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Conflict and the path to resolution in global virtual teams

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CONFLICT AND THE PATH TO RESOLUTION IN

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Abstract

       With the spread of globalization, many organizations are reaching around the world to fulfill their missions. In the fast-paced world of technology, there are ever-improving ways in which organizations can be in touch with transcontinental colleagues. Many organizations are using global virtual teams (GVTs) as an important part of their business model. Yet, just as globalization adds new complexities to the work of organizations, complexity is also increased on teams that are dispersed globally and working virtually. Some of the complexities found on a GVT include intercultural communications, building team identity with colleagues who do not meet face-to-face, working across time zones, and cross-functional agendas. Amid all the complexity, conflict can easily arise and disrupt the workflow on GVTs.

       The purpose of this research was to determine a set of best practices to establish and lead a GVT, with a focus on how to resolve conflict when it arises. Questions related to the topic are
       1. How is trust established and maintained on GVTs?
       2. What is expected of a member of a GVT?
       3. What are the potential causes of conflict on a GVT?
       4. Is there a best way to approach conflict resolution on a GVT?

       Qualitative data was gathered through one-on-one interviews with 18 people working on different GVTs. The interview questions focused on how to build trust in a virtual setting, expectations of team members, and how conflict is approached and resolved. Based on the data, a set of best practices was established. This research offers both leaders and members of GVTs a set of best practices they may use for practical application.

Table of Contents

List of Tables

Chapter 1

Introduction

With the increase of social networking sites bringing people around the world into contact more than any other time in history, people are relying on technology to stay connected. The globalized economy is no exception; organizations are using technology to facilitate projects done by global virtual teams. A global virtual team (GVT) is described as a temporary, culturally diverse, geographically dispersed, and electronically communicating work group (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). International organizations are investing in GVTs for a variety of reasons, including access to international markets, a reduction in international travel expense, consistency of application of company strategy, and encouraging diversity in ideas to promote innovation and strategies. Although there are many advantages for organizations that utilize GVTs, there are challenges as well.

There is a plethora of literature to choose from to learn about how to structure teams within the organization. Since the 1980s, use of teams has gained popularity, and much has been written about team building, the importance of trust, and cross-functional teams. For example, Katzenbach and Smith (1994) offered different models for building a high-functioning team in *The Wisdom of Teams*. In *Team Building: Proven Strategies for Improving Team Performance*, Dyer, Dyer, and Dyer (2007) gave four determinants of high-functioning teams, namely, context, composition, competencies, and change management skills.

In the past 10 years, technology has made the use of GVTs more accessible. Technologies such as WebEx, E-circle, email, and wiki allow GVTs a variety of platforms from which to accomplish their goals and exchange ideas. Yet managers and team leaders are not always clear on how to go about building a GVT. GVTs face many

of the same challenges of co-located teams, but added on top of those are a new set of potential problems.

Several common issues on GVTs include potential conflict arising from misunderstandings due to intercultural communication, issues around power (knowledge), dealing with different time zones and different work ethics, and questions of priority or team loyalty (for those who are on more than one team). Research shows that trust is often built quickly within GVTs (Robert, Dennis, & Hung, 2009), yet if that trust is damaged, it is extremely difficult to re-establish. Prevention is the best defense against the disruption conflict can cause on a GVT.

The premise behind this research is that organizations will find it beneficial to understand the potential areas of conflict that may affect the productivity of GVTs and with this knowledge increase the opportunity to prevent dysfunctional conflicts. For the purpose of this study, conflict is defined as a point of disagreement between two or more members of a GVT that may be disruptive to the workflow of the team.

Purpose of Study

The overall purpose of this research project is to determine a set of best practices to establish and lead a GVT, with a focus on how to resolve conflict when it arises.

Related questions to the primary topic are

1. How is trust established and maintained on GVTs?

2. What is expected of a member of a GVT?

3. What are the potential causes of conflict on a GVT?

4. Is there a best way to approach conflict resolution on a GVT?

It was hypothesized that the potential for conflict on a GVT is lowered as awareness of the causes of conflict is heightened. The goal is to lower the possibility of

conflict that would negatively affect work production. It must also be accepted that a certain amount of impactful conflict is inevitable; and, therefore, it is necessary for a team leader to have a set of skills to facilitate conflict resolution.

The assumption is that if members of a GVT are aware of the potential areas of impactful conflict and have the skills to resolve conflict when it arises, the following will occur:

1. Trust will be maintained among the members of the GVT.

2. The team will be able to communicate on a deeper level, increasing innovation and productivity.

3. The members of the team will have a clear understanding of how to recognize when conflict occurs and be able to discern the root of the issue.

4. Team members, including the team leader, will have a set of skills to bring conflict to a resolution.

Research Setting

This study was structured to include a cross-section of industries, including high-technology business, small businesses, and educational institutions. The organizations are composed of a variety of business models, sizes, and company cultures. Each of the organizations included in the study has globally dispersed teams working on projects of varying complexity. The research from this study is intended to be transferable to different organizational settings. The goal of this study is to build a set of best practices for GVTs.

Importance of the Study

With the use of GVTs on the rise, organizations could use a set of best practices to help manage dispersed teams. It is important for organizations to understand the

potential areas of conflict on a GVT, which include intercultural communication, power dynamics, issues with technology, and flow of information. Research to date has been done to compare dispersed teams to co-located teams, how technology impacts the productivity of a dispersed team, and how trust is built on a GVT. There also has been research on the different causes of conflict on GVTs, but little has been done on how to resolve conflict once it has taken root.

Outline of the Thesis

This chapter introduced the purpose and overview of this thesis. Chapter 2 will include a literature review of the research that is available on GVTs, with a focus on the different causes of conflict found on GVTs. Chapter 3 will explain how the research was designed, including the methodology behind the survey and interview questions. Chapter 4 will examine the results of the study and explain its relevance to organizations. Chapter 5 will focus on a discussion of the key findings of the study and what the implications are. It also will contain a reflection on the limitations of the study and provide recommendations for further study of conflict resolution on GVTs.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

This section reviews the body of research regarding conflict resolution in GVTs. Some researchers focused on the antecedents of conflict on GVTs (Brake, 2008; Furumo, 2009; Hinds & Bailey, 2003), but very few discussed methods of conflict resolution (Shin, 2005; Ting-Toomey, 2007). This chapter offers a brief review of traditional teams followed by an examination of the research on GVTs in the areas of best practices, trust, conflict and its antecedents, conflict resolution, and culture.

Traditional Teams and Team Building

Teams and teamwork have become an important part of many organizations over the past 40 years. In 1965 Tuckman, an educational psychologist, introduced a model that described the four stages of development on a small team as forming, storming, norming, and performing. In 1977 he revised the model with Jensen, to add a fifth stage, adjourning (discussed in Bonebright, 2010). Rather than progress through the five stages in an orderly manner, teams may bounce between the different stages, for example, the storming and norming phase (Parker, 2008). Challenges that may arise when attempting to apply Tuckman's model to a virtual team include issues around team size and team member turnover.

Building a productive team is time-consuming and demands a conscious effort. "Team building is a meta competency which great teams develop that allows them to systematically evaluate and change the way the team functions" (Dyer et al., 2007, p. 78). Dyer et al. described the Three C's of teams as context, composition and team relationship, and task competencies. Teams that are able to assess themselves in terms of

the Three C's, and then adjust themselves accordingly, are likely to reach Tuckman's stage of performing.

Creating context for a new team is considered the job of top management as well as providing the team with support in terms of development. The organization can support team development in a number of ways, including rewarding successful teams and making time available for team development. Team development includes establishing systematic processes for team assignments and creating a team structure. Team competencies include setting clear and measurable goals, developing an effective decision-making process, and establishing open lines of communication. Building trust on a team is based on creating mutual respect and fostering collaboration. Using feedback, for both positive and negative comments, will help when managing conflict. Conflict is often the result of unmet expectations (Dyer et al., 2007).

In *The Five Dysfunctions of a Team*, Lencioni (2002) offered more insight into the various roots of conflict on a team and the results of allowing conflict to fester. At the base of Lencioni's pyramid model is the absence of trust, which leads to invulnerability. The next level of dysfunction is the fear of conflict, which leads to artificial harmony. A team that has a lack of commitment must deal with ambiguity. Towards the top of the pyramid is the dysfunction of avoiding accountability, which leads to low standards. At the top of the pyramid is an inattention to results, which reflects a team whose members put their own needs above those of the goals of the team. Lencioni's pyramid of dysfunction is deficit-based. When viewed with a positive approach, the five levels of the pyramid are as follows: team members trust one another, they engage in unfiltered conflict around ideas, they commit to decisions and plans of action, they are held

accountable for delivering against those plans, and they focus on achieving collective results.

