

The Role of Communication in Creating and Maintaining Member Identification

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Abstract

This paper highlights the basic knowledge to the question, how do employees in a virtual context build and sustain identification? This paper provides insights as to why communication is the answer to the question above and evidence that revealed the impact of communication on organizational identification which depend upon an individual's virtual work status. Although information technologies provide employees the flexibility to work from any place and at any time, this type of spatial dispersion, threatens the very meaning of organizations. Overall, Existing research is examined and identification is found to be the critical glue linking virtual workers and their organizations. The paper concludes with recommendations for leaders to build trust, improve team effectiveness, communication, and efficiency with minimal disruption in achieving coordination and control.

Virtual Organization: The Role of Communication in Creating and Maintaining Member Identification

Recognizing issues, analyzing causes, and identifying solutions early can mean the difference between the failure and success of a virtual team. Virtual teams are replacing regular face-to-face interactions. While technology offers solutions for virtual teams, it also raises questions. What can help team members build trust and understanding and enable them get to know each other better when they cannot easily meet in person? What do we need to understand about cultural differences to choose appropriate technology? What team communication protocols improve interactions and reduce misunderstandings? How can teams use technology to keep track of what they are doing?



In many organizations it is no longer important when you work and where you work, as long as the work gets done. Virtual organizational forms represent important shifts in the organization of work. According to Kotha (1994), large corporations have created mass-production systems that require the congregation of organizational followers. Zander (1996) notes however, that the advent of information technologies, however, has enabled a decentralization of work. It is now possible for organizational members to work together while being spatially and temporally from distant from one another.

All these changes raise new challenges for organizing in a virtual setting. The same technologies that offer followers the flexibility to work any time and anywhere may also separate the ties that bind organization members to each other and to their employer. Specifically, the cues that pull followers together in more traditional organizational settings include dress codes, shared language, shared organizational routines, and organizational identifiers such as organization charts, office buildings, and co-located followers. Heydebrand (1989) notes that the links between virtual followers and their organizations may be less tangible and more social and psychological in nature. Additionally, the dispersion and dislocation characterizing employment in virtual systems strain the psychological ties between organizations and their members.”

Let’s consider the construct of identification and its importance in a virtual work context. To do this we should explore the relationship between communication and identification in general, followed by an examination of the effects of different communication media on workers’ identification. Finally, we need to explore the role of virtual status as a moderator of the relationship between communication modes and followers’ identification.

Literature Review

Kiesler (1986) provides a theoretical link between communication and organizational identification. Specifically, communication affects employee attitudes that may be strongly related to identification. Communication strengthens member identification because it provides organizational members with an opportunity to create and share their subjective perceptions of the organization’s defining features (i.e., its norms, values and culture). Knowledge of these facets of the organization creates a sense of shared meaning among followers. Furthermore, Kiesler (1991) indicates that communication helps create shared meaning because it provides social context cues which leads to the perception of social presence, and creates a shared

interpretive context among organization members. Zack (1993) stipulates that shared meaning provides organization members with a clear sense of the organization's identity, and thus may strengthen member identification.

The frequency with which individuals communicate with others in the organization enhances organizational commitment because frequent communication leads individuals to feel that they are active participants in the organization (Huff et al., 1989). In turn, a sense of active participation may lead followers to feel that they have greater control in the organization (Huff et al., 1989). Furthermore, the public act of participating without being coerced to do so may lead individuals to feel more positive about the organization and, therefore, to identify themselves with the organization more strongly (O'Reilly, 1981).

Identification is a means by which organizational members define the self in relation to the organization (Turner, 1987). Thus, identification represents the social and psychological, and spiritual ties binding followers and the organization, a tie that exists even when followers are dispersed. Harquail (1994) suggests that strength of identification determines some critical



beliefs and behaviors. Among them are followers' feelings of interpersonal trust, goal-setting processes, internalization of organizational norms and practices, desire to remain with the organization, and willingness to cooperate with others (Kramer, 1993).

