A STUDY ON CONFLICT MANAGEMENT BEHAVIOUR AND ITS REPERCUSSIONS ON VIRTUAL TEAM EFFECTIVENESS

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Abstract :

With the Computer Mediated Communications being the highlight of modern work world in a mad rush to accomplish targets efficiently in a technology driven world, it becomes essential to study how Virtual Teams function in the absence of social presence of its non-collocated members. Arising concerns thereof would be inevitably lack of trust, absence of team cohesion and inefficient conflict management trends that could take a toll on effective functioning of virtual teams. Team members generally respond to conflicts arising therefrom, not as a result of personal remorse, but as something that springs out as virtual teams start working on their projects. This could be related to taking decisions related to their assignment and in the absence of physical teams, how member using CMC deal with conflicting work related issues in their teams.

This paper is primarily a study of Conflict Management Behaviour among virtual team members and its subsequent repercussions on team effectiveness. To this end, a 19 item questionnaire on Conflict Management Behaviour was administered to respondents residing in Bangalore, who have been part of virtual teams to gain insight as to how they have responded to conflicts in their teams. The questionnaire measured 5 Behaviour styles namely avoidance, accommodation, competition, collaboration and compromise. The respondents were required to answer the items using the likert scale pattern ranging on a 5 point scale, with 1 standing for "almost never" and 5 for "almost always". The demographic parameters considered for the study would be age, sex, years of virtual team experience. The findings of the study can also be extended to explore implications of Conflict Management on the strength of team cohesiveness and Virtual Team Citizenship Behaviour in the long run.

KEYWORDS : Virtual team, Team effectiveness, Conflict Management Behaviour, Computer Mediated Communication, Team Cohesiveness

Introduction

Virtual teams that operate asynchronously must do without mechanisms that synchronous teams have to coordinate their activity and manage conflict. New pressures facing organizations have ledmany to suggest the use of global virtual teams. Simultaneously, recent technological advances are enabling new ways of structuring, processing, and distributing work and communication activities to overcome boundaries of time and space (Boudreau, Loch, Robey, & Straub 1998). In particular, new technologies are providing the means for dispersed (different place), asynchronous (different time) virtual work. Establishing links and connections is no longer a question of technical feasibility. The key question is, how can organizations create virtual teams that work effectively?

Extant theory of how teams operate is largely based on work done in non-virtual teams. Among the taken for granted assumptions in theory from non-virtual teams is that teams operate more or less in the same space and time; i.e., synchronously. Synchronous communication is assumed in most treatments

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of team functioning - for instance, in understanding how teams manage internal conflicts that could impede team functioning. Yet virtual teams cannot necessarily rely on traditional social cues and mechanisms, leaving them without a crucial mechanism for handling problems of team functioning. In such cases, the use of temporal coordination mechanisms imposed upon a team can be valuable because it can substitute to some extent for the cues that would naturally be available to members in a traditional face-to-face context (McGrath 1991; Ocker et al. 1995-1996).

While there seems to be great potential for virtual teams, there are several fundamental sociotechnical difficulties in execution. Synchronous interaction is an orderly process wherein verbal and nonverbal cues help regulate the flow of conversation, facilitate turn-taking, provide immediate feedback, and convey subtle meanings. In lean asynchronous communication environments, the conveyance of cues is hindered, feedback is delayed, and there are often interruptions or long pauses in communication (McGrath 1991). In an asynchronous discussion, the norm is for many topics to be active at the same time with team members making contributions at different times (possibly on different topics) (Ocker et al. 1996). This can increase information overload and may reduce the synergy of the team if there is no linkage among the responses. In addition, long time lapses between communication events can lead to discontinuous and seemingly disjointed discussions (Ocker et al. 1996). This suggests that a significant challenge facing virtual teams is coordinating the temporal patterns of group behavior (McGrath 1991; Warkentin, Sayeed, & Hightower 1997).

Conflict in Virtual Teams

In virtual teams, the dispersed asynchronous communication context renders many of the usual forms of social control in teams inoperable (e.g., direct supervision, physical proximity, shared experiences, social trust) (Jarvenpaa et al. 1998). Virtual teams typically communicate via technology that is lean, low in social presence, and low in interactivity (Zack 1993). In other words, a groupware system like Lotus Notes does not have the same capacity to convey the multiple cues that characterize human conversation. Gestures and nonverbal nuances, cues of social influence, symbolic content, and contextual cues are not captured or transmittable. This makes interaction and consensus building difficult (Straus 1996; Dennis 1996). As a result, effective communication in an asynchronous computer-mediated communication environment tends to require a great deal of effort (Smith & Vanacek 1990; Straus 1996). All of these communication and coordination difficulties create the potential for conflict in virtual teams that must be managed effectively (Jarvenpaa et al. 1998; Ocker et al. 1996; Turoff, Hiltz, Bahgat, &Rana 1993). Thus, while there are certainly many potential interesting factors to study about virtual teams, we focus on conflict management because it is a fundamental issue for effective virtual team performance given the inherent communication and coordination challenges they face.

