

Leadership Approach for Managing in Distributed Team

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Abstract: This article reported on the working process of a distributed team and the leadership approach for managing a distributed team. The objective of this Article is to demonstrate how to manage a distributed team to achieve the operational excellence. The discussion focused on the capability of many organizations to allow a distributed team working in their organizations to achieve the highest benefit. However, method to overcome the barrier that occurs when working in distributed team is more challenging. For a better understanding of this model, the article also provided good examples of distributed team effective models of famous organizations. The leadership styles that are identified in this article are applied from transformational leadership theories, which are the key success factors in terms of managing distributed team. There are six steps that would be helpful for managing distributed team, which are strategically selecting team members, developing a vision in order to manage each location in the same directional goals, developing commitment and trust, creating organizational leadership by building empowered teams and facilitating organizational learning and evaluating team performance and reselecting team members in case that problems can not be solved. Finally, there are other recommendations that were provided in this article to assist the leader to increase the efficiency and effectiveness in managing a distributed team to get the maximum benefit of it.

1. INTRODUCTION

Up to the present time, worldwide organizations have realized the necessity of advancement in information and communication technologies (ICTs). Working in a distributed team model is nowadays largely adopted by organizations. This fact is supported by an article of Carmel stating that "Today, organization's significant advancements in information and communication technologies (ICTs) and increased use of offshore outsourcing opportunities have resulted in different types of organizational work being conducted by formal, distributed, cross-cultural, and ICT-mediated teams" (Carmel, 1999; Hossain and Wigand, 2004). Moreover, the rapid growth of offshore companies will have to expand substantially the number of locations that they consider (Farrell, 2004). Therefore, in the global environment today, the distributed team model has been adopted widely in many international organizations for achieving operational excellence. The distributed team is "a cross-organizational, cross-functional project and your teammates are in different time zones, on different continents and even in different hemispheres."

The distributed team work process

The distributed team is also defined as a group of organizationally discrete co-workers that are assembled using a combination of electronic media and information technologies to accomplish an organizational task. Distributed teams allow team members to communicate and connect to each other via virtual tools that mostly

communicate through the internet and web to manage the location sites, which is the easiest way for communication in a distributed team. There is the example of an effective distributed team model that was found from the research of An Executive Summary Distributed Team Performance (Pharmer, 2001). That suggests the team effective model of a distributed team, which looks at the relation between the characteristics of a team and the performance of the team. This model illustrates the interrelationships between input variables. (Characteristics of the team, the work, individual team members, and the task), throughput (communication, coordination and teamwork activities) and team performance output (Fig. 1).

The Leadership theory: Transformational leadership

The leadership theory that is challenging in terms of enhancing and overcoming the distributed team's barriers to effectiveness is Transformational Leadership theories. The real essence of transformational leadership is that these leaders "lift ordinary people to extraordinary heights" (Boal and Bryson, 1988) and causes followers to "do more than they are expected to do" (Yukl, 1989a) and "perform beyond the level of expectations" (Bass, 1985).

Transformational leaders are the leaders who motivate individuals to perform beyond normal expectations by inspiring subordinates to focus on broader missions transcending their own immediate self interests, to concentrate on intrinsic higher-level goals rather than extrinsic lower-level goals and to have confidence in their abilities to achieve the extraordinary missions the leader articulates (Bartol et al. 2004).

