Strategies for Developing Trust in Virtual Project Teams

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ABSTRACT: Organizational leaders often fail to use the trust building strategies necessary for the successful implementation of virtual project teams (VPTs). Grounded in Meyerson et al.'s swift trust theory, the purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies project team leaders (PTLs) and project management office leaders in charitable nonprofit organizations leverage to effectively develop trust in VPTs. The participants were six PTLs and project management office leaders from a charitable nonprofit organization in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Data were collected through semistructured interviews and a review of the organizational documentation. Data analysis occurred through a thematic approach. The major themes emerging from the study were trust, leadership, communication, and technology. A key recommendation is for leaders to create an environment conducive to effective communication and the right technology to facilitate the collaboration and work efforts of the team. The implications for positive social change include the potential for nonprofit organizations to effectively utilize VPTs in support of humanitarian and disaster relief projects for the benefit of people and communities around the world.

KEYWORDS: Virtual teams, Swift trust, Trust, Virtual team effectiveness, Culture, Technology, Leadership, Geographically dispersed, Virtuality, global, Project teams, Knowledge sharing, Virtual team trust, Digital, Virtual project team

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1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

The globalization of world economies and technological advancements enable businesses and all types of organizations, including nonprofit organizations, to operate without concern for traditional boundaries. Organizations employ different work environment models to accomplish objectives. One work model used to accomplish organizational goals is virtual teams. Virtual work teams, which often consist of geographically dispersed team members, represent an effective means for leaders to satisfy organizational objectives [1]. Virtual group members may operate in different regions and time zones without the limitations connected with traditional boundaries for employment. Geographically dispersed virtual teams continue to surge in popularity as organizations expand operations globally to complete time-sensitive goals [1]. Sixty-six percent of all organizations that have operations worldwide use virtual teams [2, 3]. One of the major challenges for virtual team leaders is building trust among members of the team [4]. Organization leaders must recognize the broad implications of trust in order to maximize team and organizational performance. However, some PTLs and project management office leaders in charitable nonprofit organizations focusing on disaster relief lack strategies to effectively develop trust in VPTs. The findings of this study

might enable PTLs and project management office leaders responsible for leading VPTs create trust building environments within the team, which contribute to team success towards the accomplishment of organizational performance goals.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

Virtual work environments allow organizations to function with distributed team members. VPTs represent an effective means for accomplishing organizational performance objectives [5]. When examining virtual teams, geographic separation is one of the defining qualities of the team [6, 7]. The physical separation of team members means that virtual work groups usually have limited face-to-face interaction [7, 8]. The geographical dispersion of team members can result in challenges when there is a need for group collaboration [7, 9]. One of the ways VPT leaders enhance team cohesiveness and combat the difficulties of a distributed work team is by leveraging information technology and other communication tools.

Information and communication technology advances have contributed to the increased popularity of the VPT [6]. When it comes to virtual teams, technology can be a valuable tool, which enables group members to communicate effectively [6, 10, 11]. The choice of the communication medium affects the social dynamics within virtual teams [13]. When there are language differences within the team, the communication medium chosen could lessen language proficiency differences among team members [13]. Team members that are not proficient in the dominant language as well as the other teammates will find value and use in the communication tool if the medium reduces language barriers.

2.1 Virtual Teams

One of the challenges for VPT leaders is to encourage group

members to stay connected to the organization and the project objective. The greater the isolation team members experience in a virtual setting, the greater the possibility that the members become disinterested and detached from team goals [7]. Without a shared commitment to project goals, the team will not be successful.

Organization leaders depend on VPTs to accomplish performance goals. The productivity of virtual teams relates to the strength of the relationships among team members [8, 14]. Trust is a critical element in virtual environments [15-17]. Team performance links to vulnerability trust among team members, which is trust based upon relational factors [18, 19]. The relationship among virtual team members is one of several factors related to the success of the team.

2.2 Swift Trust Theory

The swift trust theory, first introduced by Meyerson, et al. [20], is used by researchers to suggest that trust materializes in temporary teams without the benefit of developing relationships. Meyerson, et al.'s [20] application of swift trust focused on dispersed teams. Key concepts of the swift trust theory are as follows: (a) it occurs in a temporary team setting; (b) there is no time for group members to develop shared experiences; and (c) in the absence of traditional opportunities to develop relationships, group members presume that trust will exist in the group [20]. Virtual teams may form on a temporary basis or serve a long-term role in an organization, which makes the swift trust theory relevant for any discussion focusing on trust in a virtual team context.

