



# Virtual Team Leadership: Perspectives From the Field

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## ABSTRACT

*The purpose of this study was to improve the understanding of virtual team leadership occurring within existing virtual teams in a range of organizations. Qualitative data were collected through comprehensive interviews with nine virtual team leaders and members from six different organizations. A semi-structured interview format was used to elicit extensive information about effective and ineffective virtual team leadership behaviours. Content analysis was used to code the interview transcripts and detailed notes obtained from these interviews. Two independent raters categorized results into themes and sub-themes. These results provide real-world examples and recommendations above and beyond what can be learned from simulated laboratory experiments. The four most important overarching findings are described using the following headings: 1) Leadership critical in virtual teams, 2) Virtual team meeting effectiveness, 3) Personalizing virtual teamwork, and 4) Learning to effectively use different media. These findings represent the most significant and pertinent results from this qualitative data and provide direction for future research, as well as practical recommendations for leaders and members of virtual teams.*

*Keywords:* dispersed teams; e-leadership; leadership; team leadership; virtual leadership; virtual teams; virtual teamwork; virtual work; virtual work

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## INTRODUCTION

Rapid technological advancements have led to a new paradigm of work — it can now be conducted anytime, anywhere, in real space or through technology (Cascio & Shurygailo, 2003). The virtual workplace is a reality, and all indications are

that technology-mediated communications will become increasingly prevalent in the future (Martins, Gilson, & Maynard, 2004). Leaders are finding themselves directing portions of, or even entire projects, solely through communication technologies (Avolio & Kahai, 2003). Virtual teams require

new ways of working across boundaries through systems, processes, technology, and people (Duarte & Snyder, 1999), which require effective leadership. Despite the widespread increase in virtual teamwork, there has been relatively little focus on the role of leaders within these teams (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002).

Descriptive field studies examining virtual team leadership have been recommended as valuable by Bell and Kozlowski (2002), as there is currently a paucity of such data. Most of the existing research on virtual team leadership consists of anecdotal case studies of virtual teams in single organizations (e.g., Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002) or laboratory studies using *ad hoc* student teams (e.g., Balthazard, Waldman, Howell, & Atwater, 2002; Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 2003). The purpose of this field study was to improve the current understanding of leadership within virtual teams in a range of organizations by interviewing virtual team leaders and members. The findings outline specific leadership behaviours involved in successful virtual teamwork, thereby providing tangible recommendations for organizations implementing virtual teamwork and providing the basis for future theory development.

## LEADERSHIP RESEARCH

Previous leadership theories have used trait, behavioural, and contingency-based approaches to describing leadership effects at the individual, team, and organizational level (Yukl, 2006). Recently, these theories have received less attention, as an alternative paradigm has come to the forefront of leadership research. This paradigm has inspiration as a key tenet and the theories using the paradigm have been coined “the

New Leadership theories” (Bryman, 1993). One similarity among the new theories is that they provide a rationale to explain how leaders can increase organizational effectiveness, and inspire followers to achieve outstanding levels of motivation, admiration, respect, trust, and commitment. These outcomes are the result of an emphasis on symbolism and emotionally-based leader behaviours (e.g., visioning, role modeling, risk-taking), in addition to cognitively oriented leader behaviours (e.g., adaptation, versatility, intellectual stimulation) (House & Aditya, 1997).

Of particular interest to the present study is the theory posited by Bass (1985) and later revised and updated by Bass and Avolio (1994, 1997). This theory, called the Full Range Leadership Theory (FRLT; Sivasubramaniam, Murray, Avolio, & Jung, 2002), was developed to integrate transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles, and has been supported empirically (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Lowe & Kroeck, 1996). It is widely accepted in the management and leadership literatures (Antonakis & House, 2002) and has served as the conceptual basis for many studies of virtual team leadership (e.g., Kahai & Avolio, 2006; Kahai, Sosik, & Avolio, 1997; 2003).

How leadership works within the contexts of different communication media, however, has received relatively little attention in the literature. Furthermore, the extant research that has considered possible interactions between leadership and communication media is comprised of mostly laboratory-based studies. The nature and results of these studies as well as the few relevant field studies on virtual team leadership are discussed next.

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