A call to action for virtual team leaders: practitioner perspectives on trust, conflict and the need for organizational support

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Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this study is to investigate the leadership behaviors of managers of virtual teams (VTs), particularly in the areas of trust building and conflict management. This study aims to expand the research of VT performance by offering first-person accounts from VT leaders on the strategies implemented to drive VT performance.

Design/methodology/approach – This study used a grounded theory approach to examine the leadership behaviors through in-depth interviews with eight field managers of VTs employed by different technology companies. Interview questions focused on trust-building and conflict management techniques. This structured qualitative study incorporates elements of narrative inquiry interwoven in the findings.

Findings – Building a high-trust environment was found to be critical to VT performance. VT managers indicated that effective conflict resolution skills were also important.

Research limitations/implications – Although the sample size is within the suggested range for a valid phenomenological study, the results may lack generalizability. Participants were limited to the technology industry; leaders of high-performing VTs in other industries could offer differing results.

Practical implications – This study's contribution is the exploration and identification of innovative techniques that VT managers implemented to build trust and resolve conflict. A lack of holistic training programs for the VT leader is also considered along with suggestions for future research and implications for the VT managers.

Originality/value – This study's contribution is the exploration and identification of innovative techniques that VT managers implemented that drive VT performance, particularly related to building high levels of trust and managing conflict effectively. Practices are suggested whereby both the VT

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leader and the organization take an active role in ensuring that the VT has the opportunity to perform optimally.

Keywords Trust, Conflict management, Virtual leadership, Coaching and development, Virtual team performance

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

It is the year 2020 and we are in the midst of a worldwide public health pandemic because of the rapid explosion of the COVID-19. The pandemic has made its rapid and implacable advance around the world, forcing sweeping changes including the emergence of remote video conferencing as a professional lifeline. A Massachusetts Institute of Technology report found that 34.1% of Americans who previously commuted to work report that they were working from home by the first week of April 2020 because of the coronavirus (Brynjolfsson & Horton, 2020). There is little doubt that many organizations will have greater remote work after the pandemic has subsided compared with before the outbreak because of continued health concerns and operational efficiencies. The current numbers of people working from home suggest that this response to the virus may have hastened a trend toward remote work already in progress. As Kate Lister (2020), President of Global Workplace Analytics has noted, "the genie is out of the bottle and it's not likely to go back in." This will significantly impact organizational culture and the leadership required for virtual teams (VTs). This new reality spurs many important questions for organizational leaders including, how is trust and effective conflict management remotely fostered by VT managers and supported by organizations? The present study focuses on this question.

Even before the pandemic, working virtually away from the organization's brick and mortar has been on the rise for many years. A survey from the Society for Human Resources Management (2016) reported that 60% of US companies offered their employees telecommuting opportunities. Bell and Kozlowski (2002) were some of the first researchers to define the concept of VTs, noting their special characteristics of being distributed in nature and having a spatial distance between members. They also found that VT members predominantly interact through technologically mediated communication (e.g. videoconferencing and email) vs conventional teams who operate in a traditional in-person environment. VTs can also be distinguished from proximal teams, where members co-locate, through variables of geographic location, organizational function or temporal distance between team members (Kimble, 2011; Martínez-Moreno, Zornoza, González-Navarro & Thompson, 2012; Verburg, Bosch-Sijtsema & Vartiainen, 2013; Szewc, 2014). Importantly, it has been proposed that "virtuality" exists on a continuum (Kirkman & Mathieu, 2005), the degree of which is based on physical distance among team members, ratio of proximal to VT members, the use of electronic communication technology and relative time worked proximally to time worked virtually (Ortiz de Guinea, Webster & Staples, 2012; Gilson, Maynard, Jones Young, Vartiainen & Hakonen, 2014). For instance, one team member might exhibit greater virtuality working 100% of the time away from the physical space of the organization compared with another team member who works only 50% of the time away from the brick and mortar of headquarters.

Virtual and proximal teams also differ in the leadership skills needed to effectively drive team performance (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002; Purvanova & Bono, 2009; Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Ford,

Ford & Piccolo, 2017). A sampling of measures examining performance in VTs include the degree of virtuality (Schweitzer & Duxbury, 2010), use of communication technology (Kankanhalli, Bernard, Tan & Wei, 2006) and team identity (Kimble, 2011). In addition, recent literature also points to concepts of trust building (Brahm & Kunze, 2012; Breuer, Hüffmeier & Hertel; Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013; Pierce & Hansen, 2008; Gilson *et al.*, 2014) and effective conflict resolution (Chang & Lee, 2013; Kankanhalli *et al.*, 2006; Montoya-Weiss *et al.*, 2001) as two of the most fundamental predictors of overall VT performance.

While the unique challenges of managing VTs have been established, research focusing on the tactics, behaviors and leadership techniques VT managers use to drive overall team performance in the modern-day organization is limited. Further, a clear understanding of the exact practices that leaders use to build trust between leader and member and resolve conflict at the individual and team levels has not yet emerged (Liao, 2017). With the continued proliferation of VTs, it is imperative for practitioners and managers to understand optimal strategies to drive performance of their VTs.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to acquire distinctive and disparate perspectives from VT leaders on the implementation of those strategies that support performance of VTs, particularly related to building high levels of trust and managing conflict effectively. By obtaining first-hand accounts from VT managers via interviews, the findings of the present study can assist VT managers, practitioners and organizational leaders to maximize overall VT performance.