Swift trust helps to explain how newly formed virtual teams operate. The maintenance of swift trust within the team remains predicated on actions congruent with member expectations [21]. Organization leaders must recognize the broad implications of trust in order to maximize team and organizational performance. The ubiquitous nature of trust in the business world compels a deeper understanding of the major components of trust and how trust forms.

2.3 Cognitive and Affective Trust

Trust is a multi-faceted concept. Trust exists along two main dimensions: cognitive and affective [22-24]. Cognitive trust results from the professionalism and perceived competencies of others [24]. Affective trust is emotion-based [22, 26, 27]. Affective trust is able to endure throughout the existence of a team, whereas cognitive trust can deteriorate when expected behaviors and norms are not met [25]. Affective trust develops from relationships, which differs from swift trust. Affective trust would not be a factor in the development of swift trust in virtual teams.

2.4 Vulnerability Trust

Whenever there is a trust relationship among individuals, there is an element of vulnerability for the trust participants. Trust only exists if there is vulnerability [19]. Building rapport with team members is at the core of the development of vulnerability trust, which enables the team to function more cohesively. During the early phases of team development,

members should refrain from criticism, which impedes the formation of vulnerability trust [18]. When a team initially forms, a fertile environment exists for relationship building and setting the foundation for vulnerability trust.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

3.1 Research Purpose

The purpose of this qualitative single case study was to explore strategies PTLs and project management office leaders in charitable nonprofit organizations focusing on disaster relief use to effectively develop trust in VPTs. The target population for this study was at least six PTLs and project management office leaders in one charitable nonprofit organization located in the Washington, DC metropolitan area with operations worldwide that use successful strategies to build trust in VPTs.

Nonprofit organizations focusing on disaster relief were the focus of this study given the critical role of these organizations in societies around the world. Nonprofit organizations with social missions exist to benefit the public in the areas of human services and to address societal problems such as reducing poverty levels [28, 29]. Nongovernmental organizations and nonprofits operate to positively affect the world and its inhabitants [30]. When VPT members build trust and work collaboratively resulting in lower costs, the performance of the nonprofit organization may be positively affected, helping provide support relief effort for citizens and communities suffering from a natural disaster. Given the increasing use of VPTs to accomplish organizational performance objectives, the PTLs and project office management leaders might find the strategies and findings in this study beneficial when building trust relationships within a virtual environment. If VPTs within nonprofit organizations operate at maximum effectiveness through effective leadership, technology, and communication that leads to high trust levels in the group, then their humanitarian and public good missions will have a positive effect on societies and people in communities throughout the world.

3.2 Research Question

What strategies do PTLs and project management office leaders in charitable nonprofit organizations focusing on disaster relief use to effectively develop trust in VPTs?

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

4.1 Research Method and Design

A qualitative method was used to explore strategies some PTLs and project management office leaders in large charitable nonprofit organizations focusing on disaster relief use to develop trust in VPTs. This required a deep understanding of the real-life experiences and decisions of PTLs and program management office leaders within a nonprofit organization. Qualitative research is an approach that enables the researcher to focus on feedback from individuals who can provide valuable information concerning the issue under study [31, 32]. Researchers use qualitative studies to explore the lived experiences of study participants [33-35].

A qualitative single case study design was appropriate for this study. A case study design enables researchers to obtain a perspective on real-world occurrences within an organization [36, 37]. Case studies allow researchers to study a phenomenon that addresses research questions that focus on how events occurred within the context of real life [36, 37]. The qualitative single case study design aligns to the central research question for this study, which was an exploration of the strategies used to effectively develop trust in VPTs. There must be harmony between the research approach and the research question [38]. In addition, single case studies are appropriate when the goal of the study is to contribute to the understanding of an issue that is rooted in a conceptual understanding of a topic [37]. A single case study design for this research project was selected to obtain rich data to understand successful strategies used to develop trust in VPTs through the lens of the swift trust theory.

