

Impactful Leadership Traits of Virtual Leaders in Higher Education

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Abstract

Universities are increasingly leveraging virtual teams into their organizational structure and strategic framework for many functions including academic administration and faculty leadership. One benefit of a virtual workforce is the ability to hire the most qualified individuals regardless of where they are physically located. As the virtual workforce expands, leaders may intuitively rely on traditional face-to-face approaches and strategies for employee oversight and motivation. These techniques may be ineffective or challenging to use in the virtual environment necessitating new approaches. Leaders of virtual teams need to understand the intricacies associated with these groups and be cognizant of factors that assist in creating cohesiveness, trust, and communication amongst virtual teams.

This qualitative phenomenological study explores leaders' perceptions surrounding competencies needed to effectively lead virtual teams in online education. A decisive sampling method was used to identify 10 experienced academic leaders who supervise virtual teams. As a result of the interviews, seven major themes emerged: (a) training and development; (b) trust; (c) emotional intelligence; (d) communication/team building/technology; (e) employee recognition and motivation; (f) leadership styles; and (g) virtual leadership competencies unique to higher education. Based on these themes and further evaluation, the need for specific soft skills and robust technology emerged. Specifically, organizational success partially hinges on comprehensive training for virtual leaders, the significance of trust, emotional intelligence, and effective, respectful communication.

Keywords: Virtual leader, online virtual leadership, virtual higher education, educational leadership, academic leadership, higher education, online learning.

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In today's environment, more organizations are investing in the creation and utilization of virtual teams to help support their operations, improve cost efficiency and to expand their talent pool. Among the organizations moving to more virtual entities are institutions of higher learning and universities. As the popularity of online classes continues to grow, it is important for institutions to support faculty, staff and students in ways that are conducive to their needs (Mohr & Shelton, 2017). In this contemporary environment, virtual leaders must apply up-to-date leadership and collaboration skills to increasingly complex work environments, such as in the higher education space. As the collegiate landscape becomes more diverse and virtual, universities that offer online programs continue to expand and employ workers who work remotely, rather than from a traditional office. As a result, many virtual team leaders may attempt to use the same leadership skills used to oversee face-to-face teams without success. Virtual team leaders must be aware of the essentials that come with managing virtual teams and be cognizant of factors that assist in creating a culture of collaboration, trust, and the appropriate use of communication amongst virtual teams (Azderska & Jerman-Blazic, 2013).

Virtual academic communities have increased in size and scope and are continuing to expand due to globalization efforts and the growing upsurge in online student enrollment. The higher education environment is very diverse. Long gone are the days when a traditional brick and mortar university was the only option for potential students. Many of these traditional universities are offering online programs, and some universities only offer online programs. Public and private universities co-exist as well as for-profit and non-profit entities. Based on the institutional dynamics, the utilization of virtual teams and virtual programs vary. There are differing dynamics as well: size, student base, degree program offerings, as well as the support and flexibility that are offered to students. Increasingly, students are electing to pursue their education outside of the traditional brick and mortar venues, choosing to take some or all of their collegiate level classes online. It is imperative that collegiate leaders understand these challenges and hire wisely for virtual leaders who can optimally lead virtual academic teams. The phenomenal growth of online learning in higher education institutions has created an indisputable need for guidelines that assist new and continuing online instructors about how best to teach in the online environment (Martin, Budhrani, Kumar, & Ritzhaupt, 2019). Accordingly, virtual teams comprised of faculty and faculty leaders face unique challenges.

Given that creative and innovative management methods are needed, at the root a strong sense of trust is necessary for managing virtual teams effectively (Bonatti & Horner, 2011). The emotional intelligence of a virtual team leader is significant, and the aspects of communication and trust are vital (Bryant, 2013). Without a culture of trust from managers, team members may resist change and underperform. A compelling culture of trust between managers and virtual employees is necessary to counteract the absence of physical support. Hill, Kang, and Seo (2014) identified leadership attributes in virtual academic management situations to include encompassing technology suited for the situation, creating a sense of community with shared objectives, and working together across institutional constraints.

A virtual leader who is perceived as being untrustworthy can damage the integrity and efficiency of the virtual team, but also nurtures a negative view of the organization from the employee's perspective. Virtual employees who do not trust their leader or their organization typically do not demonstrate a formidable level of organizational citizenship. As a result, these employees may lack loyalty to the organizational unit, and fail to fully commit to the business

needs (Goudy, 2015). Challenges can be presented when an organization hires and trains leaders to manage virtual teams who may, or may not, be suitable, capable or committed to do so. The demand for economical and robust talent management for virtual teams requires a framework for building and maintaining virtual teams to support the success of the organization (Mukherjee, Hanlon, Kedia, & Srivastava, 2012).

Purpose of the Study and Problem Statement

The purpose of this study was to explore the vital success factors of virtual leaders and ascertain their leadership influence on team performance in institutions of higher education. The results of this study could be used as the underpinning for further research on virtual teams in academia, what their specific needs are, and their potential to contribute to universities' organizational profitability, as well as boost their competitive place in the increasingly saturated higher education market (Ogren, 2016).

The particular problem examined in this study was the deficiency of information on virtual leadership to include which specific skills are needed to successfully lead virtual teams in the higher education arena. In addition, there are the questions of how to cultivate these competencies in the complex higher education environment, and what, if any, leadership traits are unique to the higher education leaders leading in a virtual capacity. Information gained about these specific skills could allow higher education entities to concentrate their training efforts and increase employee engagement and allegiance to the university, potentially reducing the costs of attrition (Thaly & Sinha, 2013).

