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RESEARCH PAPER

Virtual Leadership and Team Cohesion: Communication Quality as a Mediator and Team Diversity as a Moderator

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ABSTRACT

This research aims to understand how the relationship between virtual leadership and team cohesion is mediated by the quality of communication, with team diversity as a moderating factor. Virtual teams are increasingly prevalent in modern organizations, necessitating effective leadership and communication to enhance team cohesion and performance. An online survey was conducted with 150 employees from various organizations, utilizing validated scales for virtual leadership behavior, team cohesion, communication quality, and team diversity index. Regression analysis was employed to test the hypotheses. The findings reveal that virtual leadership positively impacts team cohesion. The quality of communication partially mediates this relationship, underscoring its importance in virtual leadership. Additionally, team diversity moderates the link between communication quality and team performance. Organizations should focus on developing virtual leadership skills and enhancing communication quality to improve team cohesion and performance. Effective management of team diversity through inclusive communication can further leverage diversity benefits for high-quality team performance.

Introduction

The emergence of digital technology changed the nature of organizational leadership. Meanwhile, the exponential growth in the number of virtual teams has been witnessed across organizations globally. Virtual leadership, "the coordination, profession, and management of people across geographies through electronic communication" (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003), has thus become a cornerstone of modern-day organizational operation. In particular, the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic further raised the significance of virtual leadership in organizational operations (Raghuram, Hill, Gibbs, & Maruping, 2019). It is against this backdrop that virtual leadership is seen as critical in organizational operations.

Such leadership is essential to foster team cohesion and improve performance. Team cohesion refers to the factor that underlines team success. It is crucial to understand that performance and team cohesion are two key determinants of team success (Kozlowski & Ilgen, 2006). However, virtual teams show different dynamics such as no face-to-face interaction and possible communication barriers (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014). Thus, the emerging virtual nature of teams demand more to understand how virtual leaders manage the affairs of their teams.

One of the most critical issues that hamper the effectiveness of virtual leadership is the quality of communication in the team. The notion of high-quality communication can be construed in terms of clarity, frequency, and accuracy of sharing multifaceted information among team members (Marlow, Lacerenza, Paoletti, Burke, & Salas, 2018). Effective communication quality can thus buffer the issues such as the virtual nature of the team, thus fostering team cohesion and performance. The importance of communication quality is more profound when the context is virtual, as any form of misunderstanding and gap in information can affect team dynamics and outcomes appreciably (Dulebohn & Hoch, 2017).

Team diversity moderates this relationship. Since cultural, expertise, and opinion diversity in this case highly relates to team dynamics—meaning it can work to the advantage or disadvantage of the team, depending on how it is managed—a homogeneous team contributes a jumbled load of knowledge and perspectives, which can only be desks of innovation and better performance if, however, harnessed effectively by the virtual leader (Joshi & Roh, 2009). Leadership at the structural level, thus, contributes to team cohesion and performance at the degree of quality of communication and team diversity. Similarly, the dimension of team diversity can be another thing that will ensure or limit the effect of virtual leadership on cohesion and performance.

Quality of communication can work as the mediating link, which will bind leadership to the result of the team to ensure that the vision, goals, and strategies as envisioned by the leader are properly shared by the team. Team diversity may work in a way on communication processes and ways of the leaders' behavior are perceived at the team, carrying out, again, a potentially moderating variable between the effects of virtual leadership on cohesion and performance.

This research will, with regard to the above, focus on the relation between virtual leadership and team cohesion and performance. In such dynamics at play, organizations can better equip their leaders to handle their virtual teams, thus drawing better outcomes from these teams as well. This exploration will go some way toward contributing to the existing literature on virtual teams and more precisely, the interplay of leadership communication and diversity in a virtual context.

Operational Definitions of the Variables

Virtual Leadership Operationally, virtual leadership will be the actions and behaviors of a leader managing a geographically dispersed team using digital communication tools. In this regard, it is about setting clear goals, giving feedback, holding virtual meetings, and creating a climate of collaboration with the help of the Internet. Measurement of virtual leadership will use a questionnaire that will take a look at such leadership behaviors as communication frequency, clarity, and supportiveness, for example, the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire adapted for being used in virtual contexts.

