

CHALLENGES IN MANAGING VIRTUAL TEAMS IN SOCIAL PROJECTS

Nataliya Venelinova, PhD

Faculty "Business and Management",
Department Management and Social Works
University of Ruse "Angel Kanchev"
Phone: 0888558782
E-mail: nvenelinova@uni-ruse.bg

Abstract: *The development of social networks and communication technologies definitely changed the project management practice reconsidering information management of the highest importance for the quality of the project management. The software applications and the Covid -19 crisis strengthen the imposing practice of dominance of the virtual teams. The paper systemizes key features of the virtual teams in project management and analyzes their strengths and weaknesses in terms of the communication effects in managing online groups. The particular case of social projects has been used as a basis to identify the challenges in managing virtual teams. An operational definition of this specific type of project is also proposed. The e-leaders role and required features in comparison with the traditional leadership in project management are central issues discussed in the paper with the view of proposing an updated set of competencies relevant to the management of virtual teams.*

Keywords: *virtual teams, project management, competencies, social projects*

INTRODUCTION:

Virtual collaboration between people, groups, organizations, formal or informal became one of the most extensively developed social practices in the last decade. The reason for such "invasion" of the virtuality on the management and the organizational culture, behavior, and leadership can not be only explained by technological development and the 4th Industrial revolution, nor by the social-economic trends. Without any doubt, the speeding-up of decision-making is a priority issue for any entity regardless of its type and size, as well as the area of core activity and the virtuality provides an exclusive opportunity for optimizing the management at all levels.

The present paper is aiming to identify and analyze the challenges in initial collaboratively-based traditional management practice (e.g. project management) transposed in a virtual environment. A special focus has been given to the features, functions, sensemaking, and decision-making processes in temporary virtual teams organized to manage social projects. It might be sound surprising but the topic of virtual teaming is not new for the researchers working in the field of social sciences."Although management scholars have created a large body of knowledge on how to manage teams that are physically present in a single location, there is far less understanding of how leaders can manage teams effectively that work together virtually, using computer-based communication technology" (Ford, 2017).

EXPOSITION

The challenge to manage a group of people whose members are not sharing a joint work location and are distributed all over the world, who might never meet each other, or never know each other in person is much bigger than leading a co-located team. But to explain properly this challenge first it is necessary to define the "virtual team" as a category of the team which is quite different than the traditional one. In the project management practice, it generally can discuss three types of strategies related with the project team success, which regarding the field of scientific interest are differently called but nevertheless, they all refer to the team management triade "organization – leadership – decision-making" (Kerlinger, 1986; Chang, 2001; Ford, 2017). Each of the components of the triade is complex by nature and encompasses several aspects developed

as separate branches in organizational, social-behavioral, strategic management, cultural, psychological, economic, communication and media knowledge. Obviously, it is impossible to discuss all the projections of the teaming in a paper that's why the interpretation of the challenges concerning the management of virtual teams is through the prism of the rational experience of social projects. The social projects have been chosen as the almost natural environment of the topic of the paper because of their implicit orientation to human relationships and their explicit effects in and outside the team. To be clearer a social project is "a project or undertaking of solidarity actions aimed at improving one or more aspects of a society in which it exists, thus strengthening the sense of citizenship, or the social understanding of citizens" (Almeida, 2020). More pragmatic perspective on defining social projects is proposed by Law Insider, where they are determined as a type of projects "related with the public services that the government provides to the public free of charge or at nominal charge and include education, health, potable water and road projects" (Law Insider, 2020). As it might be seen the first definition is based on the idea of social responsibility and the social impact of any kind of initiative regardless of the type of their beneficiaries or the type of financing. The second one refers directly to the public source of financing invested to improve the social environment and which is undertaken by public bodies. This definitely excludes all social projects with measurable social impact, aiming to solve significant social deficits in a certain area, which might be initialized and/or implemented by business entities or by non-governmental and non-profit organizations. Such understanding is far not only from the logic shown by the world practice but is completely insufficient to describe the most important feature of the social projects in comparison with any other type of project – the social impact. And the social impact itself is actually the achievable and measurable, sustainable social change between the initial situation and this after the project closure.

The fuzzy defining of social projects in the literature is rooted in several misunderstandings: and the most often met of them concerns the mistake to accept the management of social projects and social project management as similar or even more as the same things.