Enrollment in online universities has grown substantially in recent years. Currently, enrollment in online education programs continues to grow even though enrollment in higher education as a whole is on the decline. More than 6 million students took at least one online course in Fall 2015 (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Following this trend, online virtual academic employee teams have grown in popularity and demand. Without the necessary training to adequately support the virtual teams, leaders often observe reduced productivity, feelings of isolation from virtual team members, and increased employee attrition. Some universities, as well as other organizations, deploy virtual teams but do not provide the essential training to successfully support leaders and team members, leading to loss of revenue, negative team morale issues, and productivity challenges (Thaly & Sinha, 2013). As a result, virtual teams fail as often as they are successful, because they are often not led and sustained appropriately (Ogren, 2016). If leaders are not conscientious of the competencies associated with managing virtual teams, students may be negatively impacted. To diminish the high failure rate of virtual teams, up to 71% (Morgan, Paucar-Caceres, & Wright, 2014), more information and evidence is needed. Prior literature included studies on virtual leadership in a wide variety of industries, however a gap existed in applying virtual leadership in online higher education. This study expands current literature from the unique perspective of the online education leader.

Literature Review

The review of the literature focused on areas relevant to the purpose of this study: to explore the vital success factors of virtual leaders and determine their leadership capabilities. Likewise, the literature review informed the study's research questions and design. Altogether, precedents of the research topics were found in the literature on leadership in virtual workplaces, working in teams, and virtual team leadership in higher education.

Various leadership models and theories are explored, as well as seminal and ongoing literature on virtual teams, virtual team leadership, and virtual team leadership in higher education. Past studies around the topics of trust, employee engagement, effective communication styles and the use of technology are examined. As they pertain to effective virtual leadership, the concepts of emotional intelligence, motivation and employee interactions are discussed. Throughout the literature the similarities, difference and challenges between face-to-face leadership traits and those virtual in nature are conveyed.

Leadership in Virtual Workplaces

A unilateral leadership strategy is critical to organizational success; research delineated characteristics of virtual team leadership include communication, understanding, role clarity, and leadership attitude (Saafain, 2013). Whereas these leadership attributes are important in face-to-face environments, it is even more critical to understand and practice these attributes in a virtual leadership role.

As organizations are becoming more dynamic and agile, virtual teams are becoming progressively customary and compulsory (Mukherjee, Lahiri, Mukherjee, & Billing, 2012). Part-time employees as well as full-time employees working regularly from remote locations were employed by two out of three Fortune 500 companies at the beginning of this century (Kirkman, Rosen, Gibson, Tesluk, & McPherson, 2002). More recently, a proliferation of virtual teams has infiltrated the American business arena, to include higher education. This growth has stemmed from updated strategies, as well as demand (Booth, 2011). Investigation of leadership in virtual workplaces begins with the robust body knowledge of leadership in general, across industries. Salient theories and practices include transformational leadership, and virtual leadership coupled with technology.

Transformational leadership. Transformational leadership usually provides more support for employee motivation and increases followers' commitment to engage in experimental strategies and actions (Carmeli, Sheaffer, Binyamin, Reiter-Palmon, & Shimoni, 2014). As a result of Hirschy's (2011) study, six leadership practices which effective leaders can use to overcome the challenges associated with leading virtual teams emerged to include: (a) establishing and maintaining trust using communication technology; (b) ensuring that distributed diversity is understood and appreciated; (c) managing virtual work-life cycle meetings; (d) monitoring team progress using technology; and (e) enhancing the visibility of virtual members within the team and within the larger organization. Silvas (2016) proposed that virtual academic leaders need to apply transformational leadership practices and that they should engage followers' interests to make the organization better. In consideration of follower engagement, particularly when the face-to-face clues are not present, this seems to be an area in which a transformational approach is beneficial to both traditional leadership, and leadership within the academic environment.

Virtual leadership with technology. The use of up-to-date, reliable technology is critical to virtual faculty members, students, leaders and administration in the higher education setting. Overcoming obstacles in virtual settings requires highly involved, experienced and present leaders. An effective virtual leader uses the available technology to communicate and engage his or her teams; however, it is the capability of the virtual leader, not the technology that ultimately determines team success (Casebier, 2014). Once these systems and norms have been established, teams and team leaders should focus on tools beyond conventional phone and email, and employ more innovative technologies for collaboration such as wikis, blogs, Zoom, Skype, and the like,

all with the goal of increasing employee engagement and connectivity, and to promote an overall comfort with technology (Crisp & Jarvenpaa, 2013). Among other things, technology can provide a linkage to connect virtual team leaders to their teams, and virtual team members to each other. The ability to instantly connect can provide a sense of community as well as promote visibility. Visibility is an indispensable piece of the concept of trust and can assist with avoiding and potentially recovering from communication breakdowns and misunderstandings (Bjorn & Ngwenyama, 2009).

Virtual teams. The virtual team make up can vary based on industry. Virtual teams can be very structured, mirroring a more traditional organizational hierarchy, or project-based, which are frequently self-managed, and at times have no designated leader. The advancement of technology in the workplace has brought about several changes to organizations and their employees, altering core elements of the organization, such as its performance, outcomes, structure, and culture (Jackson, 2015). Although technology is essential to the virtual team, because some or all virtual team members do not interact face-to-face on a regular basis, they can exhibit a lack of social skills, they can be more inclined to exhibit hostility, express a lack of trust, and interact on a more superficial level than face-to-face teams (Azderska & Jerman-Blazic, 2013). Communication is less comprehensive and less satisfying for some virtual teams, and building trusting and collaborative relationships may happen less frequently, if at all (Peñarroja, Orengo, Zornoza, & Hernández, 2013). Without good communication and trust, it is difficult for any team to function effectively, particularly a remote one.