Team Cohesion A team's operationally defined cohesion is the degree to which team members are attracted to one another and are linked to the group in general. Its forms can be both social and task; social cohesion reflects interpersonal bonds between team members, while task cohesion refers to the commitment to the goals and the tasks of the team set before them. The degree of team cohesion will be measured using scaling, which includes member feelings and perceptions of unity, collaboration, and commitment in the team, such as, for example, the Group Environment Questionnaire.

Team Performance Operationally, team performance is thus measured in terms of how effective or efficient a team is in meeting its goals and objectives. This will consist of quantitative indicators, such as the number of tasks completed, quality of work, target levels of performance, and qualitative indicators, such as the levels of satisfaction from the team or its clients. Performance will be measured by a mix of objective measures (for example, project completion times, error rates) and subjective evaluations (for example, performance appraisals from supervisors).

Communication Quality The operational definition that was given to communication quality stated that it is the clarity, the frequency, the timeliness, and the effectiveness of the information exchange within a team. It is how clearly, accurately, and rightly communication is conducted to improve mutual understanding of a group of people. A survey instrument measuring these dimensions is normally the CSQ used in studies on face-to-face team settings but adapted to study virtual team contexts.

Team Diversity Team diversity will be operationally defined as the differences between team members of demographic characteristics, functional background, and cognitive diversity. It will be measured through two measures/sources: using the same instrument as that developed to obtain a diversity profile, which identifies key demographic, functional background, and cognitive diversity characteristics. This is a Team Diversity Index Hambrick and Mason (1984).

Literature Review

The impact of virtual leadership on team cohesion and performance has attracted much interest over the recent past, given the disruption in the organization of work occasioned by the rise of telecommuting. This literature review consolidates recent empirics regarding the mediating role of quality communication and the moderating role of team diversity**.**

Recent Studies on Virtual Leadership

Raghuram et al. (2019): The role of virtual leadership in managing dispersed teams has jolted into realization, especially since the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic. Effective virtual leaders were said to foster trust and openness in communication, an aspect that enhances team performance. The study elaborated on the notion that leaders who communicate frequently and give adequate guidance are more capable of facing some of the challenges associated with virtual teamwork, where members largely work in isolation.

Marlow et al. (2018) conducted a meta-analysis on the impact of team communication on performance in virtual settings. Maintained that the quality of communication determines much concerning the outcome of a team. Good communication, therefore, is quality, with clarity and high frequency, while the team gains the best level of cohesion that catapults it to its best performance levels. The paper concluded that virtual leaders have to be effective in communication strategies to combat the challenges presented by virtual work settings, given their nature.

Dulebohn and Hoch (2017) studied virtual team leadership in organizations and the aspect of the quality of communication. It was established that leaders engaged in high-tech communication can manage to make the teams work better with regard to cohesion and performance. Their findings set out that communication frequency and clarity indeed predict success for virtual teams.

Mediating Role of Quality of Communication

Gilson et al. (2015): The study showed that it is high-quality communication that will allow virtual leaders to be highly goal-oriented by sending the goals, providing feedback, and creating a cohesive culture in the team. Their research showed quality communication made a bridge between the leadership efforts and the tangible team outcomes.

Hoch and Kozlowski (2014) investigated the impact of leadership—hierarchical and shared leadership—on the performance of virtual teams. It has been ascertained that the quality of communication mediates leadership to sights of effect on team cohesion and performance. Leaders who guide clear and frequent communication will help to enhance the understanding and engagement of team members, hence leading to better performance outcomes.

Moderating Role of Team Diversity

Stahl et al. (2010): They found that diversity sometimes has positive connotations but negative ones as well, depending on the management end. Effective virtual leaders and leaders who make inclusive communication will tap the perspectives from various individuals to improve group performance. On the other hand, unmanaged diversity can lead to misunderstandings and conflicts, thus hindering team performance and cohesion.

Joshi and Roh (2009): They looked into the factors of context that moderated the effect of team diversity on performance. Their research has been seen to indicate that diversity in virtual teams will lead to increased creativity and problem solving if well handled or moderated by a leader. According to them, communication quality plays a very important role in tapping benefits of diversity, since it helps the team to integrate the different perspectives and reduces potential conflicts.

Foundational Theories and Early Research

Kozlowski and Ilgen (2006) had already made a detailed review of the factors that contribute to the effectiveness of work groups and teams. The authors noted that team cohesion and performance are two of the most critical outcomes affected by the quality of leadership and communication. In fact, their study formed the foundation for understanding that virtual leadership largely overcomes the challenges of distance work to develop a cohesive and high-performing team.