Despite in very first sight, no difference can be found and they seem and sound like a linguistic playing, actually, they are completely different. The management of social projects corresponds to the Law Insider's definition and concerns processes leading to social improvements, based on social responsibility. Social project management is a non-traditional way of organizing and performing projects grounded on collaborative platforms or social networking and facilitated by software, which provides the opportunity to distributed dispersed team members to establish project micro-ecosystem where they can act and be managed as a virtual team.

Because of this extremely specific feature, social project management is fully dependant on the quality of any aspects of the communication – technical and technological, social, cultural, psychological, organizational, etc. and namely the communication and the means of communication enable the virtual team to achieve project objectives. That means the social project management as imperative combines the traditional historically developed practice of project management and web-based solutions for collaboration that might be introduced in traditional practice (Bjørn§Ngwenyama, 2009). The development of social project management based on this integration leads to the definitive change of the management processes and will result in a new paradigm of the project management cycle which in the nearest future will probably require the separate development of the social project management theory and practice.

Considering the important notice concerning the difference between social project management and the management of social projects, it must be said that the present paper points attention to virtual teams' management in projects with a social impact. The component "virtual team" refers to the social project management and the component "social impact" refers to the project management of social projects. This means that the two management practices differentiated above are integrated into the perspectives and the examples used for the purposes of the present paper.

Framing this perspective, a virtual team can be defined as a group of people intentionally involved and coordinately acting to achieve shared objectives, who are geographically and

organizationally dispersed and are managed based on computer-mediated communication in a completely virtual environment. A similar understanding of virtual teaming with different nuances can be met in most of the authors who have worked on this topic regardless of their field (Mulki, 2009; Jarvenpaa, 2013; Ford, 2017; Beloev, Antonova at al, 2021). Based on this the key features of the virtual teams are easily recognizable:

- 1) people (employees or localized sub-groups) are not co-located;
- 2) no need and not necessary team members to meet physically face-to-face;
- 3) people must have a high level of communication and digital competencies in addition to their core professional specialization;
- 4) people must be able to use and apply sophisticated technologies to execute their project roles and to solve problems;
- 5) it is necessary for people to demonstrate multicultural tolerance;
- 6) people are success-oriented;
- 7) people should be preliminarily trained to work in a virtual environment because the degree of virtualization and the established virtual practices are different and dependent on the technological development of the region/country and the quality of life;
- 8) people must be flexible and adaptive to the fast-changing work environment and to accept the changes as opportunity and stimulation of their creativity but not as dramatic effects that block them to act;
- 9) people are expected to be empowered to propose and take decisions that change the path to achieve the expected results in conformity with the development trends especially those concerning the quality of project performance, the effectiveness and the sustainability of the proposed solutions, and the added value;

If we go back to the triade “*organization – leadership – decision-making*” the interpretation of the above-outlined features refers to the mature organization with a highly collaborative management orientation. The key challenge is that maturity in terms of the organizational practice means with established traditions, culture, identity, and well-developed processes with proven effectiveness and efficiency (Nydegger&Nydegge, 2008; Snellman, 2014; Kunev at al, 2020). These features are contradicting to the fast-changing virtual ecosystem and require transformations that might be conflicting or unacceptable for the team members. Indeed the organization able to manage virtual teams for project purposes must be an organization with advanced technological development oriented to the achievements and success, based on mutual recognition of the personality and the professionalism of its members, use to work in a cross-cultural environment and have already established collaborative practice both as management style and as a technological platform; the organization invests regularly in raising the qualification of its member to keep them up-to-date about the advanced software solutions and to develop their ability to apply them for the purpose of proper projects implementation. The use of virtual shared-environment focuses on a very specific issue – the tracking and monitoring both of the system and the team members. This aspect ensures an extremely high level of transparency and provable achievement, which makes objective the measurement of the contribution of each team member, but also might raise the personal fears and affect the process of sensemaking of the project framework, roles, rules, and procedures (Jarvenpaa, 2013).

In terms of the leadership of the virtual teams it should be taken into consideration that the success of the project is fully dependent on the quality of in-team communication, the sharing and common understanding of the project objectives; the respect of mutually recognized rules and procedures which are not imposed outside the team but developed together and established to facilitate the project execution trough coordination and cooperativeness. This requires the project leaders to switch from transactional leadership to transforming leadership style. In the theory of leadership, transforming leadership is understood as a style where a leader works with team members beyond their immediate self-interests to identify needed change. The transformative leader can create a vision and guide the change through influence, inspiration, motivation, and to implement the change as shared belief and joint decision together with all equally committed team

members. Usually, this leadership style is typical for the execution of social projects where the level of collaboration, the mutuality of beliefs, expectations, and values, the cross-cultural tolerance, the social responsibility, and corporate citizenship are the prerequisite of the project initializing due to its social nature and the expected results. Even in the case when the transformative leadership is not established at the beginning of the project, the achievement of social change as the essence of the social projects requires the fast turn on this type of leadership which is the necessary precondition for effective involvement of the project stakeholders with completely specific or often contradicting characteristics (e.g. minorities, people with disabilities, people with different level or lack of education, etc.) in the project execution.

