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December 1999

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Commitment in a Virtual Team

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Introduction

The conventional way that people work is changing – today's employees are likely to work in virtual teams at some point in their careers. Today's companies are more likely to have an employment force spanning the world, and the face-to-face (FtF) aspect of proximal teams is no longer always possible or desirable. But what are virtual teams? Simply defined, teams are a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks and exist for some task-oriented purpose (Cohen and Baily, 1997; Guzzo et al., 1996). A virtual team, in addition to the above, works across time, space, and organizational boundaries (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997). Team members are not necessarily located in the same building, time zone, or even country, and communicate with each other through advanced communication and information technology. While research on virtual teams is increasing, many questions remain regarding what is needed to ensure their effectiveness. The FtF meetings and socialization that occur when team members are co-located can serve to strengthen the bond between team members, whereas socialization in teams may be diminished with virtual teams. When team members can't "bump" into each other in the hall, meet informally in the break room, or even see each other, can a bond exist between them? Can team members feel as committed to a virtual team as a traditional FtF team?

Importance of Research

Research on commitment has focused on employee commitment to an organization. A lack of research on an individual's commitment to a team has been noted (McGrath and Hollingshead, 1994), despite research that supports the argument that the two levels of commitment are separate constructs with unique antecedents and outcomes (Becker, 1992; Becker and Billings, 1993; Morrow, 1993, Zaccaro and Dobbins, 1989). The research that has been done on team commitment has examined only FtF teams and focused primarily on outcomes, finding a positive relationship between team commitment and performance, productivity, and satisfaction, and a negative relationship between team commitment and intent to leave an organization (Becker, 1992; Becker and Billings, 1993; Klein and Mulvey, 1995). Researchers have found desirable outcomes when an individual expresses commitment to their proximal team, is the same true for individuals in virtual teams? If so, can organizations do anything to engender team commitment among virtual team members?

Definitions of Commitment

The definition of commitment has changed over time to reflect research findings. Originally, the most popular definition of commitment was offered by Mowday, Porter, and Steers (1982) and referred only to organizational commitment: an identification with and involvement in the organization characterized by (1) internalization of the values and goals of the organization; (2) willingness to work extra hard on behalf of the organization; and (3) a strong desire to remain a member of the organization. Recently, definitions of commitment have reflected both the *nature* of commitment and the *focus* of commitment as researchers recognized that many forms of work commitment can be conceptually and empirically differentiated from each other (Mathieu & Zajac, 1990; Morrow, 1983; Morrow & McElroy, 1986; Reichers, 1985).

Definitions regarding the nature of commitment are still focused on organization commitment (OC) and have been defined by multiple components. Meyer and Allen (1991) defined three components of commitment: *affective* (emotional attachment, identification, involvement with organization); *continuance* (awareness of costs associated with leaving); and *normative* (feeling of obligation to remain with the organization). Or, an easier way to think of it: want to, need to, ought to. O'Reilly and Chatman (1986) also proposed a three component definition of commitment, but labeled their three components as *identification* (attachment based on a desire for affiliation), *internalization* (congruence between individual and organization values), and *compliance* (attachment undertaken for specific rewards). However, internalization and identification are highly correlated and research results have not always distinguished between the two (Caldwell et al., 1990; O'Reilly et al., 1991).

Besides the nature of commitment, researchers have also examined the focus of commitment. In a review of commitment literature, Morrow (1993) stated that organization commitment is distinguishable from other forms of workplace commitment. Several foci of commitment have been identified including: top management (Becker, 1992), work group (Becker & Billings, 1993; Zaccaro & Dobbins, 1989), team leader or supervisor (Becker et al., 1996), union (Kelloway, Catano, & Southwell, 1992), and occupation or profession (Meyer, Allen, & Smith, 1993). While this work has led

researchers to conclude that commitment is multi-focused, the bulk of research has still been done on OC.

Overall, definitions of commitment in research work have referred to a "psychological bond" that ties the employee to an entity but the nature of that bond can differ depending on the nature and foci of the commitment.

Individuals typically have multiple memberships within an organization, and in particular, will have memberships in teams. Little work has examined the characteristics that differentiate team commitment from OC although researchers have found differences exist. Furthermore, characteristics of virtual teams may render them different still from FtF co-located teams.

Literature Review on Commitment

Research on team commitment in FtF teams has been largely ignored (McGrath and Hollingshead, 1994). The little work that has been done on team commitment has concentrated on proximal teams only. The following sections briefly describe research that has examined the relationships between different features and commitment.