Although the Tuckman model may apply loosely to virtual teams in the sense that they will go through several stages as a team, the different aspects of team building discussed by Dyer et al. can be directly related to the development of a virtual team. The research discussed in the following review reinforces the importance of the Three C's when building a virtual team. The dysfunctions addressed in Lencioni's model are also directly related to virtual teams; in particular, the importance of developing trust on a virtual team is closely examined in this chapter. The next section begins to explore how these three models of teams and team building relate to virtual teams.

Best Practices for GVTs

In reviewing the literature on GVTs, there was a lack of research that specifically examined how to resolve conflict once it has arisen amongst team members. Some researchers explored a set of best practices for building and working on virtual teams. The following is a summary of those practices.

Inevitably, many researchers compared and contrasted working on virtual teams with working on co-located teams (Dyer et al., 2007). One of the issues that arises when working on a dispersed team is the lack of "water-cooler talk." The small talk that takes place in the office during breaks that helps build team cohesiveness is difficult to replicate on a virtual team. Yet it is just as important for the members of a virtual team to build a shared context from which to base their work.

This water-cooler talk can be replicated in several ways. The first is to dedicate some time at the beginning of each virtual team meeting to catch up on what team members did over the weekend, recent holidays, or share an appropriate non-work-related

story. Another method for building a virtual team's cohesiveness is to create a virtual café or workspace (Brake, 2008). The virtual space can be filled with team members' personal photos, biographies, or whatever the team members feel would represent them as both individuals and a team. Personal connection can also be nurtured through telephone conversations and computer conferencing (Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001).

Clarity of purpose is another aspect of a high-functioning team. Individual team members need to have a clear understanding of their role on the team as well as the primary objective of the team. The team leader can play a key role in building an effective team by working to establish ". . . positive team processes, develop supportive team member relations, create team-based reward systems, and select only those team members who are qualified to do the work" (Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001, p. 532).

In terms of evaluation, performance can be evaluated on communication as well as on accomplishment of the task (Greenberg, Greenberg, & Antonucci, 2007). It also has been suggested that cooperative rewards have a positive impact on team performance, whereas competitive reward structures have an adverse effect. According to Greenberg et al., "competitive rewards can detrimentally influence the willingness to share information . . . [and] can influence the way team members perceive the behavior of others and result in negative evaluation of others' integrity" (p. 329).

Trust

Many researchers have examined the issue of trust on GVTs. In terms of best practices, members must have trust in each other for them to function as a productive team. The following is an examination of the different components of trust and how it can be built upon within a GVT.

Because virtual teams are often composed of colleagues who have never met, and will never meet, face-to-face, trust can be difficult to establish. Having said that, researchers have found that "high levels of initial trust called swift trust have been observed among members of temporary teams and virtual teams" (Robert et al., 2009, p. 242). Robert et al. (2009) argued that team members place other team members into categories based on their characteristics, such as gender, profession, or organizational role, and form judgments based on that individual's category and not his or her actual performance. The authors asserted that because swift trust is based more on characteristics rather than actual behaviors of team members, it is not only fragile, but it is often inaccurate.

Knowledge-based trust, or cognitive trust, replaces swift trust as team members work together and gather data based on perceived ability and integrity (Robert et al., 2009). The development of cognitive trust can be supported through personal interaction that will allow team members to better understand one another.

Greenberg et al. (2007) neatly summarized "the components of trust as: ability, integrity and benevolence" (p. 326). An examination of the life cycle of a virtual team matches the development of trust with the stages of the team's establishment. The life cycle of a virtual team has five phases:

1. Establishing the team (Build dispositional trust)

2. Inception (Build swift trust)

3. Organizing (Build ability and integrity)

4. Transition

5. Accomplishing the task (Create benevolence and integrity)

As teams progress through each phase of the life cycle, simultaneously they should progress through the various stages of building trust.

During the establishment phase of the team life cycle, leaders should look for the following qualities in team members: responsibility, independence, and self-sufficiency. Clearly defined responsibilities of individual team members will help avoid confusion and frustration on the team (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

Ongoing evaluation of communication patterns will help build a more successful team. Timely and substantive responses are components of explicit communication. The quality and predictability of communication are more important than a high quantity of communication. Providing timely and detailed feedback to members' contributions as well as creating a regular pattern of communication between team members will increase predictability and build trust (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999).

Technology tools are progressing rapidly, and video conferencing is helping to give team members an opportunity to re-create the feeling of a face-to-face meeting. Yet teams that do not have access to state-of-the-art technology must rely on email, file sharing, or other various methods of communication, which do not allow members to read visual clues that signal behavior and attitude (Greenberg et al., 2007). Therefore, communication among team members must be explicit.

Social communication should be encouraged, which will foster a sense of team cohesiveness. Both managers and members need to be aware of and discourage the formation of subgroups. Trust also can be disrupted by the domination of vocal members going unchecked (Greenberg et al., 2007).

The development of trust on a GVT is a challenge, but by no means is it impossible. Members on a team should be aware of the difference between swift trust and

cognitive trust; they should modify their behavior in ways that will encourage their teammates' swift trust to transition into cognitive trust. Managers can play a vital role in helping with the establishment and development of trust by having a deep understanding of the life cycle of a virtual team and how trust relates to that cycle.

The next section will review how a lack of trust on a virtual team can create conflict. Although lack of trust is only one of several reasons for conflict on a GVT, it is interesting to note that most affective conflict can be traced to a lack of trust between team members.

Conflict

Much of the research done on GVTs examines the different antecedents of conflict. There are two main types of conflict within teams: relationship and task conflict (Kankanhalli, Tan, & Wei, 2006-07). Relationship conflict, also referred to as affective conflict, causes tension within the team due to personality clashes. Task conflict arises when members of the team disagree over one or more stages of task completion. Researchers have found that a certain amount of task conflict on a team, virtual or not, can have a positive effect on the project. The diversity of cultures among team members can lead to diversity in thoughts and ideas during the creative process, which can add to the final product of the team. However, if the conflict is affective, it will cause more disruptions than benefits to the team and consequently have an adverse effect. Task conflict can be beneficial as long as it is not complicated by, and does not degenerate into, affective or process conflict (Hinds & Bailey, 2003).

Conflict on teams, both co-located and virtual, can be viewed in one of the following categories:

1. Affective Conflict, also known as interpersonal or emotional conflict, is characterized by personality clashes on the team, resulting in anger and/or hostility among team members (Hinds & Bailey, 2003).

2. Process Conflict is characterized by disagreements regarding the team's approach to how the task is to be accomplished, methods the team might use, and/or group process.

3. Task Conflict is characterized by disagreements focused on work content, different opinions, and viewpoints about the work being performed or what should be done (Hinds & Mortensen, 2005).

Hinds and Mortensen (2005) found that there is a direct correlation between the complexity of a task and the amount of conflict around achieving that task. Yet, if managed correctly, task conflict also can have a positive relationship with performance, in part because it forces members of the team to consider alternatives and to think through options (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). Task conflict remains beneficial to the team as long as it does not degenerate into process and/or affective conflict, which can be damaging to the team's cohesion and ability to function.

Furumo (2009) examined group dynamics through the lens of Social Impact Theory to better understand what leads people to behave as deadbeats or deserters on a team. She explained

> Social Impact Theory views individuals as sources and targets of social impact. When working in groups, individuals perceive themselves and others in terms of social impact and decide, based on this assessment, how much they will participate in the group. The greater the sources and targets of social impact within a group, the less motivation of individual members to contribute to the group effort. (p. 66)

Interpersonal conflict can arise on a team if any members fail to complete their tasks because they perceive their contribution as marginal.

According to the Social Impact Theory, a deadbeat is an individual who is impacted by the dilution effect: this may limit their effort because of a lack of motivation and a belief that their efforts cannot be individually identified. A deserter is the next level. When members desert the team due to frustration, they are impacted by the immediacy gap. This occurs when distance between members leads individuals to feel isolated from the group (Furumo, 2009).

Studies of interpersonal conflict management provide a theoretical framework with two underlying motives: concern for self and concern for others. The framework proposes five major conflict management styles:

1. Integrating: high concern for self and others

2. Compromising: moderate concern for self and others

3. Dominating: high concern for self and low concern for others

4. Obliging: low concern for self and high concern for others

5. Avoiding: low concern for self and others

In Furumo's study, virtual team members who were active seemed to deal effectively with conflict by using an integrating style of conflict management, whereas deserters were more likely to use an avoiding style of conflict management (Furumo, 2009). The implication is that team members who have an understanding of the different styles of dealing with conflict and possess an awareness of their personal preference might help other team members remain engaged in the task rather than let them become deadbeats or deserters.

