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# BACK TO BASICS

*Sharing Goals And Developing Trust In Global Virtual Teams*

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**Abstract:** There is a widely recognised view that trust is a vital requirement and a 'need to have' quality for effective virtual teams. Despite, however, this acknowledged importance of trust, only limited empirical research exists to date that explores the challenges of creating and developing trust relationships in the global business environment. This paper develops a theoretical framework for conceptualising trust development in this context by taking into account the role of shared goals and power dynamics. Based on data collected on eighteen global virtual teams, we challenge the prevailing assumption that global virtual team members experience swift trust. Within a business environment where conflict and power differentials prevail, building trust is not always a swift process. We find that the process of jointly constructing team goals holds significant value as it may provide the 'glue' to hold team members together long enough to enable trust development.

**Keywords:** Trust, goals, power, global virtual teams, computer-mediated communication.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

*"The HQ people are making all of the decisions and their goals may be different to ours in Singapore. For example, their goals may be for profit, but they did not discuss this with us. Therefore, when they did certain things it felt as though they were just inflicting their power on us.... Maybe our management in Singapore have told us that our [own] objectives are for cost savings, and this can result in conflict and mistrust within the team*" (Global Virtual Team 8, Interviewee G).

The significance of trust as a state of a positive, confident expectation (Cook and Wall, 1980; Currall and Judge, 1995) has been widely recognised in the virtual organization literature. Handy (1995: p.44), for example, has put the point quite succinctly: "Virtuality requires trust to make it work: Technology on its own is not enough". As Lipnack and Stamps also put it (1997: p.225): "in the networks and virtual teams of the Information Age, trust is a 'need to have' quality in productive relationships", whilst according to Platt (1999), trust is essential to any virtual team because these teams do not have everyday interaction and the potential for losing trust is much higher. However, while trust has been identified as a defining feature for virtual organizations (Davidow and Malone, 1993), and while several suggestions have been made for strengthening trust relations within virtual teams, empirical research in this area has remained limited.

In this paper, we aim to cover some of this gap by taking a focus on two factors that we believe are important to our understanding of trust development within the context of global virtual teams: shared goals and power. Even though both shared goals and power dynamics have been recognised as important in developing trust in a virtual team context, these bodies of literature have largely evolved independently of one another.

In what follows, we provide the conceptual foundations of the study and develop a framework that identifies the inter-relationships between shared goals, power and trust. Then the research project conducted for the purpose of the study is described and the methods used for data collection are justified. The results are analysed and discussed using the theoretical framework and their theoretical and practical relevance is identified.

## 2 CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Shared goals are often highlighted as being a key element in the establishment of effective teams. In fact, the literature seems to take for granted that shared goals exist in virtual teams. For example, Lipnack and Stamps (1997: p.7) define virtual teams as "a group of people who interact through inter-dependent tasks guided by a common purpose…". Similarly, Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) define a global virtual team as a group of geographically dispersed individuals who work on a joint project or common task. Through the creation of shared goals, groups of people have an inter-relatedness, a shared commitment (Handy, 1995) and a common motivation that adds up to more than just a "bunch of individuals" (Lipnack and Stamps, 2000). These teams exist for some task-oriented purpose, and therefore orientation to task is what distinguishes them from other types of small groups (Lipnack and Stamps, 2000). Shared goals or objectives provide a link between relational and cognitive dimensions (Tsai and Ghoshal, 1998) and can help to provide a sense of shared meaning (Kasper-Fuehrer and Ashkanasy, 2001) or a common business understanding. These goals articulate what the team stands for and the outcomes that they expect or "their shared vision", which can be an important part of a "relational contract" (Kasper-Fuehrer and Ashkanasy, 2001) and an important element of a cooperative relationship management strategy (Allen et al., 2000). It has even been suggested that the best predictors of a virtual team's success are the clarity of its purpose and group's participation in achieving it (Lipnack and Stamps, 2000).

Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) have conducted one of the most detailed research projects into studies on trust and virtual teams thus far. Their eight-week study of seventy five teams of university students each consisting of four to six members, highlighted significant differences in the behaviors and strategies between high and low trust teams and supported the existence of swift trust; this type of trust presumes that roles are clear and that each member has a good understanding of others' roles and responsibilities (Meyerson et al, 1996). Their study was initiated with three artificially created, well-articulated tasks for the teams to complete, which, in effect, created shared goals in terms of both the purpose and objectives of these teams. However, whilst this study is comprehensive and provides useful insights, it does have limitations when attempting to apply its findings in a business context where goals are often neither pre-set nor clearly stated.

Furthermore, power differentials, which could influence the degree of inter-dependence among members, are not significant in the case of university students. In business environments, however, power differentials prevail. Power, defined as the capability of one party to exert an influence on another to act in a prescribed manner, is often a function of both dependence and the use of that dependence as leverage (Rassingham, 1999). Indeed, power is an important contextual factor that affects trust (Hart and Saunders, 1997) in that it suggests the existence of a unilateral dependency or an imbalanced relationship (Allen et al., 2000).

Power can take the form of either coercion or persuasion. Coercive power (Allen et al., 2000; Rassingham, 2000) is often apparent when one party possesses a punishment ability. Whilst short-term gains are sometimes available, coercion very much reflects a short-term perspective, which can result in the weaker, more vulnerable, party yielding begrudgingly and engaging in defensive co-operation. This in turn encourages opportunism (Rassingham, 1999; Van der Smagt, 2000) and degrades the relationship (Allen et al., 2000) often into a downward spiral (Rassingham, 1999). Coercion often results in distrust (Allen et al., 2000) and a resultant evasion, deception, and distortion of information. It therefore becomes a significant constraint to relationships, which prevent improvements in coordination, and often results in an attempt by the weaker player to try to escape (Rassingham, 1999). Therefore, whilst coercion can force cooperation (Rousseau at al., 1998), true collaboration requires trust (Kanter, 1994) and as a result coercion is often self-defeating in the long term (Rassingham, 1999). Persuasive power provides a better alternative for enhancing the satisfaction of less powerful partners (Allen et al., 2000; Hart and Saunders, 1997; Rassingham, 1999). It seeks to build trust and helps with the tight coupling of actors with often economic, symbolic and personal benefits (Rassingham, 1999). Whilst persuasion often requires the adoption of a long-term perspective, it is often more expensive and takes time. It also significantly increases the probability of building trust, which occurs when a trading partner is informed about the fullest potential of the relationship (Rassingham, 1999; Hart and Saunders, 1997).

Following from these, we argue that evidence of swift trust has been identified in global virtual teams as this was based on a study that took place within university environments where tasks were well articulated and power differentials were insignificant. In our study, we aim to examine trust development within a global virtual team context taking into account the role of shared goals and the use of coercive and persuasive power. Figure 1 presents a model that identifies the interactions between shared goals, power and trust in this context.

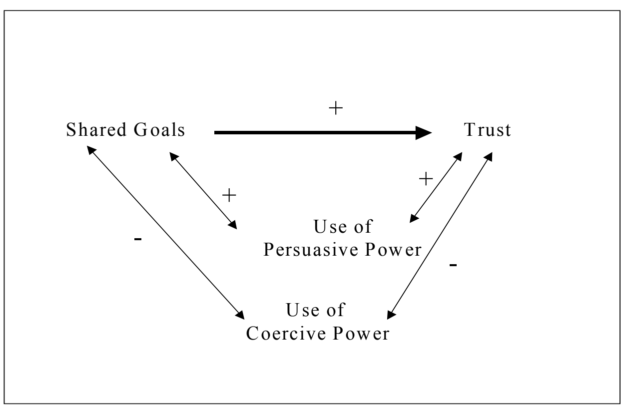


*Figure 1.* A Model of Shared Goals, Power and Trust

For the purpose of this paper, we have chosen to utilise empirical research that is targeted specifically at exploring the role of shared goals in managing power and influencing trust towards improving the sharing of knowledge within global virtual teams.

