To understand creativity in virtual work: identification of leadership toward creativity in different types of companies

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An empirical study that links leadership and creativity in complex virtual work

• Virtual work refers to people working in different locations using ICT to manage a business

• The aim was to develop a descriptive typology to identify and describe how leadership in virtual work is made up in various types of companies

• The study incorporated business-oriented and pedagogical thinking in leadership
Theoretical framework

• Virtuality and virtual work
• Creativity and collective creativity
• Creative-conducting leadership approaches in virtual work
  - Transformational leadership
  - Emotional leadership
  - Complexity leadership
• Leadership with a task-focused attitude
• The heterarchy perspective in leadership
  - Leadership in heterarchy is shared, collective leadership and an enabler of interaction, meaningful work, inspiration, and creativity
• Hierarchy as an organization principle

Methodology

• A basic qualitative research approach
• A multiple case study
• An interpretivist approach and an abductive form of analysis were applied in the data analysis
Data gathering

- Interviews of 21 persons in four companies in the ICT sector and in one business advisor company in Finland from April through June 2016; 5 female and 10 male leaders and 4 female and 2 male employees aged 20–60 years

- Half of the case companies mostly operated globally, many participants were experienced in global business and virtual work - the cases aligned with the main types of company profiles that exist in the virtual contexts

- The questions focused on leading a virtual workforce toward collective creativity and interaction, and the outcomes and development of leadership

Data analysis process

- Codes -> themes under 5 headings -> 3 separate summaries

- A rough outline of the typology based the 3 summaries

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Criteria for the creative-conducting leadership (Humala 2016)</th>
<th>Criteria for the heterarchial leadership</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• understanding virtuality as a networked work context</td>
<td>• combination of organizing principles</td>
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<td>• developing a virtual leadership mindset</td>
<td>• supportive interdependent interaction</td>
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<td>• leading meaningful work for progress</td>
<td>• distributed authority to orchestrate</td>
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<td>• energizing people</td>
<td>• work</td>
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<td>• reinforcement of creativity and</td>
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<td>• innovative ideas</td>
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- Identifying each company type in more detail

- The final typology including the key issues
The outcome:
a typology identifying leadership toward creativity in four different types of companies

Type A “Nascent launch pad”
Type B “Collective mind”
Type C “Command center”
Type D “Leaky boat”

The key issues in each company type were categorized under three critical business sections:
1) leadership, 2) communication, 3) learning and growth
“Collective mind” company fosters creativity and major business outcomes

Main characteristics:

- shared values
- meaningful work
- collective intelligence and reflection
- transparency
- coaching leadership

Leaders in “collective mind” companies:

- understand virtuality as a networked context
- apply distributed authority
- are assertive and consistent
- create social bonds through effective multichannel interaction and caring for each other

Contribution

FOR RESEARCHERS

- improved theoretical understanding by defining alternative trajectories in the transition toward leadership creativity in virtual work
- empirical support to apply heterarchy perspective to lead a virtual workforce toward creativity

FOR PRACTITIONERS

- fostering creative interaction requires developing leadership, communication, interaction, learning and growth at the same time
- knowledge how to evaluate leaders’ and employees’ personal work performance in virtual work
Conclusions

• **Humanistic values** are essential in future development of leadership in virtual work to promote their professional growth, self-regulation, and meaningfulness at work

• **Leaders need to know their people** and their skills and passions over the role limits and support utilizing them – and **be interested in the technologies**

• **Conscious reflection** to organize work and business models is a key to navigate in the virtual business environment

More information


Keywords: virtual work, creativity, leadership, typology, heterarchy