Feelings of uncertainty, diminished trust, and a lack of open communication are challenges for virtual teams. Trust among virtual teams is a fundamental element of their framework; there needs to be a mutual understanding of the factors that contribute to trust, communication, and leadership challenges. Without proper and clearly defined communication channels and expectations, trust cannot be cultivated, and without trust, there cannot be open communication. This conundrum points to a mutually exclusive relationship, and validates the unique responsibilities virtual leaders have, the greatest of which is establishing and maintaining trust. A successful leader needs to analyze the cadence of team communication, what channels they will use to communicate, and through which channels as a means of providing consistency. An awareness and a strong grasp of the factors that contribute to trust and communication, as well as the leaders' awareness of challenges in virtual teams, are paramount to group success, and to the success of the overall business (Mukherjee, Lahiri, Mukherjee, & Billing, 2012).

Virtual team leadership. It is paramount that a virtual team leader be aware of the intricacies associated with virtual teams and be cognizant of the fundamental needs and factors that assist in creating trust in these environments. A strong sense of communal trust enriches communication, which can lead to an effective virtual team culture, and can be integral in improving successful task performance. This can ultimately lead to broader organizational success (Berry, 2011a). Trust is palpable within a team when virtual team members communicate effectively and openly with each other and are accountable for their actions (Roussin & Weber, 2012). Within the literature, the significance of leadership effectiveness, trust, and communication consistency has been established. In their research, Chen, Wu, Ma, and Knight (2011) found that communication frequency was not the fundamental indicator to team success. Consistent expectations around team communication as well as the cadence of meetings was more of a marker of success.

Without the aid of a physical presence and the cues associated with face-to-face interactions, leaders must find a way to demonstrate a strong virtual presence (Avolio, Sosik, Kahai, & Baker, 2014), as well as be agreeable to update and modify their managerial and interpersonal communication skills for the virtual workplace. Virtual leaders can directly impact outcomes by applying self-management behaviors associated with: (a) establishing specific, challenging, and mutually accepted goals; (b) monitoring, evaluating, and providing feedback to members and teams; (c) coordinating and synchronizing activities, information and tasks; and (d) establishing task assignments, roles and balancing workloads among members (Ziek & Smulowitz, 2014). While self-management and assessment by the virtual leader is paramount, the dynamics of working in a virtual team are more complex than working alone in a remote setting, and can present issues of professional isolation and exclusion in the workplace (Vega, Anderson, & Kaplan, 2015). This distinction should be at the forefront for the virtual leader when assessing performance and analyzing culture. Trust in virtual teams, from a leadership perspective, should be cultivated thoughtfully, carefully and slowly. In the professional setting, trust is typically defined as the faith or confidence in another person or organization's integrity, fairness, and reliability; however, trust is typically lower, initially, within virtual teams (Berry, 2011b).

Virtual Team Leadership in Higher Education

There is a copious amount of research available on virtual leadership and leadership theories. However, virtual leadership in higher education is under-researched. Leaders in higher education wear many hats; they are required to know and understand curriculum, assessment, pedagogy, legal issues, personnel issues, current research, and professional development (Peart, 2014). There is an increased pressure for faculty and administrators to be accountable for learning outcomes and retention. That being said, it would behoove faculty and faculty leaders to be engaged in improving pedagogical strategies by implementing techniques and best practices that are effective in producing improved student outcomes in the online environment (Orcutt & Dringus, 2017). Throughout the industry, pressure exists for higher education entities to be accountable for the achievement of learning outcomes and retention. Educators and administrators are increasingly interested in improving pedagogical strategies by deploying practices that are effective in producing improved student outcomes in the online environment (Ekmekci, 2013). Virtual team leaders are an integral part of this strategy.

Regardless of the outpouring of literature surrounding the topic of leadership, there is no general or widely accepted theory of leadership for the past, present, or future that can be perfectly adapted or modified for higher education. In addition, there are unique factors related to higher education's need to develop sustainable leaders. Leadership development and professional development is a critical element of the higher education mission (Caillier, 2014). As the popularity of and student enrollment in online classes continues to grow, it is imperative for institutions to support faculty and administrators in ways that are conducive to their needs, and to create professional development programs and skill sets that are tailored to the needs of online faculty members with the goal of improving the faculty's effectiveness (Williams, Layne, & Ice, 2014).

The importance of intellectual curiosity and the quest for knowledge is at the root of higher education. Intellectual leadership should underpin a university and the university education it offers (McFarlane, 2011). However, in many cases the germinal culture of a university has been replaced by behaviors associated with managerialism, and the primary concern of a university is the bottom line. At times, it seems that there is a dollar amount which is placed on the head of

every student and staff member. McInnis, Ramsden, and Maconachie (2012) postulated that strong leadership is necessary to maintain strong faculty and administrators, who in turn will inspire, influence, and enable future leaders. Leaders must take care to inform, educate, train, listen to, support, and empathize with managers as they start to work in, and with, an entirely new way of organizing and utilizing teams. This preparation is integral to discussing virtual teams in online higher education institutions. In their research, Nydegger and Nydegger (2010) identified several tactics to effectively manage virtual teams. These strategies include the importance of culture, defining purpose and roles, as well as clear and consistent guidelines and expectations.