4.2 Participants and Sampling

Study participants were recruited from workers in the selected nonprofit organization that focuses on disaster relief. Approval was received from the appropriate organizational authorities to recruit the individuals who were potential participants and the key resources of information on their experiences during the study. Eligible participants for the study had knowledge of or successfully implemented strategies designed to develop trust within VPTs.

Purposive sampling was the primary sampling approach in the study. In purposive sampling, the researcher identifies a target group based on the thrust and focus of the study [39, 40]. The goal of this study was to understand the successful strategies used by PTLs and project management office leaders to build trust in virtual teams within nonprofit organizations. The nonprofit organization selected for the study, which had PTLs and project management office leaders with successful trust building experience in virtual teams, was located in the Washington, DC metropolitan area. Snowball sampling was a subordinate approach when necessary during the study. Snowball sampling involves the researcher asking study participants to recommend others who meet the criteria for participation in the study [40]. The sample population for the study was PTLs and project management office leaders in a charitable nonprofit organization that possessed experience with building trust in virtual teams. The primary criteria during the purposive sampling include PTLs and project management office leaders with direct experience in successfully building trust in VPTs within the last 5 to 10 years. A limit was established on the number of participants included in the study of six participants. The privacy and confidentiality of the nonprofit organization and the study participants is protected by excluding names or other identifying characteristics in the study. All study participants received a letter designation, such as Participant A, B, C, and D etc., to preserve confidentiality.

4.3 Data Collection

Semistructured interviews were conducted with participants during the study through recorded phone interviews. The

open-ended interview questions developed for the study focused on successful strategies for developing trust in virtual teams following an interview protocol to facilitate timely and consistent interview approach with participants. Each interview candidate's permission was obtained through a signed consent before any individuals were included as a participant. Each participant also received a sample of the interview questions and received notification of the intent to audio record the interview session. Interview participants were able to review and comment on the interpretation and analyses of data collected during the study. In addition to the interviews, a review of documentation from the organization provided additional evidence during data collection.

4.4 Data Analysis

Researchers use method triangulation in qualitative case studies. Method triangulation occurs when the researcher leverages multiple data sources to explore the phenomenon under study [41-45]. The use of various sources allows the researcher to obtain sufficient data points. Multiple techniques were used to ensure the integrity of this study, including interview notes, the content from interview transcripts, and organizational documentation.

During the data analysis phase of the study, a logical and sequential process was followed. Once the interviews were finished and the interview transcripts were reviewed, the transcripts and initial analysis of the interview responses were sent to participants. Member checking of researcher interpretations and conclusions of data represents an acceptable approach for assisting researchers with data analysis [46]. Once the member checking was completed, the interview transcripts were used to continue with a content analysis. In qualitative studies, content analysis represents the overall analytic approach to data by the researcher [47]. The content of the interview transcripts served as the primary basis for the coding process. The coding process began with the establishment of codes, which originated from concepts taken from extant literature. Qualitative researchers use coding to develop and emphasize themes derived from study data [46, 48]. Initial codes were modified and additional codes were identified as necessary based on an analysis of the transcripts. Researchers use the codes to derive themes [49]. After completion of the coding, appropriate themes were developed from the research data.

A commercial software product was used during the analysis phase of the study. Using a computer program to assist with data analysis is helpful [46, 49]. Through content analysis, the predominant themes derived from the interview data were used to address the central research question. The thematic emphasis from the data analysis was compared against the extant literature, the conceptual framework, the interviews, and documentation obtained from the organization. The qualitative researcher's construction of findings from data using more than one source creates credibility for the study [50]. When explaining the results, triangulation mitigates the disadvantages of using a small sample in qualitative research [42-45].

4.5 Limitations

A limitation of this study is that one organization was the subject of the study. There may be cultural or regional differences in the operations of nonprofit organizations across the United States and the world, which may limit the ability to generalize the results. Another limitation of the study is that data collection took place from a single organization, which may reflect participant experiences that are unique to the participants in the study and not generalizable to virtual teams in other organizations.

5. RESULTS

Each of the interview participants, Participants A, B, C, D, E, and F, possessed direct experience in successfully building trust in VPTs within the last 5 to 10 years. The participants were all responsible for leading or overseeing a VPT in the organization. Four themes emerged from the analysis of the interviews and the review of organization documentation: trust, leadership, communication, and technology.