This section reviewed the literature on conflict, the different types of conflict found on a GVT, and the different ways in which individuals deal with conflict. The following section is an examination of the literature on different models of conflict resolution used on GVTs.

Conflict Resolution

As mentioned earlier in this chapter, little has been written in the area of conflict resolution on GVTs. Several articles examined different models of conflict negotiation and management. One issue commonly addressed was how culture affects the interactions of the team members.

Although the study did not deal directly with GVTs, Ting-Toomey's (2007) examination of three different models of conflict negotiation offered solid insight into understanding how to resolve conflict when different cultures are involved. Two of the three models might apply to conflict resolution on GVTs: the Conflict Face-Negotiation Theory and the A.E.I.O.U. Collaborative Negotiation Training Model. Using a framework of intercultural communications, Ting-Toomey pointed out that

> The greater the cultural distance between the two conflict parties, the more likely the assessment or judgment of the conflict negotiation process would be polarized and misconstrued. The cultural membership distances can include deep-level differences such as historical grievances, cultural worldviews, and beliefs. (2007, p. 256)

The Face-Negotiation Theory offers a collectivistic Asian perspective to conflict. Ting-Toomey stated, "Intercultural conflict often involves different face-losing and face-saving behaviors. . . . Face loss occurs when we are being treated in such a way that our identity claims are either being directly or indirectly challenged or ignored" (2007, p. 256).

A limitation of the Face-Negotiation Theory is that it does not offer steps to resolve conflict once it has arisen. As a framework for managing conflict, what this theory does offer is an interesting perspective on the dynamics of cross-cultural communication and potential areas of conflict. For example, it examines how cultural value spectrums for individualism-collectivism and small-large power distance shape facework concerns and styles. Through understanding a culture's power distance, individuals will gain insight into team members' preferences for horizontal-based versus vertical-based work teams. Ting-Toomey stated that knowledge is the most important component of facework competence: "Without culture-sensitive knowledge, conflict parties cannot learn to uncover the implicit 'ethnocentric lenses' they use to evaluate behaviors in an intercultural conflict situation" (2007, p. 259).

The second model in Ting-Toomey's article is based on a conflict-training program that emphasizes a strong collaborative negotiation perspective. The A.E.I.O.U. Collaborative Negotiation Training Model, designed by Coleman and Raider, stands for "attack, evade, inform, open, unite, and with an added 'y' to symbolize yes" (Ting-Toomey, 2007, p. 262). Whereas the Face Negotiation Theory does not offer conflict resolution, the A.E.I.O.U. training is presented in six or seven modules. The modules cover both cultural perspectives on conflict as well as an overview of the collaborative negotiation process.

The collaborative conflict management style is the focus of a study done by a team led by Paul (Paul, Samarah, Seetharaman, & Mykytyn, 2004-05). This study examined how using a collaborative conflict management style on a virtual team would influence collaborative style and group performance. Paul et al. stated that the four challenges of working on a virtual team are as follows:

1. Communication

2. Culture

3. Logistics

4. Technology

In order to unpack the cultural aspect of the challenges, Paul et al. turned to

Hofstede's five bipolar dimensions of national culture:
>   1. Power distance—degree of inequality among people that is considered as normal;
>   2. Uncertainty avoidance—degree to which people prefer structured over unstructured situations;
>   3. Individualism—degree to which people prefer to act as individuals rather than as members of groups;
>   4. Masculinity—degree to which tough values prevail over tender values;
>   5. Long-term orientation—degree to which people's efforts are focused toward the future rather than the present. (2004-05, p. 190)

Research indicates that individualism-collectivism orientations affect conflict

management styles (Paul et al., 2004-05). Through understanding Hofstede's dimensions

and how they are reflected in team members' behaviors, the "ethnocentric lenses" (Ting-

Toomey, 2007, p. 259) mentioned will be more easily removed. The dimensions also

work in concert with the other patterns of conflict management behavior mentioned

earlier in this chapter.

Culture

The fascinating thread that ran through most, if not all, of the articles in this

literature review is culture. It is not surprising considering that communication is one of

the key ingredients to having a successful virtual team, global or co-located. Hofstede

and McCrae defined culture as "The collective programming of the mind that

distinguishes one group or category of people from another" (2004, p. 58). The article

went on to explain that culture is a collective, not individual, attribute; is not directly

visible but manifested in behaviors; and is common to some but not all people. Hofstede's influential study of IBM employees between 1967 and 1973 included people from 71 countries. The result of that study was that Hofstede developed four dimensions of culture, mentioned earlier in this chapter. The fifth dimension, long-term orientation, was added in the 1980s (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). The dimensions are based on value systems, and as was stated in their article, although these value systems are not visible, they are manifested in behaviors. If members on a GVT are self-aware of the values guiding their behaviors and are conscious of the value systems their team members are operating under, they may adapt certain behaviors to improve team interactions (Anawati & Craig, 2006).

With a focus on improving cross-cultural communication, Anawati and Craig (2006) offered several ways in which team members may adapt their behavior. According to their research, team members should avoid using slang, colloquialisms, jargon, and acronyms. Metaphors do not always translate well. During phone or video conferences, it is helpful to regularly check for understanding.

The authors suggested that cultural understanding may be encouraged via informal socializing with team members. Sharing information about one's life outside of work—including topics ranging from music, to food, to local holidays—will serve a dual purpose of creating team cohesiveness and cultural understanding (Anawati & Craig, 2006). Managers of the team need to be aware of how team members from different cultures may react to their management style. In terms of Hofstede's dimensions, people from countries with high power distance may not be comfortable with a manager whose style is more informal; whereas someone from a culture with a low power distance may be unsettled by a formal manager. Several antecedents to potential conflict are suggested

by different cultural interpretations of humor, praise and criticism, time vision, and tone of voice (Anawati & Craig, 2006).

Conclusion

This literature review examined different sets of best practices on how to create virtual teams, stressing the importance of formal processes, clearly defined roles, and a shared purpose for the team (Lurey & Raisinghani, 2001). The literature review offered insights into how team members build trust with one another through displays of their ability, integrity, and benevolence. The depth of trust is also linked with the life cycle of a virtual team (Greenberg et al., 2007). The literature review highlighted the different types of conflict found on a GVT including affective, process, and task conflict (Hinds & Bailey, 2003). Further discussion of four of the challenges members of a virtual team must face include communication, culture, logistics, and technology (Paul et al., 2004-5). With these points in mind, an exploration of how conflict is resolved was discussed. Lastly, the issue of culture was explored in the literature review.

The following chapter explains the research design and methodology of this study.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

This chapter focuses on the research design and methodology of this study. This study was conducted in the beginning of 2011 and consisted of 18 interviews with members of GVTs from more than 15 organizations. The unit of analysis was the individual team members. The purpose of this study was to discover how conflict is resolved in a virtual setting, to establish a set of best practices for GVTs, and to contribute to the existing body of work on GVTs. The chapter will proceed according to the following sequence: research design, research questions, sampling methodology, description of data collected, and measurement.

Research Design

This study focuses on qualitative data collected during interviews with individuals currently working on a GVT. The researcher drew upon the theory of appreciative inquiry (Watkins & Mohr, 2001) when developing the questions. The appreciative interview questions were designed with the intention of keeping the participants focused on the factors that led to resolution as opposed to the conflict (see qualitative interview guide in Table 1 and Appendix A). These questions also addressed topics related to conflict and GVTs, such as the relationship between team members and how trust was established. The interview concluded with an open-ended question to allow the interviewee to offer any information that was not covered by the previous questions. The researcher also asked clarifying questions during the interview to gain a better understanding of the participant's response or to gather more details.

Table 1

Qualitative Interview Guide

•What does it look like when this team is at its best?

•Tell me about a time when a member on the team did something to build your trust in them.

•Tell me a story about a time when you felt deeply connected to the other members of the team.

•What is a core value of this team?

•Tell me a story about when a conflict on your team was resolved to everyone's satisfaction.

•How do you feel most comfortable dealing with conflict? How do the other members of your team react to this?

•How long have you been working on this team?

•How long has this team been working together?

•In which country were you born?

•Which country do you currently live in?

•Is there anything about conflict on your team that we haven't talked about that you would like to raise before we leave?

Footnote: These questions generally will be supplemented during the interview with prompts such as

•Can you tell me more about . . . ?