Theoretical background

Trust and performance

Trust is one of the most studied variables in the context of VTs (Gilson *et al.*, 2014). In fact, in a recent multidisciplinary literature review on the topic, the authors identified 124 articles that focused on concepts of trust in VTs (Hacker, Johnson, Saunders & Thayer, 2019). In one of the first studies focusing on the impact of trust on VT performance, Pierce and Hansen (2008) found that team member trust had a positive effect on perceived (i.e. self-rated) VT effectiveness. Three unique styles of trust were examined, including institutional-based trust, defined as a function of the individual's belief in institutional norms; personality-based trust, defined as a person's propensity to trust others; and cognitive-based trust, which develops through the use of social cues, impressions and interactive tasks that an individual can receive or deliver to or from another (Pierce & Hansen, 2008). A survey of 873 responses indicated that all 3 elements of trust were associated with self-rated team effectiveness. Interestingly, the association between trust and performance may be reciprocal. In a case study, employees reported that one of the drivers of building trust levels among VT members was consistent levels of performance (rather than social bonds as in traditional, in-person teams) (Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk & McPherson, 2002).

In a more recent study, researchers noted the importance of building trust at the earliest stages of team development for VTs (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013). In their study of 68 temporary VTs, Crisp and Jarvenpaa (2013) found a positive link between developing early trusting environments, a concept they define as "swift trust" and overall team performance. Though the study examined student VTs rather than employees in an organizational setting, the study has merit due its longitudinal nature, taking place over a period of eight weeks, a rarity in the study of VTs (Gilson *et al.*, 2014). In addition, the results relied on independent, unbiased third parties to rate team performance, rather than self-assessments, which could introduce bias. Importantly, the link between trust and performance of VTs is not limited to organizations in the USA, but present in organizations in other countries as

well (Brahm & Kunze, 2012; Verburg *et al.*, 2013). Finally, a recent meta-analysis examining 52 studies representing 1,850 VTs reported stronger associations between team trust and team performance in virtual compared with traditional face-to-face teams (Breuer *et al.*, 2016). Altogether, these findings suggest that trust is a foundational element in work performance for the VT.

Conflict management and performance

Another variable commonly studied in the context of VTs is conflict. Meta-analyses have indicated that conflict tends to occur more in VTs rather than in traditional, proximal teams (Gilson *et al.*, 2014), and it is to increase with increasing virtuality (Ortiz de Guinea, Webster & Staples, 2012; please see above for full definition of virtuality). Importantly, these resulting increases in conflict are thought to underlie declines in performance (Ortiz de Guinea *et al.*, 2012). For instance, a study of 159 VT members employed by US and Korean firms involved in construction, finance, business consulting, sales and distribution showed a negative relationship between conflict and overall VT performance (Wakefield, Leidner & Garrison, 2008). Also, high performers spent the least percentage of their time on conflicts, resolving them quickly and moving to the next task (Ayoko, Konrad & Boyle, 2012). It is possible that the conflict itself is caused by the virtual nature of the team such that electronic communication can:

- lack immediate feedback, which leads to conflict avoidance and declines in performance (Kankanhalli, Bernard, Tan & Wei, 2006); or
- escalate conflict (Ayoko *et al.*, 2012).

Managing disagreements may also be more difficult virtually than in-person (Wakefield *et al.*, 2008).

A recent study of 141 engineering students organized into 4 VTs found that conflict management mediated the relationship between goal commitment and performance (Pazos, 2012). The study highlighted that when conflicts were successfully managed and resolved, goals were successfully achieved, which resulted in either higher levels or nullified declines in VT performance.

The investigators further suggested that conflict management training in organizations leads to better performance outcomes.

Virtual team leadership and performance

The VT environment is accompanied by challenges that differ from those in a proximal team environment. Consequently, different leadership approaches are required for VTs (Bell & Kozlowski, 2002). For instance, complex tasks require a higher degree of integration and collaboration among team members. As tasks became more complex in virtual environments, managers need to anticipate problems and provide clear direction for each team member to regulate individual performance to help increase performance for the overall team. In addition, conflict management in a virtual environment may depend upon whether the VT manager extends communication opportunities to the VT (Bergiel *et al.*, 2008, p. 105) to productively work through conflicts.

After Bell and Kozlowski's (2002) seminal study was published, investigators sought to identify the leadership styles that were needed for the virtual environment. Altogether, trust and conflict management skills were found to be consistent and essential elements for managers in driving overall VT performance (Szewc, 2014; Liao, 2017), in addition to other elements that may have been specific to organizational environment (Gibbs *et al.*, 2017) or

other factors intrinsic to the study design (Hoch & Kozlowski, 2014; Hoyt & Blascovich, 2003; Chang & Lee, 2013; Purvanova & Bono, 2009). Liao (2017) further proposed that managers need to guide VTs in a multilevel way, exhibiting different behaviors to drive individual team member and overall team performance.

A study examining the learning performance of students in a VT setting in Taiwan found an interaction between leadership style and conflict management, whereby transformational leadership was shown to be more effective than transactional leadership when dealing with conflict. In other words, transformational leaders using a collaborative conflict management style, comprising active listening and creative problem-solving, was found to be the best approach to resolve conflict and drive higher levels of performance as scored on a quantitative scale (Chang & Lee, 2013). However, in both of these studies, subjects were students in a university setting and the results cannot necessarily be translated to the organizational construct. These studies illustrate that transformational leadership in managing VT member conflicts is an effective style to achieve successful team performance, where close relationships need to be nurtured and maintained over a relatively long period of time. However, the specific tactics and behaviors that VT leaders use to build trust and manage conflict for their teams have not been examined in recent literature. As such, more examination of the work of VT leaders is needed to better understand how they guide their VTs to maximize levels of team performance.

Method

A phenomenological research approach (Creswell & Poth, 2017) was selected for this study to distill individual experiences of leadership behavior used to drive performance for the VT, specifically focusing on the areas of trust building, conflict management and conflict resolution. The fundamental goal, as Creswell (2013) explains, is to arrive at a description of the nature of the particular phenomenon. Following essential guidelines for phenomenological data analysis by Creswell and Poth (2017), the researchers highlighted significant quotes and statements in the transcripts to provide a better understanding of how the subjects experienced the phenomenon being studied.