5.1 Theme 1: Trust

The first theme to emerge from the interviews and research question was trust. Interview Participants A, B, C, D, E, and F identified the presence and importance of trust for successful VPT performance. Table 1 includes a summary of the number of times participants mentioned trust.

Participant	Trust references	% of total
A	3	14
B	9	43
C	2	10
D	3	14
E	1	5
F	3	14
Total	21	

Table 1: Participant references to trust.

Interview Participants A, B, C, D, and F identified the presence and importance of trust for successful VPT performance. The interview participants indicated that trust among members within the team enables all group members to work toward the same goals and objectives. Participant F commented, "For me, trust is very important. It permeates, I think, throughout the entire team." Team members who trust each other are more willing to collaborate toward the accomplishment of organizational and team goals. Participant D explained, "Getting feedback from the team, and really creating a collaborative environment, I think is probably the biggest thing that helps maintain the trust in this kind of virtual environment."

Participant B indicated that "There are, you still, in order to have trust, you still have to maintain an authentic relationship with your people." As Participant B reported, "And so again, relying on each other, knowing that each other's there to help, helps build that trust. It helps build that connectedness. It helps build that relationship." Trust built on relationships is affective trust. When group members understand expected behaviors,

there is an opportunity for the team to create an enduring structure for success.

In response to questions concerning successful strategies for building trust within VPTs, the participants discussed the various techniques that were centered on maintaining a connection with the virtual team members. Participant D commented, "Strategies for trust are just having consistent check-ins with co-workers and employees." Although occasional in-person meetings remain beneficial when team members are not co-located, the quality of the interactions, whether face-to-face or virtually, is another important consideration.

A review of an internal organizational policy directive memorandum, which reinforced the responses from interview participants, revealed that virtual workers receive encouragement and have clear guidance on engagement activities in the accomplishment of tasks and meetings to facilitate collaboration leading to trust. For example, the organization leaders through an internal organizational policy directive memorandum, informed VPTs that they must work as a team and with the highest work standards in order to meet performance goals. Teambuilding and encouragement when VPTs achieve milestones should not be absent from the virtual work environment.

Swift trust means that an individual willingly becomes vulnerable to another person [18, 52]. When extrapolating the principles of swift trust to VPTs, it follows that group members who can develop shared experiences and relationships possess the foundational elements to build trust with each other. The group members are not bound by need to develop trust in the absence of opportunities for relationship building. Based on the findings in this study, virtual teams that have a collaborative environment foster trusting work relationships. Team members who work closely with each other build opportunities to develop reliability across many situations. Trust results when individuals know they can rely on other team members to accomplish the collective goals.

When individuals share experiences and build a sense of connectedness, it becomes easier to rely on each other in a team environment. The findings from this study reinforced that trust does not exist in a virtual team or any team without a relationship among the team members. There must be opportunities for team members to develop a bond and work relationship with other members. Team members need opportunities to have conversations to build trust. The conversations allow members to learn about each other and identify shared interests. The virtual team leader and leaders in general must develop authentic relationships with team members. Authentic relationships engender trust and commitment from team members.

5.2 Theme 2: Leadership

Leadership also emerged as a prominent theme during the study. The participants cited leadership as a key factor in the

development of trust within the VPT. Table 2 identifies the references to leadership from the participants.

Participant	Leadership references	% of total
A	7	25
B	12	43
C	1	4
D	4	14
E	4	14
Total	28	

Table 2: Participant references to leadership.

The leader must hold team members accountable to accomplish organizational performance objectives according to Participants B, C, and E. Participant C explained, “I think that there are some different strategies that could be put into place to hold people more accountable for the things that they do throughout the day.” Participant E said accountability manifests when, “Some staff are required to turn in weekly counseling logs. Now that is—the necessity of that is that we need to be able to track the number of hours that—billable hours, to the vendor for that particular program.”

Additionally, virtual team leaders must set clear expectations for performance and the objectives of the team. Team members need to know the rules of engagement with the team and their responsibilities to assist the team meet organizational performance goals. Based on the interviews, the consensus view among Participants A and B is that the focus on task-oriented activities must be balanced with concern for the virtual team members. The virtual team leader and leaders in general must also develop authentic relationships with team members. Authentic relationships engender trust and commitment from team members.