## 3 RESEARCH SITE AND APPROACH

Kappa (a pseudonym) is a company that operates in the high-tech industry and was ranked among the top 20 in Fortune 500 top companies in 2001. It currently serves more than one billion customers worldwide and has an employee base of 150,000 people. Kappa operates as a globally dispersed corporation and makes extensive use of global teams at both intra- and inter-organizational levels. Due to its global characteristics, Kappa was a suitable organization to participate in our study.

In view of the above, the research was specifically focused on gathering information about the effectiveness of Kappa's global virtual teams. Data were collected by interviewing global virtual team members. The criterion sampling tactics (Shaw, 1999), which helped to make decisions on selecting interviewees, were defined as interviewing individuals who: a) were Kappa's employees; b) satisfied the grounded definition of global virtual teams; namely teams that were culturally diverse, geographically dispersed and technology enabled (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999, Lipnack and Stamps, 2000) and c) had worked within a global virtual team for more than two months – thus allowing some exploration of the changes within the team over time.

Whilst many of the interview candidates were from the UK, an attempt was made to vary as many of the aspects of the same as possible. As a result, candidates were selected from across the world and interviews were conducted with employees in Germany, United States, Singapore as well as UK. Similarly, interview candidates were from a range of roles, levels of seniority, cultures, gender, facilitators and involved managers from various business functions across the organization. A total of twelve interviews were conducted and eighteen global virtual team scenarios were explored. The UK interviews were conducted face to face and the remote interviews were conducted via telephone. All the interviews were recorded with the interviewee's agreement and the duration of the interviews ranged from thirty minutes to one hour.

Interviews were organized in a way that encouraged interviewees to recall and reflect on their experiences from working in a global virtual team that they judged to have 'worked well', and conversely their experiences from working in a team that 'did not work well'. This approach resulted in a free flow of data and often produced two case scenarios from each interview. The interviews were guided by prompt questions aimed at exploring the background to the team, the amount of time that the interviewee had worked within the team, the purpose of the team, the frequency of face to face interactions, the distribution of power amongst the team members, the level of trust within the team, and whether and how trust changed over time.

## 4 RESULTS

The collected data provided information on the experiences and effectiveness of eighteen virtual teams all of which operated at a global level. The majority of these teams were intra-organizational, but four were inter-organizational. All interviewees expected that their teams would continue collaboration in the future. Six of the teams did not work well whilst two other teams improved their effectiveness over time. Table 1 presents a synopsis of the characteristics and experiences of Kappa's virtual teams.

*Table 1.* Synopsis of Findings: Team Characteristics and Effectiveness

| Team | Interviewee | Interviewee location | Inter/Intra organizational teams | Worked well? | Shared goals? | Power differentials? | Trust? | Collaborative? | Swift trust? |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | A | UK | Intra | Y | Y | Y | N-Y | N-Y | N |
| | B | US | | Y | Y | Y | N-Y | N-Y | N |
| | C | GER | | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 2 | D | SGP | Intra | N-Y | N-Y | Y | N-Y | N-Y | N |
| 3 | D | SGP | Intra | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 4 | E | UK | Inter | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 5 | E | UK | Intra | N | N | Y | N | N | N |
| 6 | F | UK | Inter | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y |
| 7 | F | UK | Intra | N | N | Y | N | N | N |
| 8 | G | SGP | Intra | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N |
| 9 | G | SGP | Intra | N | N | Y | N | N | N |
| 10 | H | SGP | Inter | Y | Y | Y | N-Y | N-Y | N |
| 11 | H | SGP | Inter | N | N | Y | N | N | N |
| 12 | I | UK | Intra | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N |
| 13 | I | UK | Intra | N | N | Y | N | N | N |
| 14 | J | UK | Intra | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N |
| 15 | J | UK | Intra | N | N | Y | N | N | N |
| 16 | K | UK | Intra | Y | Y | Y | Y | Y | N |
| 17 | K | UK | Intra | N | N | Y | N | N | N |
| 18 | L | UK | Intra | N-Y | N-Y | Y | N-Y | N-Y | N |

<u>Keys (for Table 1 entries):</u>
Y: Yes
N: No
N-Y: Improved over time
GER: Germany
SGP: Singapore

Table 2 below details the common features and behaviors observed within the global virtual teams described in the interviews and identifies the inter-dependencies between the factors shown in Figure 1. These are explained in the following sections.

