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Multiple Roles of Distributed Team Leaders

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Introduction

- Distributed leadership has become increasingly common, yet it is still unclear how the challenges of distribution affect the leadership
 - Existing studies are based on ad hoc student groups and concentrate on only one aspect of leadership
- This study aims to describe distributed leadership by examining what kind of roles real working distributed team leaders perceive themselves to have



Data and method

- Data: Interviews of 37 distributed team leaders
 - Interviewees represented 11 companies and were culturally and geographically dispersed
 - The semi-structured interviews covered team dynamics, work tasks and roles of distributed team leaders
 - Interviews were recorded and transcribed
- Inductive content analysis by two researchers was used for coding



Results 1/4

- Distributed team leaders performed managerial, informational and interpersonal roles
- These roles form a unified whole: they cannot be separated from team leaders' work. Leaders perform several, even contradictory, roles (cf. Behavioural complexity theory)



Results 2/4

Managerial roles	Description of the role
Strategist	Systemic thinking, Visioning, Setting the goal, Planning, Preparing, Scheduling, Developing Strategies, Developing teamwork
Organizer	Thinking about team composition, Recruiting, Assigning roles & responsibilities, Organizing team, Delegating tasks
Provider	Providing prerequisites for teamwork, Getting and allocating resources, Budgeting, Providing training, Providing means to share information within and outside the team
Decision maker	Making decisions, Authorizing actions



Results 3/4

Informational roles	Description of the role
Informant	Communicating the goals, the processes and strategies, the time scale and deadlines of work. Informing team of the made decisions, members' roles, the progress of work. Reminding team of current things and the goals. Giving expert advice
Information collector	Finding out whether team members understand the goals and the role allocations, need help, face factors threatening teamwork (e.g. conflicts, stress, excessive workload). Following the progress of work
Communication facilitator	Facilitating communication between team members, Encouraging team to discuss the goals and share information
Liaison	Developing and maintaining relationships with line managers, Informing the sites about the team, getting support for the work, Negotiating with line supervisors (members' tasks and job allocations) and different business units
Informal communicator	Communicating with team members informally, Listening to the worries of team members



Results 4/4

Interpersonal roles	Description of the role
Coach	Motivating, Giving performance appraisals and feedback, Rewarding
Relationship builder	Building interpersonal relationships with each member, Building trusting relationships within the team, Encouraging team members to get to know each other, Creating and maintaining identification within the team, Arranging unofficial meetings
Troubleshooter	Preventing misunderstandings and conflicts, Settling misunderstandings and conflicts, Noticing and dealing with cultural differences in the team, Dealing with plethora of communication and collaboration tools
Empowerer	Creating commitment to teamwork and goals of the team, Encouraging team members to participate: facilitating collaboration and individual work, Giving team members responsibility



Conclusions

- Characteristics of distributed teamwork (e.g. lack of face-to-face meetings, different native languages, cultural and occupational backgrounds, communication via electronic devices) do affect the roles that leaders perform
 - When compared to the roles of collocated leaders (e.g. Mintzberg, 1971; Quinn, 1984; Yukl, 1981, 2006) **it seems that the roles are mainly the same in distributed and collocated settings**
 - However, **roles that support teamwork and empower team members are highlighted in distributed environment**. Traditionally leadership role theories have largely ignored the need to lead the group as a whole
 - It seems that **virtual environment requires leader to lead both individuals and the group**, trust members and delegate tasks
 - This makes distributed leadership challenging as creating and maintaining identification and trusting relationships is considered to be especially difficult in distributed settings