Leaders must model integrity, which promotes a feeling of trust within the team and with the leader. The leader should encourage members to help each other when necessary and rely on each other when there is a need to share information. Leaders also have the responsibility to make sure team members know they are valued. Valued team members have ownership and a stake in the success of the team. Leaders must know and understand how to motivate team members in different ways. The job of the leader is to maximize the potential of team members. Participant A said, “Well, trust is something that is built upon communication and relationships.”

Participants B, C, D, and E unanimously agreed that the virtual team leader must be committed to holding regular communications with team members. Open communication leads to trust. The leader should emphasize the importance of teamwork to build camaraderie. During meetings, team members should be motivated to share ideas and make recommendations. When team members recognize that their opinions matter, this leads to a stronger commitment to the shared goals. Participant B explained, “It’s really about having recurring meetings, recurring team check-ins, recurring individual check-ins. It is using applications that allow us to

have, keep track of the to-dos.” According to Participant C, “I would say that the weekly goal that would tie into the deliverables, of course, and the communication is key.” Participant D indicated, “And kind of in those meetings, just going through what the obstacles are, if there are any challenges.” When team members recognize that their opinions matter and the leader is attuned to problems they encounter while working toward the identified goal, the member has greater commitment to the shared goals. The leader should allow team members to be vocal and share their ideas during meetings to foster a sense of belonging to the team. High performing virtual teams trust the individuals responsible for directing and leading team efforts. Trust in the leader leads to members’ trust in the work environment.

Further, leaders should be self-aware and understand how their behavior and attitudes affect team performance. Participant A explained, “So, when it comes to leadership, leadership skills and leadership abilities you look for individuals who have a desire to speak additional or speak different or push things forward.” In addition, effective leadership in the virtual environment may rotate among individuals based on a particular task. Participant A commented, “A leader typically doesn’t always lead from a vantage point of project team leads. Yeah, you’ll have people who will run point on a project but you have to look at it as Who’s leading this endeavor?” Leaders often emerge from different circumstances and are not always formally appointed to a position. Team members may designate an informal leader based on trust with an individual or certain expertise that a member possesses that is relevant to the VPT’s activities. Effective VPT leaders allow high performing members to be part of daily operations to the maximum extent possible. The leader can build trust and a shared vision for the team by encouraging team members to lead portions of meetings. The opportunities to lead meetings provides valuable experience for future leaders and builds trust.

An internal organizational policy directive memorandum distributed to virtual workers provided additional evidence of the important role of virtual team leaders. The policy documentation contains the organization’s expectations for VPT members, which includes the requirement to work 40 hours per week and to put forth maximum effort. VPT leaders leverage the guidance documentation and verbal communications with virtual members to set objectives, create an environment of accountability, and to promote team effectiveness.

5.3 Theme 3: Technology

Technology selections in a virtual environment must simultaneously allow team members to accomplish work products and produce data virtual team leaders need to make decisions. Table 3 reflects the number of times study Participants referenced technology.

Participant	Technology references	% of total
A	2	13
B	4	25

C	3	19
D	2	13
E	1	5
F	4	25
Total	16	

Table 3: Participant references to technology.

Participants B and F agreed that the technology must enhance and assist with decision-making so leaders can pivot resources to meet changes in organizational performance goals or respond to changes in the environment. Effective use of technology is important for VPTs. Participant B indicated, “I absolutely think in this regard, you have to use technology. Technology has to be your friend. We have to become savvy at leveraging those tools to stay in touch with each other.”

Leveraging technology in VPTs must enable collaboration and allow for easy use by members for collective work efforts towards the project goal according to Participants C and F. Participant C said, “The communication, the meetings, whether it's Teams or Zoom, and weekly tasks that would often need communication between you and your supervisor staff, or team...” Participant F reported, “The other thing I should have said earlier is that hopefully whatever the technology or the platform that we're using, it is user-friendly in terms of the folks that are actually using the application.”

The technology mediums must be deployed and have functionalities, which promote rich interactions among members even though they are not in the same location. A review of internal policy documentation from the organization indicates that virtual workers are encouraged to “remain attentive” and use cameras during virtual meetings.

Participants A, C, D, and E stated unanimously that one of the challenges with technology is team members may have bandwidth or issues with their cameras. For example, a team member's camera may freeze. Technological issues may negatively affect the ability of team members to fully participate in meetings or accomplish work assignments. Participant A indicated, “There may be a few challenges with the bandwidth of their internet connection whether they're mobile or whether they're in their own home sometimes there are bandwidth issues and that's to be expected.” Participant C explained, “And then not having reliable Wi-Fi, so it's always kind of the barriers there.”