Procedure

VT managers in tech companies, the industry with the greatest percentage of VTs (Society for Human Resources Management, 2016), were targeted for the research. A total of 25 human resource managers from 25 different companies were contacted by email with requests to identify and interview company VT managers with reputations of high performance. Specifically, performance was specified to human resource managers as follows: the VT managers received consistent high-performance evaluations; they received promotions in the past and positive performance scores from their direct reports; and they had grown their team base over time with responsibilities that had been expanded within their tenure with their company. Although not specified, the VT managers selected most likely had a strong positive reputation from their co-workers as well. In total, eight VT managers agreed to participate in the study and each of them gave their informed consent.

Six men and two women were interviewed for the phenomenological study. Seven of the eight were based in the USA, with one individual based in Canada. Each of these team managers led teams with ten or fewer direct reports. The duration of experience with their current employers varied from 13 months to 35 years. Interviewees were employed in technology firms, which ranged in annual revenue from $2bn to over $150bn. Sample titles included vice president of market development, vertical lead for financial services, vice president of analyst relations and vice president of product marketing. Five of the eight

interviewees had master's degrees while the three others had undergraduate degrees. Two of the eight interviewees had domestic direct reports, while the remaining six had domestic and international direct reports. Though the exact composition of each VT varied, VT managers had representative direct reports based in China, the UK, Australia, Mexico, Singapore, Germany and France. All of the interviewees were based in a different physical location from the majority of their employees at least 50% of the time.

Interviewing

A total of eight interviews were conducted by the lead researcher over a three-month period from December, 2017 to February, 2018. Six of the interviews were conducted by recorded telephone conversation, while two were completed in-person. The names of the interviewees were changed to protect their privacy. The length of the semi-structured interviews ranged from 60 to 90 min. After introductory and key demographic questions were answered, the interviewer asked the subject what they believed to be the key behavior they had undertaken to drive performance for their VT. Subjects were then asked if they believed that building trust with team members was important to overall VT performance. The definition of trust used for the interviews was the commonly cited version by Mayer *et al.* (1995) as "the willingness of a party to be vulnerable to the actions of another party based on the expectation that the other will perform a particular action important to the trustor, irrespective of the ability to monitor or control that other party." Finally, interviewees were asked how they had worked to resolve conflict among team members and how conflict and conflict resolution related to their overall VT performance. For the study, conflict was defined as task-oriented or relationship-oriented conflict. Jehn (1995), a leading researcher on organizational conflict defines task-oriented conflict as taking place when there are disagreements among group members about the content of the tasks being performed while relationship conflict exists when there are interpersonal incompatibilities among group members, which includes negative emotions such as animosity and annoyance. When delving into both trust and conflict, interviewees were probed for additional details, specific examples or more contexts through additional questions to best understand the behavior taken to successfully lead high-performing VTs. If the interview was completed in-person, it was digitally recorded via a personal voice recorder. If the interview was completed via teleconference, the call was recorded via the software application TapeACall®. Field notes were taken during the interview. After the interview, the audio recording was professionally transcribed using transcriptionhub.com®. The transcription of the audio file was then returned to the interviewee and reviewed for accuracy. As "... the time spent with tape recordings and transcriptions is an important part of the immersion phase of heuristic research..." (Etherington, 2007, pp. 79–80), many hours were spent listening to and making notes from the tapes and transcriptions to help identify emergent themes. The researchers scrutinized the transcripts to reach agreement on significant themes displayed in the interview transcripts.

Data representation and analysis

While rooted in a grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967), this structured qualitative study incorporates elements of narrative inquiry. In the discussion of data analysis, we follow Polkinghorne' (1995) approach by melding the text into thematic groupings, yet also sharing components of what he terms "narrative analysis," that is, representing on the page a storied account of people's lives. The transcripts were grouped, as Clandinin and Murphy (2007, p. 632) suggest, around "topical threads," with patterned themes derived from analysis of the transcripts, presenting an ongoing dialogue between the

general and the specific to provide illustration and context. The bricolage of instances, events and resulting themes that emerge from the interviews is brought together in a unifying interpretation.

Following Miles and Huberman (1994), analysis of the interviews unfolded in a continuous, iterative process. Transcript content was analyzed for emergent themes, which were sorted into relevant categories. The notes taken during the interviews and from transcriptions were then organized and integrated, and the themes further refined. Finally, a conceptual framework was created within which the interview data could be interpreted.

To aid in theme identification and analysis, the qualitative study software Nvivo11® MAC, by QSR International was used to categorize themes from the interview transcripts, in the following sequence of steps:

Initial coding. First, transcripts were read and reread by two of the three researchers, and initial content codes developed and assigned to each substantive statement made in response to a given structured interview question, for each participant/interviewee. Content codes were revised (renamed/refined) as necessary through the systematic coding process of the transcripts. Codes were compared across researchers and revised as needed. The researchers also analyzed the field notes taken from each interview not directly captured in the transcriptions and cross-referenced them against key statements from the transcriptions. Next, textural and structural descriptions of how the participants experienced the phenomenon were derived from the statements and themes. By identifying core themes and elements that were derived from the interviews with the assistance of the software application, the "essence" of the phenomenon was identified.

Identification of emergent themes. As initial content coding continued, consistent themes began to emerge and were created as "parent nodes" within NVivo, with content codes becoming "child nodes" in a hierarchical organization. NVivo allows multiple coding at single and multiple levels, combination and revision of codes without loss of more fine-grained designations, as well as searches within and across participants. After the interviews were completed, transcribed and analyzed, four core themes from the discussions were identified. These themes included trust building with team members, conflict resolution techniques, leadership principles for the virtual and non-virtual setting and coaching and organizational support opportunities specific to the VT manager.

Findings

Trust in virtual teams

Three sub-themes of trust became apparent from the interviews:

- interviewees recognized that a high-trust climate with direct line team members was foundational for overall team performance;
- interviewees used innovative techniques to develop a high level of personal trust with their direct reports; and
- interviewees noted the importance of building trust with direct reports quickly, defined in the literature as "swift trust" by Crisp and Jarvenpaa (2013).

These sub-themes are detailed below.