1.2 Conflict Management Behavior

Past research has identified various behaviors manifested by team members during conflict (Ruble & Thomas 1976; Poole, Holmes, &DeSanctis 1991; Sambamurthy& Poole 1992; Miranda &Bostrom 1993-1994. We draw on work by Rahim (1983, 1992) and Thomas and Kilmann (1974) that delineates five conflict handling modes to describe conflict management in organizational work groups: avoidance, accommodation, competition, collaboration, and compromise.

Avoidance behavior is characterized by evasiveness and failure to confront other

parties. People demonstrating this behavior is apathetic toward conflicting points of view and outcomes in general. Accommodation behavior is characterized by an obliging concern for others. Competition behavior is characterized by each party pursuing his/her own interest without regard for others. This behavior involves concealment of information, competitiveness, and negative attitudes toward alternative solutions. Competitive interactions typically involve the use of power and domination as one party tries to force its views on the other. Collaboration behavior is characterized by attempts to identify and achieve outcomes that satisfy the interests of all parties involved. This behavior emphasizes openness to others' points of view, objective consideration of all information, and shared problem-solving toward a jointly optimal solution. Finally, compromise behavior is characterized by

intermediate concern for self and others. The parties acknowledge differences in preferences and then work toward settling on some intermediate position.

Need for the present study:

Increasing use of CMC in global scenario, subsequently leading to increase in Global Virtual Team, so understanding Conflict Management in this context is important. As virtual teams are said to be more effective than collocated teams, its essential for us to understand how or what makes it more efficient and in what context, is it only on the task performing side of it or is it also on the interpersonal exchange among virtual members.

Objectives of the study:

- To explore implications of demographic variations on Conflict Management styles of virtual team members.
- To identify predominant conflict management styles prevalent in virtual teams.

Hypothesis:

- (H 1) Difference in age does not influence Conflict Management Behaviour of virtual team members.
- (H 2) Male and female respondents will not differ in their styles of Conflict Management by virtue of their sex.
- (H 3) Years of Virtual Team Experience does not influence CMB of its members.
- (H 4) Predominant Conflict management styles would not exist to deal with conflicts.

Methodology:

Data was collected from 41 respondents who were part of Virtual Team, using a Conflict Management Behaviour Tool. Perceptions of conflict management behaviors were measured at the individual level because they represent the subjective viewpoint of each participant's expression of specific conflict management behaviors (Dennis & Kinney 1998). Nineteen measures for the five conflict management behaviors were adapted from Rahim (1983). The detailed questionnaire items are reported in the Appendix at the end of the paper. The participants had to answer all the 19 items measuring Behaviour styles for Conflict Management on a 5 point Likert Scale. The responses were scored and then subject to analysis using SPSS (version 14) to identify significant differences (if any) among respondents from virtual teams, based on demographic variations. The results were then tabulated and discussed here below.

RESULTS :

Table – I: Details of demographic variations of the sample.

Sl. No:	Demographic Variables	Classification of variables	N
1	Age	25-35	17
		35-45	24
2	Sex	Male	26
		Female	15
3	Years of experience in Virtual Team	0-5	19
		5-10	22

Table – II: Variants in Conflict Management (CM) Style of respondents based on age.

Dimensions of CM	Age (in years)	N	Mean	SD	t-value
Avoidance	25-35	17	6.05	3.28	1.54
	35-45	24	7.01	4.03	
Accommodation	25-35	17	9.03	2.23	.62
	35-45	24	10.81	1.89	
Competition	25-35	17	8.54	2.12	4.32**
	35-45	24	12.81	1.01	
Collaboration	25-35	17	10.71	4.31	2.03**
	35-45	24	4.97	5.02	
Compromise	25-35	17	5.02	1.03	1.18
	35-45	24	4.08	1.01	

Table – III: Influence of sex differences on Conflict Management Styles

Dimensions of CM	Sex	N	Mean	SD	t-value
Avoidance	Male	26	17.02	2.98	.81
	Female	15	12.03	3.68	
Accommodation	Male	26	4.91	2.16	2.86**
	Female	15	3.98	2.11	
Competition	Male	26	12.21	.90	.454
	Female	15	11.09	1.22	
Collaboration	Male	26	8.98	2.12	.62
	Female	15	9.12	1.85	
Compromise	Male	26	8.25	3.63	1.89*
	Female	15	5.92	2.51	

Table –IV: Variations in Conflict Management style based on years of experience in Virtual Teams (VT)

