

The Role of Leadership in the Performance of Virtual Teams Among Teachers' Training Colleges in Namibia

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Abstract: Leadership is the process of influencing others to act in a manner that is in line with the objectives of the individuals as well as the objectives of the team. Through leadership, teams are supposed to deliver their performance. The purpose of this exploratory study was to explore the leadership role in the performance of virtual teams in teachers' training colleges in Namibia. The study seeks to gain an understanding of leadership challenges and leadership gaps in the new operating environment. It employed an interpretivist philosophy, with an emphasis on the interaction between leaders and their organizations. The study employed an inductive approach, exploratory design, and qualitative methods to collect data from 20 purposively selected leaders. Qualitative content analysis was done through a thorough analysis of the data. The findings of this study demonstrated that leadership influence on people and teams results in improved performance because leadership affects people to realize their potential as well as act in accordance with the goals of the team. Leadership thus affects the performance of virtual teams. The study also found that the operating environment change within teachers colleges in Namibia, from operating at a local level to virtual operations resulted in leadership challenges. That was because the leaders did not adapt their leadership styles to fit the new environment. The study recommended the leaders of the organization to analyze the leadership styles that would help them retain their influence on their teams as well as retain team cohesiveness. The limitation of this study was that it targeted one section of the tertiary education sector entity and came up with results specific to the teachers training colleges' context. Further research could target the entire industry, using quantitative approaches to come up with generalizable findings.

Keywords: Behavioural Theory, Leadership, Teamwork, Team Performance, Virtual Teams.

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I. INTRODUCTION

The accelerated digitalization of tertiary education institutions has radically changed the way in which their various teams work together in the delivery of academic services [1]. Virtual teams comprising of groups of people working together from different locations have become more common in higher education [2]. Global events like the COVID-19 pandemic, which prompted the need for instant changes to remote working environments, have hastened this evolution [3]. Various education institutions therefore encourage the utilization of remote teams in their provision of education.

The success of virtual teams in tertiary institutions is faced with peculiar challenges that are different from the conventional corporate world [1, 4]. This is because, academic institutions have specialized organizational cultures, governance arrangements, and performance expectations that shape the way virtual teams are managed and perform [1, 2]. The leadership in such environments has to balance

complicated stakeholder interests, academic freedom, and resource limitations amidst ensuring education quality and institutional performance. Virtual team utilization therefore confronts education leaders with the task of ensuring their teams remain performing despite the great loss in the ability to physically interact.

Literature has continuously shown that leadership is the key to virtual team success [5]. However, the way in which virtual leadership influences performance in higher education is still an understudied area. Existing leadership theories, which are formulated, based on face-to-face contexts might not be entirely applicable to the context of leading virtual teams where there is little physical interaction between leaders and followers [5, 6]. Therefore, a thorough examination of the ways by which education leaders may attain high performance from their virtual teams is required, in order to better understand how leadership practice influences virtual team performance in teacher training institutions. Using a qualitative research design, this study reveals the lived experiences of team members and academic leaders, offering in-depth insights into

the leadership behaviors, strategies and challenges that typify successful virtual team leadership in higher education settings.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

➤ *Defining Leadership*

Leadership is one of the basic concepts in business and society [7]. As a process of influencing the behavior of others to accomplish personal and organizational objectives, leadership is among the multidimensional and complicated phenomena [8]. Consequently, researchers remain interested in leadership as a concept, which remains crucial in the constantly changing globalized world [9, 10]. Particularly important in leadership theory is that there is no one method of influencing the individual, teams or organizations [11]. Leadership therefore relies on the situation that the leader is working in alongside the nature of followers that the leader is leading [7]. Because leaders work in various situations, and with people of varying character personalities, they should study the situation before taking a specific position towards influencing their followers.

Scholars suggest different leadership theories and definitions, with some like ref [9] calling leadership an influencing function aimed at goal achievement. Other researchers view leadership as a function of influencing behavior, which would consequently lead to accomplishment of desired objectives [7, 10].

