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Virtual Teams and Their Leaders: A Paradigm on Achieving Learning Agility

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Academic Leadership Journal

Introduction

Two Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) are having a bite of lunch. One of the CEOs complains to the other, “You know, my company is just not making it. We can’t seem to ‘keep up with the Jones.’ Everywhere I look our competitors are making gains on our territories while we lose ground. They’re expanding while we are not. They’re earning an ‘A team’ reputation, while we’re stuck with a ‘C’. I just don’t know how to turn things around.”

“Well,” his friend answers, “Have you explored changing your leadership style a bit to better support your teams? How about agility? That’s what your company needs to get going again. You need to be able to switch gears, think outside of the box, and move quickly in order to make it in this market,” he explains.

“Yeah, well,” the CEO responds wistfully. “How in the world do you go about that?” the CEO responds with surprise.

“Ok,” his friend responds, “Here’s a radical idea. I’ve heard that leaders of virtual teams seem to be having a lot of success with making their organizations learning agile. Maybe looking at the way they do things may lead your team in a direction that can benefit your company.”

“Learning agility of virtual team leaders? Alright, tell me what you know,” he says.

“Walk with me,” his companion says with a smile. “Let’s examine the possibilities.”

Background

Clark and Gottfredson (2008) assert that in order for companies to succeed in today’s economy, developing learning agile skills amongst team members is essential. Being learning agile, defined as a company’s ability to respond quickly and efficiently to changes and challenges, is accomplished by leaders and employees applying their knowledge and skills in creative, and sometimes, non-traditional ways (p. 2). Clark and Gottfredson’s (2008) model of agility, for example, places an organization in a stage of learning agility based on three tiers that loosely correspond to the evolution of organizations: 1.0, 2.0, or 3.0. The placement of an organization at a particular stage defines a company’s learning mindset, leadership behavior, learning technology, and organizational support within an environmental context (p. 5). Skill in these areas can be interpreted as a company’s agility proficiency.

Townsend, De Marie, and Hendrickson (1998) predicted that virtual teams would represent ‘workplaces of the future’ (p. 17) that are able to reach “unprecedented new levels of collaboration, flexibility, and productivity” (p. 17), propelling these organizations to the top of the list of companies that are left standing to compete for the world’s dollars. In the year 2010, Townsend, et al.’s prediction stands correct in the face of the millions of workers reported as ‘remote,’ ‘virtual,’ or otherwise geographically separated from their employer’s physical location. IDC, a firm that researches

information technology companies and their markets, predicts, “the number of worldwide mobile workers will reach 1 billion – including nearly 75% of the U.S. workforce – by the end of 2011” (“IDC worldwide mobile,” 2010, para. 1).

Ganguli and Mostashari (2009) define a virtual team as a “group of geographically, organizationally and time dispersed workers brought together by information technologies to accomplish one or more objectives of the organization” (p. 3). Virtual teams are often created to complete a particular task and are often disbanded or reconfigured after the completion of a project (p. 4). An organization who works through virtual teams is not limited to hiring employees in their geographic area, but is able to bring talent together from all over the world. Not only are these team members some of the more talented in their field, but they also tend to exhibit emerging leadership skills. They are also able to incorporate new technologies into their repertoire quickly and effectively, are strong communicators, and are innovative problem solvers.

Weber (2002) refers to virtual teams as agile (p. 577). “Virtual organizations promote adaptability, flexibility, and the ability to react quickly to changes in the market” (p. 578).

These beneficial traits allow virtual teams to create products in a timely, cost effective, and rapid fashion (Lee-Kelley & Sankey, 2008, p. 51). It would seem to follow that replicating the skills that virtual teams employ in order to become more dynamic as an organization might be an attractive notion to consider. Senge (2003) states, “Many businesses are recognizing that traditional, top-down control becomes less viable as interdependence grows” (p. 10).