*Table 2*. Differences between High Trust and Low Trust Global Virtual Teams

| ***Hight Trust Global Virtual Teams*** | ***Low Trust Global Virtual Teams*** |
|---|---|
| **Factors related to Shared Goals:** | **Factors related to Shared Goals:** |
| *Awareness of shared goals | *Lack of awareness of shared goals |
| *Take time to build shared goals | *Lack of shared goals |
| *Open debate for shared goals up front | *Opinions of others not considered |
| *Team-based goals have primacy | *Individual goals take primacy |
| **Factors related to Power:** | **Factors related to Power:** |
| *Availability of facilitators | *Power battles |
| *Facilitators focus on win-win | *Coercion |
| *Recognition of knowledge as power | *Misunderstandings and conflict of interests |
| *Recognition that power moves; power in many places | *Use of positional power |
| *Power differentials are minimised | *Perception of 'I have Power' |
| **Communication:** | **Communication:** |
| *Face-to-Face where possible | *Asynchronous CMC |
| *Regular synchronous CMC | * Time difference matters |
| *Social interaction | *Little or no social interest |

## 4.1 Shared Goals and Trust

Shared goals were evident in all of the 'high trust' teams and these teams were also found by the interviewees to have worked well. High levels of trust are arguably key to effective communication (Dodgson, 1993) as trust facilitates challenge, debate, learning and innovation, and "improves the quality of dialogue and discussions … [which,] facilitates the sharing of … knowledge" (Ichijo et al, 2000: p.200), and committed relationships. Conversely in all of the scenarios where trust was described as low, shared goals were lacking. In the situations where team members were of the opinion that trust had been broken the level of emotion was high:

> *"At that point in time, because it was my neck on the line, I really felt that this had been done deliberately. You know, I was pretty mad. I was sure it was deliberate. I didn't have anything to back that up but when you are working in a team where things change very quickly, people do think that others hold on to information deliberately. You start to wonder whether their motivation is the same as yours. Whether their motivation has dropped back. When you are not sat next to somebody you can't see how hard they are working or whether they are working on the things that are [more] important to you" (Team 1, Interviewee B).*

A number of the scenarios included situations where facilitators had made use of shared goals to encourage collaboration. In all of these examples shared goals were used to create a higher level or an overriding goal or vision. These goals were focused on the success of the team as a whole, and in some cases attempted to combat the individual or non-complementary goals. An example of this is shown below:

> *"Initially the folks in the US perceived that they had the power and at the same time we felt that we had the power in the UK. So I was very sensitive to that, because if I had acted as though I had the power that would have caused problems. And I was not in a position to alter the power due to the political situation. So I looked for something that was important than our individual political needs, and used the customer as the central focus. This worked well in the majority of situations as everybody could easily relate to meeting the customers' needs" (Team 1, Interviewee A).*

Participants described situations in which facilitators were attempting to both rebuild and improve trust (Teams: 2, 4, 6, 14, 16, 18). In these examples the use of shared goals features prominently:

> *"We had a very definite vision of how we wanted the relationship to work. We were keen to engage and excite the other companies. We gave them an overview of our business and worked hard to try and give them the full picture to create a vision if you like" (Team 4, Interviewee E)*

> *"At the very start of the project the project managers from each company got together and put together a comprehensive contract…It was developed jointly and was very comprehensive. We went through a lot of*

> *iterative discussions to make sure that the document was extremely well thought out" (Team 6, Interviewee F).*

The use of precisely defined, mutually beneficial projects had also been adopted by a number of interviewees in an attempt to begin building trust:

> *"...By focusing carefully on the things that are hurting both of us, I think we can start to rebuild trust. The new product introduction process reinvention is a good example" (Team 18, Interviewee L). In this scenario, ground rules were included in the shared goals definition sheet, such as "Think [Kappa] First, Front-end, Back-end Second" as well as explicitly listing the expected benefits.*

The preciseness with which shared goals are defined is influenced by the levels of dependency and exposure that exist within a relationship. In team 3, shared goals were apparent but had not been defined. This was considered to have been appropriate given that the relationship was seen as a low risk one. Similarly, where the relationships had been devised specifically for the creation of knowledge (Teams 4 and 6) the shared goals were carefully developed.