Organizational functions that pose a particular challenge in virtual contexts, such as: a) coordination and control of dispersed organizational actors; b) work group functioning; c) encouragement of extra-role helping behaviors; and d) retention of valuable followers, depend on identification. Blake & Suprenant (1990) state that in order to achieve coordination and control, traditional organizations rely on various means of performance monitoring such as direct supervision and the enforcement of rules and procedures. However, traditional means of coordination and control may be ineffective and even dysfunctional when followers are dispersed in a variety of workplaces.

Furthermore, Baroudi (1994) suggests that virtual organizations should replace external controls with internal controls such as trust, employee motivation, and the convergence of individual and organizational goals. Therefore, identification, which provides a psychological link between workers and the organization, facilitates coordination because it leads to convergent expectations (Zander, 1996). Identification motivates members to coordinate their efforts to achieve organizational goals by enhancing interpersonal trust and cooperation (Brewer, 1986). Additionally, members who identify strongly with the organization are more likely to accept organizational goals as their own personal goals, are more likely to attend to superordinate goals such as loyalty and obedience (Dutton, et al., 1994).

Overall, it can be argued that identification helps organizations meet some of the most critical challenges of the virtual work context, such as ensuring coordination and control. Identification accomplishes these feats through its influence on employee expectations, motivations and consequent behaviors. Identification may be a particularly effective and efficient means by which a virtual organization can accomplish its goals and insure performance. These arguments provide evidence of the usefulness of identification among virtual followers. What remains puzzling is how identification can be strengthened in a virtual context, particularly because the traditional means by which member identification is created and sustained (i.e.,

shared dress, architecture, and other artifacts) may not be available to virtual workers. Maintaining the identification of virtual followers is especially critical because it helps organizations meet the challenges of managing dispersed followers (i.e., obstacles to coordination and control). Therefore, it is important to identify the factors that create and sustain identification of virtual followers, recognizing that the determinants of identification may differ from those of non-virtual followers.

Virtual Communication Challenges

Communication in a virtual world requires much higher levels of communication and coordination than traditional co-located teams (Barner, 2001). Face-to-face communication is the most effective means to facilitate trust (Kasper-Fuehrer & Ashkanasy, 2001). Both verbal and non-verbal cues are necessary to communicate trustworthiness (Kasper-Fuehrer 2001). . Communication researchers have established that the functions of nonverbal behaviors include providing information, expressing intimacy, and exercising social control" (Agunis, 1998, p. 456). Bandow (2001) states that attaining a comfort level with team members you don't know and don't share space with can take two to three times longer than face-to-face interactions.

The lack of a traditional social context compounded by cross-cultural contexts makes it more difficult to establish camaraderie among virtual team members (Hsieh, 1997). Physical separation results in the loss of informal communication and the social lubricant that is created when people get to know each other. Members may never have met, or even seen each other and have no context in which to understand one another. To ensure high performance, virtual managers need to instill trust and cooperation between the members (Lally, 1997).

In exploring the link between communication and identification in organization, it is



important to realize that individuals' virtual status leads them to utilize different communication media. Moreover, face-to-face communication tends to convey social context cues very strongly (Kiesler, 1991), and has been found to be particularly effective in creating social presence (Boyd, 1991) and a shared interpretive context among organization members (Zack, 1993). In contrast, e-mail and phone communication are not as rich as face-to-face communication in their ability to convey social context cues (Daft, 1987), and therefore e-mail and phone may be less effective as a means of creating and maintaining identification.

Overall, different communication media have different properties with respect to qualities of the media specifically and with respect to predictors of how the media will be used (e.g., the level of accessibility and level of informality that they provide (see Table 1)). These four properties, in turn, have important implications for the impact of particular communication modes on the strength of members' identification. What one medium lacks in one dimension (i.e., the social context cues in e-mail), it may make up in another (i.e., the high informality and accessibility of e-mail).

Table 1.