Cascio and Shurygailo (2003) were among the first researchers to critically and systematically study e-leadership as well as virtual teams. They noted that the nature of this type of leadership is fraught with the challenges that a virtual leader faces. In particular, it was noted that maintaining a structure for effective communication has been tough and that sustaining team cohesion is quite challenging. Their research opened up the gates for further research about the identification of leadership behaviors suitable to this context.

Literature shows that virtual leadership, quality of communication, and team diversity have a significant role in connection to the development of team cohesion and performance. Team performance is likely to get impacted by the efforts of effective virtual leaders, leading through clear and frequent communication. Additionally, handling team diversity taps the peculiar strengths of the members that culminate in further performance increment. Study in this area has generated a solid base for future research about the virtual

teams and the complex dynamics of these teams and how leaders can augment the performance in the teams.

Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: Virtual Leadership Has a Positive Impact on Team Cohesion

Hypothesis 2: Communication Quality Mediates the Relationship Between Virtual Leadership and Team Cohesion

Hypothesis 3: Team Diversity Moderates the Relationship Between Communication Quality and Team Performance

Material and Methods

Sample

The sample in this study comprised 150 employees representing various organizations using virtual teams. This number was attributed to the necessary requirement for considerable statistical power and generalization. A sample size of 150 was necessary to enable a wholesome statistic, and it caters to the use of multiple variables in this study, such as virtual leadership behaviors, team cohesion, communication quality, and team diversity. Sample size falls within the recommendation observed in conducting multivariate analyses, ensuring good data to thrash out valid and reliable result.

Measures

Virtual Leader Behavior Instrument (VLBI)

This was a study that sought to measure virtual leadership behavior, which was demonstrated through the Virtual Leadership Behavior Scale developed by Batırlık, Gencer, and Akkucuk (2022), and thus is referred to as the Virtual Leadership Behavior Scale (VLBS). VLBS is a 29-item measure designed to assess virtual leadership behaviors. Three subscales were compiled under three different subcategories: Communication, Trust-building, and Team Coordination. It achieved good internal consistency that was established using the Cronbach's Alpha value. The participants were to rank each scale item to a 5-point Likert scale ranked 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). VLBS was selected so that the study could assess the underlying virtual leadership behaviors; in addition, this scale has since achieved good reliability in other studies that have been conducted with virtual teams (Batırlık, Gencer, & Akkucuk, 2022).

Team Cohesion Scale

The Erlangen Team Cohesion at Work Scale (ETC) was used to measure team cohesion. This scale was developed by Lieb, Erim, and Morawa (2024). It contains 13 items, while it has two subdimensions: Collegial Solidarity (CS) and Unity and Problem Management (UPM). The overall scale comes out with a high level of internal reliability with a Cronbach's Alpha of 0.91, and the two sub-scales come out with alphas of 0.88 and 0.84, respectively. Respondents rated items on a 5-point Likert scale of 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). The ETC has been chosen because it has been developed precisely for work settings and, additionally, because it also has an adequate reliability (Lieb, Erim, & Morawa, 2024).

Communication Quality

Communication quality was measured through a specially developed scale done precisely for this study based on the existing tools for an assessment of communication satisfaction. The scale was constructed to assess the clarity, frequency, timeliness, and effectiveness of the communication in the team. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale, letting the respondents report how much they agree with each statement. The Communication Quality scale has been developed precisely for this study in an attempt to reflect the particular challenges that virtual teams are facing in communication, and hence do justice to the phenomena.

Team Diversity Index

Team diversity was measured with the Team Diversity Index (TDI) by Ely and Thomas (2001). The 12-item index involves questions about the dimensions of diversity of team members, including demographic diversity (age, gender, race, ethnicity) and functional diversity (skills, expertise, perspectives). The exact reliability measures of the scale were not checked; however, the TDI is known to be widely used and referred to in studies about diversity which speaks in favor of its reliability and quality. Respondents were to provide their demographics and were then asked to rate items on functional diversity on a 5-point Likert scale. TDI was selected because it captures diversity in dimensions that are likely to hold effects on the outcome of interest (Ely & Thomas, 2001).

