria, as in other countries, primarily uses the traditional team type (face-to-face team) in construction works and that research about virtual teams is still in its nascent stages.

Odubiyi and Oke (2016) found that communication among team members leading to flexibility of operation and decision-making was a key strength of virtual teams. The authors also found weaknesses among virtual teams. They require (a) special training, (b) a need to develop skills to manage conflict among team members, and (c) ways to adapt to the needs of clients regarding the communication and structures of virtual teams. Improving efficiency, through reduction in time-to-market, collaboration ability of team members, and delivery time of projects were found to be common opportunities for virtual teams.

Research also revealed that two threats among virtual teams in this population were members' performance level and complexity of technical application. The study concluded that success of virtual teams depended on exploiting the opportunities that were opened to them. In addition, it was discovered that virtual teams support an enhanced organization structure, where reduced lines of authorities and hierarchies may exist and information sharing is rapid, versus the traditional team structure where informal discussions serve as a prominent channel for information sharing and exchange.

Trust, E-Leadership, and Organizational Commitment

Iriqat and Khalaf (2018) investigated the enhancing role of building trust and the impact it had on e-leadership and organizational commitment in virtual teams. The authors discovered that e-leadership is significantly related to building trust and organizational commitment of virtual teams situated in Islamic banks in Palestine. They also found that the three dimensions of e-leadership (engagement, execution, and elasticity) significantly predicted organizational commitment. Furthermore, the authors discovered that trust building enhanced the impact of e-leadership on organizational commitment in these same banks.

As a result of their research, Iriqat and Khalaf (2018) recommend to banking management that they focus on developing the electronic abilities and skills of directors through visioning, engagement, energizing, empowering, executing, and flexibility. As a result, increased organizational commitment and the trust of employees in banking sectors would be realized.

Virtual Leadership and Distance Education Teams in Turkey

According to Kuscü and Hasan (2016), companies and universities have opened to the world, and because of globalization, many have developed a world-wide presence, reputation, and global brand. Many companies and universities now provide distance learning programs with classes and in-service training in virtual platform via the Internet. These learning opportunities may be conducted in one country and delivered synchronously to customers or recorded specifically for worldwide asynchronous consumption later. Individuals work in different time zones and environments as members of virtual teams, and virtual leaders are challenged to effectively manage their virtual teams. The authors examined virtual leadership in distance learning teams. For the purpose of the study, the virtual leader was any member of the team for academicians, a manager for a technical support team, and a teacher for students.

The major findings of this research were about who the virtual leader was and what properties virtual leaders should hold. Communication skills were the most important ability for a virtual leader. Presently, virtual teams are indispensable in business and education. Regarding education, society has generally not moved beyond the conventional (traditional) concept, not realizing the value and relevance of virtual education. Many believe virtual leadership is simply management in another context, not understanding the nuances that exist between it and face-to-face leadership. However, it is necessary to consider a virtual leader differently from conventional leaders (Kuscü and Hasan 2016).

Kuscü and Hasan (2016) found that virtual environments were more challenging to leaders, since they are free-flowing, and it is more difficult to monitor environments in which organizational loyalty level varies. Thus, the most important duty of the virtual leader becomes motivating team members to achieve the mission of the organization. Virtual leaders must establish environments founded on confidence where job descriptions are clearly defined, and leaders know their team members well and can identify team member needs. The virtual leader's job can be more challenging than other leaders, but it also has its advantages. The leader may be able to access more people at a time and to offer a comfortable working environment. The virtual leadership characteristics of all three groups studies indicate that communication skills, ability to motivate, and a functional level of technological competence were important. Another identified leadership skill is creating confidence on and leading the team. The common factor for effectiveness discovered among these three groups (i.e., academicians, technical support teams, and students) was that they required different skills as compared to other leadership approaches in conventional environments.

Future of Virtual Workplace Engagement

The present and future of virtual leadership is connected to the rise and direction of the digital economy, as new technologies and applications will change the way business connects internally and externally with their stakeholders. Data are at the heart of the digital economy and its protection will be critical. The digital economy is of great interest domestically and internationally. Its development and future are at the heart of every country's economic competitiveness (US Department of Commerce 2017).

According to the US Department of Commerce (2017), the digital economy has become an integral part of the daily lives of most humans throughout the world. We use online tools and services to search for information, help with our children's homework, and order household goods from our favorite retailer, along with many other uses from gaming to dating. Organizations throughout the globe use telecommunication and information technologies to solve problems, develop products, or provide

services. Companies use these tools to find and connect with other businesses, connect internally between different business locations to share information, along with a myriad of other uses. These tools add value to the economy and collectively represent what is known as the digital economy.

New technologies are at the forefront of delivering the digital economy and need for virtual leadership. According to AT&T (2019), for new technologies to be widely deployed, mobile and hard-wired networks must deliver “complex and wide-ranging network management capabilities for quality, performance, bandwidth, latency, and coverage” (Para. 2). Wireless and video traffic has grown exponentially and 4G set the foundation for the gig economy; 5G will jumpstart the next wave of unforeseen innovation (AT&T 2019). According to Segan (2018), 5G provides three new dimensions: greater speed (move more data faster), lower latency (responsiveness is improved), and the connectivity to more devices at one time is possible (improves performance of sensors and smart devices). The G in 5G means that it is a generation of wireless technology. Most generations (from 1G to 5G) have technically been defined by the speed of their data transmission, they are also highlighted by breakthroughs in encoding methods that are known as air-interfaces making them incompatible with a previous generation of technology.