This paper contends that successful virtual teams are representative of higher levels of learning agility. Their characteristics speak as a model for those searching to develop agile learning practices. Observing some of the key adjustments leaders of remote teams have made to their current leadership style in order to achieve this success can provide insight to organizations struggling to reach new levels of agility. An examination of these leadership modifications will make the proposed connection between learning agility and virtual teams. Virtual team leadership and a commitment to learning, emerging leadership behaviors, the use of technology, and collaboration and support will be explored through the literature and interviews and members of a virtual team.

Question

Can modifying leadership styles act as a catalyst for moving a corporation towards a more flexible, adaptable future? Is being flexible and adaptable even a feasible task? Weber (2002) believes that organizations must evaluate whether the pros outweigh the cons of becoming agile versus not (p. 589). As organizations look around at their competition, and as in the introduction, realize that they have somehow fallen behind; many will want to know how to begin again. Joroff, Porter, Feinberg, and Kukla (2003) explain that while not all organizations are able to “institute agility across the board,” (p. 298) all organizations should start somewhere. That ‘somewhere’ could rightly be leadership.

Virtual Teams’ Continuous Learning Cycle

Because there is no such thing as the ability to be proficient in every type of skill required of today’s workers, “today’s world requires lifelong learning” (Lojeski, 2010, p. ix). Virtual teams and their leaders are in a continuous cycle of learning. From developing fresh perspectives on work models, to

thinking through new ideas, to incorporating a new piece of technology into the workflow, all accomplished from different locations around the globe, virtual teams use learning agility practices to get jobs done. This feat requires that not only the team members exhibit a mindset and openness to continual learning, but that team leaders also live under this expectation.

This is where the leap towards establishing new levels of agility within an organization begins: with an openness, willingness, and acknowledgement that change and learning are inevitable and are, in fact, desired. The recognition and commitment to ongoing learning brings out of the box thinking, new ideas, and fresh perspectives to passé models of leadership. It allows agility to reign, brings products to the marketplace, and wins awards of excellence from governing bodies. But none of it happens without the express commitment by a leader to meet a team's learning needs.

How does a leader go about fostering ongoing learning in a team? Clark and Gottfredson (2008) suggest that continuous learning does not happen in an isolated event, but actually occurs in a cyclical fashion. Termed the 'Five Moments of Need,' Clark and Gottfredson (2008) describe periods in the life of an employee when learning needs are at their height. Through these five learning events, leaders can begin to shape an ongoing learning plan that will develop a sense of affinity with change in employees:

1. Learning how to do something for the first time.
2. Learning more based on prior learning experience.
3. Learning at the point of application, independent of any prior learning, when previous learning has been forgotten, and/or when adapting performance to unique situations.
4. Learning when things change in order to adapt to new ways of doing things.
5. Learning when things go wrong in order to solve a problem (p. 23).

As Clark and Gottfredson (2008) point out, most organizations are apt to cover training for the new employee (as described in number one of the five moments of need) and perhaps an additional training to bump an employee to the next level (as described in number two of the five moments of need.) But it is the virtual teams and team leaders who have discovered the benefits of the continuous learning that comes from incorporating the last three moments of need. A survey conducted through this white paper with a corporation that heavily relies on remote workers found that:

1. 80% felt that all five moments of need were currently being addressed by their team's leadership.
2. 70% felt that they had input in the way these training events were addressed within their teams.
3. 80% stated that they felt their work was consistently supported and their work was better as a result of the focus on training.
4. 90% felt that continuously being trained and updated at the moments of need, as described by Clark and Gottfredson, (2008) increased their overall satisfaction with their jobs.

This survey concurs with Clark and Gottfredson (2008) findings that 82% percent of employees

reported that “the organization’s increased commitment to ongoing learning would increase their personal job satisfaction” (p. 25).

Virtual Teams Lead Together

Some believe, as does Zigurs, (2003) that “virtual teams provide a unique opportunity for redefining the concept of leadership” (p. 347). No longer do traditional models of leadership meet the needs of project teams that hold offices globally. Leaders of globally dispersed employees must be able to exhibit a variety of leadership styles, often all at once, while depending on two new leadership skills: those of co-activating leaders and those of a learning leader. (Lojeski, 2010, p. 61).