Trust as the foundation of performance. Early in the interviews, it was apparent that the managers of these VTs made a strong, positive association between building trust with individual team members and high levels of team performance. Trust that team members have for their managers may include speaking up on their behalf when necessary,

availability to answer questions or resolve concerns and understanding that sporadic personal challenges can hamper delivery of consistent results; whereas trust that managers have for their team members may include overcoming roadblocks to successful project completion. Dan provides an example when he stated:

> And I think trust also goes to knowing that no matter what happens your team members and your boss is going to have your back. . .What people tell me and the people on the team have repeatedly told me this that I always have their backs and even if they do something wrong I will support them to the rest of the company and then work through what needs to get fixed just between me and them. So, I placed big emphasis on never throwing someone under the bus on the team and backing them a 1,000 per cent. So, I think that over time really, really builds up trust.

Also, Mike stated, "I can't imagine having a highly performing organization team without trust being a core. Trust a value, a core value and a core reality which it is." Nathan remarked of his team, "In general they are a highly effective team. The reason why they've gotten there is because that there is a high level of trust. . ." David outlined the criticality of trust for his VT, "Trust is one of the most important things that any manager or any team has to have. Trust is massively important to success of any high-powered and well-functioning team. . ." Being able to build a strong level of trust extended beyond the current team to as early as the hiring practice. As Charles mentioned:

> My number one criteria is to earn trust. When I hire it's the number one item I focus on. I'm a firm believer in if you're really good at what you do and you're not a trust owner, it doesn't matter.

For Charles, the trust element was so critical that if he questioned the trust capacity of potential new members to the team he would not hire them. Nonetheless, as David said:

> Sometimes obviously I need to push them in terms of timelines or the approach because one of the negatives of getting people to work together is that sometimes you get into Groupthink mode. . . So you get to breakup Groupthink mode. But in general they are a highly effective team and the reason why they've gotten there is because that there is a high level of trust and there is that high level of autonomy that they feel like they can do anything, they don't need me there to help them and I don't need to micromanage them. So that becomes, that makes my job is a virtual manager much easier.

Though interviewees highlighted additional areas contributing to the team's performance, having a high-trust level with direct reports was consistently reported. Importantly, the emphasis was placed on trust despite the acknowledgement that high levels of trust were much more difficult to achieve in a virtual setting than in a co-located setting. As Nathan stated, "Building trust as a leader, a virtual leader, you cannot just take someone out for lunch or for a drink after work." To respond to the reality of the virtual world, managers of the teams consistently mentioned the need to work very hard to find innovative ways to build personal levels of trust with their direct reports.

Personal trust innovations in the virtual world. When asked about the specific skills needed to build personal levels of trust with their reports, the interviewees all admitted it was easier to do so in an in-person environment. Rick noted:

> One of the most important things about in-person is that it can build the relationship so much easier. You gain the benefit of the various elements of communication that go far beyond simply the words that are exchanged – all the body language, all the tones and facial gestures.

Mary expressed similar sentiment stating, "You can't see each other and you're not in the room with each other all the time. Email and phone conversations don't pick up on some of the nuances that in-person or person-to-person contact does." Because of the virtual setting,

those interviewed expressed that they made a consistent and strong effort to find innovative ways in which to build a high level of personal trust, with many taking advantage of advanced technology tools to do so.

Rick derived a novel idea first introduced as an exploratory project, formulating a weekly video blog that was distributed to team members. It quickly became a must-have for his group, providing a lens into his personal life. He explained:

> I do the video as another element of communication. It's my personality: They often have some level of an edge to them, either a humorist edge or a topical edge. They have ranged from my hobbies and my interests like skiing to interviews with team members to interviews with people who are not directly team members. . .It became a demand, like we want a video every week [. . .]

Rachel uses a social networking application to personally connect with her team members and build trust among the team. She stated, "The kind of trust application we use for the management team is WhatsApp. . .We use it to share a picture of the kids. . .pictures of the Thanksgiving turkey and where one is going for Christmas. . ." Many of those interviewed expressed how in the co-located world they could easily take their team members out to lunch, buy them coffee or sponsor a team-building happy hour event. However, they could not easily replicate a similar act to build personal trust in the virtual context. James compensated by setting up virtual lunches, turning on his video conference system while his colleagues in London ate the lunch he ordered for them. He remarked:

> They'll set up a Skype call in a conference room. I'll order in lunch and say I'm going to call in for a couple minutes to see how you guys are doing. How are the Olympics or how's your soccer team doing? I think that builds trust and they recognize that.

On the rare opportunities, Mary interacts in-person with all members of her remote team. She will also frequently meet with her team members' families over a meal. She noted, "Really creating personal connection points is important to deepen the relationships and has an element to building trust." These managers continually looked for ways to strengthen the personal levels of trust with their team members as they did not have the advantage of proximity to build close relationships with them on a daily basis. As Rachel stated, "In a virtual environment, it's really, really hard because you don't see the person. You are engaged on a weekly basis but then if you don't meet up regularly, things become more distant. Building trust is really the constant connection."

Swift trust and the virtual team. The interviewees realized as they gained more experience in working with VTs they needed to find ways to build trust quickly with new team members. The majority cited the importance of partnering new hires with current team members in their location for a shadowing and mentoring experience as they could not be on-site themselves. Nathan remarked:

> When a new employee comes in, I buddy them up. . .In the process of shadowing, those people get to know each other. You kind of get a kick start in relationship building. I'll follow up with both the buddy and the new employee a week later. I want them to feel like, I'm not hiring this person to do more work for me. I'm hiring this person to be part of the team so that we can all succeed.

James operates in a similar way stating, "I'll set up shadowing sessions where there'll be a one-on-one or a small group, where this individual can sit with, shadow, view the day-to-day, ask questions, and start to build those relationships. . ." Charles does the same, remarking, "I assign to the new person a mentor who can help them with

whatever they need." In the virtual context, team managers provided a proxy for the support they individually could traditionally provide in an on-site setting by using other team members who may be co-located with the new hires.