In the same way, ref [11] agree with the perception of leadership as an art of mobilizing followers to want to exert effort towards the accomplishment of the mutual goals [9, 10]. Another interesting point is that leadership is merely influencing a change in behavior [12]. The exercise of influence to accomplish an aim is shared across all the definitions of leadership, implying that influence is internalized in leadership. Nevertheless, no single method of influencing behavior is universal or supreme to successful leadership [10]. Dependent on the environmental circumstances, some leadership behaviors might fail to produce the intended impacts on every occasion.

Strong leadership is key to organizational success because it has the influence on individuals, teams, groups and the entire workforce of an organization to strive for high performance accomplishment [13]. Despite consensus between studies on the importance of human capital to organizational performance ref [12] there is no doubt that organizations have come to appreciate their human capital due to the leadership efficacy in influencing individuals and teams [9, 10]. This is because; leadership directs the teams to the long-term goals of organizations [13]. Based on the discourse in literature, leadership has interest in the overall organizational performance, and these results in guaranteed attainment of the organization's vision.

➤ *The Development of Leadership*

Leadership deals with influencing people to act in accordance with certain objectives of an organization [8]. Leadership allows organizations and teams within the organization to work towards strategic goals of the organization together [13]. Through leadership, an organization can attain its

strategic goals. Virtual teams demand leadership behavior that affects people working in different locations to accomplish organizational goals. The necessity for change in leadership behavior has been observed due to the evolving working environments, particularly regarding virtual team-working [6]. Consistent with the literature, it is realized that leadership remains a relevant topic in academic literature. The present study is based on the realization that virtual team need effective leadership for them to succeed in accomplishing their individual and team goals.

During the 19th century, leadership theory centered on the leader's inherent characteristics, seeking to outline the characteristics that successful leaders possess and the personality of the leaders [14; 15; 16]. The underlying was the belief that leaders are born rather than made through training and development [12, 13]. This assumption, commonly known as the Great Man Theory proposed that there are limited and rare individuals who possess exceptional characteristics to lead effectively [9].

Hence, some individuals like Mahatma Gandhi, Julius Caesar and Abraham Lincoln would be leaders and others would follow [12]. Society believed that these leaders were born with the qualities of being leaders, which made them convince others to follow them [15; 16]. The perception hence made other individuals undermine their power and become followers.

Over time, the Great Man Theory would develop into the traits theory, which also assumed other leaders are born while others are made [12]. The traits theory supposes that successful leaders might have inherited traits, learned traits or traits obtained from experience [11; 16]. That needed emphasis on the correct set of characteristics combination to make a leader succeed [13]. However, discovering the correct set of traits was ineffective, prompting the dismissal of the concept and assuming the behavioral theory [11].

According to ref [16], the behavioral theory believes in the existence of behaviors that can be learnt in order to lead a team effectively. Despite the behavior and characteristics being essential to leadership; the fact that traits and behavioral theories gave no regard to the surroundings and situation, led to subsequent studies to determine the contribution of the surroundings and the situation on leadership effectiveness [7]. Leadership discussion continued to draw the attention of scholars.

Around the 1960s, the size of the situation became an issue for researchers [12, 15]. Researchers would later begin exploring the styles adopted by leaders in their quest to affect the behavior of others towards personal, team and organizational goal accomplishment [7, 13, 16]. Since the most suitable style would depend on the situation, researchers called this theory contingency theory [10; 13].

Leadership development continued until the 1990s when transactional and transformational leadership theories emerged, revolving around the idea that the style adopted by the leader must change in accordance with the situation as well as the individuals whom the leaders were attempting to

influence [12, 13; 15; 16]. Effective leaders are therefore those who have the ability to recognize what style fits the situation and the followers. The leadership style has to make a perfect match with the provided context.

➤ *Role of Leadership in Organizational Performance*

Literature demonstrates that leadership is one of the functions within the organization [8, 9]. Leaders have a significant role of inspiring others to realize their full potential [7, 9]. Through motivation and influence, leaders motivate others to strive to accomplish their own goals as well as those of the organization [7]. Leadership involves concentrating on influencing others to act in ways, which are in accordance to the set organizational set goals. Leadership performs its function according to ref [8] when there is a change in the behavior of followers towards the organizational goals. Leadership influences the behavior of others in such a way that they align their intentions and performance to the organization's goals.

