

Efficacious Characteristics and Leadership Practices of Virtual Team Leaders in Higher Education

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Introduction

- Dr. Erin Alward – DAA, University of Phoenix Central Florida Campus
- 17 years experience in higher education both Online and Campus

- Dr. Yvonne Phelps – VP, University of Phoenix Campus Services
- 20 years experience in higher education both Online and Campus

Problem and Significance

- Some higher education institutions have launched virtual teams without the necessary training and support due to the growth of online enrollment and support needs
- Due to this, many online teams fail as often as they succeed (Anantatmula & Thomas, 2010; Ogren, 2016).
- Dearth of information on virtual leadership in the complex higher education environment
- College administrators could benefit from this study as they strive to build virtual teams to support their online enrollment efforts
- This study will add to the limited existing literature on virtual leadership in higher education specifically

Research Study Participants

- Virtual leaders who were currently working, or had worked, as a virtual team leader within the higher education environment in the United States
- Purposeful sampling of 10 virtual leaders
- Administrative leaders who supervised virtual teams of staff and faculty members
- Leaders in this population had current or previous responsibility for the remote management of five or more direct reports
- In the role as leader, participants had been directly responsible for the coaching, training, and development of direct reports

Themes

- Through the process of horizontalization, 24 individual themes with 7 invariant constituents made up the composite description of the leader's experiences
 - Training and Development
 - Trust
 - Emotional Intelligence
 - Communication/Team Building/Technology
 - Employee Recognition/Motivation
 - Leadership Styles
 - Virtual Leadership Competencies Unique to Higher Education

Training and Development and Trust

- All 10 (100%) of the participants interviewed shared that they had no formal training to lead virtual teams
- That being said, when probed further participants drew upon their past experiences in the virtual world. Many shared that they used their experiences as a virtual student or faculty member to assist them in leading virtual teams
- Trust was identified as a significant theme as a result of the interviews
- “The quality of a virtual leader can be summed up in a single word, and that being trust; the tendency is to micromanage because the person is not physically there; if you hire good people and you trust them you know the job is getting done.”

Emotional Intelligence, Communication, Team Building, Technology

- Emotional intelligence was vital as a virtual leader competency
- “Emotional intelligence is more significant than any technical competency I have in my toolbox.”
- Technology can be the lifeline that virtual team members cling to; therefore the technology must be collaborative and reliable
- However, it is not a substitute for strong virtual leadership skills
- Team Building; meeting once a year was an ideal practice but budget concerns surfaced as a recurring theme
- Unique team building ideas (virtual wine tastings, food bank volunteering, virtual Secret Santa and off site meetings) were shared as successful events

Employee Recognition, Motivation and Leadership Styles

- Examples shared included recognizing birthdays, work anniversaries, baby announcements, Christmas cards
- Strong focus on getting to know employees to understand their motivation and building a team culture
- Trust in their leadership styles; no micro-management unless needed
- Transformational, Situational, and Servant Leadership tenants
- Understanding that face-to-face virtual leadership styles will not always transfer
- Not being in the day-to-day operations of their virtual employees

Virtual Leadership Traits Unique to Higher Education

- Varied results as many participants had only led in the higher education space
- Several participants shared that leading virtual employees was different in higher education due to academic freedom and the makeup of faculty (highly educated and academic freedom/entitlement)
 - Even though higher education and professional settings share some common markers with respect to virtual management, higher education differs in two very important markers: entitlement and academic freedom.
- Regulatory concerns that are found within higher education
- Higher education professionals, especially tenured faculty, feel a sense entitlement to a permanent position. So, unlike the professional sector, there is no job retention leverage

Recommendations and Future Research

- A recommendation for future research would be to duplicate this study focusing on virtual leaders attached to a particular educational institution. Findings from such a study could shed light on how specific institutions train and prepare (or do not) their new virtual leaders
- Qualitative research should be conducted with the employees being led by virtual academic leaders; administrative and faculty.
 - Input from the employees being led by virtual leaders can provide a wholly different perspective and contribute to the body of literature surrounding successful, academic, virtual leadership behaviors. What may be assumed as a successful leadership trait to the leader may prove to be unappealing to the virtual employee and faculty member on the receiving end of the behavior

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