VT managers also leverage socialization into the company to build trust quickly. Rachel's policy was to get the new hire ingrained with the company culture from the first day. She commented, "In the virtual world, a hiring manager often never sees the person that they're hiring. We see them often from the first day (at the company)... We get them to headquarters...They get to know their manager, boss, their peers and the other managers." James had a similar strategy in place working very hard to embrace new hires in the company at the early stages which built trust. He stated, "I work to have their calendar booked up with meetings with me, meetings with others and the organization. They feel immediately ingrained in what they're doing, immediately ingrained in the organization." Though none of the interviewees admitted they had a perfect system for building swift trust at the early stages of employment with new team members, the majority realized its importance in the virtual setting.

Conflict and conflict resolution in virtual teams

Conflict and conflict resolution techniques were explored in the interview and three core sub-themes became apparent:

- Managers used various styles of conflict management techniques to resolve conflicts among the team rather than favoring one (i.e. adaptive conflict management).
- Managers emphasized team members resolving conflicts independently without management involvement.
- All managers stressed the importance of coming together to resume team goals following conflict resolution.

Adaptive conflict management. Managers referring to style, structure and technique described multiple approaches to resolving conflict, whether by phone, a virtual platform, email or in person. For instance, Nathan stated, "It really depends on not my style but the team member style. And I try to adapt based on what their style is." Rick had a similar view remarking, "I could use any and all...You use different techniques for different structures, different folks." Though the resolution style varied from conflict to conflict, several of those interviewed mentioned their preference to deliver difficult information in an in-person or telephone format rather than via email communication. As David remarked, "I just pick up the phone and call people...It's simple to get into rising conflicts just over email...I use the telephone as the conflict resolution tool."

Managers also noted a strong inclination to ensure that conflicts are prevented from worsening. Charles mentioned, "I definitely do not avoid..." while Rachel stated, "It's definitely not avoiding...It's talking it through." James agreed, "You have got to talk about it, you have got to work together, you have got to communicate. It's the only way you're going to work through it. To let something sit to fester, it's just going to end poorly."

Conflict resolution independence. Without being able to mediate conflicts in person because of their proximity, VT managers leaned heavily on their team members to resolve conflicts without their involvement. Rachel put it bluntly, "The only two people that can solve this problem are the two people that have the problem. So, can

you please call each other? If you can't resolve it I'm happy to get on a call with you." Mary used similar tactics when she discussed two members in conflict, "It was forcing them to pair together, have individual conversations to ask the questions and get under the hood of the car as to what the real problem was." Nathan had a similar method:

> I'll try to have them resolve it first. If it's a business-related conflict I'll expose it. If they can't solve it themselves we are getting in a room and I'm calling attention to the elephant. And I'm going to put them in a position where they need to resolve it.

David took it a step further, forcing individuals in conflict to work together on projects. He explained:

> If they have to learn how to work together to achieve something, invariably they will learn more about each other. Both people will realize that the person that they're collaborating with is actually a really good person and they may just see the world a little bit differently or have a different communication style. The collaboration just helps people to see other people as human beings working through a project together.

In leading a VT, without the benefit of face-to-face interaction, the managers found in many cases that the best way to resolve a team member conflict was by asking the team members to resolve their differences on their own, only stepping in when a common resolution could not be found independently.

Team alignment following resolution. The majority of those interviewed stressed the importance of all team members aligning with the decisions made after the conflict was resolved. If this did not occur, there was a likelihood overall team performance could be impacted negatively. Mike stated:

> You are on a team and you need to make a decision. You should disagree; you should argue. You should have diverse thoughts and share diverse experiences so people can bring their particular expertise and insights to the table. . .Once the decision has been made then everybody needs to get behind that decision.

Mary shared a similar sentiment, "If somebody vehemently disagrees, that person has to come along for the ride even though they may disagree." The VT managers stressed how vital it was for the team to move forward aligned as a unit. Without the benefit of sitting next to their colleagues in an in-person setting, VT managers emphasized the need to communicate in forms outside of email, in which messages could be easily misinterpreted. For instance, James relied heavily on video conferencing to make sure everyone is in alignment. He remarked:

> At this point, 75-85% of the calls I make are videoconference calls. There's a mandate I have that they do the same, that if they're on a call with another group through their machine, turn on your camera. The more in-person time you have, the more you get to know them, their expressions, their little nuances, as it's easy to send an aggressive email because in theory, no one's on the other side.

Overall, team managers did not leave conflicts unresolved, used various strategies to resolve them and made sure team members were fully aligned with decisions.

Leadership in virtual teams

Though the interview protocol primarily focused on the managers' team leadership behavior to build trust and resolve conflict, several questions also examined overall VT performance

by probing leadership principles, behaviors and traits the managers displayed with their team members. These can be broadly divided into two categories:

(1) leadership practices in any setting; and

(2) leadership practices in a virtual setting. Both practices deserve closer attention.

Transparency, recognition, mentoring and coaching: leadership in any setting. Interviewees demonstrated transparency in myriad ways. For instance, Rachel was transparent about her priorities that "There are a few times of the year where you cannot count on me. If there is a soccer world championship, I'm not there for you if the German team is playing." Charles was transparent about his virtual work environment:

> I've told [people] that I work in my basement. I've told them that my wife, the kids are upstairs. . .Not shying away from being transparent with what your work life is proposing. . .The more you can do that, the more people can identify with what you're going through.

Another common theme among the interviewees was recognition of individual team member achievements contributing to overall team success. Mike mentioned, "I'm a huge believer that it's my job to get every penny that I can for the people on my team for their compensation. I fight tooth and nail for that and I try to make sure that my team understands that." In contrast, other managers sought ways to recognize their top performers in non-financial ways when additional resources may not be available. It could be as simple as calling out the achievements of his team members to his superiors as David noted:

> I really love to give credit where credit is due. When people do a great job on the team and they (upper management) say hey David, you've done an awesome job, I will say yes, but it was because of this person. It's because of Erin, it's because of Cindy, it's because of John, and they're the guys who really got this work done. I do that overtly via email or through verbal communications.