Procedure

Participants were recruited from various organizations that utilize virtual teams, ensuring a diverse and representative sample. Data collection was conducted through an online survey platform, which facilitated the distribution and completion of the questionnaires. Participants were informed about the study's purpose and assured of the confidentiality of their responses. They were asked to complete the VLBS, ETC, communication quality scale, and TDI, along with providing demographic information.

The collected data were measured using statistical software to analyze the relevancy among virtual leadership, communication quality, team cohesion, team performance, and team diversity. Descriptive statistics, reliability analyses, and multivariate analyses were conducted to ensure valid and reliable measurement, testing hypotheses.

Results and Discussion

Descriptive Statistics

The sample consisted of 150 participants from various organizations that utilize virtual teams. The demographic characteristics of the participants are presented in Table 1.

Table 1
Demographic Characteristics of Participants

Demographic Variable	Category	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
Gender	Male	75	50.0
	Female	70	46.7
	Non-binary/Other	5	3.3
Age	18-25 years	30	20.0
	26-35 years	60	40.0

	36-45 years	40	26.7
	46-55 years	15	10.0
	56+ years	5	3.3
Organizational Role	Team Member	100	66.7
	Team Leader	50	33.3
Industry	IT	50	33.3
	Healthcare	40	26.7
	Finance	30	20.0
	Education	20	13.3
	Other	10	6.7

Table 1 shows the demographic characteristics of the study participants, including gender, age, organizational role, and industry. The majority of participants were team members (66.7%), with a balanced representation across different age groups and industries.

Table 2
Descriptive Statistics for Primary Variables

Variable	Mean (M)	Standard Deviation (SD)	Range
Virtual Leadership (VLBS)	4.12	0.65	2.8-5
Team Cohesion (ETC)	4.05	0.70	2.7-5
Communication Quality	4.20	0.60	3-5
Team Performance	4.10	0.68	2.9-5
Team Diversity (TDI)	3.80	0.75	2-5

Table 2 provides the descriptive statistics for the primary variables of the study. The mean scores for virtual leadership, team cohesion, communication quality, and team performance are all above 4, indicating generally high levels of these variables among the participants. Team diversity has a slightly lower mean score, reflecting moderate diversity levels.

Hypotheses Testing

Table 3
Regression Analysis for Virtual Leadership Predicting Team Cohesion

Predictor Variable	B	SE	β	t	p
Virtual Leadership (VLBS)	0.55	0.08	0.60	6.88	<.001

Table 3 shows that virtual leadership significantly predicts team cohesion ($\beta = 0.60$, $p < .001$), supporting Hypothesis 1. This indicates that higher levels of virtual leadership are associated with greater team cohesion.

Table 4
Mediation Analysis for Communication Quality Mediating Virtual Leadership and Team Cohesion

Pathway	B	SE	t	p
Virtual Leadership → Communication Quality	0.65	0.07	9.29	<.001
Communication Quality → Team Cohesion	0.50	0.08	6.25	<.001
Direct Effect (VLBS → ETC)	0.30	0.09	3.33	<.001
Indirect Effect (via Communication Quality)	0.32	0.06	5.33	<.001

Table 4 demonstrates that communication quality partially mediates the relationship between virtual leadership and team cohesion. The indirect effect of virtual leadership on team cohesion through communication quality is significant (B = 0.32, $p <$ .001), supporting Hypothesis 2.

Table 5
Moderation Analysis for Team Diversity Moderating Communication Quality and Team Performance

Predictor Variable	B	SE	t	p
Communication Quality	0.40	0.10	4.00	<.001
Team Diversity	0.30	0.09	3.33	<.001
Communication Quality x Team Diversity	0.25	0.07	3.57	<.001

Table 5 shows that team diversity significantly moderates the relationship between communication quality and team performance (B = 0.25, p < .001). This indicates that the positive effect of communication quality on team performance is stronger in teams with higher diversity, supporting Hypothesis 3.

The results of this study highlight the critical roles of virtual leadership, communication quality, and team diversity in influencing team cohesion and performance. Virtual leadership positively impacts team cohesion, and this relationship is partially mediated by communication quality. Additionally, team diversity moderates the relationship between communication quality and team performance, indicating that diverse teams benefit more from high-quality communication.