Leadership and emotional intelligence in virtual higher education. The relationship between emotional intelligence and academic success is a noteworthy linkage in analyzing leadership in higher education.

Emotional intelligence has often been a formidable connector to transformational leadership, self-efficacy, and spirituality, as well as academic success (Weichun, Sosik, Riggio, & Baiyin, 2012). A leader's emotional intelligence awareness and prowess may be pivotal to improving effectiveness, particularly in virtual teams. Emotional intelligence can be the proverbial glue that bonds organizations together as it relates to relationship management and the leadership development process. The importance of a leader's emotional intelligence is often a dominant topic discussed in organizations; however, the importance and analysis of how this impacts virtual teams is under-researched (Bryant, 2013). The integration and analysis of strong emotional intelligence characteristics within the hiring and training process may amplify virtual leaders' effectiveness in higher education. Virtual academic leaders play an even more important role in structuring the communication practices, culture identification, and work processes than within traditional universities (Jang, 2013). Within the virtual academic community, this statement might be somewhat intuitive, underscoring the importance of being able to analyze the salient differences between virtual and non-virtual academic leaders.

There are distinct differences between virtual and non-virtual leaders. Having a strong sense of emotional intelligence and enhanced communication skills allows a successful virtual leader to address conflict via several channels, including polling outside participants in group discussions, promoting appropriate conversation channels when disagreements occur, creating a culture of trust to allow these conversations to occur, as well as encouraging the input of more reserved members of a team. Understanding how a virtual team functions based on team role composition, comfort level, and skill set is a competency that virtual leaders need to possess (Eubanks et al., 2016).

Summary

Leadership is an extensively studied discipline, and in proposing this research, it is necessary to hone-in on the aspects that are most salient for virtual higher education environments. Transformational leadership practices are pillars that provide important substance to education where leaders are, or should be, thoroughly involved and invested in developing others, including faculty. Inquiry on leadership in virtual higher education environments is informed by several bodies of knowledge; some which are well-researched and well-known; others are emerging only in the second decade of this millennium.

Emotional intelligence techniques are critical to leaders who must be able to establish group norms and create a sense of culture and connectivity via technology. These leadership behaviors are particularly fundamental when applied to understanding how virtual academic teams

can flourish. Altogether, virtual leaders need explicit training and guidance around these topics as they engage in leading virtual teams, particularly for leaders who are new to the concept. The foundational literature of leadership, virtual work environments, trust, communication, and employee motivation and engagement shape the body of knowledge surrounding virtual leaders and virtual teams in higher education.

In the task of selectively presenting academic virtual leaders' characteristics, the authors turn to the psychological and sociological orientation of virtual leaders: trust, emotional intelligence, readiness for the job, and leading others to organizational success. We take the liberty of drawing a line around a second set of leadership factors, arguably and equally important, that gathers the factors of communication, team building, technology, employee recognition, and motivation, as behavioral outcomes of recognizable leadership styles. The results and conclusions in the present article emphasize the disposition and development of leaders who are increasingly tapped to create, guide, and administer online higher education programs. This study also paves the way for future research in the area of virtual leader effectiveness in the academic setting.

Method

This research investigated the perceptions of virtual leaders in online, higher education institutions, regarding their successful leadership traits, behaviors, strategies, and beliefs. A qualitative phenomenological research design was applied to explore the lived experiences of virtual leaders in online higher education institutions as they led their virtual teams. The lived experiences were evaluated through a series of open-ended interview questions with 10 virtual academic leaders (Appendix A). The phenomenological approach allowed participants to share experiences and encounters in an unimpeded manner (Moustakas, 1994). An interview guide was used to sustain a consistent and vibrant dialogue and elicited more details on the specific traits virtual leaders used. The interview protocol invited the discussion to include commentary on two supporting areas of those lived experiences: developing the personal competencies needed to lead virtual teams in the complex online higher education setting, and leadership unique to the virtual online environment.

Participants

There is a limited population of virtual academic leaders who could contribute to the body of knowledge surrounding this topic; as such, a focused sample of 10 participants was chosen. These administrative leaders included virtual team leaders and managers who were currently working, or had worked, as a virtual team leader within higher education. All of the participants held leadership roles at private universities and were geographically located in different areas throughout the United States. Participant demographics are described in Table 1.

Table 1

Participant Information

Pseudonym ID	Job role	Education	Job experience
Alice	Vice President of Academic Operations	Ph.D.	30 years
Chantal	Campus/Academic Director	Ph.D.	15 years
Gabrielle	Senior Director of Academic Disputes	J.D.	15 years
Becky	Full-Time Faculty	Ph.D.	10 years
Lorenzo	Program Chair	Masters	12 years
Karen	Director of Faculty Training	Masters	13 years
Bill	Program Chair	Masters	12 years
Melissa	Campus Operations	Masters	13 years
Garth	Academic Director	Ph.D.	20 years
Jerry	Regional Director of Academics	Ph.D.	19 years

Additionally, participants currently or previously directed virtual teams of staff, staff faculty and part-time faculty members in a remote setting, with responsibility for five or more individuals. In their roles as leaders, participants had been responsible for the coaching, training, and development of these employees. By defining the population on these aspects, the selected participants were diverse in the scope of authority in their positions, their educational background and their tenure with their institutions.

