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

Dr. Erin Alward, DAA, University of Phoenix, Central Florida Campus

Dr. Yvonne Phelps, VP Academic Affairs, University of Phoenix
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
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
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
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
• 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.
References


• Curry, S. (2016). *Effects of the Virtual Environment on Online Faculty Perceptions of Leadership: A Grounded Theory Study*


Evaluate Sessions and Win!

- Download and open OLC Conferences mobile app
- Navigate to specific session to evaluate
- Select “Evaluate Session” on session details screen (located under session type and track)
- Complete session evaluation*

*Each session evaluation completed (limited to one per session) = one contest entry

**Five (5) $25 gift cards** will be awarded to five (5) individuals

Must submit evals using the OLC Conferences mobile app or website