James gives his individual team members corporate awards for performance whenever possible, explaining that it builds comradery. Though each had their own way of accomplishing it, the majority of VT managers interviewed made sure to reward team members that contributed to team performance as frequently as possible.

Finally, the interviewees realized they needed to consistently coach and mentor their team members in various ways depending on their individual needs and talents. Charles encouraged a high-performing individual contributor on his team to expand her ownership and influence, potentially outside of her day job, to make a strong impact on the organization. Mary and David both frequently coached individual team members on conflict management, trying to ensure that individuals understand that there are different approaches to solving problems. David confronted two team members on a recent disagreement: "Let me tell you what I observe is happening. I see you two as the two strongest people with the strongest opinions and you're not listening to one another. You're a mirror image of yourself and you're not listening to one another." With a more seasoned team, the coaching for Rick had the role of a feedback loop for him to make sure he was on track with his messaging. He commented, "I tend to get some reverse mentoring from the managers on my team. I ask, tell me how you think the team is receiving these messages?

That's very helpful." All managers engaged in coaching, though their particular approaches varied.

Goal communication, presence and sharing leadership: leading virtually. In addition to developing trust and healthy conflict management practices within their teams, interviewees discussed additional management and leadership practices they believed contributed to overall VT performance. For example, when leading the team in a virtual context, interviewees stressed the importance of having clear, consistent goals for individual team members and the overall team. Progress toward these goals needed to be communicated to the team frequently, as Rick noted. Nathan agreed, stating that his main indicator of performance for his VT was clarity on mission and measures of success. Rachel also stressed clarity for goals in her communication to the VT, "People need to understand the goal they are moving towards, why they are moving towards something, what does success look like? Objective setting, making clear how people are getting measured." Overall, interviewees repeatedly remarked on the importance of communicating consistent goals and progress toward those goals.

Transparency also helped team members to see how their work contributed to overall team performance. Mary explained that transparency is especially important when delivering difficult messages to team members on progress toward goals. James commented:

> I look at it at the team and individual level. I then report on how much time they're spending in various projects against the amount of work that I'm able to measure and report on. And from there, it's transparent to the whole team. I share that during a huddle, three times a week. We track it. We trend it. And at the end of the month that dashboard is escalated up to senior management.

David operated in a similar fashion for his monthly calls with his team. He remarked:

> We do weekly team meetings where everybody talks about the projects they're working on. They give us the top three things that they did for the last week and the top three things that they're going to do in the coming week. It helps people focus on the things that are important for the week and the things that are not important. For the folks who are not performing, they are either going to have to step up or they're going to show that they're not really doing a whole lot. . .

As the virtual manager has limited exposure in-person with his direct reports, those interviewed also described *how* they communicated with their team members. For instance, Charles noted:

> I'm always focused on my tone. Managers need to focus on tone, tone of emails, and tone of calls. I am really cognizant of making sure this person can see me through the phone or see me through email in how I write or how I talk. It is not necessarily the what, but the how, how you position, how you are framing things.

David preferred to use the telephone to connect with his team members noting, "I just pick up the phone and call people. . ." and indicating that conflicts are more likely to emerge over email. Those interviewed had mixed feelings on preferred communication style for the remote environment, be it video conference, text, instant message or other form. However, the majority emphasized how important it was to pay attention to how messages were communicated versus simply what was communicated.

Many interviewees also mentioned the importance of frequent communication and maintaining presence. Mary noted that strong communication was her number one indicator of team performance, remarking, "I think it is communication. It is talking to each other on a continuous basis, to make sure we're not missing anything and that we are continuing to or

continuously sort of refreshing and energizing the relationship." Nathan went further in describing maintaining presence:

> The key to any sort of virtual environment or virtual matrix teams is over communication. Sometimes a lot of people don't do it because it requires more time to do that. But to me it has been the single most important lesson of managing remote or across time zones or locations because it accomplishes. . .clarity of what it is that you are, that you want to get done. It also creates presence. You are not out of sight, out of mind if you are always talking to those people.

Charles agreed that "being present is really important as a remote manager. . .Being overly present, actually. If you are remote you need to be online. That's why being on instant messenger is really important, they feel like you're right there, being receptive and responsive in a timely fashion." James, as a manager of a global VT, also underscored the importance of being consistently available for his team members, who are located in various time zones around the world, even though they fell in non-traditional working hours for him. For the virtual managers interviewed, being available to team members, being careful in how messages were delivered and being cognizant of how timely they were delivered all minimized confusion and contributed to greater performance for the group.

Finally, several interviewees described sharing leadership duties with team members who were located elsewhere. Importantly, Charles indicated the need to enlist team members whom the manager trusts to bridge remoteness. Overall, the virtual managers interviewed learned that they needed to distribute leadership duties to trusted team members to aid in overall team performance. For James and Mike, who lead a technology firm's analyst relations department, sharing leadership responsibilities meant growth and exposure for some of the members on their teams.

Coaching and organizational support in leading virtual teams

Interviewees also pointed out a lack of coaching for successful leadership practices for VTs. Nathan noted he was "self-taught, self-developed." James dove a bit deeper on the topic:

> Organizations, and mine included, don't know what they're doing to train virtual teams. We have asked this, for this, specifically for years. They just haven't committed to it yet unfortunately. I was part of a team leader program and through the program, we kept asking for coursework for virtual management and we haven't gotten that.

