

PARADIGMS OF LEADERSHIP IN THE TELEWORKING ENVIRONMENT: A QUALITATIVE STUDY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores those personal dimensions of leaders and followers and the teleworking environment already identified by research, and develops a tentative model for leader effectiveness in the virtual environment.

The emergence of communications technology has created work environments that challenge well-established paradigms of leadership. Teleworking and virtual office environments have redefined the relationships between the employee, the supervisor, and the conditions of the workplace. Among the variables considered are manager and employee role acceptance, anxieties related to new role performance/behavior, and the importance of self-management, goal commitment, satisfactory communication, and work/life balance in the definition of satisfactory role acceptance. New contingency models of leadership are needed to better define the qualities and characteristics of leader effectiveness in the leader-follower relationship where direct personal contact is no longer the primary mode through which influence is conveyed.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is one of the world's oldest preoccupations (Bass, 1990). In the last fifteen years, though, there has been a trend towards leaderless organizations. Distance learning, virtual office, teleworking, etc. have all emerged. The enablers are primarily technological; inexpensive personal computing and high speed transmission of data to and from virtually every home, office, or other work location anywhere around the world.

According to a survey sponsored by AT & T as of October 2001 there were something under 30 million people in the US teleworking (Venkatesh & Johnson, 2002). Gartner predicted that 137 million workers worldwide would be involved in some form of remote work by 2003 (Manoochehri & Pinkerton, 2003). These figures do not include the 43.2 million (Holub, 1999) self-employed people who work out of their homes

According to Chaudron (1995) a successful teleworking program requires the "right reasons", the "right job", and the "right employee". The right reasons means that management should not just view it as an accommodation or benefit to the employee but should also expect increased productivity. The right job is one that involves individual versus team contributions. Although team projects can be accomplished with a mixture of at-home and in-office work, the right employee is one whose personal traits will be suitable for teleworking. To these three R's must be added the "right manager" and the "right environment". The personal traits of the manager are just as important as the employee's traits. The manager's anxieties and inability to lead can undermine the potential benefits of a telework program. Environmental concerns include the at-home workplace distractions and available resources, the in-office

accommodations, and the formal and informal communication channels. This paper will focus on the right employee, the right manager, and the right communications.

TELEWORKER CONSIDERATIONS

According to participants at an ACM forum (1995), working electronically kills the most human qualities of an employee – the ability to interact both socially and professionally. These statements reflect the isolation that can occur in a teleworking environment. However, teleworkers and managers who are part of a program to interact informally, develop interpersonal organizational networks and create synergistic relationships have shown reduced feelings of isolation (Kurland & Cooper, 2002). Other findings regarding the effects of teleworking included reduced amounts of feedback received from supervisors, coworkers, and clients (Huws, 1984); loss of the stimulation of exchanging ideas with colleagues (Hamilton, 1987); and the fact that any feedback will be lower quality because of the reduced nonverbal cues (Norman et. al., 1995).

Another area of major concern to the telecommuter is the balance between work life and family life. Researchers have found that professional workers who were telecommuting had a tendency to become “workaholics” when they were highly involved in their jobs (Olson and Primps, 1984); a negative relationship between family relationships and satisfaction with telework (Hartman, Stone and Arora, 1991); the flexibility of telework allowed employees to balance their home/work responsibilities (Jenson, 1994); and that the flexibility in work arrangements could empower the employee with the ability to integrate and overlap work responsibilities and family responsibilities leading to positive spillover and achieving a healthy work/family balance (Galinsky et.al. 1993).

The “right employee” suitable for a telecommuting job is results oriented, self-disciplined, well organized, a good time manager, satisfied by the challenge of the job not from managing others, and is trusted by the manager (Murphy, 1996). In other words, they are model employees who have the ability to get as much done at home as they would in the office.

In the collaborative work environment of today self-management may neutralize traditional concepts of leadership or render them ineffective or redundant (Castaneda, Kolenko & Aldag; 1999). In a similar vein, Manz and Sims (1980) have defended self-management as a substitute for leadership. Manz (1986) points out that the ultimate control for managing behaviors is to encourage employee’s self-control systems rather than imposing organizational controls. Self-management by an individual involves using self-goal-setting, self-observation, self-reward, and self-punishment to control behaviors (Tsui & Ashford, 1994).

Clearly, the leadership paradigm for the teleworking environment must include aspects of self-management. Additionally, the “right employee” must be one who is capable and desirous of self-management. When employee reactions are negative to the concept, resistance to self-management can result (Kirkman & Shapiro, 1997).

TELEWORK MANAGER CONSIDERATIONS

Research has shown that managers facing a new telecommuting environment can have uncertainties and resistance to the change. Managers often perceive a threat of loss of power, influence and importance as they realize that their subordinates are becoming, to a large extent, self-managers. Managers also recognize that their own leadership skill sets may be on the verge of obsolescence (Manz, Keating & Donnellon; 1990).

In order to work effectively in a teleworking environment, it is important for the manager to develop a sense of trust in the teleworker. Trust is a dyadic relationship involving the attributes of both the trustee and the trustor (Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner; 1998). The trustor

must have the propensity to trust. This trait is a result of cultural, social, developmental experiences, and personality type (Mayer, Davis & Schoorman; 1995). The trustee attributes are his/her perceived ability, benevolence, and integrity (Jarvenpaa, Knoll & Leidner; 1998).

