

Transformational Leaders and Challenges in COVID-19 Virtual Work Environments

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Abstract—This paper is a nonempirical analysis of existing literature on virtual leadership, transformational leadership, and remote work cultures. This paper will provide insight into how virtual workplaces can utilize transformational leadership styles to overcome challenges that have become a reality due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Many organizations were forced into remote work to remain viable. It investigates the obstacles of working from home and the challenges leaders face in coaching and development. Employees lack face-to-face interactions and begin to feel isolated. Leaders cannot have in-person meetings and conversations and struggle to engage and encourage employees. In acknowledging the different dynamics of virtual work environments, organizations can make the necessary adjustments to best support employees. This paper reviews prior research studies and applies what is known to assist with current obstacles. This paper addresses how transformational leadership will assist in overcoming challenges within virtual work environments.

Keywords—Challenges in remote work, transformational leadership, virtual leadership, virtual work environments.

I. INTRODUCTION

MANY organizations have an increasing responsibility to develop their leaders to be most effective in a virtual work environment. Businesses across the globe have been recently affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic. When the pandemic hit, many companies adjusted work practices and work cultures to stay afloat. For the safety of the employees, companies took advantage of technological advancements within their work cultures to allow employees to work remotely. Organizations were agile to maintain sustainability while supporting physical and mental health concerns. “As organizations change in the future and become more virtual and global, it is critical leaders look at all methods to connect employees and motivate them to contribute to the organization’s success on both an individual level and collective base” [8].

Even before the pandemic, companies were expanding their organizations internationally. Global expansion requires work cultures that support remote business practices due to distance. The internet has allowed remote work to be a possibility; however, there are challenges with digital cultures. Virtual employees have additional factors that lead to a feeling of isolation, the loss of collectivism, and issues with work-life balance. Coworkers that are helpful and supportive of each other; cultivate a work environment of increased interpersonal links within the company and open lines of communication [6]. Transformational leadership skills are to be used to overcome

these challenges and the obstacles with the coaching and development of employees, the building up team spirit, and employee engagement.

Transformational leadership is a relational theory where leaders and subordinates have a respected voice, assign tasks, and are motivated towards achieving a common goal [3]. “This leadership style provides the opportunity to explore workplace changes, behavior modifications, program delivery while creating an environment for enhanced outcomes” [12]. Transformational leaders lead through inspiration, influence, and empowerment. Work cultures that cultivate autonomy and trust will encourage positive behaviors in employees.

This paper will address how organizations can leverage transformational leadership as a tool to overcome challenges within a virtual work environment. Virtual work environments have similar requirements of their leaders as in in-person work cultures. There are, in addition, enhanced commitments for leadership to support employees with home-life distractions and barriers. Positive “relationships between transformational leadership and the meaning, self-determination, and competence dimensions of psychological empowerment” [13]. Virtual leaders need to conform to inspiring work environments that improve well-rounded support to employees. Avoiding employee burnout is imperative. Mentally healthy employees will perform better than mentally exhausted employees.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

Virtual work environments are becoming increasingly prevalent within many organizations. Employees working from home is not a novel idea [7]. “In 2009, by installing ‘remote terminals’ in several employees’ homes, IBM was able to enable as much as 40% of its global employees ... to work from home” [7]. The organization saved around \$100 million within the US by reducing office space. There are several reasons for this shift in work conditions, from globalization to cost savings to the COVID-19 Pandemic. The work environments that have been in existence for centuries are shifting to virtual workforces [8].

Traditional workplaces where employees were required to work in an office are no longer necessary with the advancements in digital technology. “The technological advancement has definitely brought the world closer” [7]. Organizations are expanding across international waters to maintain sustainability and growth. A global organization deepens its strength and capabilities with more options than a

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domestic company [10]. More recently, the onset of the COVID-19 Pandemic has forced organizations to remote work due to health concerns. The dynamics of a virtual work structure require well-equipped leaders. Many of the same challenges of coaching and developing staff are present. Additional skills are necessary within a virtual workplace.