Mike similarly noted, "The total amount of time that I have had to train on how to work remotely or virtually or with a virtual team would probably be less than an hour total in my entire career. . ." Even Rick, who has guided a VT for over 10 years stated: "We don't typically train people, just because that's kind of the way it's done. So, you learn it as part of coming here. You're always evolving it." Rick concentrated on the technology that can enable virtual work but not a holistic view on best practices for the virtual manager. Mary offered that "It would be nice if there were a support group or training around working virtually, shared work processes and things. We sort of made our own way. . ." David said: "In both of my management training classes that I attended in 2017, almost all the managers had remote employees, but yet it was not addressed overtly in the training that we did." The majority of those interviewed view the lack of coaching for VT managers as a gap that has not been addressed by their current employer. Consequently, they have had to individually develop core skills in leading a VT, primarily by trial and error and experiential learning.

For a summary of successful practices that VT leaders have implemented to build trust and manage conflict, please see Table 1.

Expect a relationship of trust	"My assumption is you are going to do your job and you are going to do it great and I'm not going to lord over you, but I'm here to help if you need it. Obviously, there are certain things I'm going to check on from time to time either because my management needs to know or because it's simply a way for me to stay attuned. But unless you tell me otherwise, my assumption is that everything's great"
Be transparent in information sharing	"When there's an issue that's affecting the team's ability to accomplish their goals, being transparent, saying what you can, saying it quickly and saying it in one-to-one if you can do that or with smaller groups so that you . . . address questions in a safe environment. . . and really get to what and how it is impacting them; how are they interpreting each other. . ." ". . .the first technique is being very explicit in communicating . . .it is something that is or can or should build over time based on experience and based on evidence" "we have very frank discussions that everyone is encouraged respectfully, of course, to disagree, to put any issues that they have on the table. And we do that sometimes in a group setting and sometimes it's done in a one-to-one or a few of us together in a smaller group to address conflict or to address disagreements"
Communicate excessively for clarity	"I actually interact with the team constantly. . . I have one-on-ones with every employee every week. I have a staff meeting every week and then we have a bunch of meetings. But I also employ all those other communication mediums to talk to them; text message, Slack, IM. . .You want it to be as if you were in the office. Now that's obviously a lot easier for me to do with the employees that are in the same time zone with me, but that's kind of the intent of over communication. The other intent of over communication is making sure everybody understands what it is that we need to do. And in my experience, if you don't over communicate and because you are not there what happens is, what you in your mind wanted the team to go do, in their mind was very different. Because you weren't there drawing on a whiteboard. You weren't there talking to them until you felt like they got it in terms of body language. A lot of people's reactions with their bosses nod their head to say yes. But they really don't understand it and then they go off and do what they thought was the right thing but really it wasn't and then you just wasted x amount of hours. So to me those are the primary reasons and why I think it's so important to over communicate"
Be consistent in communication	"the most important way one can engender trust is by being reliably consistent with their commitments and promises. . .. So I think it's communicating the same information to everybody at the same time. . . making time to have subsequent conversations because those changes might impact one person more than another"
Address conflict immediately	"I've unfortunately learned this the hard way and the only way – only way to quickly resolve it is through communication, is having that. . . 'open door' even though you're not co-located. You have to nip it immediately. If you don't, then the trust goes out the door. . ."
Coach and guide employee's development	"If I'm asking someone to take a difficult project that might be a stretch task for them, that they don't have the knowledge, they're not comfortable, I'll step in, I'll work with them, let them lead it but I'll be there to support him through it. I will also show them best practices of cases where I or other leaders in the organization have had success, whether it's presenting a dashboard or reports or how to generate data or analyze it. I try to show these best practices to my team to build the trust"

(*continued*)

Table 1.
VT leadership practices that build trust and manage conflict to drive team performance

	"I try and work with each person on the team on honing in on things that people love to do and do best and giving them an opportunity to do as much of that as they feel comfortable with, while at the same time giving them challenges outside of their comfort zone, but trying to target in on the bull's eye of what they are best at accomplishing"
Set up team member buddy and/or shadow system	"I'll set up shadowing sessions where there'll be a one-on-one or a small group, where this individual can sit with, shadow, view the day-to-day, ask questions, and start to build those relationships"
Support autonomy	"...someone that has more tenure or a higher skill set is going to need a different level of support . . . I don't need to handhold someone who knows what they're doing. I think the more hand-holding I do, the less trust they're going to have in me. They want me to step back, know that they know what they're doing, that they can manage the project or manage the task or procedure, and let them see it through to the end"
Recognize high performance	"Three out of the four quarters someone on my team was given an award being recognized in a larger team for the work that they've done. So, I think that's another way to really build trust that people are being recognized for the work that they're doing. And then finally, whenever there are executives that come to events and my people are working at those events, I always make sure to introduce them to the executive and say, this is how this person is helping better your product or your product area become more successful"
Advocate for one another	"I would 100% trust that I can lean on each and every one of my direct reports because I know them. I would trust them to be my representative..."
Create personal connections with and among team members	"And then there are individual one-to-one that the team has with each of the other team members to ensure that they are connecting on a regular basis to connect the dots to make sure where we're not missing anything and that we are continuing to or continuously sort of refreshing and energizing the relationship"

Table 1.

Discussion

Prior research has indicated that building high levels of trust is essential to improving overall team performance for the VT (Brahm & Kunze, 2012; Breuer *et al.*, 2016; Gilson *et al.*, 2014) and building swift trust as defined by Crisp and Jarvenpaa (2013) can aid in overall team performance. In this study, the VT managers interviewed explained that trust building is indeed foundational to team functioning and the most important element of overall VT performance. These VT managers found innovative ways to achieve high levels of personal trust with their team members to optimize performance.

The study respondents also confirmed current literature noting that unresolved team conflicts were likely to negatively impact performance (Ayoko *et al.*, 2012; Ortiz de Guinea *et al.*, 2012; Wakefield *et al.*, 2008). In fact, VT leaders encouraged the expression of disagreements among team members, justifying conflict as essential for development and innovation. They characterized most of the disagreements among team members as task-oriented rather than relationship-oriented (Jehn, 1995). Nevertheless, the VT leaders describe resolving conflicts by adapting the manner in which they addressed the conflict to the needs of team members and the unique conflict situation. Finally, they noted the importance of all team members resuming their pursuit of team goals after the conflict had been resolved.