Purposeful sampling was used in this study, aligned with qualitative research designs (Creswell, 2009) and 10 virtual leaders were chosen for the study. The goal was to ensure deep and thorough data collection; that is, data saturation that reaches the point in data collection when new information provides little or no changes to the analysis (Guest, Bunce & Johnson, 2006). While collecting data, participants were assigned a pseudonym before the interviews were transcribed; the pseudonym was used to guarantee confidentiality to the highest extent.

Data Collection and Analysis

The semi-structured interview protocol was designed to solicit empirical, opinion-based answers and to facilitate an understanding of the interviewees' perspectives, experiences, and thought processes while the interview was taking place. The 10-question interview guide was developed using wide-ranging, unrestricted questions. The interview topics focused on gathering information on guiding trust, activities and tools used for employee engagement, leadership theories and beliefs, and job preparation and training.

The phenomenological approach allowed participants to speak at length, without a formalized structure, and allowed participants to share their lived experiences in an unimpeded manner with a focus on gaining an understanding of each virtual leader's perception of his or her experiences (Creswell, 2009). Interviews were conducted telephonically or via Skype which provided the virtual leaders the opportunity to speak in a medium that was familiar and comfortable for them. This setting facilitated participants' willingness to answer the questions honestly, candidly, and without receiving unintended cues, messages, or body language reactions from the interviewer.

An amended van Kaam method of analysis (Moustakas, 1994) of phenomenological data was used for this study. This method was most appropriate for ensuring that each participant experience was cataloged and analyzed equally to understand the participant’s perceptions. After a preliminary review, statements which were deemed irrelevant or repetitive were deleted, leaving only the horizons or "textual meanings and invariant constituents of the phenomenon" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 97). The qualitative analyses netted fundamental themes and identifiable patterns in the interviewees’ communications (see Table 2). Themes were groupings of codes that emerged either during or after the process of code development (Fraenkel & Wallen, 2007). The emerging core themes were thematically labeled within different invariant constituent nodes for further analysis.

Table 2
Initial Codes and Emergent Themes

Theme name	Aligned codes that led to theme
Training and development	Lack of training; self-taught; trained for other reasons (not to lead); lack of training had no impact
Trust	Trust
Emotional intelligence	Emotional intelligence
Communication/team building/technology	Monitor performance; set expectations; inclusion for virtual employees; virtual employees not treated the same; computers; video conferences; telephones; team meetings; individual meetings; face-to-face meetings; frequency of meetings
Employee recognition/motivation	Motivation; self-motivation; reviews; budget
Leadership styles	Leadership; leadership styles; trust
Virtual leadership competencies unique to higher education	Virtual leadership different for higher education versus other settings

In analyzing the data, the researchers looked for themes and key phrases, then placed them in to brackets or clusters. The researchers used bracketing, to ensure non-judgmental behavior, setting aside pre-understanding (Sorsa & Asted-Kurki, 2015), thereby safeguarding the rigor and validity of this study.

Trustworthiness of Data

Altogether, the research procedures were planned and executed to address trustworthiness of the collected data in several ways. Credibility and transferability were maintained through a robust data collection plan, deep engagement on the part of the researchers, and detailed responses from participants. Special care was taken to ask follow-up questions, to ask the interviewees to share examples and specific experiences, and to provide ample time for a conversation to occur. Thus, study findings are transferable to other contexts and individuals.

To establish confirmability, a process was used to meticulously analyze data and corroborate findings. Feldman, Sköldberg, Brown, and Homer (2004), suggested that a narrative analysis of the data allows for tacit or implied understandings to emerge from the stories the participants tell during their interviews (Krause, 2017). Member checking was conducted to assure that the responses provided by the interviewees were congruent with the respondents’ experiences

(Bergold, 2012). Furthermore, participants reviewed transcription of their interviews to check for accuracy.

Results

Results of this qualitative phenomenological study reveal the lived experiences of virtual leaders operating in the higher education environment. Thereby, they delineated the behaviors and practices they employed to successfully lead their virtual, academic teams. Following conscientious narrative and thematic analyses, 24 codes were identified, and seven major themes emerged: (a) training and development; (b) trust; (c) emotional intelligence; (d) communication/team building/technology; (e) employee recognition and motivation; (f) leadership styles; and (g) virtual leadership competencies unique to higher education.

Participants' reflections were fluid with much cross-referencing among all themes. As a means of reporting results, the seven themes are treated in two subsets. On the one hand, there is a set of themes on readiness for virtual leadership in academia: training and development, trust, emotional intelligence, and virtual leadership competencies unique to higher education. On the other hand, there is set of themes, somewhat tactical, that reflect how leaders' activities and guidelines are refined as they execute effective virtual leadership in these areas: communication, team building, technology, employee recognition and motivation, and leadership styles. Throughout the study results, we hear the voices of those who were successful, or not; who were guided well, or not.

Theme 1: Training and Development

Training and development surfaced as a theme, elucidating that virtual higher education leaders lack the training they need to lead virtual academic teams. All 10 (100%) of the participants stated that they had no formal training to lead virtual teams. Yet, an interesting phenomenon that stemmed from the interviews is that the participants drew upon their previous experiences in the virtual environment. Many revealed that they used their experiences as a virtual student or faculty member to assist them in leading virtual teams. Other participants shared that they had experience as a virtual employee and used that knowledge to lead their virtual teams once they moved from virtual employee to virtual leader. Becky capitalized on her ability to lead by watching people in current virtual leadership roles, stating "I was fortunate to have great leaders and the opportunities to grow in positions so that helped provide me with tools, resources, and skills needed to be a good leader/virtual leader."