Even the best technology is not useful if virtual members encounter technology challenges and do not understand how to navigate and utilize the features to communicate with other members. Participants D and F both agreed that training and assisting virtual members on the technology available to the virtual team is a necessity. Participant D explained, “So, yeah, just letting people know that we're going to – we're here to work with them. And just to let us know what they need in order for us to help them through, through those challenges. And being very open and transparent.” The organization must have a plan for assisting team members when technology issues arise. A best practice is to have personnel on-call to

troubleshoot technology issues for the VPT members. A team member experiencing connection delays or other problems may not be able to effectively communicate and collaborate with other members, which impedes team performance.

The consensus among Participants D and F is that not only must the VPT have the right technology, the technology must support the secure transmission and storage of client data. In order for the organization to function properly and maintain trust with key stakeholders, including clients, the data entrusted to the organization must remain safe from unauthorized access and disclosure. Participant D indicated, “To be able to continue to provide those services without compromising anyone's personally identifiable information. Especially with all of the uptick in hacking and cyber breaches, and all of that.” Technology considerations must focus on security. The organization's information technology team must be responsible for ensuring the networks and communication mediums of the virtual team remain secure and safe from unauthorized access.

Organizational documentation reviewed during the study contained data that were congruent with the feedback from participant interviews. The organization's internal policy directive memorandum for VPT members demonstrates the criticality of successful technology deployment and implementation. VPT members must “dress appropriately” when using video conferencing platforms, refrain from eating food during virtual meetings, keep their cameras on when conversing with team members in group meetings, and remain attentive so there is no opportunity to multi-task or engage in other distracting activities. Technology, when used properly and consistently within the VPT is beneficial to the organization and members.

5.4 Theme 4: Communication

Communication was another theme identified in the study. Interview participants emphasized the importance of communication throughout all levels of the team. Table 4 contains the number of Participant references to communication.

Participant	Communication references	% of total
A	3	15
B	5	25
C	3	15
D	6	30
E	3	15
Total	20	

Table 4: Participant references to communication.

Participants A, B, and C each identified that communication with virtual team members is essential to team success. Conducting meaningful meetings facilitates understanding and shared goals among virtual team members. The meetings should be conducted following an organized agenda. A clear and organized meeting will lead to a common understanding of the goals and objectives of the team. Participant A explained, “Well, its communication. You have to have

effective communication not only with your team but also with participants on virtual learning and virtual workshops and virtual meetings.” Participant B said, “And make sure that, and talk about those to-dos and make sure that if there’s challenges that we check in. So it’s all about communication, communication, communication after you care.” Participant E indicated the following as a strategy for building trust: “So, again, it is meeting with the entire team, and making sure that you communicate clearly with the entire team, and in that way, it leaves little room for miscommunication - someone miscommunicating, or misconstruing what you actually said.”

Knowledge sharing assists the virtual team’s efforts to work synergistically to accomplish organizational performance goals. Participants B and E stated that meeting together allows everyone to hear the same information at the same time and creates opportunities for building trust within the group. In addition, the team meeting is an environment that fosters information sharing and allows team members to share best practices for resolving common problems. Participant B explained, “We have shared folders. So folks can, we have document management systems in place so that people can share data.”

Although internal virtual team communication is essential, Participants A and E identified that VPTs also need to consider effective communication with outside stakeholders. Participant A commented, “Externally, when we have meetings with external clients, because of the platform that we use we really have to make sure they’re comfortable with that platform.”

Participant E explained, “The team members who interface with clients, there have been some difficulty in communicating with clients whose native language is not English.”

The organizational documentation reviewed during the study includes the internal policy directive memorandum for VPT members that leaders use to encourage individuals to communicate in a manner internally and externally, which contributes to organizational and team success. Team members must be active participants during virtual meetings so there are active contributions from participants while on various technology platforms. Effective communication creates opportunities for the virtual team to flourish and reach operational performance objectives for the organization.