When it came to leadership skills, those interviewed practiced many techniques that have been shown to be associated with overall team performance in a traditional, co-located setting, including transparency with actions and behaviors (Vogelgesang, Leroy & Avolio, 2013). Recent literature in the leadership field has shown that managers who demonstrate high levels of communication transparency have higher

ratings of leadership effectiveness from their team members (Norman, Avolio & Luthans, 2010). A positive relationship has also been shown between leadership behavioral integrity transparency and follower work engagement and performance (Vogelgesang *et al.*, 2013). Sharing of leadership responsibilities (Srivastava, Bartol & Locke, 2006) and recognition of individual achievement (Luthans, 2000) are also important. Delivering recognition to followers has been shown in the field to be an effective leadership tool that can drive organizational performance (Luthans, 2000). With regards to sharing leadership responsibilities, previous research in the area of empowering leadership, which includes coaching, has been positively related to knowledge sharing and team efficacy, which both positively relate to team performance (Srivastava *et al.*, 2006). However, those interviewed also used and stressed behaviors that they believed were uniquely tied or more critical to team performance in the virtual setting. The behaviors were not revolutionary, cutting-edge new techniques but rather the mode in which the behavior was used, focusing on manager's tone, communication frequency with and presence among their team members. These managers understood that it was essential to be readily available to their team members, replicating a traditional work environment. They indicated that frequent and clear communication was critical as it reduced uncertainty and maintained team trust, leading to consistent high levels of VT performance.

Lastly, those interviewed indicated that their organization and senior management had failed to acknowledge and support their unique needs as VT leaders. This manifested itself through the lack of company-sponsored VT coaching programs, peer support groups, mentorship opportunities for team leaders and company manuals or documentation on how to lead VTs to drive overall team performance.

Call to action for the virtual team leader and the organization

VT leaders in this study indicated that building high levels of trust and effectively managing task and relationship conflict among their team members were essential to VT performance: they are interdependent practices ensuring that trust is maintained and developed. VT leaders noted that the strategies used were either self-taught or learned by trial and error during their time spent working in a virtual environment. They further indicated that their organizations and executive leaders had failed to acknowledge and support their unique needs as VT leaders. Altogether, the research findings of this study suggest a need for both the VT leader and the executive leadership of organizations that employ VT leaders to undertake certain measures to support the virtual team leader. These actions for both parties are summarized here:

Organizational support to drive virtual team performance

- Understand the unique needs of VT leaders to use core elements in driving VT performance.
- Provide organizational support for VT leaders and members to develop and apply skills and abilities to build trust and healthy conflict management strategies.
- Implement best in class coaching programs for leading VTs and fostering VT leader skills and abilities.
- Hire VT leaders and members with strong communication and conflict management skills.

- Initiate VT leader peer support groups within the organization.
- Encourage and reward participation in, application of and results from VT best practices.
- Assign existing VT leaders as mentors to new VT managers.

Virtual team leader/practitioner initiatives

- Participate in best in class coaching programs to learn VT core leadership practices that drive VT performance.
- Upon creation of the VT, bring all members together in face-to-face fashion to initiate "swift trust" concepts.
- Address conflict with time urgency and a direct, honest and transparent approach.
- Recognize, encourage and reward VT member participation in, application of and results from VT best practices.

Limitations

There are several limitations to the findings of this study. First, though the sample size of eight participants is within the suggested range of three to ten participants for a phenomenological study (Creswell, 2014), the findings require further testing with larger sample sizes to make decisive conclusions. Second, the findings here were qualitative in nature. Future studies would benefit from investigating VT leadership using quantitative methods. Third, participants, though employed by different companies, were also limited to the technology industry. Leaders of high-performing VTs in other industries could offer differing results. Fourth, participants were nominated to participate in the study by human resource professionals and not by a scientific, quantitative method to judge performance. Finally, there is still no consensus on which metrics define a VT leader/manager.

Implications for research

This paper also suggests several research possibilities. First, as a general implication, more can be done to incorporate even broader literature on trust theory. Perhaps additional practices in virtual trust building can be identified beyond those that we have examined in this study. The fact that our results showed so much influence on the importance of building trust suggests the value of using such a lens in theory, practice and research on virtual leadership. Second, in this study, we have examined the importance and result of leadership practices in trust building and conflict management among team members from team leaders' perspectives. Adding perspectives from team members about trust building and conflict management would further our understanding of how VTs can effectively drive performance. Team member perspective would also provide insight into the power dynamics inherent within the team when conflict resolution was sought. Third, VT leaders through their team-building efforts achieved team and organizational loyalty, candor in communication, positive relationships and high employee performance. Although specific measurements were not collected, these characteristics were inferred based on the VT leader's reputation with their human resource department and through the accounts of the VT leaders themselves. Nonetheless, future studies using quantitative measurements for performance and larger sample sizes would bolster the findings of this study. Finally,

although this study has addressed building trust and conflict management as two factors that VT leaders use to drive performance, there are very likely other factors that merit further investigation.

Conclusion

The purpose of this study was to acquire first-person perspectives from VT leaders on the strategies implemented to drive VT performance, particularly related to building high levels of trust and managing conflict effectively. Those interviewed offered unique and varying perspectives on the strategies they use to drive performance. Our review of the literature suggested that altogether a high-trust climate with direct line team members along with successful conflict management is foundational for overall team performance. Our study supports these findings. In sum, this paper and studies reviewed in the literature suggest that trust-building and conflict management training in organizations leads to better performance outcomes. However, an equally important finding was that those interviewed received little formal support, including tools for guiding the VT toward positive performance outcomes, from their executive management and organization as a whole. This study proposes an active role that the virtual leader and the organization must take in ensuring that the VT has the opportunity to perform optimally. Adopting and executing on this call to action for VT leaders and their organizations has the potential to optimize performance of VTs in the future.

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