Individuals require some form of inducement to act in a specific way, more so if the interests of their performance goals are bound to clash with those of the organization [10]. It is in accordance with this argument that [13] hold the view that aside from enacting internal controls to guide how individuals conduct themselves, organizations need leaders capable of influencing a change in the way its employees view their position in the organization.

To lead teams or people is thus not a question of occupying a position of power [8]. It is the impact that the leaders have on the teams and people that is of most importance [17; 18]. That is what justifies the view of ref [19] leadership effectiveness are complicated and need enough effort towards ensuring that the actions of the leaders have an effect on the behavior of the followers. The leader seeks to demonstrate behaviors and characteristics, which make the followers, want to accomplish the organization's objectives.

The leader's behavior thus comes to the forefront in ensuring leadership effectiveness in the evolving business landscape [13]. The leader's impact on the follower's cascades down to the followers, instilling the willingness to adhere to some performance standards that result in attainment of strategic goals [20]. Unlike management, leadership does not coercively compel people to undertake stipulated actions towards attainment of performance goals [21]. Leadership instills the desire and personal interest by the people themselves to attain the performance goals [19, 20, 22]. Willingness by employees to perform at high levels is courtesy of motivation and resilience [7, 23]. Leaders need to motivate their followers to seek their personal goals as well as the organizational goals resiliently.

➤ *Virtual Teams*

The recent decades have witnessed a growth in the establishment of virtual teams due to organizations venturing into international markets [24; 25]. Domestic organizations also adopt technological advancement through the formation of virtual teams [17, 26]. Technology allows individuals and teams to transfer competencies and skills without being at the same location [25]. Organizational leaders also consider

working virtually as a benefit to the organization since it eliminates the expense that would be used in bringing people together, especially when the organizational activities can proceed with little interaction [26]. Being successful in such work, though, requires proper leadership that motivate team members to stay focused on the teams' and organization's objectives [17]. Virtual team leadership is thus essential in the attainment of virtual teams' performance.

Virtual teams are organizationally dispersed either groups or teams that collaborate towards the achievement of the organization's objectives [27; 28]. The teams derive cohesion from organizational integration through methods, culture and objectives that value the organization as a whole [29]. Shared organizational interests overcome the gap created by the absence of physical contact among these teams such that they concentrate on team performance as opposed to individual victory [30].

The other aspect of virtual teams is the geographically dispersed team, where physical proximity of members is absent as they work from various geographical areas [6, 24, 29]. The effect of dispersion on an organization is a deficit in spontaneous interactions, which are normally experienced when teams work in a local setting [28]. Virtual team leaders take on the role of fostering the link between members with the aim of ensuring individual performance aligns towards collective performance.

Temporal dispersion presents an additional challenge to the virtual team environment, with factors like time zone differences undermining the free interaction of people as well as their work [27]. The utilization of electronic communication like emails does contribute to resolving such concerns [29, 31]. Nevertheless, there is the issue of inadequate live communication, and hence a pressing need the leaders to be dynamic in how they shape collaboration within the teams and among the team members [27]. It is clear that leadership is a critical function towards facilitating effective virtual team performance. In their research, ref [28] show that leadership is crucial for attainment of desired team performance since it is the force behind driving long-term results.

➤ *Virtual Team Leadership*

Team performance is a topic of continued interest among researchers and business professionals [23]. The interest is fueled by the realization of the imperatives of uniting employees with the sole aim of achieving a common goal [32]. Employees without a common goal risk pulling towards different directions, resulting in failure to achieve individual, team and organizational objectives [7]. Developing and maintaining a team with the same focus on the common goal requires quality leadership that identifies and influences talented individuals to behave in a way leading to achievement of mutual goals [22]. Leaders of virtual teams ought to invest time and effort in establishing a congenial environment where members offer their talent towards the actualization of organizational performance.

