E-Leadership: Leading in a Virtual Environment

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Abstract: The rapid technological changes have facilitated working in a virtual environment which has become a common workplace around the world. Accessing the intellectual power of a global workforce through virtual teams has its own advantages. But the absence of face-to-face settings poses various challenges which have to be considered while working in such environment. There arises the need for an e-leader with the requisite e-leadership competencies. The purpose of this paper is to study the unique features of e-leadership, qualities necessary for effective e-leadership, the challenges involved and to recommend solutions.

Keywords: Virtual environment, virtual teams, e-leadership, competencies, challenges.

I. INTRODUCTION

The recent developments in information and communication technologies such as mobile computing and applications, cloud computing, virtual reality, online collaboration softwares have transformed the way of interactions between people. Nowadays most human interactions are mediated through information technology. These changes have led to the development of a new work environment called virtual environment or e-environment and a new form of organisation known as virtual organisations or e-organisations. E-organisations require e-leadership which is a new concept in the field of leadership. Effective leadership is necessary for the success of all kinds of organisations. In the virtual context effective leadership means realizing the potential of the various mediums and tools of information and communication technology and embracing them to avail the benefits and opportunities they provide to take the organisations to new heights of success.

The use of technology mediated communications such as e-mails, teleconferencing, videoconferencing and various internet based forums in organisations have led in the emergence of virtual teams that are guided by e-leaders. Virtual teams consist of people who are geographically dispersed and communicate with each other in an electronic environment. Leading effectively in a virtual environment is not an easy task. (Kostner, 1994; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; Solomon, 1998; Duarte & Snyder, 1999). E-leaders require additional communicational skills than traditional leadership roles. (Zemliansky & St.Amant, 2008). Qualities essential for e-leaders as identified by Duarte & Snyder (1999) are: "coaching and managing performance without traditional forms of feedback, choosing and appropriately using electronic communication and collaboration technologies, leading in a cross cultural environment, developing team members, building and maintaining trust, networking across hierarchical and organisational boundaries and developing team processes."

At the present time when the world is facing COVID-19 pandemic and lockdowns, there is no other option for interaction but the virtual means of communicationand so the importance of virtual teams has increased. Working in a virtual environment offers a number of advantages to organizations such as time and cost efficiency, global talent pool, round the clock availability and many more. But it is not free from challenges. In March 2018, RW3 Culture Wizard (an intercultural training consultancy) conducted a global virtual team survey- '2018 Trends in High Performing Global Virtual Teams" which consisted of 1620 respondents from 90 countries. Only 24% of the respondents rated their virtual team leader as effective. The "human factor" i.e. lack of interpersonal communication due to absence of face-to-face interaction was identified as the biggest challenge. Cultural barriers, absence of visual cues when people cannot view each other, language barriers and time zone differences further complicate the problem.

II.   OBJECTIVES

The main objectives of the study are:

- To study the features of e-leadership that make it different from traditional leadership.
- To study the challenges faced by e-leaders.
- To recommend solutions.

III.   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

3.1 E-Leadership

Avolio et al. (2000) defined e-leadership as "a social influence process mediated by advanced information technology to produce a change in attitudes, feelings, thinking, behaviour, and/or performance with individuals, groups, and/or organizations." It can take place at any level of the hierarchical system of an organisation and includes both one-to-one and one-to-many interactions within organisations. E-leadership has two main constituents- communication and technology. E-leadership involves leading in a virtual environment. E-leaders guide and communicate with their virtual teams through technology mediated communications.

3.2 Difference between e-leadership and traditional form of leadership

Tannenbaum et al. (1961) defined leadership as "interpersonal influence, exercised in a situation and directed through the communication process, towards the attainment of a specified goal or goals." Leadership is all about influencing followers. Without influence there is no leadership. (Northouse, 2013). The purpose of e-leadership is also the same as that of traditional leadership i.e. influencing others towards the attainment of a common goal. But what is different is the environment and the medium through which this influencing process is done. In e-leadership, the face-to-face communication is replaced by interaction through electronic mediums of communication. Not only the interaction between the e-leader and the followers takes place via information technology but the acquisition and distribution of information needed for assisting organizational tasks also occurs through information technology. The main difference between leadership and e-leadership is feeling the leader's presence, reachability, speed, permanence and perception of a leader's communication. The purpose of e-leadership too is to foster the relationships among the organisational members. (Bansal, 2008). It is the physical space and the mode of communication which makes e-leadership different from traditional leadership. The emphasis is still on people (Avolio & Kahai, 2003), but the specificities of working in a virtual environment have to be considered by the e-leaders in order to be effective.