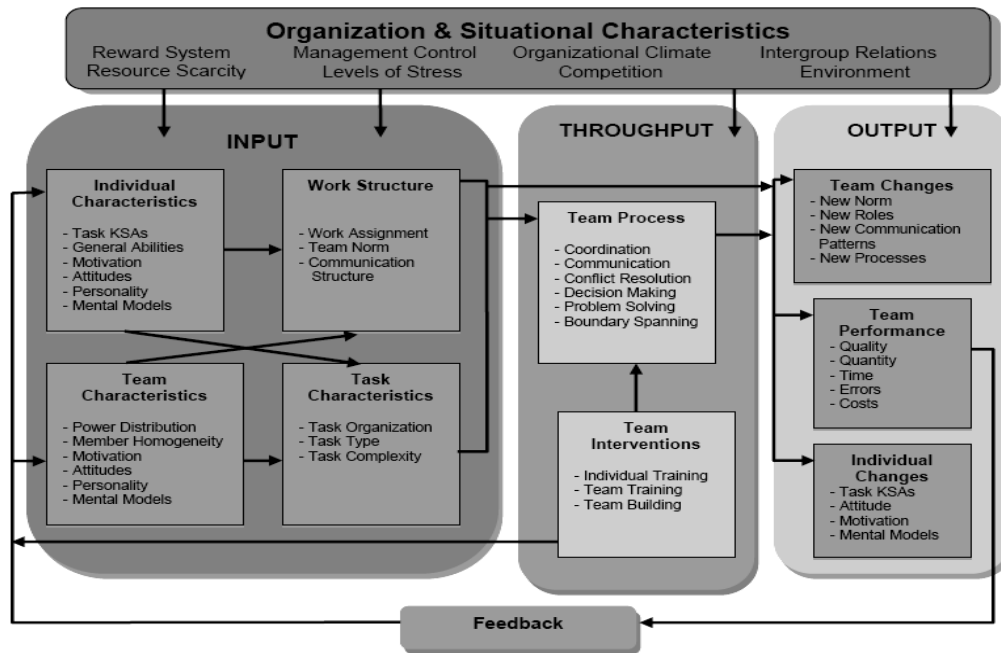


Fig. 1. Team effective model of distributed team as suggested by the above mentioned research: Team Effective Model “Knowledge Skills Abilities KSAs,” (Modified after Salas et al., 1992)



Fig. 2. Conceptual Relationship between transformational Leader Behaviours, Potential Mediators, and Organizational Citizenship Behaviours (Pierce and Newstrom, 2001)