•Would you explain what you meant when you said . . . ?

The qualitative data was collected through interviews conducted via telephone and in person, when possible. An initial email was sent to potential participants informing them of the criteria for selection, providing information about the privacy of their data, and issuing an invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix B). The email also outlined the overall purpose of the study and explained that participation consisted of an interview of approximately an hour.

Research Questions

The primary focus of this study was how conflict is resolved on a GVT. Questions related to the main research topic are

1. How is trust established and maintained on GVTs?

2. What is expected of a member of a GVT?

3. What are the potential causes of conflict on a GVT?

4. Is there a best way to approach conflict resolution on a GVT?

The research explored how conflict is resolved on GVTs through gathering qualitative data. The goal was that through coding and examining the themes discovered in the data, the researcher would be able to identify a set of best practices around how to approach resolving conflicts on GVTs as well as to inform future work in the area for practitioners and direct future research.

The assumption was that if members of a GVT are aware of the potential areas of conflict and have the skills to resolve conflict when it arises, the following will occur:

1. Trust will increase among the members of the GVT.

2. The team will be able to communicate on a deeper level, increasing innovation and productivity.

3. The members of the team will have a clear understanding of how to recognize when conflict occurs and be able to discern the root of the issue.

4. Team members, including the team leader, will have a set of skills to bring conflict to a resolution.

Sampling Methodology

The research was conducted with individuals from a variety of organizations. Individual participants in the study were determined using the following criterion: study

population currently worked on a GVT. A GVT was defined as a team that (a) is geographically dispersed across at least two countries, (b) communicates via technology, and (c) has at least two different nationalities represented on the team.

The sampling techniques used in this study were purposive as the study required individuals currently working on GVTs. To generate the sample group, the researcher leveraged different networks including professional contacts and Pepperdine University Master of Science in Organization Development (MSOD) alumni. The researcher initiated contact via email or spoke with professional contacts in organizations. Once initial participants were involved in the research, snowball sampling was applied to the study. All participants were asked if they knew anyone else who would fit the sample criterion and who might be interested in becoming involved in the study.

Participant privacy was considered and adhered to throughout the data collection process. All interviews were preceded with participants signing consent forms (see Appendix C). This research involved minimal risk to the participant, as the interviews focused on a topic that is subjective, while the data recorded was qualitative. All participants' names remained anonymous, and information was shared in aggregate format only. The topic of how conflict is resolved on GVTs will have minimal psychological effects on the participants.

Three techniques were used to collect and record the data. Interviews were recorded via a digital recording device, handwritten notes by the researcher, and notes on the researcher's personal laptop computer. The researcher was the only one with access to the data, which was stored in the researcher's notebook and electronically on the researcher's personal laptop.

Once the data was transcribed from the digital recorder, it was coded and analyzed anonymously. All notes and data will remain the property of the researcher.

Description of Data Collected

The following is a description of the general characteristics of the participants of this study:

1. Identification: Seven of the interviewees were people known to the researcher who met the research criterion. Four of the participants responded to a general invitation to join the study, which was sent to the MSOD listserve. Seven of the participants were introduced and recommended to the researcher through other participants, in a snowball effect. No two of the participants interviewed worked on the same GVT.

2. Relation to the Research Topic: Each of the participants worked on a GVT. Ten interviewees were leaders of their teams, and eight were members of their teams. Two participants began as members and had since moved into a leadership role.

3. Professional Experience: The span of time interviewees worked on their teams was from one month to 12 years. Participants worked in several different industries, including technology, e-commerce, food and beverage, chemical, and consulting.

4. Gender: Participants were equally represented with nine men and nine women.

5. Nationality: Eleven of the interviewees were born in the United States, two were born in the United Kingdom, three were born in Australia, one was born in Russia, and one was born in Jamaica.

Measurement

After the research methodology was chosen, the next step in developing the research design was to define the dependent and independent variables. The dependent variable in this study was observing how conflict is resolved on GVTs. The independent

variables included (a) length of time the team has been together, (b) number of countries represented on the team, (c) number of members on the team, (d) complexity of the task(s), (e) type of conflict, and (f) participants' conflict management style.

The questions asked during the interview process attempted to draw out any insights the participants had regarding how conflict is approached in a virtual team and how it is resolved.

The independent variables are numerous, with an endless combination within the theoretical population of GVTs. Through the data collection process, the researcher gathered information about the primary units of analysis, the individual team members.

The goal of the data collection was to gain insights into the following topics: how is conflict approached and resolved on a GVT, how trust is built on a GVT, and whether there are a set of best practices regarding conflict resolution on GVTs. Content analysis was used to review the data collected from the interviews, to code it, and to extrapolate common themes. According to this method, interview responses were reviewed to identify a range of responses, themes were identified based on commonalities, and participant responses were placed into separate categories according to each theme (Cummings & Worley, 2009). An analysis of the themes identified by the researcher is presented in chapter 4.

Conclusion

This chapter described the research design, methodology, and measurement that were developed to study how conflict is resolved on GVTs. The details of the design were discussed in detail, including the variables, processes used for sampling, and data collection and analysis. A detailed discussion of the findings through the analysis of the data collection is the focus of chapter 4.

Chapter 4

Research Findings

The overall purpose of this research project focused on determining a set of best practices to establish and lead a GVT, with a focus on how to resolve conflict when it arises. This chapter presents the data collected from interviews with individuals working on GVTs and describes the findings of this research.

Data Reporting

Participant responses to the interview questions reflected their points of view regarding relationships between team members, team dynamics, and functionality in the team. This section describes the five major themes that surfaced from the data, based on participant responses. The interviews were digitally recorded, then transcribed. The researcher then coded the transcribed interviews, from which the five themes emerged. A second person then reviewed the indicators and confirmed the five themes for validity. The five themes were

    1. Member Attributes and Behaviors

    2. Team Dynamics

    3. Team Actions

    4. Layers of Culture

    5. Conflict

The themes are presented in the following order: the first theme is an examination of the "Member Attributes and Behaviors," the second theme reports on how those attributes and behaviors show up on the team and is called "Team Dynamics." The third theme, "Team Actions," describes actions a team can take to strengthen the relationship between team members. The fourth theme is called "Layers of Culture" because several

different types of culture affect the interactions on a team: the culture of the organization, the culture of different functions within an organization, and the national culture of the individual team members. Lastly, the fifth theme, "Conflict," is discussed.

Theme 1: Member Attributes and Behaviors

Through the examination of team dynamics, many of the participants spoke about their idea of membership. Interviewees expressed different aspects of what being a team member meant to them, and an overarching theme of membership emerged from the data.

One indicator mentioned in 7 of the 18 interviews was the notion of good intent. This can be correlated back to the notion of swift trust (Robert et al., 2009) discussed in the literature review. As one interviewee said, "when you are not seeing the person day-to-day, you start off on a point of trust." Good intent is one of the building blocks to creating a deeper sense of trust, but the data indicated other aspects of the concept as well. Although positive intent is connected to the concept of swift trust, for team members to develop real trust in one another, they must follow through on their commitments.

Good intent also was used to describe another member's intentions in terms of how they approached the work. "I believe everyone in the company is good and wants what is good for the company" and "I think everyone has the intention of doing their best" are both reflections of members' good intentions regarding the work.

Knowledge and expertise, both mentioned in 7 of the 18 interviews, were strong indicators of what was expected of the individual members on the team. Participants expressed a belief that each member was on the team because he or she possessed certain knowledge or expertise, and there was an expectation that information was to be shared. "When . . . the person you are talking to has the same . . . level of expertise . . . I think

things move quicker and you really feel as though the work you are going to produce is difficult to improve."

The act of one member sharing information or their expertise with another member was an integral part of building relationships within the team, as expressed by one interviewee:

> Because she was willing to take the time to teach me and include me, then I would do whatever she asked, really happily and willingly. I felt that she made the effort to share information with me that she didn't have to.

Eight of 18 participants discussed the importance of members being open and transparent. This includes not only the act of sharing knowledge and expertise, but of explaining the reasoning behind decision-making.

This section examined the data in terms of team membership. The individuals are initially perceived as having good intent and they are expected to bring to the team's work certain knowledge or expertise which is to be shared among team members. The concept of openness and transparency extends to members' thought processes and decision-making processes. The next section will discuss how these individual member traits are reflected as traits found on a team.