In self-managed situations the role of the leader “is to provide the individual with clear task boundaries within which discretion and knowledge can be exercised” (Slocum & Sims, 1980:201). The manager is assisting the self-managed employee to engage in a form of self-leadership (Manz, 1986). A leader’s role in a self-management situation lies in facilitating the development of self-controls by employees so that they can successfully manage their work with fewer organizational controls (Cohen, Chang & Ledford; 1997). According to Leifer and Mills (1996: 119) self-management “develops as one’s cognitive map or schema is changed and organized to be consistent with the values and beliefs of the organization, thus resulting in behaviors consistent with organizational goals.”

The effective teleworker manager works with the telecommuter to establish goals. The manager no longer manages attendance, but must manage performance. Goal setting is widely recognized as a powerful motivational technique (Locke & Latham, 1990). Goals should not be viewed as an ends, but as collaborative milestones by which progress can be measured. They should be a collaborative agreement between the manager and the employee (Randolph, 1995).

The “right manager” in the teleworking equation is someone who (1) is capable of trusting the employee’s integrity and abilities, (2) can manage by objectives, agreed performance standards and deadlines, (3) can evaluate performance by results and not attendance, (4) can reconstruct the conduct and self-image of employees by encouraging them to acquire the capacities and dispositions that will allow them to become self-managers (du Gay, Salaman & Rees; 1996), and (5) is generally flexible and understanding of employee needs to balance work and family life.

TELEWORK COMMUNICATIONS CONSIDERATIONS

In a qualitative study, Weiner and Hill (1995) found that telecommuting had a negative influence on communication and peer interaction with coworkers and managers. Ramsower (1985) found that full-time telecommuters engage in less upward, downward, and horizontal communications.

The teleworker’s feelings of isolation and anxiety can be exasperated by having to rely on electronic communication channels. E-mail has been shown to be not as rich a communication medium as face-to-face interaction (Ngwenyama & Lee, 1997). The social cues cannot be conveyed electronically (Norman et.al., 1995). A study performed by Kraut et. al. (1998) indicated that social interaction via e-mail was positively related to social isolation, loneliness, and depression.

Leadership research has also suggested that organic systems (i.e. face-to-face) involve more two-way communication, more managerial information, advice-giving rather than orders, and decisions than non-organic (electronic) systems (Weick, 1987). Generally it is a leadership style that more resembles consultation rather than command (Courtright, Fairhurst, & Rogers, 1989).

MODEL OF TELEWORK LEADERSHIP

Combining all of the constructs identified in the literature review produces a schema of the leader role, subordinate role, and the leadership function and is available from the authors.

The ultimate goal of an alternative work arrangement, such as teleworking, is to improve productivity, or at least not reduce it, while either improving worker job satisfaction and/or reducing organizational costs. Organizational constraints, economics, nature of tasks performed,

dedicated resources at home and at the office all play a role in the overall job performance of the teleworker. However, this model is focused strictly on the leadership aspects. As such, the only antecedents to teleworker performance represented in the model are the level of acceptance by the teleworker with his/her role and the level of acceptance by the manager with his/her role in the telework environment.

Teleworker role acceptance is partially a function of the ability to deal with anxieties over feelings of isolation and concern for career advancement. Additionally, the teleworker must attain a level of satisfaction with the ability to balance the work life and family life aspects. Successful teleworking requires the teleworker to have both the desire for and the ability to self-manage. The degree to which this is accomplished is also a predictor of role acceptance. The importance of communication channels between the teleworker and the manager as well as with coworkers has already been discussed. The extent of satisfaction with the amount and richness of communication is also a predictor of role acceptance.

The telework manager role acceptance is also a function of the perception of satisfaction with the communication channels with the teleworker. In addition, the manager must deal with his/her own anxieties over perceptions of loss of power and resistance to new leadership techniques. Another important antecedent to manager role acceptance is the manager's propensity to trust the teleworker. The manager must feel comfortable with the teleworker's abilities, integrity, and dedication to the task. The adoption of certain leadership styles or attributes also will affect acceptance. The manager must be goal oriented rather than attendance oriented, must be understanding of the teleworker's need to balance work and family lives, and must be able to accept the concept of employee self-management.

In order to fit the pieces together, performance goals must be mutually agreed upon by the teleworker and the manager. The worker must be committed to attaining these goals and the manager must be committed to using them as the means of evaluating employee performance.

TESTING AND RESULTS OF THE MODEL

In order to test the applicability of the model to the actual teleworking environment, a grounded approach was undertaken utilizing interviews of teleworkers and their managers. The interviews substantiated the model almost entirely. However, there were two other unexpected results that also came out of the interviews. The first has to do with productivity and the second with the effect of the extent of teleworking. All but one of the interviewees felt that telecommuting had not increased their productivity; for them, it was an issue of satisfaction and retention. The other area of unexpected findings concerned the amount of time spent away from the office and its impact on the telework model. Based on the interviews, it was found that if a person teleworks sixteen hours a week or less there are no real feelings of being in a teleworking mode on either the part of the teleworker or the manager.

CONCLUSIONS

No existing theory of leadership is designed to directly relate to the teleworking environment. Although most areas of this leadership relationship are the same as in the face-to-face work arrangement, there are some unique areas that add a new dimension. Primarily, these areas deal with the anxieties that both the manager and the teleworker face in this new management environment.

Finally, the entire model of telework leadership needs to be tested qualitatively and empirically. Hopefully, with proper validation, it could serve as a starting point for exploring this emerging relationship.

References and a schema of the telework leadership model are available upon request of the authors.