3.3 Characteristics of virtual teams

- Absence of face-to-face settings.
- Interaction through technology mediated communications.
- Virtual distance (space, time, organisational, geographical) between team members.
- Engagement in interdependent tasks.
- Team diversity (participation of people having different cultural backgrounds).
- Saves time and money as no need of travelling, more flexibility, better work-life balance for the participants.
- Collaboration and Coordination is of utmost importance.

3.4 Roles and Competencies required for e-leaders

As e-leadership is nothing but leading in a virtual environment so the traditional leadership roles like influencer, coordinator, visioner, director are equally applicable. But to be effective in the virtual environment some competencies are of special importance. Zemliansky & St.Amant (2008) identified the following competencies for e-leaders-

- **Communication Competencies**- E-leaders should possess not only the basic communication skills such as listening, empathy, open mindedness, clarity but they should also be well aquainted with the skills required in communicating with information technologies. Technical skills and soft skills both are essential for e-leaders.
- **Coaching and Managing Performance**- E-leaders must communicate enough information with the virtual team members and should encourage information exchange so that both the parties can become aware of the expectations regarding each other. Everything regarding the task, the expectations, the conditions, the rules and the procedures to be followed should be clearly defined by the e-leader so that there is no confusion among the participants regarding the work to be done.
- **Selecting and Using communication technology**- Selecting the technology which is latest and equipped with abundant features

will not be appropriate in every situation. While deciding which form of communication technology will be suitable for the virtual team, the e-leader should consider the following factors-

1. the task at hand
2. leader and members accessibility
3. time limitations
4. cultural inclinations to a particular technology mediated communication.

- **Leading in a cross-cultural environment**- The e-leader should be capable to understand the cultural dissimilarities among the virtual team members. Different cultures require different leadership styles- assertive, aggressive or directive. He should develop that style which suits the cultural blend, the virtual team is built up of.

- **Developing virtual team members**- The e-leader should find and implement ways to develop the feeling of virtual team identity among the members. For.eg. giving a symbolic name to the team, creation of a website with photographs and personal information about each member. He should be capable of uniting the virtual team members across time, space and geographical boundaries.

- **Building and Maintaining trust**- The e-leader should be capable of building and maintaining trust in the absence of face-face settings. He should carefully plan his communication efforts because every word, task, action and initiative can build or break trust.

IV.   CHALLENGES

- **Creating trust in a virtual environment-** Rotter (1967) has defined interpersonal trust as "expectancy by an individual or a group that the word verbal or written statement or promise of another individual or group can be relied upon." Building trust is one of the skills required in leadership. In leader-follower relationships, both the parties work towards achieving a common goal and so trust between them is based on interdependence and reciprocal influence. Trust is a bond and 'emotional glue' in between the leader and his followers. It depends upon the form and quality of interactions between the trusting parties. (Savolainen, 2014). The better the parties know each other, the better is the trusting relationships. Creation of trust in virtual settings becomes quite challenging for e-leaders. As the factors that contribute to interpersonal relationship development like face-to-face contact, physical proximity, non verbal cues and facial expressions are eliminated in virtual context; that is why most of the studies consider virtual environment as barrier to trust building. (Brennan & Johnson, 2008). There are lesser opportunities to socialise with each other so it takes longer time to create trusting relationships between the virtual team members.

- **Leading a culturally diversified team-** Virtual teams consist of people who are geographically dispersed and belong to different cultures. According to Hofstede (1984, 2001) and Trompenaars (1993) "differences in values and attitudes influence the way people interact and make use of their environment." Shachaf (2008) found that cultural differences influence the selection of medium of communication. So, the e-leaders have to deal not only with the language barriers, impact of different communication styles in different cultures but they also have to deal with the differences in reactions among the virtual team members with regard to the use of a particular technology mediated communication. For instance, providing feedback through e-mails may be preferable or may not be preferable in a culture. These differences when not handled properly can easily create misunderstandings and misinterpretations which can hamper the working of virtual teams.

- **Problems in scheduling meetings due to different time zones-** The participants of virtual meetings may belong to different countries and cities located in different time zones; this creates a lot of challenges for e-leaders. It can lead to downtime, delays and work planning problems.