Theme 2: Team Dynamics

Building upon the collected data regarding team member attributes and behaviors, this section examines the interviewees' points of view regarding team dynamics. The dynamics discussed in this section are differentiated from the next section, which examines actions a team can take to improve performance. The predominant indicator of this section is building the relationship between the team members and examining the different ways in which interviewees' experienced this. To set a context for the data regarding team dynamics, Table 2 includes some information on the teams.

Table 2

Team Information

Time team has worked together	Number of people on team	Nationalities on team	Countries team is located in
1 Year	Core 25/Total 120	20	4
1 Year	9	5	n/a
5 Months	4	4	4
5 Years	Core 5/Total 100	20	20
5 Years	8	3	3
7 Years	8	3	2
7 Years	12	7	12
1 Year	10	3	2
10 Years	7	4	4
1.5 Years	5	4	2
1.5 Years	45	7	3
1 Month	15	5	4
9 Months	Core 22/Total 75	40	90
12 Years	5	5	5
2 Years	Core 6/Total 9	7	80
1 Year	7	3	4
2 Years	30	12	9
2 Years	7	5	5

The basis for building the relationship among team members is communication.

On a virtual team, communication takes many forms including email, phone conferences,

video conferences, and instant messaging; but according to 15 of 18 interviewees, face-

to-face meetings are the most important. Fifteen out of 18 participants discussed the importance of communication.

> Everybody knows how we are going to have our communication, what the reporting needs to be, who gets copied on it, how we are going to run our meetings. The meetings start on time and everyone feels it is an effective meeting.

Building a personal connection as well as a business connection is important according to 11 out of 18 interviewees. As one participant explained, "He [the team leader] scheduled meetings so there would be a long check-in period . . . people talked about not only their business issues, but also personal issues."

Connections were also built through members sharing time and knowledge with one another. Another interviewee talked about the impact one of her colleagues had on building a relationship: "We always took our lunches together, and typically we did our dinners together . . . so you really got to know people beyond the business environment."

Trust was a thread that ran throughout most of the themes, beginning with the swift trust (Robert et al., 2009) that many team members start with, and then moving into a deeper sense of trust which is created once team members follow through on their commitments. It was touched upon by one interviewee ". . . if [a person] deliver[s] according to that commitment, then I think that is key to building trust."

Another important team trait mentioned by 10 out of 18 participants was having a clear set of shared goals. Once the relationship is established and trust is more deeply rooted between team members, teams are able to function at a high level. As one participant explained, "I would say we were at our best when there was a collective goal, a shared goal."

This section discussed the traits and dynamics found on a GVT, including the importance of building the relationship between team members, both personal and

professional; how trust is a thread running throughout the themes within the data; and how having a clear goal helps the team stay on track. The next section begins to offer a set of best practices in the form of actions a team can take to become a high-functioning team.

Theme 3: Team Actions

This study set out to establish a set of best practices for GVTs and to explore how conflict is resolved on a GVT. The following section will analyze the data regarding actions a team can take that will inform a set of best practices.

Far and away, the most strikingly consistent data throughout the interviews was the impact of face-to-face meetings with the GVTs. Fourteen out of 18 participants mentioned the importance of gathering the team in one location. Often, the teams met on a quarterly basis. When asked about feeling deeply connected to the other members of the team, one participant responded, ". . . when we actually get together three times a year is when the connection really forms."

Interviewees talked about how these meetings often took place in different countries around the world, which gave national team members the opportunity to host the visiting team members. "We enjoyed some sort of educational or social or cultural event about the country we were visiting." The benefits of the face-to-face meetings ran far deeper than having a productive business meeting. These meetings gave the team members an opportunity to get to know each other on a deeper level through seeing how they lived and getting exposure to another culture. They helped establish a sense of team identity. One American participant who was living and working in Korea talked about how the team went out and sang karaoke; another American interviewee explained, "Dinners were three to four hours, as you would experience in a European dinner." These

events allow members to get "to know people beyond the business environment."

Following the thread of trust through the data, the face-to-face meetings are the most

important action for a team to take in terms of establishing and building a foundational

connection that helps swift trust move onto a deeper level.

Other indicators that fit into this category included the action of structuring the

team. Seven out of 18 participants discussed the importance of structure on the team,

including clearly defined roles and leadership. As one interviewee put it, this meant

"allocating responsibility" or "clearly defining better what somebody is going to do and

not going to do." Defining members' roles allows each person to understand what is

expected of them as the team works towards achieving a common goal. One participant

stated "When there are guidelines and a clear structure and clear vision, I think everyone

moves forward without any conflict."

All of the interviewees' teams were structured in different ways. Several teams

had a distinct leader who played the traditional role of project manager, whereas other

teams followed a more organic type of leadership, allowing for members with domain

knowledge or a strong idea to temporarily step into the role of leader. The hierarchy on

one team was explained as

> . . . when the person you are talking to has the same level of expertise, it is not
> about levels; you don't need to feel as though the person is more superior or more
> junior, it is just about subject matter . . . the result is as good as you can get.

This section examined a few actions that were indicated in the data as being

helpful when building a high-functioning GVT. These actions will be further developed

and expanded in Chapter 5. The next theme will explore the data concerning how the

different layers of culture affect a GVT.

Theme 4: Layers of Culture

The layers of culture found on a GVT run deep. At the deepest level is the national culture of the team members. Eleven out of 18 participants spoke to the influence of national culture on their team. The other layers of culture that affect a GVT are the culture of the organization, the culture of the different functions or departments within the organization, and finally the individual team members' national cultures.

The importance of national culture on a GVT should not be ignored; as one participant explained, "I think cultural issues still play a role, despite how aware and global people feel like they are." Stereotypes and traditional cultural beliefs came up most often when discussing communication. Teams that had members of cultures with different communication styles—for example, the United States (direct communication) and Korea or India (indirect communication)—tended to struggle with issues around direct communication. One Russian participant, who is the leader of this team, said "Communication in general, in the Indian culture, sometimes it is hard for people to ask many questions. They are worried about coming across as stupid or incompetent." Yet this same participant went on to say that the Indian members on the team might "make their point and get into an argument . . . depending on how comfortable they are working with you." Power distance also played a role in cultural issues. The leader of the team in India also described his team as follows: "culturally they respect authority and they follow authority . . . even if they don't agree, even if they feel hurt, they would not necessarily voice it."

Another example of how national culture affected the team was this rather extreme case of an American living and working for a Korean company. ". . . It really didn't matter what nationality you were; as long as you weren't Korean, you weren't

getting a certain amount of respect." This team included members from India, Latin America, North America, Russia, and Southeast Asia; and according to this participant, they bonded over the fact that they were seen as "second-class citizens."

The culture of an organization can also affect the team dynamics. One participant explained how one of the company values had spread across the globe: "I think what works well is this 'keep it human' value that does actually permeate the culture of the company globally." This "keep it human" value had to do with communication. As this participant described it, "keep it human" pertained to resolving conflict. When resolving a conflict, the first choice is meeting face-to-face, or if not possible, making a phone call. The last resort would be to reach out to someone via email. This company value reflected its desire for employees to use direct communication, regardless of employees' national cultural communication style.

Another interesting example of how the culture of an organization influenced a team is also connected to communication. One participant's organization obliged each employee to complete a training called "Insights Training." As the interviewee explained it, "The whole idea behind 'Insights Training' is learning how people communicate." He went on to describe how through this training he was able to understand his communication style as well as others' he worked with. Through trainings like this, the organization is expressing a cultural value of self-knowledge as well as offering employees a platform to use when dealing with the issues that arise when working with people who have different communication styles.

Within the culture of an organization, different functions or departments have yet another layer of culture. Several of the GVTs described in the interviews were cross-

functional, which sometimes brought up issues around resources and objectives as well as issues of culture. One participant explained,

> Conflicts are driven by inconsistencies in either objectives or expectations communicated down the different channels of hierarchy . . . the corporate team . . . has a culture of accountability. Every project needs to have very detailed plans, all the way down to a granular level about who is going to be doing what and who is responsible for making sure that happens. Our sales force and training organization have a culture of you need to trust the people you hire to do their jobs.

Although the team may be given one clear task to accomplish, if the cultures of the functions clash, like the team described above, conflict is inevitable.

The layer of culture that influences members on a GVT in a very personal way is that of their own family culture. Although this was brought up directly only once in the interviews, it remains a powerful influence in the way each person interacts with others. When asked how she felt most comfortable dealing with conflict, one interviewee responded, "Personally, I hate it. I don't like to raise it when you should, when it is small and in its early stages. . . . I was raised in an Irish-Catholic family where you just don't address conflict." This participant was aware of how her family culture influenced her approach to dealing with conflict. Through self-knowledge she was able to recognize the pattern established in her family and adjust her behavior to better suit the needs of working within a team dynamic.