	Face-to-Face	Document	Telephone	Electronic mail
Accessibility/	Synchronous	Asynchronous	Synchronous	Asynchronous

Synchronicity	with respect to time and place	with respect to time and place	with respect to time; asynchronous with respect to place	with respect to time and place
Formality	Dependent upon communicators	Highly formal	Dependent upon communicators	Highly informal
Shared interpretive context	Facilitates creation of interpretive context			Facilitates communication within established interpretive context.
Social context cues	Strong	Moderate	Moderate	Weak

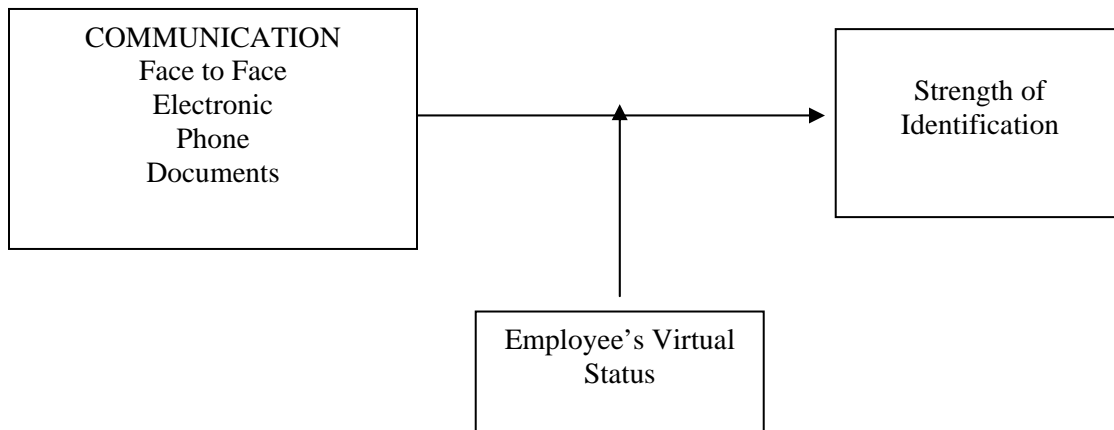
Communication, Spirituality, and Identification

If individuals' virtual status affects their use of communication media, then virtual status may impact the relationship between communication and identification. In terms of spirituality this notion was addressed in Scripture in John 20:29. Jesus tells the apostle Thomas that Thomas believes (and will join in the identification as a believer) because of his face-to-face contact with Jesus, but that others will believe despite being remote to the events of the day. This suggests that faith is a moderating variable in the identification process, and that when communication media are more informal, organization members are likely to feel that they are active participants in the process of creating and sharing the identity. Members may therefore feel a stronger psychological tie to the identity created through this social process.

Electronic communication is especially important as a source of commitment and involvement for more peripheral workers. For example, Bikson (1988) examined the impact of electronic communication on one type of peripheral worker (retired followers). He conducted a field quasi-experiment involving two task forces in which half the task force members were recently retired. One task force was given electronic communication technology and another was not. While all retired people on the task forces rated themselves as 'peripheral' at the outset of the experiment, six months later the retired members of the task force that communicated electronically were more involved than those who did not communicate electronically. Early research on the effects of communication media on the attitudes of peripheral workers further lends support to the model that I explore.

The expectation is that virtual status will moderate the relationship between mode of communication and identification. The effects of the specific mode of communication used on the strength of member identification will vary depending upon an employee's virtual status (see Figure 1).

Figure 1



Taking a Look

I surveyed a family member’s coworkers at the U.S. Department of Education (Programming Department) that permit a virtual work program. The program was initiated for cost reduction purposes in order to accommodate people with disabilities and for with equal employment opportunity purposes. A total of 22 followers were surveyed, with 18 responses received (overall response rate = 81%). Most followers were using a combination of different work modes in a given week. The typical employee would utilize office space for a portion of the week and work out of their home and/or clients’ offices the remainder of the time. The median number of days that followers worked from traditional offices was only 2 days per week. About a third of the followers utilized office space for a day or less in a typical week. The rest of the time these followers were working from home or in a mobile mode.