Co-activating Leaders

One of the challenges for virtual team leaders is to maximize the range of talents and skills that virtual staff brings to the team. This often means foregoing traditional leadership roles for ones that are better suited for a learning agile organization. In a learning agile organization, leaders recognize the wide range of abilities of their staff and move themselves out of the hub of the decision leading process by co-activating the team to be leaders themselves (Lojeski, 2010, p. 62). Leadership is encouraged for all team members by allowing them to handle much of the project’s decision making details. As Lojeski (2010) puts it, “today’s leaders co-opt others to make things happen – putting themselves aside at times (servant leadership), asserting their authority at other times (transactional leadership), but recruiting others to lead at all times” (p. 62).

Leaders of virtual teams do not delegate tasks or attempt to manage project issues, but allow team members to devise solutions on their own. This leader understands that employees are capable of innovative resolutions to situations without much leader hand-holding. The ability to activate leaders from within the team leads to “greater trust, higher levels of satisfaction, and better citizenry behavior” (Lojeski, 2010, p. 74). This, in turn, results in higher levels of trust between team members and an increase in their commitment to a project (Yoo, 2004, p. 30).

The confirmation that higher levels of job satisfaction results from a greater level of responsibility and leadership to the project was confirmed by the group of virtual workers that were surveyed for this paper. The survey revealed that the team members, who were allocated additional responsibilities that allowed them to lead in a particular area, did report higher levels of satisfaction with their work. To further support this finding, Ebrahim, Ahmed and Taha (2009) found a “positive correlation between empowerment and virtual team performance” (p. 2663). This perhaps adds to the reasoning for the virtual leader to enable the team to reach levels of self-actualization in regards to leadership roles.

Learning Leadership

One reason why committing to a co-activating leadership practice is so important is because one person (i.e., one leader) can’t do it all alone. A leader needs teams of experts; well-rounded people, that can assist in keeping up with that quickly evolving market that requires organizations to become more agile in the first place. Clark and Gottfredson (2008) state, “Competence is now a matter of individual learning agility” (p. 18). They contend that this is an adjustment from the ‘leader-as-expert’ thinking of the past. They state that leaders need to become comfortable with acknowledging their inability to be omnipotent, but should highlight their ability to learn. (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 18).

In other words, it's ok in a learning agile organization for a leader to say the words, "I don't know." Not only is that ok, but it is preferred over a leader who tries to stealth the fact that they don't know how to proceed.

In one organization that relies heavily on virtual teams, one team member reported enjoying being a 'go to person' for training on technology. "It's what I'm good at – showing other people how to use new technologies. I've really enjoyed being given the role as team trainer. It means a lot to me."

Another team member, who actually works part time in the office and part time at home, enjoys the responsibility of ensuring that all of her remote team receives the same message that is communicated in meetings. "Sometimes if you're on the phone for a meeting while the rest of us are physically gathered around a table in a room, it's hard to hear what's going on. It's also sometimes hard to interpret what people are saying because on the phone you lack the ability to see people's faces and gestures. After our meetings, I usually get on the phone with my remote team members and make sure that they understood what was going on in the meeting. I also pass on office information that sometimes doesn't make it out via email. My team seems to appreciate my efforts."

These two individuals are able to actively use their strengths to support and lead the team.

Co-activating team members, allowing them to lead the group in their area of expertise in turn allows the leader to "reside not in the executive suite, but in the collective intelligence of employees at all levels, who need to use one another, often across boundaries, and learn their way to those solutions" (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 124). In an organization enhanced by learning agility, the leader is not the all knowing, powerful person that imparts the knowledge, barks out the orders, and expects all to follow. In this new world of leadership, this leader builds credibility on the wisdom to know when to let the team run the show and the ability to learn from team knowledge.

Virtual Teams and Technology

DeMeuse, Dai, Hallenbeck, and Tang (2008) state, "Successful executives have strong and active learning patterns from key job assignments. They learn faster, not because they are more intelligent, but because they have more effective learning skills and strategies" (p. 4). This willingness and ability to learn applies to technology, on which virtual teams and their processes are often built.