The inability to apply transformative leadership in social projects raises the conflicting potential of the management practice with finally can result in poor project quality, a decrease of team productivity, or blocked project execution by the stakeholders due to a lack of mutual basis for recognition of the benefits or problems for solving.

The described process is strengthened and much more intensive when to the social projects a social project management practice is applied. The integration of the virtuality and technological aspects with the social nature of the project objectives not only requires collaborative leadership but also changes the process of decision-making from centralized to delegated, from centered on the results to focus on the project's success.

Implicit condition for this success is the development of communication system, practice, and style within the team. As much assertive is the style as easy will be the process of sharing. But the sharing itself requires proper distribution of team roles that should be communicated with the whole team not person by person and stated as responsibilities and rights so that to facilitate the process of sensemaking of the project scope and the management framework. The virtuality introduced in social projects requires the highest possible level of clarity of each task, process, rule, requirement, and decision but without being formalized to the degree of bureaucracy which will block the virtual teamwork and demotivate the members.

That means that the project manager should plan, develop and establish first the communication plan and framework, then ensure its execution with adequate technologies and procedures, to provide training in co-working in a virtual environment by applying the rules and testing the procedures to register the deviance in the communication. After that he/she must plan time and means to adapt the communication to eliminate misunderstanding, to ensure the compliance of other virtual processes related to the proper project management to the communication framework, so that finally to be ready to start the project execution. The time-saving discussed by some researchers working in the field of social project management is doubtful in case of lack of preparedness of the team, and often the time-savings during the project execution ensured by the virtual teaming are less the time necessary to prepare the team to work virtually.

CONCLUSION

The lack of understanding of the interrelations between the described activities and the applying of the traditional project management approach to the management of virtual teams for social projects will expose the project to unidentified risks and changes that are not planned as time, means, measures, and resources, which leads to defensive risk management or lack of risk management during the project cycle. The last impose the conclusion that the general challenge in managing virtual teams for social projects by applying social project management approach concerns the adequate, comfortable, easy use the design of the communication ecosystem of the project taking into account its technological, cultural, social interaction, psychological, and management dimensions and the quality of in-group and inter-organizational exchange of information which should be generally based on a collaborative platform, ensuring social-networking, and creating conditions for sharing both on information, professional expertise but also for experiencing shared emotions in solving problems (McKenna,2008),(Sirkka, Jarvenpaa,Leidner,1999), (De Bruyn,2020).

The opportunity of common experiencing the difficulties and the achievements during the project execution in virtual reality is a key factor for keeping the spirit of the team and its motivation for success, which refers not only to the technical and technological readiness of the organization of manage projects virtually but to the readiness of the project managers to substitute the traditional transactional leadership with transforming leadership style and delegation decision-making. Such type of project management practice especially in social projects is highly appropriate to the project performance from the point of view of its objectives to achieve social change but inapplicable and extremely risky without preliminary assessment of the readiness of the organization and the team members to work in distributed disperse virtual project team in a digital environment. The decision about the type of team (virtual or traditional) should be taken at the very beginning of the conceptualization of the project idea and after achieving the results of the preliminary assessment. The assessment must be repeated at the begging of the project execution in the preparation phase during the establishment of the communication framework and the parameters of the assessment can be designed in such a manner so that further to use for monitoring the level of commitment of the team members during the execution of assigned tasks.

Unfortunately, the development of the present practice in applying social project management for social projects shows still lacks enough experience in developing assessment criteria that might guarantee proper project management. It should be noted that the criteria framework for such assessment is not and cannot be unified due to the uniqueness of the objectives of each project and the uniqueness of the team and the level of virtuality and the difference of the technologies applied. That means that the assessment parameters should be developed separately for each project with the purpose to show and ensure the preparedness of the team and the organization to initialize and manage the project virtually with the view of the existing constraints, risks, threats, and their collaborative understanding and overcoming.

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