For example, interviewee F refers to a team that was set up to specify and design a specific integrated circuit for a new product and involved designers in the UK and the US: *"We were detailing the specifications but even this tended to be a back and forth iterative process. At times the specification was modified based on feedback from the designers and at other times the specification would determine the design"* (Team 6, Interviewee F/UK R&D engineer)

These findings support the proposition depicted in Figure 1 that the use of shared goals has a positive influence on the establishment and building of trust. Moreover, they reveal that the *process* of constructing these shared goals, and not just their existence, contributes towards trust development within a virtual team. In what follows, we examine the relationship between power and shared goals.

## 4.2 Power and Shared Goals

Power differentials were acknowledged in all of the scenarios, even where the teams were considered to have worked well. It was apparent that where the 'more powerful' parties had identified the success of the team as their primary consideration, they consciously minimised the use of coercive power:

> *"We were very aware that we needed the technical expertise and we only had one company that could provide this. We were therefore very careful*

*and deliberately tried not to throw up our weight around. We did not want to wield our power (Team 4, Interviewee E).*

*"[..] because we had a good relationship we were not pushy, we did not force the supplier in any way. I guess some of this is down to our company culture, but not all. Where we have power and need to use it, we do. It was just not necessary in this relationship because we were all working towards the same things" (Team 10, Interviewee H).*

Five interviewees described the power within their team as originating from knowledge and noted that at any given point in time the most powerful member was the individual with the most relevant information. In these situations coercive power was rarely used and significant emphasis was placed upon collaboration and the use of persuasive power:

*"Power tended to move based on whatever activities were going on at that time. I guess it followed those that were most knowledgeable at any point in time. This is not surprising as the reason we selected the external design company was because of their knowledge" (Team 6, Interviewee F).*

In those cases where the use of coercive power was adversely affecting the relationship, it was apparent that shared goals did not appear to exist. The exercising of coercive power was made visible through behaviors such as imposing one's own views on the team, ignoring the views of other team members and adopting the view that the other team members were 'wrong'. Within these situations the range of responses varied: from the 'weaker' team members adopting a more passive involvement or reluctant cooperation, through to more dramatic 'turf battle' examples where individuals appeared to be pursuing their own, often conflicting goals regardless of the negative impact this had on the effectiveness of the team as a whole (e.g. Team 8, Interviewee G, see 'Introduction').

These findings support the view that the use of shared goals can positively influence the use of persuasive power whilst it can discourage the use of coercive power within global virtual teams.

## 4.3 The Role of CMC in Global Virtual Teams

Many of the interviewees supported the view that face to face interaction was critical. However, it has also been recognised that the opportunities to meet face to face have been severely limited by economic pressures and more recently the terrorist attack on the world trade centre. As an interviewee put it: *"We have a travel freeze at the moment and I haven't met any of the global team for more than a year now*" (Team 1, Interviewee C).

Under these circumstances, it is found that those virtual teams that worked well tend to undertake regular communications via synchronous, ‘live’ communication technologies such as telephone and Microsoft NetMeeting. Participants confirm that synchronous media offered more feedback and therefore facilitated understanding more effectively than asynchronous technologies such as voicemail and email. The use of asynchronous technologies was, however, regularly used for documenting and recording agreements and providing brief, simple updates to work progress. The teams that worked well were also found to include a social and fun element in their interactions which appeared to have helped in creating a stronger shared social context.