Several of the respondents stated that they had managerial and leadership experience, although not virtual, and drew upon that body of knowledge to attempt to lead their virtual teams. In a similar vein, some leaders used professional development and college courses as experience. Lorenzo talked about taking courses in management and his own experiences as an employee. Gabrielle shared she had professional development training, but no formal training to be a virtual leader. Becky discussed that she had lots of hands-on training and stated "my education was [that I was] an online student for my master's and doctorate."

Theme 2: Trust

Trust was identified as a significant theme in the results, mirroring elements of the grand construct of trust: accountability, getting to know employees, and clear expectations. Trust is a fundamental component of any leader/follower relationship and the results of this research support

the unequivocal need for trusting relationships between virtual leaders and their teams in the academic environment. Several subsets of trust that were unveiled from the interviews were:

Accountability. Other participants viewed accountability as a component of a trusting relationship. Jerry connected leadership and accountability stating, “I need to be accountable as a virtual leader; if I say I am going to do something I do it, your accountability is even greater.”

Getting to know employees. The basic focus on simply getting to know their employees helped foster a culture of trust. Gabrielle shared her strategy by stating, “Leaders need to get to know their employees to build trust; consistency builds trust; constant and consistent communication builds trust.” The interviewees shared many experiences in getting to know employees to cultivate trust. Picking up the phone to hear how an employee is doing and to share a virtual cup of coffee were described as examples to build connections with virtual employees.

Clear expectations. Trust associated with setting clear expectations was critical to Karen. She described this by stating, “To build trust, I set expectations from the beginning as this lets them [employees] know what needs to be done; after this I give them the freedom to do their work.” It is critical that virtual employees have a sense of trust in their virtual leader and that the virtual leader shows, if deserved, he or she would trust virtual employees to do their work just as face-to-face employees are trusted.

Theme 3: Emotional Intelligence

Each interviewee shared aspects of emotional intelligence (EI) as critical and necessary to virtual leader competency. Responses from the participants supported that there is a link between emotional intelligence, successful leadership, and academic success. Many of the participants stated that emotional intelligence was not only critical for virtual leaders; it was far more important than any other competency they had. Participants stated that having strong emotional intelligence allowed them to self-reflect, to assist them in reading their employees from a distance, and also assisted them in navigating the nuances associated with leading virtual employees, particularly online faculty members.

The participants’ fluid exploration of their lived experiences offered descriptive narratives of their virtual leadership in higher education. For the convenience of our readership, the themes that can inform a forward-looking agenda for developing virtual leaders have been discussed in greater detail. Turning to the second subset of the themes, there is brief reporting on communication, team building, technology, employee recognition, and motivation.

Theme 4: Communication/Team Building/Technology

The interviewees noted that robust and reliable technology is vital, as if virtual employees must cling to a lifeline. As a result of this, when there are challenges or a lack of technology, productivity and morale can suffer. Becky shared unique experiences and activities to support how she worked to virtual engage her virtual teams in that “Every once in a while . . . with a virtual colleague I would have a happy hour [no-alcohol, just informal meetings to catch up and share gossip].” Sharing his experience Lorenzo said, “I encourage my employees to form connections with each other; if an employee asks me a question, even if I know the answer, I encourage them to reach out to a colleague so they build rapport with each other.”

Theme 5: Employee Recognition and Motivation

Employee recognition and employee motivation surfaced throughout the interviews. Alice reported, “Appreciation and acknowledgement is important for motivation; I recognize things like birthdays or work anniversaries.” When asked to share how she tried to motivate her employees, Gabrielle stated, “Some people are motivated by performance or positive feedback; give people a project to work on if they like that sort of thing.” Focusing on personal contact and how this is relevant to motivation was important as Garth said, “I try to motivate virtual employees through personal contact with them; I give them encouragement and let them know they are doing a great job; a little Starbucks gift card out of the blue for doing something helps.”

Theme 6: Leadership Styles

Results focused on differing leadership styles, with frequent emphasis on trust. After sharing his thoughts on his leadership style, Lorenzo reflected on what he had learned in his tenure as a virtual leader, stating, “Everything you think you know about leadership, be willing to kind of blow up all your preconceived notions of how to manage people.” When prompted to reflect on her leadership style and her experiences, Becky affirmed by stating, “I think that . . . If you're highly motivated, and you're organized, and you have good communication skills, you can and you will be a great virtual leader.”

Returning to a primary readiness theme, participants discussed the leadership competencies unique to their workplaces, online higher education. In the final set of results, the salient components of effective virtual leadership are applied to the target industry of higher education. Participants offered their expertise while addressing the overarching goal of organizational success for their teams and institutions.

Theme 7: Virtual Leadership Competencies Unique to Higher Education

Results of the interviews revealed varied views on the components of leadership and management. They elaborated practices of successful virtual team leaders, and how they are unique to the higher education environment. Most of the interviewees had experience working virtually only in higher education. When asked if leading in higher education was different or unique, Lorenzo shared:

I definitely think so, since the expectations are much clearer in higher education due to the nature of our industry. While defining success can sometimes be nebulous in other settings, it is much easier to define in higher education, especially since specific metrics can be developed to assess student and faculty performance that create benchmarks for coaching and mentoring. This is often not the case in other settings, especially if an organization is working in a new industry that may not have defined norms and expectations. Higher education professionals are forced to work within an environment that is strictly defined by rules and expectations that are put in place by our accreditors and the Department of Education. While innovative leadership is the norm in many industries, we have to be much more cautious in the higher education industry, especially since everything we do will be closely scrutinized by all stakeholders.