Which Technology to Use?

In an agile environment, leaders understand how to use technology in a more "socially adapted way to impart vision and inspire others" (p. 77). Lojeski (2010) refers to this skill as "technodexterity" because it involves an understanding of and competence in using the right technology to successfully convey the right message" (pp. 77-78). Utilizing technology to deliver good news about a recent acquisition may best be announced during a live videoconferencing session, rather than through the temporary instant message, for instance. News regarding an employee leaving the firm may best be communicated via an email versus collaborative online software. With all the software that virtual teams utilize, it is important for learning leaders to figure out the function, capabilities, and effects of using one form of technology over another. Remarkably, Arnison and Miller (2002) report that, "many other organisations that do not have geographically dispersed staff are utilizing these same technologies to enhance the communication and knowledge management of the conventional face-to-face team to make it more

efficient and effective,” (p. 168).

Cultivating Community through Technology

“Leaders need to weave together bits of information about themselves, others, and organizational goals to form fiery stories in text and pictures for audiences that can vary by as many as four generations, are culturally diverse, and are strewn throughout landmasses sprinkled around the globe” (p. 43). Leaders need to understand how to blend technologies into team culture in such a way that they are able to create community, collaborative work practices, and organizational supports. Townsend, DeMarie, and Hendrickson (1998) share, “Effective collaboration requires team members to work both interactively and independently; collaborative software is designed to augment both types of group work activity and to empower teamwork processes” (p. 21).

Developing community amongst virtual teams means that technology expands its usefulness into a relationship-establisher. Leaders may choose to use a collaborative technology for the sharing of personal successes, highlighting the outside lives of employees. Lojeski (2010) provides another suggestion of using blogs to “create connections with individuals of like interests” (p. 90). Of the virtual employees surveyed for this paper, 100% agreed that they participate in and enjoy the Confluence page (collaborative software used to share information among people) set aside for employees to share what is going on in their lives. The page enjoys regular use and continues to be filled with posts by the majority of the team members. “It allows us to get to know each other better,” one team member commented. “And it makes our virtual meetings so much more pleasant. Honestly, I take more time with my work and am more careful with what I submit when I realize that someone that I know and care about it on the other end receiving it.”

While some leaders may fear an encroachment on the workplace of birthday celebrations and congratulatory baby wishes, it should be noted that in virtual teams, technology is used as a bond to relationship building. Rather than viewing the cultivation of community through the use of technology with concern, leaders should view it as an enhancement to relationship building which is especially important for members of remote teams. Lojeski (2010) states, “cultivating community leads to other big pay-offs like virtual distance which in turn leads to increased innovation, higher job satisfaction, and better leader effectiveness”(p. 58). If this approach works for virtual teams, should it not work in a more traditional setting, as well?

Lojeski (2010) reports, “Organizations that succeed in the future will differentiate themselves effectively on how well they use technology to navigate change, respond to challenges, and leverage new opportunities” (p. ix). Learning agile aware leaders know how to meet the challenge of using technology not only to build community, but to get work done. After all, work is the name of the game.

Organizational Support

“Technology enables us to work anytime and from anywhere” (Lojeski, 2010, p. 77). A comment by a virtual employee confirms this fact in a positive way. “When work ends on the east coast, it continues on in the west. Work is handed off to the west team to be completed as the east sleeps. When the east wakes, they pick up the task and before we know it, the work is done.” Effectively planning processes that allow employees to strategically apply technology is part of a leader’s role in the virtual world. Guidance in this effort leads to the development of a strong organizational framework on which

to support team members.