This section explored the different layers of culture at play on a GVT, from the national culture of the members, to the culture of the organization, to the different cultures that can be found within an organization, and to the very personal layer of family culture. Through this examination of culture, the issue of conflict begins to be more pressing. The next section will discuss the findings within the data regarding conflict.

Theme 5: Conflict

Each of the themes discussed in this chapter presents a potential point of conflict on a GVT. Conflicts may erupt due to unmet expectations of a team member, a team with no clear goals or poor communication, a lack of leadership or structure on the team, or cultural issues. The data collected during the interviews pointed to three main topics about conflict: antecedents to conflict, conflict style, and how to resolve conflict.

Participants interviewed experienced a range of antecedents to conflict on their teams. There was no single dominating antecedent. On the member level, antecedents centered around a person's inability to work as a team player, a person who acted as a ". . . gatekeeper of a certain part of the work." Another source of conflict was when a team member showed a ". . . lack of reliability about engaging . . . just doesn't show up . . . haven't prepared . . . or they don't produce what they committed to. . . ."

On the team level, the data indicated issues around communication as a major source of conflict. As one participant described, "Do not add noise to the communication that would cloud things. . . . " Clear communication about who should be doing what can help avoid conflict. When answering a question regarding how a conflict was resolved on her team, one interviewee explained: "I would define conflict, in the context of this group, as having difficulty making real progress on our work and communicating efficiently." The lack of communication can extend to an acknowledgment of the conflict itself, as she went on to describe, "somebody may be upset or in conflict on a team, and they just completely withdraw, but others might not be aware of that. They might not notice it."

As examined in the section on the layers of culture found on a GVT, when working on a team with members from different nations, conflicts arise over

communication styles (direct versus indirect) and power distance. The culture within the organization can act as a unifying force on the team, particularly if it provides training around communication. Lack of resources and different agendas can be antecedents to conflict when working on a cross-functional GVT.

How participants dealt with conflict also was examined within the data. When faced with a conflict, 9 out of 18 interviewees chose to deal with it directly and quickly, as one participant stated, ". . . being direct and bringing it up sooner rather than later." Other participants discussed the importance of "getting to a resolution" in "direct conversation, but one that is free of blame." Approaching the conflict in an "objective fashion" with a focus on "how do we ensure that next time the outcome is better versus people did the wrong thing or trying to identify blame" was one way to de-escalate the conflict.

Eight out of 18 participants discussed the use of compromise or consensus as a way to resolve conflicts. One interviewee described the process of compromise as follows: ". . . we had to make compromises, which were frustrating and at times people were getting really annoyed about making compromises about things they felt were really important . . . you had to be willing to take little victories." Consensus was another way in which conflict was resolved. As one participant explained, "Putting all the views and opinions on the table, and then allowing those opinions to shape your opinion, until you reach what I call a consensus." Both of these methods of conflict resolution may be affected by cross-cultural differences mentioned earlier in this section, in addition to differing cultural perspectives of time, as described by this participant, ". . . our friends in the Caribbean, a little different culture, are a little more comfortable with, 'let's table that and talk about it next time.'"

Inquiry was another method used to understand the conflict more fully. "What I try to do in that situation is try to ask that person to explain it a little bit." Participants also expressed sensitivity around how to address the conflict in terms of a bilateral discussion with an individual or an intervention with the whole group. Many factors needed to be taken into consideration, including time pressures, "the interest of each individual," and "how the rest of the group responds." As one participant explained, "You wouldn't do it in front of a group that would be clearly unsympathetic to the individual, because then you put them in a very difficult position and embarrass them. . . ."

This section described the data collected regarding conflict on a GVT. The indicators were antecedents to conflict, individual members' conflict styles, and how to resolve conflicts.

Conclusion

This chapter presented the data collected from interviews with members on GVTs to gain a deeper understanding of how conflict is resolved on a GVT. Secondary considerations were given to learning about the different aspects of a high-functioning team, potential areas of conflict, and the best ways to approach conflict resolution. The main themes that emerged from the data were membership, team traits and dynamics, team actions, layers of culture, and conflict.

The next chapter presents the key findings drawn from the data analysis examined in this chapter. The implications of this study are provided along with a set of best practices a GVT might use to prevent and/or resolve conflict. An assessment will be made as to whether the data collected in this study confirms or disconfirms prior research. The chapter will conclude with the identification of new knowledge generated,

a review of the limitations of this study, and recommendations for best practices and

further research on this topic.

Chapter 5

Conclusions and Recommendations

This research project focused on determining a set of best practices to establish and lead a GVT, with a focus on how to resolve conflict when it arises. This research also will contribute to the existing body of work that generally focuses on the antecedents of conflict. This final chapter presents a discussion of the results including a presentation of the summary of the findings, conclusions drawn from the data, limitations, recommendations for best practices, and suggestions for additional research. The chapter concludes with a reflection of learning.

Summary of Findings

The summary of findings will begin to address the original statement posed for the study: The overall purpose of this research project focused on determining a set of best practices to establish and lead a GVT, with a focus on how to resolve conflict when it arises.

Related questions to the primary topic are

1. How is trust established and maintained on GVTs?

2. What is expected of a member of a GVT?

3. What are the potential causes of conflict on a GVT?

4. Is there a best way to approach conflict resolution on a GVT?

In this chapter, each of these questions will be addressed. Key findings are identified based on both the literature review and the data analysis. The findings are presented under the following headings: member traits, team dynamics, and conflict.

Member Traits

The study found that members on a GVT placed a high value on trust among team members. The concept of trust included both a belief in team members' good intent as well as initial trust. The good intent initially ascribed to team members is the basis for initial or swift trust. Swift trust is the basis for building cognitive trust, which is based on the actions of a team member, as opposed to swift trust, which is based on a belief in team members' good intent. These findings are reflective of the information in the literature review. Robert et al. (2009) concluded their research into swift trust and knowledge-based trust in both face-to-face and virtual team members by stating, "Once individuals accumulate sufficient information of others' behaviors to assess their trustworthiness, the effects of swift trust decline and knowledge-based trust based on perceived ability, integrity, and benevolence becomes dominant. . ." (p. 270).

Team Dynamics

The study found several important dynamics at play on GVTs; they are team member relationships, communication, and shared goals. Cognitive trust is the glue that helps keep a GVT together and functioning at a high level. It is built on a strong relationship among team members. The data indicated this relationship is formed in two ways. The first is when team members follow through on the commitments they make regarding work; the second is when team members get to know each other beyond the context of work. According to 94% of participants interviewed in this study, the most powerful way to build both the personal and working relationships between team members was during face-to-face meetings.

In addition to the face-to-face meetings, 89% of participants stated that regular and meaningful communication between team members is another important dynamic

found on a GVT. Clear and direct communication is helpful when establishing a team project. Yet members' awareness of different cultural approaches to communication also is helpful. The vehicle of communication is dictated by the message. For example, if one is sending out notes from a meeting, an email will suffice; whereas if one team member has a conflict with another team member, a phone call or video conference is preferable to an email.

The importance of a clear goal is also another key dynamic of a GVT. Team members must have a clear understanding of what it is they are working towards. Another level of having a clear goal for the team is for members to understand what their individual role is on the team, as described by Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999). In their article, "Communication and Trust in Global Virtual Teams," they concluded

> For the manager of a virtual team, one of the factors that might contribute to smooth coordination early in the existence of the team is a clear definition of responsibilities, as a lack of clarity may lead to confusion, frustration, and disincentive. (p. 812)

Conflict

Although the focus of this study was how conflict is resolved on a GVT, a key to finding a resolution is understanding the root of the conflict itself. The study pointed to two main antecedents to conflict, the first being cultural differences and the second being issues around communication. The following is a discussion regarding how the findings of this study are in support of previous studies.

As discussed in chapter 4, the data indicated there were several layers of culture that may affect GVTs. The most influential of these is national culture, which according to Hofstede is not directly visible but is manifested in behaviors of individuals (Hofstede & McCrae, 2004). According to the data for this study, the most common way for

national cultures to influence conflict on a GVT is through communication. This is in direct support of previous studies. For example, Anawati and Craig (2006) found that the use of slang, colloquialisms, jargon, and acronyms was an area of possible miscommunication and confusion. Metaphors do not always translate between languages. When team members from cultures with direct versus indirect communication styles need to interact, patience may be required. Another potential area of cultural conflict includes power distance.