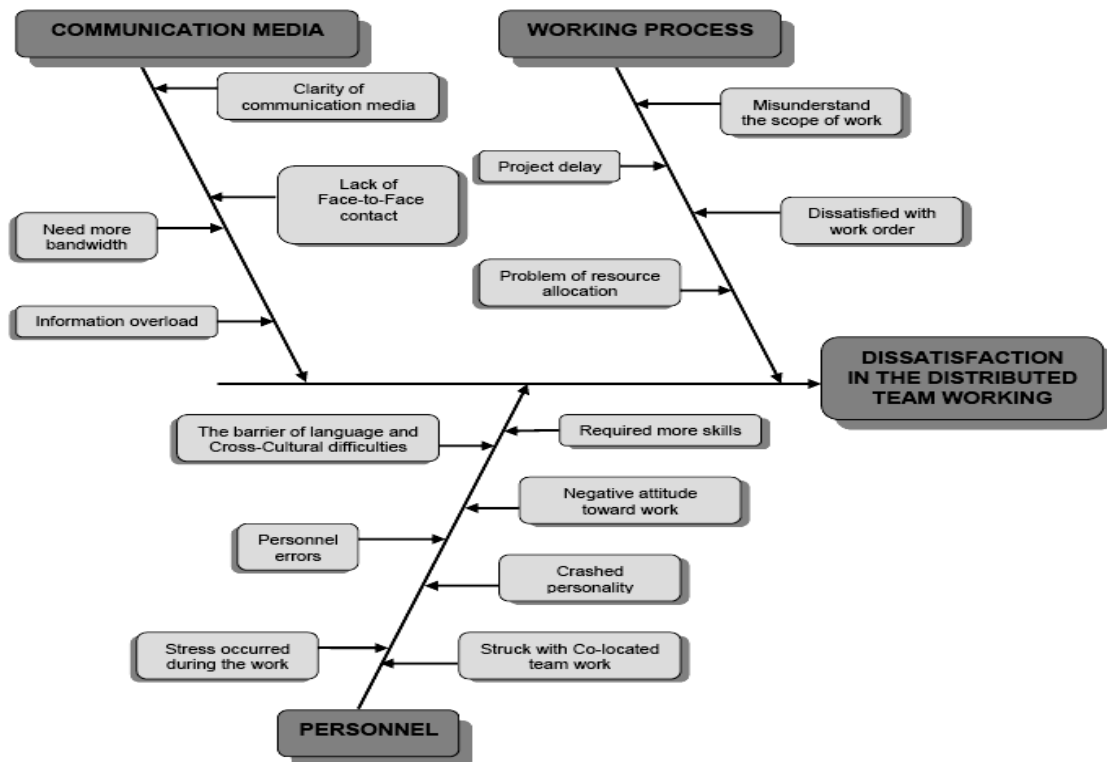


Fig. 3. Fishbone Chart shows the problems while working in distributed team (Modified after Kedboonsai et al., 2001)

The purpose of most recent studies, is to, specifically examine the effect of Transformational Leader Behaviours on Organizational Citizenship Behaviours and Potential Mediating roles of trust and satisfaction on that process as shown in Fig. 2.

The transformational leadership theory is also concerned with empowerment and dependency, which are more challenging in managing distributed team working.

2. CURRENT SITUATION IN DISTRIBUTED TEAMS

The study of the distributed team model is possible in offshore oil and gas companies that mostly have adopted this model in their organizations due to the reason that they have many locations and teams to manage in different countries. Moreover, these offshore companies also have the technology advancement for managing distributed teams. These conditions allow them to use the advantages from advanced technology and expert employees to work effectively in a distributed team environment. The main advantages of adopt this system into organizations are lower costs for project management, faster yields and higher quality decisions. However, the challenge of this system is how to manage teams effectively because there are some significant barriers as well. In addition, since members of such groups frequently come from different geographical locations and possibly have diverse educational and professional backgrounds and areas/levels of expertise, they often lack a shared frame of reference (Sarker and Sahay, 2003). This leads to a high "interpretive barrier" (Sole and Edmondson, 2002), which in turn affects the success of the collaboration (Goodman and Darr, 1996; Hossain and Wigand, 2004).

2.1 Major Barriers in Distributed Team

From the research conducted by the Consultant Internship of College of Management, Mahidol University entitled "To Study and Analyze the strengths and weaknesses of the new operation system, Distributed team in Reservoir department" it was found that significant problems that occurred while managing distributed teams include difficulty in communication in different time zones, the lack of human interaction between leader and team members, and the skills required to utilize technology and other requirements in technology support. Therefore, these problems are classified into 2 major areas, which are how to manage people and how to manage technology.

In order to identify the general problems that may cause dissatisfaction of distributed team members, refer to Fig.3: Fish-Bone Chart (Cause-effect Chart).

3. LEADERSHIP STYLES THAT CHALLENGE IN DISTRIBUTED TEAM WORKING

The challenges of leading a distributed team include all of the challenges of building the team that work in separate locations, plus the added variables of distance, time zone and cultural differences. The leader, therefore needs to concentrate on a leadership style that leads to increase human interaction and communication between team members.

2.1 Review Stage

Please use this document as a "template" to prepare your manuscript. For submission guidelines, follow instructions on paper submission system as well as the Conference website.

Note that conferences impose strict page limits, so it will be better for you to prepare your initial submission in the camera ready layout so that you will have a good estimate for the paper length. Additionally, the effort required for final submission will be minimal.

The 2 major factors to be applied in transformational leadership in the process, are for leaders to build trust and satisfaction among team members. These factors help overcome the challenges of leading Distributed Teams and can be best achieved by following these six steps:

Step 1: Strategically selecting team members.

Step 2: Developing a vision in order to manage each location in the same directional goals.

Step 3: Developing commitment and trust.

Step 4: Creating organizational leadership by building empowered teams.

Step 5: Facilitating organizational learning.