Traditional leadership models that have been in place with in-person meetings and face-to-face conversations in the office are absent or not as effective in the virtual world [10]. The virtual workplace requires e-leadership. "E-Leadership was first coined in response to a new working environment where human interactions are mediated by information and communication technology" [10]. Virtual teams have become popular due to the unparalleled benefits of increased talent pools across international waters, cost reduction, and more flexibility for employees than traditional in-office work environments [5]. Virtual organizations consist of individuals that work separately and with a degree of autonomy [10]. It is noted while virtual work environments can enhance a company's success, there are challenges with effective leadership when traditional levels of employee engagement erode, and individuals become disenfranchised [10]. Virtual workers have challenges sharing workplaces with spouses, other household members, and children being schooled from home, thus adding to issues with healthy work-life balance [5].

The leadership style within a virtual work environment will determine the success in employee performance the organization can gain. Transformational leadership as a method of leading composed of respected voices, sets of tasks, and shared motivation towards a common goal [3]. Transformational leadership supports agility, exploration of workplace changes, and behavioral modifications for the betterment of all [12]. "Idealized influence is very important from an advising standpoint because trust, mutual respect, and clear vision play a critical role in the advisee-advisor relationship" [9]. Leaders play the role of advisors; employees play the role of advisees. Leadership is about one's ability to lead, inspire, and motivate others. Virtual work environments face challenges of the lack of face-to-face interaction, the lack of the feeling of collectivism, and challenges with work-life balance. Virtual work environments require employees to understand organizational socialization factors. Transformational leaders empower employees to be team players and support one another.

Experience and education have replaced traditional resources as critical resources for organizations [6]. Organizations are dependent on the effectiveness of their knowledge management on employee motivation and willingness to engage in knowledge sharing. Employees respond to organizational socialization. Employees become the best functioning members of an organization when they learn the job requirements as well as the social behaviors of the organization. The Social Exchange Theory (SET) "essentially believes that people help each other even if they do not have to, and in return, help is expected from other people in the future" [6]. In the workplace, the SET cultivates positive emotions within individuals as employee needs are being met.

Employees have increased feelings of a team when coworkers support them in knowledge sharing [6]. New employees have a greater sense of belonging and have increased organizational identification in positive work environments and increased levels of trust. Leaders should cultivate supportive work cultures, including peer support, organizational embeddedness enhances knowledge sharing. Managers should consider organizational links and sacrifice [6]. Lastly, "Managers should encourage employees to grow trust in their teams and organizations. Specifically, managers should exhibit empathy and sensitivity to the needs of staff members. In addition, managers" [6]. This supports the feeling of collectiveness which is imperative within virtual work environments.

"These virtual organizations face the risk of losing organizational interconnections, including those connections with coworkers and organizational leaders" [8]. Organizational collective motivation (OCM) theorizes leadership ability to best motivate employees with individual and collective goals [8]. This practice allows leaders to develop a sense of connectedness with employees and see value in working together for organizational success. "Organizational Collective Motivation (OCM) was first coined by Black (1994) and founded on individual based beliefs of collective motivation. Black studied collective motivation at three levels of analysis: workgroup (unit), department, and organization" [8]. Employees are motivated to contribute to the company based on the expectancy of individual and organizational results [2].

The role of the leader is an important aspect of the success of virtual organizations. A commitment to an organization is developed from leadership action. "This is because leaders who support what an employee believes about one's self while also developing the importance of one's contributions to the collective enhances an individual's collective motivation to contribute to the organization's well-being and success" [8]. The aspects of collectivism support OCM in collective identity, group norms, and shared values. Leaders who accomplish goals are forward-thinkers, open-minded can motivate individuals and collective performance.

III. DISCUSSION

Traditional in-person work cultures are increasingly becoming a thing of the past. "Early surveys in US show a significant rise of people shifting to work from home" [4]. The percentage of US workers working from home in February 2020 increased from 8.2% to 35.2% in May of 2020 [1]. Digital technology has allowed organizations across the globe to support virtual work environments. "Now a person living in a different city or even in a different country can report to his employer who may be in a totally different geographical location" [7]. Organizations must have the agility to transform to the needs of their internal and external stakeholders.