Contrary to physically located teams where they interact physically as well as read each other's intentions, virtual teams are at risk due to biased assumptions regarding team members'

intentions [26, 30]. Building effective virtual teams with the ability to bring together skills, intentions and effort towards a shared goal demands a style that is aimed at developing a culture of trust among the members of the team as well as between teams and leadership [7, 24]. As ref [28] assert, successful team building effectiveness depends on the leader's ability to influence the followers to engage in collective effort willingly to achieve a common goal. The role of leadership applies influence to inspire others' willingness to achieve an overall goal as a team.

➤ *Leadership Issues*

The leadership role is a multifaceted phenomenon that entails coping with the behavior and performance of people in a particular setting [8]. Leaders of an individual, a team or an organization must take into consideration the concerns of the followers since they impact on them carefully [32]. By doing so, the leaders try to ensure that individuals realize their personal objectives while redirecting their priorities towards the realization of the team and organizational goals [7]. There are some challenges that are entrenched in the leadership role, especially in virtual teams. It is, therefore, significant to leaders to understand the potential challenges they are likely to encounter and implement measures for mitigating the adverse effect thereof.

One of the leadership challenges is the behavior of the followers [7, 10]. Based on the fact that leadership centres on affecting behavior changes towards organizational objectives, followers with controlling behaviors that may take time to change poses a great challenge for the leaders [18]. Ref [32] argue that leaders must amicably manage behavioral issues towards the attainment of organizational and individual objectives.

Human behavior is something that leaders cannot evade in the course of their work [18]. This would imply that individuals would be anticipated to behave differently when they are not within leaders' physical reach, hence the challenge to make virtual team members still follow the leader. Ref [10] also observes followers' behavior as a major component of effective leadership, as the success of the leader depends on the ability to induce behavioral change. Leaders would therefore have to adopt various applicable strategies towards addressing behavioral problems that might hamper the achievement of desired team and organizational goals.

The choice and application of the most appropriate leadership style to a situation is another predicament leader's face in their professional life [32]. Virtual operations being a new trend, leaders are faced with the challenge of having to adjust within reasonable time to avert loss in productivity of their teams. Literature shows that although other leadership styles are generally effective, they may not be suitable for all circumstances [10, 32]. As such, the study by ref [9] advises leaders to adopt various approaches based on their situational needs as well as followers.

The question arising is the ability of the leader to adjust from one leadership style to the other or to combine various styles so that they achieve their objectives. Effective leaders are, therefore, the ones that can easily adjust their styles as the

situation demands. From a virtual team performance perspective, it is important for leaders to be able to use styles that motivate employees to achieve goals with minimum supervision because in such a setting, the leader do not have access to the followers continuously [18; 22]. Choosing an appropriate style to use for virtual teams is therefore an issue that virtual team leaders should consider.

Universally, the effectiveness of leadership is a function of communication adequacy and continuity between the team members and the leader [10]. Virtual teams face communication challenges where technology employed in communication is ineffective or where it does not consider the ability of all members to utilize [22]. In their paper, ref [29] demonstrate that communication in virtually working teams is even more important than in the locally located teams.

Lack or ineffectiveness of communication creates a situation where team members do not trust the motives of their fellow members resulting in morality decay and neglect of responsibilities [9, 11]. Similarly, individuals could lose focus on the goal when they are detached from the leader and the team members [22]. Leadership of virtual teams is therefore crucial in ensuring maintenance of team coherence and collective performance towards achieving the overall goal of the organization.

➤ *Organizational Performance and Effective Leadership*

Ref [23] and their research offer explanations like clear obtainable goals, constructive institutional culture and effective leaders. The passion required to commit their influence to their teams' success. As a process of affecting other individuals towards acting in a manner that is aligned with the objectives of a team or organization, effective leadership is important because the leader will have to know the direction of the organization, the environment, and the followers [11, 28].

Directing others to follow a particular direction requires showing knowledge about the direction. It is assumed that the leader knows or is well informed about the direction to organizational objectives and goals [24]. Therefore, one of the bases that legitimize the leader's power over the group is the capability to demonstrate expert knowledge [17]. There is a general agreement among researchers that the performance of individuals, teams and organizations is a function of the quality and leadership style of leaders [15]. Those organizations, which emphasize retaining high performing individuals and teams, invest in building strong leadership [24]. Leaders are ethically bound, ref [26] contend, to issue the teams with the required guidelines for them to attain desired performance levels.