Step 6: Evaluating tem performance and reselecting team members in case that problems can not be solved.

Step 1 Strategically selecting team members

The first step that leaders should consider for managing distributed teams is how to form a team that can work together effectively. The strategies that leader should consider is the process of selecting the appropriate team members who have expertise in their career and also possess good working relationships with their fellow team members. This process is the most important strategy for an effective distributed team because this process will prevent many problems that may occur while working in distributed team such as Crashed Personality, the barrier of language and cross-cultural difficulties. When the leader begins with the most important step, the other steps for building trust and satisfaction among team member will be more easily developed. Some of the factors to be considered when selecting team members are:

- Determining which characteristics and job requirements are required of distributed team members. First of all, Leaders should determine the characteristics and job requirements of employees that are needed for the distributed team by considering
 - Past Experience
 - Their expertise in each area
 - The relationship between team members in past projects. (Did they work well together? What was the result of the teams' performance in past projects?)
 - The cultural backgrounds of employees should be considered in this step because if leader can select team members who have similarity in their culture and their way of communicating, potential communication programs among team members could be mitigated in this step.

- Measure those characteristics. The leader should begin with a basic steps job interview style by using a structured interview composed of situational questions, Job Knowledge questions and worker-requirement questions for selecting the right candidate for each job requirement in a distributed team. (Luis et al.,1995)
- Evaluate employees by looking at teamwork performance. Leader should evaluate team members by considering questions and qualities as follows (Luis et al.,1995)
 - How well do the team members recognize and resolve the conflict.
 - Do the team members participate and collaborate in problem solving.
 - Do they communicate openly and supportively?
 - Do they coordinate and synchronize activities effectively?
 - Conscientiousness? Team members must be able to depend on one another. Someone who doesn't follow through can cause problems for the entire group effort.
 - Agreeableness? Team members need flexibility and tolerance if they are to meld into an effective unit.
- Deciding the most suitable team member in distributed team.

Step 2 Developing a vision in order to manage each location in the same directional goals

The challenges of managing a distributed team include developing a vision in order to accomplish the project effectively. Firstly, there is a need to create a big picture of the project and influence team members to involve them, creating a shared sense of purpose and developing the vision for working in the same directional goals. When team members share the big picture of why a team is necessary to be existed and, what the team has to do, when the project will need to be completed and what is the desired result, then team members will realize the importance of their individual contributions to the whole project. Secondly, after sharing of purpose to create vision of the project with the distributed team, the leader has to allow the team members to develop shared decision-making. When the decision-making is shared, generally high levels of commitment are demonstrated by team members. And when high commitment is established in a distributed team, team members will help each other to run the project successfully when some of the team gets in trouble.

Step 3 Developing commitment and trust

A Distributed team or virtual team requires trust to make it work: Technology on its own is not enough. Therefore initial face-to-face meetings and building relationship among team members are the best alternatives to start building trust. Sometimes a video conference that allows team members to see each other and more e-mail "self-introductions" provide some personal background and interaction and have been

proven effective in helping develop commitment and trust amongst team members.

The above suggested face-to-face meeting for building commitment and trust among team members will be most effective if it is arranged by focusing in important activities outlined here;

The most effective way to build or repair trust is that leaders should set times to meet team members at their location at the early stages of the project. Leaders have to orientate the members about the purpose and schedules of the project, and the need to use budget effectively by getting everyone in the same location or near meeting locations. According to some experience of leaders in distributed team projects, it is proved that having face-to-face team building sessions at the early stages of the project cycle provides many benefits even taking into the relatively high cost of travelling and assembling teams together. These sessions can sometimes solve problems that leaders do not even realize are there. (www.stqmagazine.com)

- Sometime the leader should arrange team meetings to have enough time in order for team members to start developing their working processes and relationships. Video Conferences are sometimes necessary to assist team to see each other's face and expression. Which also be used in the early of the project or when working on critical decisions and important issues.