Twenty-four Hour Service

With the disappearance of the traditional working nine-to-five, start and stop times leaders realize that learning and work processes have become intertwined. “It is becoming increasingly difficult to separate learning from production because of the interwoven nature of acquiring knowledge and creating value” (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 21). This can be disconcerting for a virtual leader. Leaders must realize that all their efforts in co-activating leaders, allowing others to participate in decision making, relying on others to keep the team updated on technology, promoting a community amongst members, and depending on people to meet deadlines on their own, can become a balancing act, leaving the leader waiting on others to act while continuing to be a supportive voice for the team. This creation of a possible twenty-four hour workday leaves the leader feeling a little out of control of what used to be under the thumb. This adjustment to immersive learning in the work environment is crucial to the organizational support of the team unit, however, as it is the actual ‘walking the talk,’ that the leader has been promising through all of these virtual leadership style shifts. Eventually, this process becomes comfortable for both leader and team as, “work flow process technologies will eventually integrate with learning and talent management systems to facilitate a more seamless integration of workflow and learning” (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 21).

Adaptive Change

In addition, leaders of virtual teams realize, as Townsend et al., (2003) state, “the virtual team’s role transcends traditional fixed functional roles, requiring virtual team members to be prepared to adapt to a changing variety of assignments and tasks during the life of any particular team” (p. 22). While this also can seem unsettling, it is yet another strength of virtual team members that emphasizes their flexibility and ability to turn on a dime. Leaders of such people must do the same in order to stand as the backbone of their support. “People who become aware of new work-related products and practices reframe their notions of their own work and the place in which they do it” (Joroff, Porter, Feinberg, & Kukla, 2003, p. 299). This, too, becomes more settled with time and practice and as both team members and leaders discover how to quickly immerse themselves in new projects and assignments with the assistance of the co-activating leaders, technology, and support that now exist within the organization. The speed at which decisions must be made and work must be produced in a competitive world market takes more than employees who just show up to a job to do the ‘nine to five’ thing. Gargiulo (2009) claims, “Engaged employees are committed employees” (p. 7). Employees who are allowed a more flexible work environment “feel personal commitments to their performance goals and see and understand the link between these goals and the organization’s bottom line imperatives” (p. 7). Leaders understand this basic tenet of virtual employees.

Conclusion

The way in which a leader leads a virtual team is analogous to an agile organization. By examining the fundamental strengths of virtual teams and how today’s leaders can foster those traits within their organizations, this paper has provided insights which broaden the understanding of the importance and practicality of distance teams.

Becoming a learning agile organization begins with developing and fostering an ongoing learning

mindset (Clark & Gottfredson, 2008, p. 16). This commitment to learning produces leaders that learn and encourage learning in their staff. From this point of view, leaders realize that they can't "do it" or "know it all." This makes it possible to empower team members to lead in their own areas of expertise. Next, leaders concede their lack of understanding of the myriad of technologies utilized by their teams to others more capable in that capacity, while they focus on how to best utilize the technologies to create collaborative communities. This in turn, builds connections while supporting the work at hand, resulting in an overall, more agile organization. In order to reach desired levels of agility, leaders of more traditional organizations may want to consider observing leaders of virtual teams and the ways in which their thinking has evolved.

Zigurs (2003) summarizes some goals for a leader looking to change a level of agility within their organization using tools of virtual leadership:

1. Provide training on participation in virtual teams, rather than assuming the best practices from traditional teams will transfer seamlessly to virtual environments
2. Make certain that both task and relational roles are provided for, either through team members or through software
3. Establish standards for communicating contextual cues with each message to reduce misinterpretations
4. Structure the process through appropriate process structuring tools, but remember to build in flexibility so that users can adapt tools to their own needs
5. Nurture emergent leadership and self-leadership that moves the team forward by frequent contact and feedback
6. Put special and continuous emphasis on relational development (p. 348).

Gargiulo (2009) explains, "Today's employees want flexibility" (p. 7). Future generations of workers will expect greater flexibility in work environments and in the use of technology. Virtual teams and new leadership practices provide future generations of workers with a more modern and agile approach to work. The ability to work on a team, near or far, where leaders want employees to lead and make decisions while they focus on the direction of the organization is no longer a revolutionary idea, but one that exists around the globe. The world awaits leaders to lead by a new paradigm for achieving learning agility.

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