Leaders can give direct instructions in direct communication on how to make the individuals in their teams complement each other's strengths. In virtual team settings, leaders do not have the space to interact with their followers [24; 26]. Leaders must therefore adopt different leadership behaviors in order to influence the actions of their teams towards organizational achievement. Ref [30] say that the performance of virtual teams is reliant on the utilization of cooperative actions. The leader serves as the bridge between the team members while enabling teams to communicate freely as they bond [28]. Cooperation enables the teams to build

confidence in one another to facilitate the creation of lucrative relationships [30].

It is only when the teams collaborate and build trust that they achieve their performance targets [27]. The leader is that individual upon whom the responsibility to foster trust among individuals rests. Leaders achieve this by encouraging the development of behavioral rules, which help team members to appreciate each other's behavior and aspirations [28; 29]. That is, leaders achieve their teams' performance targets by inspiring their followers to influence each other, allowing for an increase in team members engagement.

Trust in the leader is also a top consideration in virtual team success since trust is the voluntary acceptance of people to become vulnerable to actions of their colleagues with the expectation that such colleagues would act in good faith for the advantage of both parties [27]. When members learn to trust the leader and their fellow members, they focus their efforts on complementing each other's efforts [30]. For ref [28], trust leads to an escalation in the participation of employees, thus holding the team together. Trust in virtual teams enhances the performance of the team. It lies with leadership to establish and sustain trust relationships among their teams.

Accepting organizational change is another factor in enabling team performance. Ref [28] work regards leadership through change as a crucial component in enhancing team performance. Together with fostering innovation, change enables teams to find their potential and identify new modes of working [27]. Appreciation of change is also important for the leaders of the team and organization since leadership through transition helps them remain goal-oriented while providing space to adjust leadership styles according to the situation [30]. Leaders who retain similar leadership styles without considering group dynamics, situational changes and followers' behavioral changes are bound to fail [28; 30]. Leadership during change assists teams in remaining flexible to their environment, shift their focus towards shared goals as well as value new ways of working for the team.

Ref [27] studies illustrate that team performance relies heavily on the leaders' knowledge of the team members. In virtual teams, leaders' knowledge of the team members is significant in determining the level of interaction the leader ought to have with each of the team members [28]. The team members possess varying personalities and the leader must know them well to change their behavior.

From ref [5], understanding the teams and their members is more critical in steering towards change. That is because while other members readily adapt to changing environments, others take time to recognize the need for change. Ref [27] describe that while some view change as a threat to their well-being, others view change as the passage to an opportunity. The leader should, therefore, prioritize gaining good knowledge about the team members and see to it that they remain keen on adapting to the changing team as well as business environment.

Evidence indicates leadership to be a key function within an organization [8]. Ref [24] also imply that leaders can take on board different approaches consistent with their situational

demands as well as followers. The leader's behavior thus takes a central role in the realization of leadership effectiveness in the changing business world [13]. Followers' actions also determine leadership actions necessary to impact organizational performance [10]. In virtual team working, individual behavior is a strong determinant of performance. Proponents of the behavioral theory note that the leader should acquire behaviors that are suitable to their jobs and contexts because their success will be based on how they act and not their innate characteristics [8; 13]. The research is thus informed by the behavioral theory.

III. RESEARCH METHODS

This study took the interpretivist position in examining the contribution of leadership to the performance of virtual teams in teacher training colleges in Namibia. The basis of using the interpretivist philosophy was the fact that the interaction with people possessing good understanding of the situation among these institutions was central in the development of knowledge. The opinions, views and experiences of the virtual teams teaching colleges aided the construction of understanding of leadership challenges in the organizations as well as understanding that the shift in the operating environment had resulted in a leadership gap. For this research, the aim was to construct new understanding of the contribution of leadership to the performance of virtual teams in training colleges for teachers; thus, the research took the inductive approach. The exploratory design was adopted to employ new information about the phenomenon in drawing conclusions and recommendations. In addition, the study used qualitative approaches, which enabled the gathering of rich data, utilized in understanding the contribution of leadership to the performance of virtual teams in teacher training colleges. Data were collected from 15 leaders who were purposely selected from among teacher training colleges in Namibia. Qualitative content analysis was employed to analyze qualitative data.