The benefits of building commitment and trust are;

1. Team members develop synergy, relationships and interaction skills.
2. Informal communication between team members and leaders enhance the team as they share their values and build a strong corporate culture.
3. In order to analyze strengths and weaknesses of team members, the leaders have to build relationships with the team members for a better understanding and the leader will anticipate when they may need help or support.

Step 4 Create organizational leadership by building empowered teams

Another topic that challenges leadership styles in managing distributed teams is how the leader can manage team successfully among difficulties in difference time zones, culture and locations. The fact is the team leaders have a lot of roles and responsibilities and hardly to manage their time to keep the team working effectively. Therefore the most effective way for leaders is building an empowered team and create organizational leadership at different levels. This would reduce the pending tasks of leaders for managing the team. The team members will be able to effectively solve problems by themselves when they can't connect to their leader. The leader should do it while building commitment and trust in distributed team.

For better team management, the leader should establish working sessions to resolve key team issues and develop common processes. This will assist the team working process

when members are faced with issues or problems. Besides, discussion practice in the meeting could be allowed. This also helps the team promote common understanding of the project values and goals. Moreover, this session will help the team members in different locations to understand and agree in processes and align their work towards organizational goals.

Step 5 Facilitate organizational learning

Finally, the last process that is challenging for a leader of a distributed team is facilitating organizational learning. After the leader has conducted initial meetings including face-to-face in the early stages, the following two factors will facilitate further organizational learning most effectively:

- The leader should provide training facilitators to develop and implement team-building exercises. The argument may be raised by that the team lacks available time. If the leader realizes the necessity of ongoing organizational learning and tries to make it possible, a lot of benefits can be created and productivity and satisfaction among team members will be increased.
- The team leader should allow the team to make decisions in order to build the leadership capability of the team and facilitate organizational learning. The roles of the leader are only checking and rechecking assignment and giving feedback to team members' on their decisions and assignments to ensure they are following the same directional goal. Then, of course, leaders have to provide the support as needed to develop organizational learning.

Step 6 Evaluate Team Performance and reselect team members in case that problem can not be solved

After completing the 5 steps in distributed team development, Leaders should also provide evaluating systems for each step to ensure the best performance in each stage. However, if problems still occur, leaders should identify the causes of those problems and take necessary action to resolve them. For example, if problems occur because the characteristics of some team members do not match with their team, leaders should consider reselecting the team members again.

4. CONCLUSIONS

Working in distributed teams has become an acceptable way of working life in an era of globalization because this model is effective in lower costs for project management, obtaining faster yields and get higher quality decisions. Therefore, the challenge in managing the team in the role of leader is very important to lead the team to organizational success.

Therefore, to achieve the supreme goals of saving costs and resolving problems regarding time differences and team member communication and work practises is recommended that leaders adopt the principles of transformational leadership theory for the most effective management of a distributed team.

The first step is to strategically select team members. This is the most important step to overcome the problems that can

occur in a distributed team when they have to work in separate location.

The second step is to develop a vision in order to manage each location in the same directional goals. It assists the team members to understand the goal, share values and contribute to the team.

The third step is to develop commitment and trust by arranging face-to-face meetings at the early stages of the project and setting the team meeting via video conference or team meeting via electronic media and e-mail to keep in touch amongst the team.

The fourth step is to develop organizational leadership by building an empowered team. The leader should establish actual working session practices in order to develop team building to keep the team work together effectively.

The fifth step is to facilitate organizational learning by provide training facilitators to assist team-building exercises and support them to make decisions and support them with facilities they need for develop organizational learning.

Finally, the leader should evaluate team performance to ensure the best performance in each stage and reselect team members in case of problems of teamwork that can't be solved.

According to the study results, when electronic media is popularly used for communication, there are four critical requirements recommended by distributed team members as follows:

1. A proficiency in the language communication between team members, especially in writing skills.
2. A desire to share ideas, voice concerns, and contribute to team learning.
3. A desire to leverage off the knowledge of others.
4. A minimum level in computer literacy of the team members.

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