Virtual work environments allow organizations that do not require the physical presence of their employees to support their workflow through the Internet. COVID-19 has allowed the IT sector to realize its true potential to reduce costs but increase productivity which results in boosted growth [7]. Whether

remote work was necessary for international expansion for globalization or due to the COVID-19 Pandemic and employee safety, businesses have had to conform to remain viable. Approximately 36% of the total working class had shifted to remote work within the first few months of the Pandemic [4].

While virtual work is not a new phenomenon, the extent and challenges posed are everchanging. Organizations gain employee trust, loyalty, and increased satisfaction when individuals feel supported by their leaders. Employee performance then improves and results in the achievement of organizational goals. Transformational leaders have the skills to recognize potential threats, be proactive, and appropriately act. Leaders play a huge role in determining how effective an organization will be in supporting employees. "By developing positive relationships, transformational leaders gain trust of their followers and anticipate their needs by providing access to structurally empowering factors (i.e., information, support, resources) necessary for employees to accomplish their work in a meaningful manner" [3].

To overcome challenges within virtual work environments, organizations should implore transformational leaders. Transformational leadership is necessary for companies that adapted to remote work due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Organizations had to alter their work environments to protect employee health. The situation was forced and not a choice for employees. There was not any time to adjust. These virtual leaders now face challenges due to the lack of employee work-life balance, constraints with employee coaching and development, employee loss of the feeling of collectivism and mental state, and the challenge of building up a team. To overcome challenges within virtual work environments, organizations should implore transformational leaders [5].

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Transformational leaders work to inspire and influence subordinates through motivation and consideration. Employees are encouraged to make decisions and trusted to work autonomously. Transformational leaders have employees who trust them, respect them, and are motivated to do more than

expected to achieve goals [3]. This leadership style has four core characteristics: idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration [3]. This sense of self-respect allows followers to feel supported and be loyal to the organization. Individuals feel an increased sense of belonging and collectivism. This type of work culture builds on desire and performance. "Research suggests that the four dimensions of transformational leaders may serve as antecedents to creating structurally empowering work environments" [3].

In the past, remote work was an option for individuals. The role of leaders has changed with virtual teams. E-leadership or virtual leadership contributes to the success of virtual teams [5]. One of the challenges faced is the lack of a common identity. Before COVID-19, virtual teams were choice-driven and allowed for greater access to talent pools without the constraint of distance [5]. Virtual leaders need to be transformational to best support their subordinates in feeling organizational importance and a part of the bigger picture. The importance of OCM in the composition of the workforce through leadership support of individual and collective motivators [8]. Leaders who use the elements of this framework can get projects completed more efficiently, manage change in a less traumatic manner, and organize corporate objectives with the understanding and commitment of all [8]. Leadership capabilities have a direct effect on employee performance.

IV. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, remote work environments that resulted from the COVID-19 Pandemic have had employees feeling less than supported or essential to the organization. Virtual work in the COVID-19 context is characterized by workers that were not previously working from home, employees that had to rely on their own Internet and office spaces, and homelife distractions and tensions [11]. The role of leaders has changed as traditional work environments have transformed into virtual spaces. Leaders must adjust coaching and developing employees to address obstacles and distractions that were not present in transition in-office workspaces. Businesses must cultivate their leadership staff with transformational leadership skills to overcome the challenges of virtual work environments.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

This article supports the importance of using transformational leadership skills to overcome barriers and obstacles within virtual work environments through nonempirical research. The recommendation is to test the success of transformational leadership skills in overcoming challenges in virtual work environments compared to other leadership styles through empirical research methods. Empirical evidence provides additional knowledge on the subject through an analysis of collected data. The empirical research used can be through quantitative or qualitative methods. The research results will either support or negate the theory depending upon the interpretation of the information collected. Uncovered data will provide insight to assist

organizations in the development of leaders. Leaders need skills that will allow them to be effective in today's virtual work environments in supporting their subordinates.

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