When answering a question about how he was managing higher education employees (administrators and faculty), and whether it was different than managing employees in other industries, Jerry speculated:

We would all like [to] think that we are unique and special and the same holds true of the higher education industry but that is probably not the case. One difference though is probably the emphasis on academic credentials. It is likely that a leader in higher education is going to have a lot more formalized education than is needed for say, many business industries. In addition, it is not uncommon for leaders in higher education to not just [only] be employees of an organization, an institution, but also instructors who also teach so they manage a group and yet, are also part of the group which they manage so it is likely that the power distance among virtual leaders is less than in other industries.

When asked by the researcher to postulate on the differences between being a virtual leader in higher education versus other professional settings, Garth went on to share:

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. Higher education professionals, especially tenured faculty, feel a sense entitlement to a permanent position. So first off, unlike the professional sector, there is no job retention leverage. Secondly, the concept of academic freedom is widely misunderstood by the majority of academic faculty. For the most part, they see themselves [as] an old town sheriff from western days. They are the law; they are always right and no one can make them change. This combination is magnified many times over in a virtual academic setting, contrasted with a traditional brick and mortar setting. In the traditional setting, faculties come together for regularly scheduled faculty meetings, see each other in committee meetings, and get a feel for each other. In short, they have more opportunities to learn to trust [spoken with air quotes]. Managing faculty in a traditional setting is more like herding cats. They still have the problems of entitlement and academic freedom, but it is not as pronounced as in virtual faculty.

Generally, it is important to distinguish between theory versus practice, but for participants this was a challenge given their lack of experience outside of the higher education space. When prompted to share how one could operationalize managing faculty, Garth asserted:

In a virtual setting, “getting a feel” for your faculty members, that is so critical in maintaining focus and the academic mission, is extremely difficult to achieve. For this to happen, leadership skills have to be even greater than those required for the traditional brick and mortar academic setting. Often, meetings are simple phone calls, devoid of the typical visual cues one has in a face-to-face setting. There is no sitting down over coffee or lunch in a face-to-face. That simple breaking of bread, which is a strong tool in the brick-and-mortar setting that works so well in bringing people together doesn’t exist in the virtual setting. Collaborative skills, the ability to gently persuade, bridge building and fostering a sense of trust with the faculty are at the top of the skill list for the virtual leader. Yes, these are very important skills for the traditional brick-and-mortar setting leader, but they are even more critical for the virtual leader. These skills require a special “touch” to pull off in the virtual setting with faculty geographically dispersed, having a sense of isolation and the vision that they are the only sheriffs in town. It is a unique challenge for the virtual leader.

Discussion

Many of the findings of this research reflect what we know about leadership and working in virtual teams. This study extends the body of knowledge by linking to precedents, and also suggests a forward-looking agenda, noted in the applications and recommendations sections. In 2002, 9.6% of students enrolled at both public and public, 2- and 4-year institutions engaged in distance education, and in 2015 29.7% of the same population took one or more distance courses (Allen & Seaman, 2017). Consequently, universities are relying on effective leadership to meet the demands of and guide this online learning growth. Knowledge gained from this research, as well as from future research, could enable institutions of higher education to focus training efforts on their online learning teams and potentially increase employee engagement and commitment, thereby reducing costs of turnover (Thaly & Sinha, 2013).

Data analyses in this study isolated seven invariant constituents or themes comprising the participant leaders' lived experiences with their virtual, academic teams. All participants reported that they received no training of any kind to lead their virtual teams, and they had to fall back on past experiences as an online student or faculty member. The experiences shared by the participants focused on a strong need for communication, recognition, setting clear goals and vision, having reliable technology to do the job, and a meticulous focus on the leadership styles needed to successfully manage their virtual teams. Trust emerged as an enormous component for virtual leaders; both in how they led their teams, and in the environments and culture they created. The participants shared their experiences in how they used technology to lead their teams and foster engagement. Likewise, they conveyed how important emotional intelligence was to have in their leadership capabilities.

Training and development. All 10 (100%) of the participants shared that they had no formalized training to lead virtual teams. Oftentimes, people were assigned to a leadership role over a virtual team with little or no training from the organization. As a result, many new leaders, like the participants in this study, are forced to develop skills informally, as they go, and to make up new rules along the way. When mentoring was available for the interviewed virtual leaders it was deemed valuable. Others suggested that mentoring should be part of their workplace training and development (Crisp & Cruz, 2009). An understanding of the differing leadership theories associated with virtual leadership should be compulsory for this training. This would be a rich component of developing those who will successfully lead academicians. The results of this study revealed that although many virtual leaders could lead their teams efficaciously, they could perform better with appropriate tools and resources. These virtual leaders sometimes met challenges with their own effort to devise new and innovative ways of leadership to get by.

Trust. Trust was identified as a substantial theme in this study, surfacing throughout the participants' discussions. Participants shared that trust between leaders and their employees is vital and foundational (Cho & Lee, 2012). The participants spoke more specifically, explaining that trust is one of several factors associated with creating effectiveness within virtual teams (Berry, 2011a). Overall, trust is a salient phenomenon in the contemporary business environment (Schilke & Cook, 2013) and clearly in the higher education online learning arena as well.

Emotional intelligence. Emotional intelligence was affirmed as an indispensable skill set for virtual leaders, as noted in the participants' discussions. In fact, emotional intelligence has clearly been a noteworthy predictor of transformational leadership, self-efficacy, and emotional support as well as academic success (Weichun et al., 2012). Participants stated that having strong

emotional intelligence allowed them to focus on empathy, as well as to self-reflect, to aid them in 'reading' their employees from a distance, allowing them navigate the nuances associated with leading virtual employees, particularly faculty members. Leading a virtual team requires a different management and leadership approach to achieve optimal success and productivity, including a focus on emotional intelligence (Peart, 2014).