According to Picincu (2019), advances in cloud services and videoconferencing technologies make it more common for leaders and their organizations to be virtual and enable teams to telecommunicate as needed or 100% of the time. This enables organizations to schedule employees more flexibly, part-time, and freelance and to allow teams and employees to work when and where they are most effective. Organizations are enhancing their capabilities for networking internally and externally and for virtual companies to develop and grow their businesses. These companies are reporting increased employee productivity as a result of telecommuting and virtual opportunities. Virtual organizations can be as viable and professional as traditional on-site companies and may even have competitive advantages through creative collaboration, unique company culture, and improved and new processes.

According to Minton-Eversole (2012), almost half of organizations polled use virtual teams, per survey results released July 13, 2012, by the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM). Virtual teams are defined in the SHRM poll as groups of individuals working across time, space, and organizational boundaries, interacting mainly through electronic communication channels. This research also reported that organizations use virtual teams in order to include talent from different locations because their organizations are becoming more global in focus. In addition, managers identified the need to boost collaboration, reduce travel, and increase productivity throughout the organization as reasons for virtual teams. Improved behaviors have also resulted as brainstorming for solutions, setting goals for team initiatives building team relations is an obstacle that prevents them from being successful. Challenges identified were time differences, distribution of work, cultural norms, leading virtual teams for projects, and developing plans for team initiatives or with virtual team projects. This research also found that most organizations in the USA were likely to use virtual teams if they were multinational.

Tartell (2019) found that tools and technology currently available to leaders are WebEx, Lync, join.me, Facebook, Twitter, Yammer, instant messaging, Skype, and Facebook to name just a few. Virtual leaders must select the right tools to create the best possible connections and information with richness and scope as key factors. *Richness* is expressed as range and information of the medium and scope pertain to the *reach* of the technology. Leaders are successful when they are proficient in the use of technology; low technical proficiency leads to less than optimal results. Leaders of virtual teams now and in the future must know the audience, know the technology, and be prepared for technological challenges and failures with backup plans. Leaders must also understand that the richness of virtual, synchronous face-to-face communication is different in a virtual environment, and they must provide teams and individuals with more task-relevant information and increased communication frequency and regularity, along with developing stronger personal relationships that support virtual performance.

Organizations like GE are becoming global networks as a result of technology and virtual networking. According to John Rice, vice chairman of GE and CEO of the GE Global Growth Organization, GE’s whole is greater than a sum of its parts, and their dynamic networking results in an exchange of ideas and solutions across GE, making the performance difference (Rice 2017). Nearly 70% of its business is outside the USA, so the networking exchange must reach across the entire organization of 300,000 employees operating in over 180 countries. Rice (2017) states that they do not have the perfect answer, but they continue to invest in the digital tools, training, and platforms for exchange for internal markets to work together be part of ideas, inventions, and practices at GE. However, when things don’t go well, he described them as a *Game of Thrones* with silos and fiefdoms. He notes that nothing changes without building the right culture, a new team culture for new ways of working. He states that the key insight from this initiative is that most people in the marketplace are external to the organization, but they are building value through internal exchanges finding the right combination of leadership and culture for their organization.

According to Lepsinger (2017), virtual organizations and their leadership are challenged by physical distance separation, and it can also be difficult to build trust, develop accountability, and unite teams. Miscommunication and misunderstanding can be greater in virtual organizations, and many virtual teams are not as functional as needed. However, some organizations are getting it right. SAP, IBM, and GE are multinationals and examples of companies successfully meeting the virtual leadership and performance challenges. They are using technology tools to collaborate and support performance. They are training employees to use interactive tools and developing virtual leaders and teams to achieve their purposes. These high-performance organizations are overcoming virtual challenges and learning to adapt to issues as they occur. Multination-organizations, virtual organizations, and teams must embrace and learn from the successes and failure of those getting it right.

Conclusions

This chapter introduced the concept of a virtual organization and the role, responsibilities, and practices for leaders in these organizations. Most corporations operate globally. Small- to medium-sized companies residing in a single country still rely on international suppliers and markets. As technology improves, develops, and advances, globalization will become more pronounced for all companies. Considering this technological trend, the virtual structure will likely become more prevalent.

Employees assigned to positions in a virtual environment will face a type of workplace isolation compared to workers in a traditional office setting or facility with physical structures as the center of operation. The virtual worker will have no recognized breakroom, cafeteria, or opportunity to visit a co-worker in the adjoining cubicle. The traditional social aspect of a workplace evaporates in the virtual organization. Good natured conversations about the FIFA World Cup tournament or the NFL Super Bowl will be absent.

Virtual organizations are generally comprised of teams or individuals that operate in separate locals with some degree of autonomy. A key component that enables productivity is technological connectivity, often asynchronously (Burma 2014). Virtual organizations can certainly enhance a company's success. However, challenges with effective leadership may arise, and employees can become disenfranchised when traditional levels of engagement erode.

The lower employee engagement in a virtual organization with virtual leaders raises a concern for employee well-being. It is critical that employees working in virtual organizations experience meaningful levels of engagement to the degree that their counterparts receive in traditional organizations with physical offices and structures. Employee well-being cannot be sacrificed in the virtual context. What effect do decreased opportunities for engagement have on employees? How can engagement be maintained? These questions were examined in this chapter and should be addressed in the workplace.

This chapter considered models of leadership and how practical and effective they can be in a virtual platform. From a performance standpoint, employee engagement was explored, specifically considering how it functions under the "virtual" condition. Virtual organizations are highly suited to globalizations, and an international perspective was also addressed. Finally, suggestions and recommendations were offered to help virtual companies energize employee engagement.

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