This study indicated that conflict was resolved in a number of different ways on a GVT, including compromise, consensus, and inquiry. Conflict resolution can be broken down into two stages: the first stage is the process by which a resolution will be achieved; the second stage is the outcome itself. Participants discussed using the process of inquiry to gain a deeper understanding of a conflict. The use of inquiry then helped them begin to formulate an outcome, such as consensus or compromise. Both of these are different paths to a resolution.

Although reaching a compromise led to the resolution of conflict, team members sometimes felt as if they had given up an important aspect of the overall project. Consensus was another form of conflict resolution that was discussed in the data, the basis of which consists of each team member sharing his or her opinion in order to find a solution that everyone can agree upon. Ultimately, the team leader and team members must use their best judgment when deciding on a process and outcome for resolving a conflict. Variables they must take into consideration include who is involved, their communication styles, and how they approach conflict.

This concludes the summary of findings of this study. The following section offers a set of conclusions drawn from the research.

Conclusions Drawn From Summary

Based on the summary of findings, the following is a presentation of three conclusions regarding conflict resolution on a GVT. The first conclusion examines relationships on a GVT, the second discusses culture, and the third regards conflict resolution.

The Importance of Establishing and Maintaining Relationships on a GVT

Virtual teams do not share the advantage that co-located teams have in terms of relationship building "around the water cooler." The research in this study was consistent with the literature review in terms of swift trust (Robert et al., 2009). The importance of team members trusting one another is related to the life cycle of a virtual team. The five phases of building a team are establishing the team, inception, organizing, transition, and accomplishing the task. As the team moves towards accomplishing the task, the trust deepens to the level of benevolence and integrity (Greenberg et al., 2007).

Communication is of the utmost importance when working on a virtual team. Ideally, teams would meet face-to-face on a regular basis, allowing members a chance to establish a relationship that goes beyond the context of the work. Regardless of whether a face-to-face meeting is possible, the quality and predictability of communication will increase trust between team members (Jarvenpaa & Leidner, 1999). Consistent with the literature review, the data in this study points to the importance of social interaction among team members to create a sense of team cohesiveness (Greenberg et al., 2007).

Differences in Culture Must be Understood and Addressed

The data collected in this study clearly indicated how team members' cultural identity affected the communication on a GVT. In the literature review, Ting-Toomey stated, "Without culture-sensitive knowledge, conflict parties cannot learn to uncover the

implicit 'ethnocentric lenses' they use to evaluate behaviors in an intercultural conflict situation" (2007, p. 259). Her findings were reinforced in this study. Paul et al. (2004-05) also cited communication and culture as the top two challenges of working on a GVT.

Face-to-face meetings in different parts of the world help to expose team members to the different cultures as well as offer the opportunity for teams to get to know one another outside of the context of work. Yet these business trips in and of themselves are not enough to facilitate the type of cultural competencies team members would benefit from when working on a GVT. Team members who have experienced some type of intercultural training or a prolonged experience in a foreign country have a better chance at maintaining perspective when a conflict arises. They are more likely to facilitate a quick resolution.

Conflict Resolution on a GVT

This study uncovered the many complexities involved with resolving a conflict on a GVT. It is impossible to recommend one action over another in terms of resolving conflict, due to the different factors involved. For example, is the conflict affective, process-related, or task-related? Should the resolution include the entire team or only the parties directly involved? How do the individual members respond to direct communication? How do the individual members perceive power distance? The conclusion to be drawn from the data and the literature is that individuals working on a GVT will benefit from having an understanding of their own communication style and their comfort level in dealing with conflict as well as insight into how their teammates deal with communication and conflict both on a personal and a cultural level.

The literature review supports this study's findings in terms of how important self-knowledge is. Furumo (2009) presented a framework with which to understand the

five different conflict management styles: integrating, compromising, dominating, obliging, and avoiding. Each of these styles was discussed by at least one interviewee. Again, due to the complexities around conflict, the best way to find a resolution is through an understanding of one's self and others.

This section was a review of the conclusions based on the findings of this study. The following section examines the limitations of this study.

Limitations

The limitations of this study can be found in the composition of the teams, the sample size, and the cultural lens of both the researcher and the interviewees.

This study was limited by the variations in construction of the teams used. The construction and functions of a GVT are complex and often continually changing. Members of the team change frequently, and teams are both cross-functionally and culturally diverse. The teams were also in varying stages of developmental life cycle. Due to the uniqueness of each GVT, it is unlikely that one form of resolving a conflict will work consistently. There was no consistency in the manner in which the teams involved in this study communicated. The teams in the study were uniquely constructed, in that no two teams had the same makeup of culturally diverse members.

The sample size consisted of only 18 participants. The addition of more interviews would have offered more data to enrich the discussion on conflict. All of the organizations represented in the sample size were for-profit companies; a more diverse sample that included government organizations and non-profits might have added a different perspective on the subject.

Although the participants in the sample size were equally diverse on the basis of gender, the point of view was skewed to nationals born and raised in the United States or

nations which reflect a western cultural perspective. The results of the data might have been influenced if the sample size included more participants from a wider range of cultures. A researcher who has a cultural bias from a western orientation conducted this study; therefore, the literature review, collection and interpretation of the data, and the conclusions are culturally bound.

This section reviewed the limitations of this study. The following section offers recommendations and a set of best practices for those working on GVTs, based on the findings of this study.

Recommendations for Best Practices

To create and work on a GVT, both the leaders and the team members must approach the work with an open mind and flexibility. Virtual team members need to bring a high degree of thoughtfulness into their interactions with one another as well as intention when creating the structure of the team. With that in mind, the following is a presentation of best practices.

Considerations When Forming a GVT

When forming a GVT, the following should be considered:

1. Designate a leader for the team who is able to manage people from different cultural backgrounds. As the team evolves, the role of the leader may change, but at the onset of the team, leadership must take a strong role.

2. Have a clear set of goals for the team to accomplish.

3. Define the roles of the members of the team.

4. Establish a set of norms for the team. In terms of communication, team members have expectations around regular meetings and who should be included on which calls or emails. Creating email lists can be helpful. Discussing norms around how

conflict should be resolved is also important to do during the team formation stage. Ideally, this will happen in a face-to-face meeting with all members of the team.

Leadership and Structure

The leadership of a mature team might look different then the leadership of a new team. Regardless of the maturity of a team, a leader must facilitate all virtual interactions. The leader's job is to keep the agenda, summarize the decisions, and allow space for inquiry and checking for understanding among team members. Best practices include

1. Clearly define the roles of team members as well as establish the overarching goal of the team.

2. Establish a set of processes by which members interact.

3. Regularly check in with team members as to how successful the processes are and change as needed.

Establishing Trust and Building a Relationship Between Team Members

Best practices for establishing trust and building a relationship between team members include

1. Ideally, meet face-to-face at regular intervals. Meetings should take place at different locations around the world and include a social element as well as task-focused time.

2. Trust between team members is of the utmost importance on a virtual team. Team members need to do their best to honor the commitments they make, but if they are unable to fulfill a commitment for whatever reason, problem solving with their teammates will help maintain the trust between them.

3. Begin each virtual meeting with a check-in period, during which team members are invited to share events that have occurred beyond the context of work.

4. Reach out to team members in between scheduled team meetings to deepen the relationship.

Clear Lines of Communication

The following are recommendations to maintain clear lines of communication:

1. Team members should avoid using colloquialisms, acronyms, and slang.

2. Metaphors and humor can be lost in translation between cultures. Humor can be an important part of building relationships between team members, but check for understanding and create a shared context when using it.

3. During meetings, allow time to check for understanding between team members. Follow up conference calls with an email of detailed written notes.

4. Practice active listening and use patience when interacting with members who have a different first language.

Enhancing Intercultural Competence

To enhance cultural competence, GVTs should

1. Provide intercultural training to give a cultural context for the members on the team.

2. Explicitly acknowledge and discuss the different styles of communication between different cultures. Using a model like Hofstede's five bipolar dimensions of national culture will offer great insight into understanding cultural differences. These activities should be led by someone who has extensive intercultural training; otherwise, there is a possibility the discussion might revolve around cultural stereotypes.

3. During the face-to-face meetings, schedule time for the team to share a cultural experience related to the country they are visiting.

Resolving Conflict on a GVT

Best practices for resolving conflict on a GVT include

1. Establish a set of norms that clearly outline expectations regarding conflict resolution. Dealing with a conflict directly and quickly seems to keep teams on track in terms of accomplishing a goal. Explicit discussion about how conflict should be approached and the cultural implications that might arise will help establish expectations of team members and maintain their relationships.

2. When handling a conflict, members need to show discretion in terms of resolving it on a bilateral basis or involving the whole team.