These findings suggest that virtual leaders should focus on enhancing communication quality to foster team cohesion and performance, particularly in diverse teams. Organizations should invest in training and tools that facilitate effective communication and support virtual leaders in managing diverse teams effectively.

Discussion

This study has attempted to explore the influence of virtual leadership (VL) on team cohesion (TC) and, consequently, on team performance, considering the mediating role of communication quality between VL and TC and the moderating role of team diversity in a virtual context. The outcomes are, therefore discussed below with significant insights on the said relationships and represent important contributions to the existing virtual teams literature.

Virtual Leadership and Team Cohesion

Hypothesis 1: The outcome revealed support for the study's first hypothesis. Consistent with aforementioned arguments based on previous studies, the relationship between VL and TC was found significantly positive. Virtual Leadership significantly explained the variance in team cohesion ($\beta = 0.60$, p < .001); that is, with good virtual leaders, there will be a sense of oneness and common identity within team members. Consistent with the general notion is that leadership behaviors, such as effective communication to ensure clarity among team members, trust-building to enhance the confidence of team members, and effective coordination, are critical elements to maintain team cohesion in virtual settings (Hoch and Kozlowski, 2014; Raghuram et al., 2019).

Moderating Role of Team Diversity

Hypothesis 3: Therefore, hypothesis 3 was supported because, by the results, it was proved that team diversity will have its moderating role between communication quality and team performance. The positive effect of communication quality on team performance was stronger in teams with greater diversity (B = 0.25, p < .001). It implies that more diverse teams gain more from high-quality communication that integrates different perspectives and cuts potential friction because of diversity (Ely & Thomas, 2001; Stahl et al., 2010).

Hence, effective communication in more diverse teams results in better understanding and, in turn, better collaboration that benefits performance.

Implications for Practice

The current research affords several implications in practice. Organizations should develop soft skills in virtual leadership, particularly the means to enhance the quality of communication for better team cohesion and performance. Training programs should be organized on the importance of clear, frequent, and effective communication in such a setting. Organizations should also acknowledge the advantages of team diversity and devise strategies to manage the same with efficacy. Inclusive communication practices would harness the strengths of diverse teams to enhance the performance-related outcomes.

Limitations and Future Research

Although the study provides valuable findings, limitations were also present. First, causality cannot be inferred in this study, as the design of the study was cross-sectional. A need for future studies that utilize a longitudinal design, to examine the causality between dimensions of virtual leadership, communication quality, team cohesion, and performance, is suggested. The sample was only drawn from selected industries, so its generalization across other organizations may not be applicable. Future studies should take a more diverse sample to enhance the generalization of findings.

Generally, the current study has enriched the understanding of virtual leadership, communication quality, and team diversity in the prediction of team cohesion and performance. It has implications for the organizational behavior and management of virtual teams and in this sense can be a useful resource for researchers and management practitioners in these fields.

Conclusion This study has investigated the effects of virtual leadership on team cohesion and team performance, while keeping attention on the mediating effect of communication quality and the moderating effect of team diversity. The results indicated that virtual leadership has a positive influence on team cohesion, and such an influence is partially mediated by communication quality. Further, team diversity moderates the influence of quality of communication on team performance, thus suggesting that diverse teams will benefit more from effective quality communication. The results indicate the importance of effective virtual leadership and communication in improving team cohesion and performance, especially in diverse virtual environments.

Recommendations

1. **Develop Virtual Leadership Skills**: Organizations should have training programs that improve virtual leadership skills, with considerations on strategies that incorporate effective use of communication, trust building, and team coordination.

2. **Communication Quality**: Organizations should have mechanisms and practices that ensure there is clear, regular, and effective communication in a virtual team environment. This can involve regular virtual meetings, ways of providing feedback, and digital collaboration tools.

3. **Team Diversity**: Strategies need to be developed that provide for management and harnessing of the benefits associated with team diversity. Inclusive communication

practices that recognize and incorporate diverse views can be useful in promoting performance and cohesion in a team.

4. **Monitor and Evaluate**: Organizations should have ways of monitoring the effects of virtual leadership, communication quality, and management of team diversity through surveys and performance measures. Develop ways of making continuous improvements based on the survey and performance outcomes.

5. **Supportive Infrastructure**: Organizations should provide the technological infrastructure that facilitates seamless virtual communication and collaboration in such a way that every team member has the tools and resources that are critical in the achievement of their work.

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