This sample offered a wide variation in work modes utilized by followers. Approximately half of the respondents spent the majority of their workweek in virtual mode (less than 2 days in the office), and may thus be viewed as followers with a relatively higher virtual status than their in-office counterparts. The second half of the respondents spent more than 2 days per week in the office, and thus may be viewed as followers with a lower virtual status. This variation was ideally suited for the purpose of this research and provided a basis for comparing the communication frequencies of these workers and their linkage with identification.

Analyzing the Data

The information in the table below summarizes the previous sections of this paper and highlights the role of trust in virtual teams. As previously suggested trust plays an important intervening role, mitigating the potential negative impacts of distance, cultural differences, reliance on electronic media, reluctance to share information and lack of history/future; thus having a positive impact on performance in virtual teams. All of the factors listed in the first column have the potential to negatively impact performance in virtual teams. Trust plays a role in minimizing the potentially negative effects. The information in this table is collected from The 12th International Conference on Comparative Management 2001.

Table 2.

Variables that Negatively Impact of Performance in Virtual Teams	Role of Trust	Potential Impact on Performance When Trust is Present
Distance in space and time Loss of personal contact; Loss of immediate feedback; Loss of informal knowledge transfer; ready access to peers	Adds a sense of connection	Makes it easier to exchange information lessens the social cost of asking question adds to desire to reply on a timely basis
Cross cultural/organizational difference Misinterpretation, Misunderstanding	Trust makes people more accepting, more willing to work out difference	Positives: Team members are more flexible and adaptable
Reliance on electronically mediated Communication Loss of nonverbal cues	Mediates the negative perceptions that lead to mistrust	Team members devise ways to make up for lack of face-to-face time
Reluctance to share information	People are more willing to share information with those they trust	More information is distributed
Lack of history/future-temporary	Trust allows people to focus on the task	Faster performance - team members move right to performing task related work

The problem is that most measures of trust focus on the cognitive aspects of a trusting relationship as opposed to the affective. These measures mislead managers who focus on budding lower levels of trust (cognitive, work related) when it may be the higher levels of trust (affective, generalized) that have greater performance implications (Macy & Stark, 1998).

Discussion and Implications

The impact of virtual initiatives may be felt both by sectors of the organization in which workers are dispersed and among those who remain in traditional centralized offices. There are implications for the study of identification and virtual work. suggesting that identification is the psychological tie that binds scattered followers together into an organization, rather than a collection of incidentally related individuals. Without identification, virtual workers may view themselves as merely independent contractors, operating autonomously and without consideration for the organization that employs them.

Interestingly, the very technologies that offer followers the flexibility to work anytime and anywhere also detracts from the creation of a shared reality essential for the formation of stable work expectations. Many organizational cues that serve as the basis for the creation of a shared reality among followers (including dress codes, shared language, and shared organizational routines) are less readily available in a virtual setting. As a result, there is a danger that organizations operating in a virtual system could be pulled apart by the centripetal forces that so heavily influence virtual organizations.



Managers in virtual organizations should be attentive to the communication media used, and to the underlying spiritually relevant objectives of the organization. Typically, organizations take communication media for granted, partly because face-to-face interaction among co-located followers emerges naturally, and may not require that a routine or pattern be established formally. If electronic and telephone media are important determinants of identification, then managers must provide the 'hardware' to facilitate this communication and the 'software' to encourage its usage. This means the communication equipment

(such as separate telephone lines at home; cell phones; e-mail systems; telephone conferencing) that is available to the virtual worker. In addition to providing training in the use of the system, it may also be important to create an organizational culture that encourages the use of on-line media to share task and non-task related information. These findings provide a foundation for exploring issues pertaining to identification and virtual organization.

Conclusion

With today's advancements in communication technology, virtual work is rapidly spreading among organizations globally. The present potential of virtual work can be realized if we recognize factors that tie organizational members together. For example, leadership should acknowledge the common bond in the religious and spiritual lives of organizational members. In this context, a spirit filled identification is "organizational glue" that can tie followers together in a virtual setting. In addition, it supports the conceptual arguments, suggesting that virtual workers' strength of identification with the organization depends upon the frequency of electronic communication with other organization members. This holds implications for both researches on identification as well as for leaders of virtual work organizations.

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AGENDA/OVERVIEW

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