3. Provide trainings for team members that help them gain insight into both their communication style and their conflict management style.

Suggestions for Further Research

Based on the findings of this study and the gaps in the literature review, several potential directions for future studies were identified.

It would be interesting to measure the impact of conflict resolution trainings on GVTs. A future study could find a sample of GVTs, with a limited set of variables in terms of size, number of cultures represented on the team, team maturity, and degree of task difficulty, to study how conflict is resolved pre- and post-training.

The issue of how individuals dealt with conflict was brought up during the interviews. Several interviewees had been through various trainings around conflict style. Another possible study for the future could evaluate the team members' ability to resolve conflicts on their team before and after an intervention using the Thomas-Kilmann Conflict Mode instrument.

As stated earlier in this chapter, the sample used in this study was skewed towards a North American-western bias. It would be interesting to repeat this study using a different, more culturally diverse sample. An ideal sample would include 30 teams, each composed of 10 members who are geographically dispersed. The teams would have remained intact for the duration of their existence, with no churn. The teams would have been together for different lengths of time and therefore be in different stages of development. Perhaps most importantly, the research would involve every member on the teams. Therefore, any data gathered on conflict and how it was resolved would be given from several different perspectives. It was a challenge to ask questions about conflict using an appreciative approach. Ideally, the research would use similar questions but perhaps add more around the different types of conflict on the team and its repercussions on the team dynamics.

Implications for Organization Development Practice

The purpose of this study was to discover how conflict is resolved in a virtual setting and to contribute to the existing body of work on GVTs. This chapter presented a discussion of the results including a summary of the findings, conclusions, limitations, recommendations for best practices, and suggestions for additional research. The following is a reflection on the learning gained while doing this research and its practical implications.

The world of business is currently being reshaped by two unstoppable forces: globalization and technology. Many organizations are turning to virtual teams to contribute on all aspects of their company. With such pressure and high expectations, it is critical that virtual teams are formed and supported with thought and care. There are very

practical implications for those working in the field of organization development, intercultural communications, or management.

In terms of globalization, practitioners of organization development can apply what they know about co-located teams when working with GVTs. This could include guiding newly formed teams through defining roles, establishing norms, and creating a set of processes, with a focus on communication. Further, this would also examine working with the management and team members to bring awareness to different communication styles and approaches to conflict and how to bridge those differences. People working within the field of intercultural communications can work with GVTs to raise awareness of how different cultures might perceive power distance, deal directly or indirectly in terms of communication, or view individualism.

Organizations and managers can help foster relationship building on virtual teams by channeling resources for face-to-face meetings and providing trainings around communication and culture. Organizations also can offer employees a strong company culture, which will help provide a framework for a virtual team to build its identity.

Ultimately, a GVT that has good communication and members that feel a strong sense of relationship with one another has the tool set it needs to become a successful team.

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Appendix A

Qualitative Interview Guide

Qualitative Interview Guide

Opening comments:

Welcome and statements regarding the purpose of the study and interview procedures.

Introductory question:

- What does it look like when this team is at its best?

Transition questions:

OBJECTIVE: These questions will explore the participant's relationship with other members of their team.

- Tell me about a time when a member on the team did something to build your trust in them.
- Tell me a story about a time when you felt deeply connected to the other members of the team.

Key questions:

OBJECTIVE: These questions will explore the issues of trust and conflict on the team.

- What is a core value of this team?
- Tell me a story about when a conflict on your team was resolved to everyone's satisfaction.
- How do you feel most comfortable dealing with conflict? How do the other members of your team react to this?

Logistical questions:

OBJECTIVE: To gain information regarding the amount of time the team has been working together and where the team members are located.

- How long have you been working on this team?
- How long has this team been working together?
- In which country were you born?
- Which country do you currently live in?

Ending question:

- Is there anything about conflict on your team that we haven't talked about that you would like to raise before we leave?

Footnote: These questions will be generally followed during the interview with prompts such as:

- Can you tell me more about . . . ?
- Would you explain what you meant when you said . . . ?

may be generally used in order to qualify explanations and further expand data collection.

Appendix B

Cover Letter to Global Virtual Team Members

Cover Letter to Global Virtual Team Members

To Whom It May Concern:

       My name is Nicole O'Hay. I am seeking your participation in an important research project. By joining in this study, you will provide insight into the ways in which conflict is resolved on global virtual teams. The enclosed questionnaire is part of my thesis research, conducted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a Master's Degree in Organization Development.

       Between globalization and our ever-increasing ability to connect through technology, organizations are asking employees to work on virtual teams. These teams are often dispersed across continents, with team members working on multiple projects at once. Conflict can arise on these virtual teams for any number of reasons: cultural differences, ideas on how to accomplish the project, or disagreements over who should be responsible for what. Conflict arises often, but how is the conflict addressed and resolved?

       The purpose of this study is to determine a set of best practices in resolving conflict on a global virtual team. Knowledge gained from this study will be useful in developing strategies on how to resolve conflict in a virtual setting.

       Participation is voluntary, and you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Any question may be left unanswered if the participant wishes.

       All responses will be kept confidential. Only aggregate data will be reported in the thesis or in any subsequent analysis beyond the thesis and possible future publication of the results. A code number appears on the upper right corner of all forms in order to assist the researcher in grouping responses. Questionnaire data will be stored securely in the researcher's locked file cabinet for three years, after which all of it will be destroyed.

       If you have any questions regarding the study, please call Nicole O'Hay at 001-510-520-1317 or send an email to nicole.ohay@pepperdine.edu. You may also contact my thesis advisor, Dr. Terri Egan at terri.egan@pepperdine.edu, or the chair of the Graduate and Professional Schools IRB, Dr. Yuying Tsong at 001-310-568-5768. This study has been reviewed by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at Pepperdine University and meets all requirements regarding the university's policies and procedures.

       Thank you for your time and support in this study. An abstract of the study results will be provided upon your request. Please contact me to receive a copy of the abstract.

Sincerely,
Nicole O'Hay

Candidate, Master of Science in Organization Development
Pepperdine University
Graziadio School of Business and Management
24255 Pacific Coast Highway
Malibu, CA 90263

Appendix C

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Consent to Participate in a Research Study

Title of Study: Conflict and the path to resolution on global virtual teams

Investigator: Nicole O'Hay, contact number: 510-520-1317

Faculty Advisor: Terri Egan, contact number: 949-230-0918

You are being asked to take part in a research study. To join the study is voluntary. You may refuse to join, or you may withdraw your consent to be in the study, for any reason, without penalty. As a participant, you may also choose not to answer any question. Research studies are designed to obtain new knowledge. This new information may help people in the future.

Details about this study are discussed below. It is important that you understand this information so that you can make an informed choice about being in the research study. You will be given a copy of this consent form. This study poses no potential minimal risks to those who participate. The potential benefits of participating in this study include an opportunity for interviewees to better understand what causes conflict on the global virtual teams and how to resolve conflicts once they arise. The researcher will provide the organizations involved in the study a summary of any best practices identified. You should ask the researcher, Nicole O'Hay, any questions you have about this study at any time. Approximately 25 individuals will participate in this study. Your active involvement will take approximately 45 minutes of your time to participate in the telephone or face-to-face interview.

The steps required by you to participate in this study are as follows:
1. Read and understands the cover letter to consent form.
2. Read, understand, and sign the consent form.
3. Schedule a time slot with Nicole to participate in a telephone or face-to-face interview.
4. Participate in the interview.

All information collected will be kept confidential and stored in a locked, secured filing cabinet for three years. Only the researcher has access to this cabinet. Participants will not be identified in any report or publication about this study. Your participation is completely voluntary and appreciated. You may withdraw at any time without question or penalty.

You have the right to ask, and have answered, any questions you may have about this research. If you have questions, complaints, or concerns, you should contact the researcher, Nicole, at 510-520-1317 or her supervisor, Dr. Terri Egan, at terri.egan@pepperdine.edu, or the chair of the Graduate and Professional Schools IRB, Dr. Yuying Tsong, at 001-310-568-5768.

A committee that works to protect your rights and welfare reviews all research on human volunteers. If you have questions or concerns about your rights as a research subject, or if you would like to obtain information or offer input, you may contact the Institutional Review Board at Pepperdine University at 310-568-5753.

Participant's Agreement:

I have read the information provided above. I have asked all the questions I have at this time. I voluntarily agree to participate in this research study.

Signature of Research
Participant:_____Date:_____
Printed Name of Research
Participant:_____
Printed Name of
Investigator:_____Date:_____