Dimensions of CM	Experience in VT	N	Mean	SD	t-value
Avoidance	0-5 years	16	6.28	3.81	3.05**
	5-10 years	25	8.39	3.99	
Accommodation	0-5 years	16	11.01	3.17	2.72**
	5-10 years	25	13.03	2.16	
Competition	0-5 years	16	5.05	3.81	.561
	5-10 years	25	5.03	3.19	
Collaboration	0-5 years	16	17.69	4.32	2.72**
	5-10 years	25	18.05	3.51	
Compromise	0-5 years	16	5.52	3.19	2.63**
	5-10 years	25	6.83	3.71	

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS:

Table – I shows the breakup of the sample based on the demographic variations of the participants of the study on various parameters.

Table – II highlights the difference in conflict management behaviour of the respondents with reference to the age of the respondents. It is evident that older employees were high on competition compared to their younger counterparts, indicating that they had a tendency to use power to win in a competitive situation, and use authority to get decisions made in their favor. They report being highly relied on their expertise and are firm in pursuing their side of the issue. This style of Conflict Management may not be very instrumental in effective functioning of virtual teams, as these teams are more performance oriented and are highly focused on accomplishing projects by set deadlines.

On the other hand, when it came to using collaboration as a Conflict Management Strategy, it is been observed in this study that the younger respondents used it more effectively than their senior counterparts. This is a positive trend in that most virtual teams tend to work for a common goal and personal differences do not matter much to the members of virtual teams as there is the absence of personal presence in virtual environments. Keeping this in the back of mind, one can deduce that there is not much scope for personal grudge or ego issues to crop up, as interpersonal relationships is almost stands the last on the criteria of virtual teams. Therefore the hypothesis (H-1) stands rejected which states that Difference in age does not influence Conflict Management Behaviour of virtual team members.

Table III shows the difference in conflict management styles based on the sex of the respondents. It has been observed from this study that male team members have been more accommodative in their approach to their peers, by giving into their wishes and have also gone along with the suggestions of their team members. This could reduce the efficiency of the team as they may not articulate their view points on the feasibility of the project. On the other hand it has been noted that women respondents sought middle ground for breaking deadlocks and were compromising than being

accommodative. However, both Behaviour patterns appear similar on some grounds, but this study helps identify a thin line of difference between the two sexes.

Table IV shows Variations in Conflict Management style based on years of experience in Virtual Teams (VT). It is evident from the study that respondents who have had more years of experience virtual teams, tend to indulge in avoidance behaviour, in which they have kept disagreement to themselves, basically to avoid unpleasant exchanges with my team mates. Even though this does not matter in terms of working in a virtual environment, as you may not know the individual in person, however over a period of time, it still affects the psychology of virtual members, whereas respondents who were new to the field of virtual work, were not very avoidant and quiet open, on the feasibility of the project. It is also seen from the table that people with more years of experience in virtual team tend to be accommodative than the new incumbents, in that they give in to their team mates and just get along with their opinion at times. This could be a way of succumbing to the stress of having worked in Virtual set up for a long time.

Respondents with more years of virtual experience tend to be more collaborative than the new comers in the field, because of the practical know how of virtual team functionality. These set of respondents have perhaps understood that the teams are primarily task oriented and therefore know that what matters at the end of the day is output and performance. This awareness due to their experience over a period of time with virtual teams, helps them to focus on exchanging accurate information with the teammates and also bring out project related work concern in open so as to resolve them in the best possible way.

Respondents with more years of experience in virtual teams have also scored high on the compromising element of conflict handling Behaviour, perchance due to their exposure of having dealt with many dead locks during the working of virtual teams, they are focused on finding a middle course to resolve an impasse. The more the experience in dealing with virtual teams the more is the realization of importance of avoiding discomfort in unblocking the bottlenecks associated with the interpersonal yet virtual communications.

Major findings:

- Age of virtual team members certainly affects their conflict management styles.
- Competition is a predominant conflict management style of the comparatively older respondents in the study, whereas it was collaboration for the younger respondents.
- There are gender differences among men and women respondents while dealing with conflicts.
- Men are more accommodative whereas women are more compromising in their conflict management styles.
- Years of experience in virtual teams also significantly affects the conflict management styles of virtual team members.
- Fresh incumbents involve in less avoidant, less accommodative and less compromising styles of conflict managements compared to ones with more years of virtual team experience.

Limitations of the study:

This empirical paper has the basic inherent limitation with respect to sample size and has

thus perhaps failed to capture the true sense of Virtual team study. This curtails the possibility of generalizing the findings obtained thereof.

Scope for further research:

- The findings of this study can help identify appropriate conflict management styles in virtual teams.
- The current investigation can be used to understand the intricacies involved in exploring commitment and citizenship Behaviour.

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