

Getting Everyone on Board: The Role of Inspirational Leadership in Geographically Dispersed Teams

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A rich body of research in the area of leadership has examined the influence of transformational/charismatic forms of leadership on employees' motivation, attitudes, and behaviors. This research is based on the assumption that leaders are able to influence followers based on close, sustained, and personalized contact with them. However, new organizational realities are challenging this assumption. Drawing on the intersections between social identity theory and leadership research, this study highlights the importance of inspirational leaders who, by developing socialized relationships with team members, can foster attitudes that are critical for team effectiveness in geographically dispersed settings. Findings support the role of this form of leadership in dispersed settings. Inspirational leadership emerged as a significant predictor of individuals' trust in team members and commitment to the team. Further, the positive relationship between inspirational leadership and individuals' commitment to the team and trust in team members was strengthened in teams that were more dispersed suggesting that inspirational leaders are important in all contexts but that their importance is underscored in highly dispersed contexts. Finally, shared perceptions of trust and commitment predicted performance at the team level.

Key words: leadership; geographically dispersed teams; identification

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A rich body of research in the area of leadership has examined the influence of transformational/charismatic forms of leadership on employees' motivation, attitudes, and behaviors (e.g., Bass 1985, Conger and Kanungo 1998, House 1971, House et al. 1991, Podaskoff et al. 1990). This research is based on the assumption that leaders are able to influence followers based on close, sustained, and personalized contact with them. However, new organizational realities involving the routine employment of advanced informational technologies and dispersed work arrangements, are challenging this assumption (Avolio et al. 2000, Bell and Kozlowski 2002, Malhotra et al. 2007). In these contexts, a sense of identification with a work group or collective organizational entity is often problematic and leaders have to rely on infrequent and technology-mediated communications to motivate team members to achieve collective team goals (Fiol and O'Connor 2005, Katz and Te'eni 2007, Malhotra et al. 2007). This paper aims at redirecting attention to the role of leaders in these newly evolving organizational contexts and considers the role of a specific form of leadership in developing attitudes that reflect identification with a collective team entity.

Recent extensions of leadership theory have drawn on additional insights from social identity theory to distinguish between personalized versus socialized relationships between leaders and followers (Howell and Shamir 2005, Ellemers et al. 2004). Personalized relationships are based on close affect-based dyadic ties between the leader and follower, rely on personal identification with the leader, and may be suited more for achieving personal goals of the leader such as self-aggrandizement or personal rewards. Socialized relationships, on the other hand, emphasize the individual's connection to a collective entity based on an acceptance of the leader's message and are conducive to positive outcomes directed at the collective entity such as commitment or citizenship behaviors directed toward the team (Howell and Shamir 2005, Shamir et al. 1993). Leaders who engage in socialized relationships are able to provide followers with a "clear set of values [and] a means of expressing these values within the framework of collective action" (Howell and Shamir 2005, p. 98). The follower identifies with and derives a sense of direction from the message that the leader delivers and is less dependent on the leader's personal attributes. In geographically dispersed teams that represent mixed-motive settings, iden-