Individual Features.
Although no research has been found that addresses the relationship between individual features and team commitment, there is research that examines the effect of individual features on OC. Allen and Meyer (1990) found that a "commitment norm" found in individuals in some cultures leads to normative commitment to the organization. The work of Hofstede (1980) on individualism/collectivism and masculinity/femininity supports the cultural aspect of normative commitment. In a meta-analysis of OC, Mathieu and Zajac (1990) identified the following as significant variables related to OC: work ethic, initiative, age, gender, organization tenure, and education. It is likely that some of these individual features will be significantly related to team commitment also.

Team Features.
Zaccaro and Dobbins (1989) examined the antecedents of team and organizational commitment and found significant support for the hypothesis that team commitment and OC could be predicted from different factors. Factors that were significantly related to FtF team commitment included satisfaction with group members, cohesion, and perceptions of team processes. Team processes studied included aspects of confidence, trust, goal motivation, decision making, communication, adaptability, job competence, and helpfulness. Other factors found to be significantly related to OC, yet not examined in relationship to team commitment, include constructive conflict (Alper et al., 1998, Wheelan and

Hochberger, 1996), procedural justice/fairness (Allen and Meyer, 1990; Koorsgaard et al, 1995), and substantive feedback (Allen and Meyer, 1990).

Task Features.
McGrath and Hollingshead (1994) stated that certain tasks may be better suited for virtual teams than others, but no empirical work has been conducted to test that hypothesis. Zaccaro and Dobbins (1989) found that an individual's liking for the task was significantly related to FtF team commitment. Research in OC has found other task-related factors to be significant in explaining OC. These include perceived task competence (Wech et al., 1998), job challenge, task autonomy, and satisfaction with the task (Mathieu and Zajac, 1990) and may also affect team commitment.

Socialization Features.
According to the 50-foot rule of collaboration, communication between people drops off dramatically when they are more than 50 feet apart (Allen, 1977). Because of the dispersed nature of virtual teams, socialization among members and visual cues are reduced considerably, if not gone completely. McGrath (1991) defined and detailed the important role group support and member well-being play in teams. Lipnack and Stamps (1997) stressed the need for greater socialization efforts among virtual team members over FtF teams. Along the same lines, Galegher and Kraut (1994) stated that a Group Support System undermined group members' abilities to establish positive social relations. Chidambaram (1996) found relational intimacy takes longer to develop in computer-supported groups, but given adequate time, groups eventually exchange social information to develop strong relational links. Kling (1991) called for more field research that acknowledges the socialization aspect of teams.

Outcomes.
Becker and his colleagues researched outcomes of team commitment. In Becker (1992), a positive relationship was found between team commitment and job satisfaction and a negative relationship between team commitment and intent to quit. In Becker and Billings (1993), a distinction was made between locally committed employees (attached to the supervisor and/or team) and globally committed employees (attached to top management and/or the organization) and found they were differentially related with intent to quit, job satisfaction and organizational citizenship behaviors. Klein and Mulvey (1995) found commitment mediated the effects of cohesion on team performance and Becker et al. (1996) found a positive relationship between internalization of supervisor's values and performance. Although empirical work supports a relationship between performance and commitment, Meyer and Allen (1997)

suggest that this relationship might be moderated by the team's standards toward performance.

Research Model and Objectives

Figure 1 depicts the research model for the current study. The three-component nature of commitment as defined by Allen and Meyer (1990) will be used because of the methodological problems found with the O'Reilly work.

The proposed research is motivated by the following questions: what factors influence the development of team commitment in a virtual setting, and how do we engender team commitment in a virtual setting? The following propositions will be examined:

P1: Individuals from highly collective countries will have higher normative commitment to a team than individuals from highly individualistic countries.

P2: Team features will be positively related to affective team commitment.

P3: Task features will be positively related to affective team commitment.

P4: Individuals in virtual teams engaging in early socialization efforts will have a higher level of affective and normative commitment throughout the life of the team than individuals not engaging in those activities.

P5: Affective and normative team commitment will be positively related to outcomes. Continuance team commitment will be negatively related to outcomes.

Research Implications and Conclusion

Data in support of my propositions will build on previous team and commitment research by extending knowledge into the virtual setting. Data not in support of my propositions will, in part, imply that cultural norms and increased socialization do not make a difference in team commitment as conceptual work implies. Thus, results in either direction will contribute to the understanding of team commitment. Antecedents of team commitment, how commitment can be strengthened, and the outcomes of it in a virtual setting are unknown. Results will be useful in both academic and organizational settings. By the time of the conference, a limited set of tentative results should be available.

References
Available from the author upon request.

Figure 1: