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Dealing with conflict in virtual teams – online affect management

Keywords: teams, virtual teams, team conflict, virtual team conflict, affect management, team resilience, online team resilience, virtual team resilience, emotion regulation

Overview

A new (2020) study looking at conflict in virtual teams has found that virtual teams, when compared to normal physical teams, are more prone to 'team fault lines', or divisions between team members based on their different attributes such as nationality, background et cetera.

The study found that by engaging in online affect management, team leaders can significantly reduce the negative impacts of team fault lines and can increase team collaboration, performance, and resilience. Additionally, the study found that

- Virtual team resilience is enhanced when individuals feel that they can express their true feelings.
- Virtual team resilience is largely based on the individual team members' being able to engage in emotion regulation techniques and manage their own emotions in a constructive manner.
- Suppressing emotional responses has a negative impact on both the team members and on team resilience.
- Collective positive emotions about the team are a critical predictor of virtual team resilience.

Therefore, any intervention to deal with virtual team conflict needs to be based on the following elements:

- Creating a safe space whereby team members genuinely feel able to express their emotions.
- Expressions of emotions (such as frustration, anger, et cetera) being dealt with constructively.
- A focus on building a positive group climate.

These three steps need to be implemented before a team engages in more robust voicing of opinions and feedback.

Lastly, the study found that it is important to create a frame or context for the virtual team about working together in a virtual environment.

As the options for creating, managing and running distributed and geographically dispersed teams increase as technology progresses, global events like the Covid 19 pandemic have served to rapidly advance the use and integration of virtual teams into the workplace. From an opportunities perspective, virtual teams have been shown¹ to extend the possibilities of bringing together diverse levels of knowledge,

OR Research Briefing

skills and expertise from around the globe and have been shown to be able to increase creativity, innovation and performance under the right conditionsⁱⁱ, largely because of the diversity that can be obtained in virtual teams.

Additionally, a number of studiesⁱⁱⁱ have found that diverse virtual teams are particularly good at preventing impulsive and untimely consensus/decision-making and ensuring that all task-relevant information is considered before final decisions are made.

However, it has also been found^{iv} that virtual teams are more prone to what are known as team fault lines. Team fault lines refer to divisions between team members that occur based on a variety of different attributes, such as nationality, age, gender, professional affiliation, and other individual attributes. What has been found to occur, particularly within virtual teams, is that individuals are frequently prone to forming associations and alliances with other team members of similar attributes and characteristics and to creating distance with team members who do not share those characteristics^v. In effect, particularly within virtual teams, subgroups frequently develop which increase the risk of interpersonal and relationship conflict across the virtual team^{vi}.

Intra-team relationship conflict is based on an awareness of interpersonal differences and incompatibilities around personal issues, such as personal traits, language, cultural practices, et cetera that aren't actually related to the team task, however, they produce friction and tension between team members^{vii} in a way that is frequently harmful to group cohesion and performance^{viii}.

Affect management

Affect management^{ix} refers to the process of managing team members' emotions, moods, and reactions through a variety of emotion regulation techniques. The aim of affect management is to move team members into a positive, collaborative, and coordinated place whereby two members are cooperative, supportive, and responsive to each other based on the task at hand, rather than interpersonal differences. Many previous studies have shown that unregulated negative emotions within teams frequently results in low levels of work and job satisfaction, significantly lower levels of team commitment, task performance and engagement^x.

The idea from a team leadership/management point of view is to design an intervention, or series of interventions, that lowers interpersonal tensions and develops a positive group climate in order to promote cooperation and cohesion.

A new study

A new (2020) study looking at interventions that can assist online affect management to significantly reduce intra-team conflict and tension has just been published by a team of researchers from the UOC University, University of Valencia and the University of Seville, all in Spain. The researchers tested a series of emotion

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regulation and online affect management interventions to see which type of intervention is the most effective with virtual teams.

Additionally, the researchers wanted to find out how best to increase virtual team resilience, so that there is less fragility between team members in order that honest feedback and opinions (employee voice) can be expressed without fear of increasing tensions or provoking conflict. Many studies have shown that employee voice, the provision of feedback and the open voicing of opinions is a critical aspect of team performance, including virtual team performance^{xi}.

Additionally, team resilience has been found to be a particularly important aspect of virtual teamwork, largely because of the inherent nature of working in a distributed manner which often poses unique problems for team members such as:

- Technical problems
- Sense of isolation
- Spatial distance
- Temporal distance (time differences)
- Language and linguistic differences
- Micro and macro cultural differences
- Cognitive and thinking style differences^{xii}

A number of recent studies^{xiii} have shown that the attributes of team resilience in virtual team context is different to normal team resilience when team members are in the same physical space.

Findings

From a team resilience perspective the study found that:

- Virtual team resilience is enhanced when individuals feel that they can express their true feelings.
- Virtual team resilience is largely based on the individual team members' being able to engage in emotion regulation techniques and manage their own emotions in a constructive manner.
- Suppressing emotional responses has a negative impact on both the team members and on team resilience.
- Collective positive emotions about the team are a critical predictor of virtual team resilience.

Therefore, any intervention to deal with virtual team conflict needs to be based on the following elements:

- Creating a safe space whereby team members genuinely feel able to express their emotions
- Expressions of emotions (such as frustration, anger, et cetera) being dealt with constructively.
- there is a focus on building a positive group climate

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Additionally, these three steps need to be implemented before a team engages in more robust voicing of opinions and feedback. It is imperative that leaders and managers of virtual teams think about team resilience as part of their affect management responsibilities.

The study also found that having a practical online affect management intervention protocol both builds team resilience and significantly helps to reduce relationship conflict across virtual teams.

Online affect management intervention

The study found that it is important to create a frame or context for the virtual team about working together in a virtual environment. What this means is having some form of briefing/workshop session, preferably before the team starts working together, about:

- The importance of team collaboration and coherence
- The importance of affect management and emotion regulation
- Why emotion suppression is undesirable
- How to:
 - identify
 - express and
 - regulate their emotions
- Outline communication strategies such as:
 - deep listening skills
 - acknowledging contributions
 - supporting fellow team members
 - aspects of team motivation

In terms of the emotion regulation skills that need to be developed, it needs to be recognised that emotion regulation is a skill that needs practice, feedback and refinement over time. As such, managers and team members need to see affect management and the development of emotion regulation skills as a form. The main skills involved include:

1. Self-awareness
2. Mindfulness
3. Cognitive reappraisal
4. Practising adaptability – trying new things and new ways / experimentation
5. Self-compassion
6. Attentional control - focus

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Reference

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Review

1. Research Quality – 4/5 A good review and primary research based on an examination of 52 virtual teams in a randomised controlled trial.
2. Confidence – 5/5 Consistent with the current research thinking and developments and the research methods give a high degree of confidence.
3. Usefulness – 4/5 Useful to anyone in, or managing, virtual teams.
4. Comments – In the current situation (Covid-19 pandemic) virtual teams have really taken off, although, the use of such teams was on the increase anyway. Virtual team members are finding critical team fault lines are hampering their work. This study should help to deal with conflict in virtual teams.

Disclaimer: This is a research review and briefing. As such it contains other studies, expert comment, interpretation and practitioner advice. It is not a copy of the original study which is referenced. The original study should be consulted and referenced in all cases. This research briefing is for informational and educational purposes only. We do not accept any liability for the use to which this review and briefing is put or for it or the research accuracy, reliability or validity. This briefing as an original work in its own right is copyright Oxcognita LLC. Any use made of this briefing is entirely at your own risk.