- **Uncertainty-** Due to lack of face-to-face interaction, uncertainties can arise among the virtual team members.Absence of nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, eye contact, voice inflection and physical gestures in some of electronic communications can lead to miscommunication.

- **Feeling of isolation-** The need for social support and affiliation are easily met in face-to-face interactions. But in virtual teams, lack of physical interactions can lead to feelings of social isolation which in turn may cause lack of interest among the participants.

V. SOLUTIONS & SUGGESTIONS

- **Clarifying the purpose of the meeting-** Virtual teams require clearly defined goals. The e-leader should ensure that written agendas are distributed to each and every member in advance. The e-leader should also ensure that every team member interprets the goal statement in the intended way and agrees upon it. The length of time allotted to the meeting should also be communicated in advance. The e-leader should recapitulate and discuss the goals at the beginning of the meeting. Notes regarding the main issues taken up by the meeting should be disseminated afterwards.

- **Developing and Maintaining a feeling of collective awareness and cohesiveness among the virtual team members-** E-leader should encourage participation and cooperative behaviour among the team members. A short and informal introduction at the very beginning will help the members to know each other personally and professionally. Collaboration can be increased by accepting the unique individual differences. Creation of forums where members can chat or exchange information helps in keeping touch with each other. E-leader should develop the feeling of collective consciousness among the team members which is based on shared beliefs, ideas and moral attitudes and serve as a binding force within the team. Team identity increases cohesiveness and creates strong relationships between the members.

- **Fostering trust within the team-** The e-leader can help in creating trust by practicing honesty, professionalism, empathy and transparency. Trust in virtual teams can be built by encouraging more and more information exchange and establishing mechanisms that ensure fast and regular delivery of feedbacks to work related problems and queries. If possible face-to-face meeting should be organised. Practices that improve team communication and coordination should be encouraged. Adhering to deadlines should also be encouraged.

- **Clarifying roles, responsibilities and procedures to avoid uncertainty-** In order to avoid uncertainty, clarity is needed with regard to roles, responsibilities, processes, procedures and results. Individual roles and responsibilities should be assigned in the very beginning; this will help in avoiding situations such as team members doing duplicate tasks and working on cross purposes. Setting rules and standards is also important. Clarity should be provided regarding the decision making process: whether unanimous or majority rule will be adopted. Regarding the results, the short term goals should be made very clear and the time by when the goals are to be achieved should also be clear.

- **Cross-cultural training-** Virtual team members should be provided training about how to work effectively in a culturally diversified environment. Cross-cultural training programmes will help in developing a global mindset. It will help in acquiring a non-judgemental view regarding various cultures, in acknowledging differences and looking for similarities. The e-leader should ensure that no culture is given importance over other.

- **Using time zone management tools-** In case of virtual teams, time zone differences have to be considered while scheduling tasks and meetings. Various tools which help in taking account of time differences, holidays, weekends and individual calendars should be used. These tools will help in selecting the most appropriate time for each participant. Some of these tools are: timeanddate.com, timezone.io, spacetime.am.

- **Managing isolation by using virtual ice-breakers-** Virtual ice-breakers are exercises, games or activities focussed on team-building: conducted during a meeting where participants are geographically dispersed. The e-leader should encourage interactions in a non-work related environment like playing games using various apps, solving puzzles, friendly conversations, sharing images of personal workplaces, telling about personal backgrounds. Interactions in a non-work related environment helps in communicating freely in a work-related environment.

VI. CONCLUSION

According to Bass (2008), "leadership depends on interaction." So, when the mediums of interaction change leadership is bound to change. The use of more and more information technology by organizations to perform work and accomplish tasks has led to the emergence of e-leadership. E-leaders guide and manage virtual teams. Virtual teams consist of geographically dispersed people, interacting through electronic means of communication and performing interdependent tasks. Virtual teams provide special advantages to organisations: cost effectiveness, access to global talent, flexible work hours, productivity and many more. But working in a virtual environment has its own challenges: absence of face-to face contact leading to lack of interpersonal communication, technological issues, language and cultural barriers, etc. Cascio (2000) summarised five qualities for e-leaders: "(1) an open, positive attitude focused on solutions to issues; (2) the ability to lead in the absence of structure and control; (3) a results-oriented management style; (4) effective formal and informal communication skills; and (5) the ability to delegate and follow up effectively." A successful e-leader is one who apart from performing traditional leadership roles adapts his behavior and skills to effectively address the challenges of virtual environment.

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