Virtual leadership competencies unique to higher education. Among the findings of this study, several leadership competencies are needed for higher education virtual leaders. A focus on employee motivation and recognition was identified as integral, particularly when leading teams of virtual faculty. In addition, a strong understanding of technology and communication skills and a desire to bring virtual teams together in various activities is needed. Therefore, academic leaders should be educated and trained in leadership theory and encouraged to cultivate thoughtful and sincere relationships with their virtual faculty employees (Curry, 2016). The results of this study align with the existing literature surrounding this topic as it is imperative to take the traditional leadership practices occurring in face-to-face working environments; then, explore how those practices affect the virtual administrator-to-faculty relationship (Fincham, 2013). A logical outcome is that the virtual environment of higher education affects the relationship between virtual faculty members, employees, and educational leaders (Morgan et al., 2014).

Recommendations for Future Research

A key limitation of this study is that most participants only had experience leading virtual teams within higher education. Another limitation of the study is that participants had varied levels of experience in leading virtual teams. Considering the present themes elucidated by academic leaders in the virtual higher education environment in this study, there are future research directions that are both interesting and necessary. A recommendation for continued research is to duplicate this study while focusing on virtual leaders who are affiliated with a particular university. In addition, to expand the scope of the research and validity, examining this amongst private and public universities is paramount. As shared in this study, training and development was a fundamental concern amongst the participants. This may vary, or not be a concern at all across differing private and public universities, as well as the specific resources provided. Findings gleaned from such a study could provide insight on how other institutions train and develop (or do not) their virtual leaders. In addition, a cross-analysis of virtual leadership departments in industries outside of higher education could provide valuable insight to successful virtual leadership behaviors that could translate to the higher education space.

Virtual teams and virtual leaders are often more prevalent outside of the higher education arena and may have more sophisticated tools to onboard new virtual leaders. From an educational perspective, educators may have a different philosophy in terms of leadership; however, other industries, such as technology may be able to provide a more robust and less philosophical approach to virtual leadership tactics.

The researchers plan to replicate and expand on this study to determine if opinions and perceptions have changed in the rapidly changing educational environment. Retention metrics, graduation rates, and course progression analytics are all important indicators for higher education leaders. As online programs, and potentially virtual teams, continue to grow, an interesting phenomenon would be to see if successful virtual leaders had any correlation to higher success within their online programs. In addition, even if a higher education institution was exploring

online programs or had a small portion of their students taking online classes, comparing virtual leaders with face-to-face leaders and teams could provide valuable data.

Lastly, the researchers are developing training tools related specifically to supporting the themes that emerged in this study. Current plans include deploying and testing the new tools for adoption and effectiveness in an upcoming study.

Conclusions

This research provided insight about leading virtual teams in the dynamic and evolving higher education setting. Based on the growing trend of online education, while overall college enrollment has declined, the documented 29.7% of all college students taking a virtual course indicates that we serve a population of 6 million learners (Allen & Seaman, 2017). As universities create and sustain online programs, we must confront the reality that virtual leaders may not be equipped to lead remote and distributed teams.

While virtual leadership has been investigated with an industry-relevant focus, scant literature exists on virtual leaders within higher education. This pilot qualitative study's robust data, stories of leaders striving to manage their virtual academic teams in the complex and regulatory higher education environment, help address the deficiency in existing literature. The themes that emerged implicate the significance of understanding the intricacies of virtual leadership and the importance of implementing robust tools and resources to support successful academic leadership.

The importance of communication has long been established in scholarly research as a fundamental component of successful leadership. Further analysis would be valuable regarding common languages and shared meanings that are often evident in the team dynamic; particularly, how these commonalities may influence virtual team performance in comparison to leadership outside of the virtual sphere. Leaders' conscientious efforts to match the message and occasion to communication technologies, frequency, and cadence can help in creating a trusting environment among team members.

Data provided from this study may be useful for higher education administrators, faculty leaders, and staff as they expand or create online programs, particularly their virtual academic teams. A formalized training program focusing on the specific resources and considerations for remote employees would facilitate supporting both the remote employee and their leaders within the academic environment.

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Appendix A: Interview Questions

1. What training, if any, did you receive prior to becoming a virtual leader?
2. How do you as a virtual leader build trust amongst your individual team members?
3. What type of activities, if any, have you conducted in order to keep your team members engaged?
4. What types of tools do you use, or have you used, to communicate with your virtual team members?
5. What are your perceptions and experiences with communication as a virtual leader?
6. How do you keep your virtual employees motivated?
7. What efforts do you make, if any, to assure that virtual team members are included in the culture, happenings, events, communication, and activities the same as the team members who are not virtual?
8. How would you describe your leadership style?
9. What role, if any, do you think emotional intelligence has in your ability to lead virtual teams?
10. Are there any additional comments, thoughts, or experiences you would like to make regarding any challenges or successes you've experienced as a virtual team leader?
11. Have you had any experience working in a virtual setting outside of higher education? If so, what type of organizational setting? What leadership styles were used to manage virtual employees?
12. In your opinion, is being a virtual lead different in higher education than other professional settings? If so, why/how?
13. Is there anything unique for being a virtual leader in an academic setting versus other professional settings? If so, what?