Teams that did not work well or did not experience trust in the initial stages of the project were more likely to identify time zone differences as a drawback in their team's effectiveness. As such, they presented the asynchronous nature of the technology as a constraint to their virtual interactions:

> *“I was assigned to work on this team as the US order management representative....the team included supply chain, order management, business management with representatives form each region. ...The most difficult aspect was the time zone. I am in the UK and the customers are on a different coast to me. So if I get an urgent customer request late in the afternoon, I am unable to get a response from the UK until the next day. This could often appear to the customer as we are being very slow because I would have to wait a whole day before I could get an answer and then really it to the customer” (Team 1, Interviewee B/US order management specialist).*

## 5 DISCUSSION

Shared goals are and should be a key characteristic of virtual teams. They could provide a means to developing a common sense of identity for team members, which can be of particular benefit to those global virtual teams who meet infrequently or perhaps not at all. These benefits include the establishment of a foundation upon which to build trust and minimise the use of coercive power in pursuit of a collaborative and productive relationship.

However, the study finds that even though shared goals are important for the success of virtual teams, these should not be taken for granted. Indeed, goals may not be shared either because they do not exist at all, team members have not become aware of them, have their own priorities or share different interpretations of the team's role. Furthermore, the study has also shown that the construction of shared goals is often not a one-off activity, but rather it is a process that requires the participation of all parties involved. Though this could be a time consuming, iterative and difficult process, the findings of our study allow us to argue that it is far better to invest in it and as up front in the project as possible than deal with the vicious, destructive downward spirals that result from team members with conflicting goals and poor levels of trust.

In considering power within virtual teams there is an increasing recognition in the literature that knowledge is indeed power and that teams are often formed to create knowledge through combination and exchange. Within these teams, the team member with power at any given time is the one with the most relevant knowledge at that time. Our study found that in high trust teams power differentials do not disappear; rather, power shifts from one member to another throughout the life cycle of a project depending on the stage and requirement of each stage.

Moreover, facilitators are found to have an enabling role in constructing shared goals and minimizing destructive power differentials. The role of a facilitator is to help in team building techniques at the early stage of the virtual work project (Duncan and Panteli, 2001). For example, the facilitator may be valuable in both designing and conducting team sessions but also structuring team discussions by using group graphics/process templates and other forms of collaborative technology. The competence and skills of a facilitator in bringing individuals and organisations together and in encouraging the use of collaborative technologies will foster an atmosphere of collaboration and trust building for the duration of a team project. This becomes more challenging when managing teams in highly-knowledge intensive environments that operate in the global market and we suggest that future research examines this topic more systematically.

This leads us to our final insight on the dynamics of trust development, which highlight the importance of continuous inter-relation and interaction between virtual team members. Within the context of a global virtual team environment, it is within such computer-mediated interactions that members jointly construct their trust development. This joint construction is influenced by the presence of each other and the role of the facilitator in the project. Within a business environment where conflict and power differentials prevail, building trust is not always a swift process, but a focus on shared goals may provide the initial impetus to teamwork and provide the ‘glue’ to hold team members together long enough to begin the virtuous spiral of building a collaborative relationship.

## 6 CONCLUSIONS

The study presented in this paper reinforces arguments in the existing literature on the significance and complexity of trust dynamics in building effective virtual teams. It goes further than the existing research, however, to identify and illustrate the significance of shared goals and power in influencing trust development. A model, depicted in figure 1, has been developed to represent the interactions between these three factors. The interrelationships identified within the model have been supported by empirical research data gathered from the experiences of eighteen global virtual teams. In addition to providing support for the model, it has also become apparent that whilst the agreement of shared goals provide a mobilising force for the members of global virtual teams, the process of developing these goals holds significant value in terms of the exchange of information, learning, improving understanding and an opportunity to demonstrate trustworthiness. For this reason, we have argued that trust within a global virtual team context is not always swift. Based on our findings, we challenge the prevailing assumption that global virtual team members experience swift trust.

It is readily acknowledged that what has been attempted here is only an exploration of contingencies to provide a better understanding of trust development within global virtual environment. Further research is required to merit the conceptual and empirical work that is lagging in the existing literature.

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