IV. DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The research determined that leadership is a key function for the organization, and it plays a vital role in the attainment of performance goals by virtual teams within teacher training colleges in Namibia. The research established that leadership has an effect on team members and the organization to concentrate on realizing their potential, which translates into the accomplishment of team objectives. The alteration in the operations setting within teacher training colleges from conducting operations in the same geographic area to virtual operations impacted teams' performance. Respondents affirmed that the working environment change demanded changes in leadership behavior and leadership styles in order to ensure the same leadership impact demonstrated while working in the same location. There was, however, a leadership gap subsequent to the change and it impacted integration of skills among team members and teams.

The results indicated that any change in situations needs to be planned accordingly, re-aligning the leadership styles to fit the environment. Results however showed that leaders need sufficient knowledge about leadership styles as well as

situations, which fits the team. This would enable them to choose appropriate styles when the situation calls for it. It was also found that different leadership styles fit different situations. Besides, the results indicate that leadership is a dynamic function needing ongoing development and modification of leadership skills.

The results thus provide leaders in the organization with the chance to take into account their virtual team situations prior to embracing such style as transformational leadership or transactional leadership. More specifically, leadership of virtual teams calls for a change in the leaders' behaviors. Behaviors such as effective communication and trust were found to be essential since they close the gaps that are generated by working virtually. The research concludes that a change in the leadership of the team and organization would result in enhancement of virtual teams' performance.

The realization that virtual teams call for leadership behaviors that affect collaboration of teams' expertise and hobbies is vital because it makes leaders implement such behaviors when managing virtual teams. It has been observed that effective leadership is essential for the functionality of within teacher training colleges' virtual teams. The realization that within teacher training colleges' performance problems have been caused by the leadership void brought about by reverting to virtual team-working indicates the necessity of identifying solutions to enhance the leadership of teams. The attainment of performance goals within the conventional environment assumed leadership effectiveness, which fashioned a story that it can be extended to a virtual environment without amending the leadership style. The findings, therefore, validate the necessity of scrutinizing the situation prior to taking a position on the influence needed by virtual teams. It seems that in spite of varied interaction and communication methods, transformational leadership has a high and strong positive correlation with team performances.

V. CONCLUSION

The study concludes that leadership is an important function in the performance of virtual teams in teachers training colleges in Namibia. The shift towards virtual operations resulted in a leadership vacuum that detrimentally affected team cohesion and performance. It can be observed that effective virtual leadership requires situational awareness, flexibility, and matching leadership styles like transformational or transactional leadership to team requirements. Trust, communication and ongoing leadership development were shown to be significant success factors. The expectation that conventional leadership styles would easily transfer to virtual environments was discredited and the need for context-dependent leadership styles was emphasized. Finally, leadership improvement strategies are needed to foster collaboration and realize performance objectives in the context of within teachers training colleges' virtual teams.

RECOMMENDATIONS

After thorough analysis of the findings, the study suggests that leaders try various leadership styles to check if other leadership styles may be functional within the virtual environment. Leaders must offer training on working in virtual teams thus not assuming that team members will transfer the practices from the conventional environment to the virtual team environment. In addition, leaders must enhance the ability to motivate and encourage team members as often as possible. Leaders must communicate goals regularly and make team members' roles clear on the tasks. Additionally, leaders must establish standards for various communication processes, offer frequent communication and ongoing feedback to team members; this would eliminate chances of any miscommunication and errors.

In addition, leaders must organize the working processes so that everybody in the team is on board and working with a common purpose. Even then, flexibility is necessary for the team to be motivated. A consideration of leadership styles such as transformational leadership that enable people to discover their inner strengths and take up innovative means of achieving their objectives is advisable. The guiding factor in the decision to use either transformational, transactional or any other form of leadership style must come from an exhaustive examination of the situation and requirements of the virtual teams in Namibian teachers training colleges. Lastly, the findings also indicated a requirement for interrelation development, mindful of the fact that members of the team in a virtual setting lack much face-to-face contact with other members of the team.

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