5.5 Action Steps for Organizational Leaders

The findings and recommendations in this study may apply to any PTL or project management office leader in a charitable nonprofit organization that needs to consider strategies for building trust in VPTs. The adoption of the trust building strategies outlined in the study beginning with the recognition and acknowledgement of the importance of trust in VPTs, will enable the organizations to successfully leverage distributed virtual work teams to accomplish project goals. The findings from this study may also be of interest to VPT members as they navigate the virtual environment and seek trust building connections with teammates.

The results in this study reveal that trust is a central element of highly performing teams leading to effective performance, knowledge sharing, and an anchor to establishing a culture of norms for members of the group. VPT leaders remain responsible for creating opportunities for members to build trusting relationships, maintain constant communication within the group, and for identifying and guiding the team to meet performance targets. The VPT is also reliant upon successful technology choices, which serve as an impetus for collaboration and effective team performance. Team members must receive training on the technology to fully utilize the available functionalities that are necessary to accomplish assigned tasks. In addition, technology must be reliable and secure to protect the data residing within information networks. The communication among team members and external stakeholders must receive priority consideration in order for the VPT to reach the full performance potential in support of organizational mission imperatives. The following are recommendations leaders can implement to support their organizations based upon the study results:

1. Recognize the value and opportunities VPTs offer to accomplish organizational performance goals when successful trust building strategies exist within the group.
2. Identify and select VPT leaders that are able to balance a task orientation with relationship building with team members.
3. Encourage VPT leaders to focus on providing maximum opportunities for the virtual team to communicate.
4. VPT goals must be tied to the overall goals of the organization, which is the responsibility of the leader.
5. Knowledge sharing and knowledge learning within the VPT lead to effective team performance.
6. The right type of technology mediums must be selected for the VPT to enable members to accomplish task assignments and to collaborate as necessary with other members of the group.
7. VPT members must be trained on the technology selected for the group.
8. Consider whether VPT members have the infrastructure, such as home Internet connections or other local networks, to support the technology that will be leveraged by the group.
9. Data integrity and cybersecurity must be considered when using technology to support virtual teams to ensure trust is fostered both internally and with external partners or clients that provide data to the VPT.
10. VPT communication is important both internally among members and with outside clients the team supports for the organizational mission assignments and projects.

6. FUTURE RESEARCH

During this study designed to explore strategies PTLs and project management office leaders in charitable nonprofit organizations focusing on disaster relief use to effectively develop trust in VPTs, it is recognized that further research is required on the role of technology within virtual teams. The role and understanding of technology should extend beyond the consideration of a technology platform's functionality, but also the viability and ability of virtual members' infrastructure at home or in the local community, to support the information technology tool. Future research should also focus on cybersecurity and the methods and software tools an organization should consider to protect the data exchanged within the virtual group and received from clients or other external partners. In addition, research on communication for VPTs should not be relegated to communication among team members. Communication dynamics must include how the virtual team interacts with external stakeholders as part of the efforts associated with completing a project or tasking in support of the organization's community or global initiatives.

A primary limitation of the study was the use of a single nonprofit organization in the eastern region of the United States and the relatively small group of six interview participants. Future research can address this limitation by expanding the scope of nonprofit organizations to other areas of the United States and different countries around the world. Further research can also address the limitations of this study by including a larger population of interview participants and possibly exploring whether the findings in this study from a charitable nonprofit organization are transferable to for-profit organizations.

7. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

When organizations employ virtual teams, trust is an essential element that must exist within the team. Trust building among virtual team members results when they have an opportunity to share experiences and learn about each other. The VPT leader is responsible for creating opportunities for virtual members to build trust. As the findings from this study demonstrate, the leader must develop trust within the team and create trust bonds with team members. Trust is built through constant communication and the identification of clear goals and vision for team performance towards accomplishment of the organizational mission.

The decision on the technology medium is a key consideration for the virtual team. The results from this study reveal that VPT members must receive training on the technology platform and have access to the necessary infrastructure to utilize the selected technology. Another important factor in successful technology deployment is the security of the data on the technology used by the VPT. Protecting data from unauthorized access and disclosure is related to trust within the team in the organizational system and the trust clients have in the organization's VPT.

The study findings reinforce that communication is essential to team success. Effective VPT communication involves internal

communication between members and successful interactions with external stakeholders, such as clients of the organization. VPTs that experience frequent and effective communication can serve as a reliable resource for the organization to accomplish mission imperatives across the world.

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