

The Influence of Swift Trust on Virtual Team's Sensemaking in Crisis: A Research Model

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ABSTRACT

Virtual teams are an important form of collaboration, especially in the context of transboundary crises. Achieving team effectiveness through good sensemaking is key to virtual teams' success in responding to crisis. However, there is still a lack of understanding about the relationship of this sensemaking in a virtual team during crisis to the virtual team's development of swift trust. Adapting from a model of sensemaking, in this paper, we propose a research model to describe the relationships among swift trust, sensemaking and virtual team performance in the context of virtual teams during crisis.

Keywords

Virtual teams, crisis, sensemaking theory, swift trust, team performance.

INTRODUCTION

Organizations are constantly adapting to contextual changes (Albu & Wehmeier, 2014). One such "change" happens when organizations face crises. Organizational crisis are events that represent the most extreme and severe situations and are characterized in terms of their high risk, low probability, high uncertainty, and time pressure (Weick, 1988). Ineffective responses to a crisis can threaten organizational identity and potentially damage the reputation of the organization (Harden & Fulop, 2015). For example, Equifax a consumer credit reporting agency, faced a major cybersecurity crises in 2017, when it discovered and reported that over 143 million U.S. customers' personally identifiable information (PII) was breached (Agnes, 2017). Agnes (2017) summarized the response to this crisis by Equifax as follows: "While their messaging was weak coming out, their strategy of communication dissemination has since been quite strong." She adds "They (Equifax) will inevitably be defined by this incident, whether they like it or not. And yes, they will also be defined by the way they choose to respond."

Crisis research, in particular, organizational crisis research has burgeoned over the past decade (Jong, Dücker, & Velden, 2016; Paraskevas, 2006; Sauer, Felsing, Franke, & Rüttinger, 2007; Stachowski, Kaplan, & Waller, 2009). In particular, **sensemaking**, a process oriented construct, has been used as an effective theoretical lens for capturing the underlying path to successful crisis management. However, most studies in this line of research either focus on identifying the constituting elements of sensemaking (e.g. Hamm et al., 2015) or treat sensemaking as an endogenous factor to organizational or teams' performance in crisis (e.g. Higgins & Freedman, 2013).

Therefore, in this paper we attempt to fill the aforementioned theoretical gap by identifying "swift trust" as an important exogenous antecedent of sensemaking. We conceptually begin the exploration of the following research questions: How does swift trust influence sensemaking and its components? Can sensemaking in turn influence virtual team performance? We propose a research model for studying how sensemaking and swift trust influence virtual team performance during organizational crisis. Virtual teams generally have diverse

members with different skills and status. Prior research has found that under such a circumstance, virtual team members develop a priori “swift trust” (Meyerson, Weick, & Kramer, 1996). Swift trust is a key condition of virtual team members’ sharing of information that is essential to virtual teams’ sensemaking. Swift trust is an indicator of team capability and plays a key role in facilitating sensemaking (Waller, Lei, & Pratten, 2014).

CONCEPTUAL FOUNDATIONS

Sensemaking theory

Sensemaking is the process through which individuals and groups attempt to explain novel, unexpected, or confusing events (Weick, Sutcliffe, & Obstfeld, 2005). Sensemaking usually occurs at the early stages of a crisis (Boin et al., 2014). Key activities associated with sensemaking include information gathering, information dissemination, information sharing, and interactions among members (Thomas, Clark, & Gioia, 1993). Weick suggested three categories of sensemaking tasks: perceptions, interpretations, and actions. Sensemaking is one essential behavioral indicator of teams that begin actively engaging in cognizing, understanding, interpreting, and sharing among team members (Sackman, 1991; Weick, 1988). During sensemaking, individuals may develop different interpretations of the situation (Maitlis, 2005; Reissner, 2011; Weick & Roberts, 1993).

Research that discussed sensemaking during organizational crisis has primarily focused on the topics of leader communication strategy (Boin & Renaud, 2013; Dixon, Weeks, Boland, & Perelli, 2017; Salicru, 2017), organizational transparency (Albu et al., 2014), individual’s sensemaking of risk (Wall, 2014), inter-organizational cooperation styles (Boin et al., 2014), and reducing ambiguity in organizations (Burke et al., 2006). Generally, researchers agree that during crisis, organizations have to balance between the effort of collecting a complete and accurate information set and the choice of comprehending the gathered information in a timely manner.

A concept that is important for understanding the notion of sensemaking is *ambiguity*. Ambiguity is a distinct characteristic of all crises. A critical task for people involved in sensemaking during crisis is to reduce such ambiguity by better comprehending the crisis (Stieglitz, Mirbabaie, & Milde, 2018). Carroll (2015) proposes three categories of ambiguity during crisis: fundamental ambiguity, causal ambiguity, and role ambiguity. Fundamental ambiguity refers to the situation when no one is capable of putting a label or category on the crisis. Subjects experience causal ambiguity when they know what is going on but struggling to determine the causal attribution of the crisis. Role ambiguity describes the individuals who are accountable for specific tasks during the crisis. The outcome of sensemaking should be a shared and accurate understanding of ambiguity across these categories during a crisis.

Another important concept for sensemaking is “relationship.” During crisis, organizational leaders have to manage both the internal relationships within organizations and the external relationships with stakeholders and the public. Crises can lead to a high degree of uncertainty and anxiety. Negative feelings and emotions, such as fear and anger, can cause irrational decisions with unintended consequences (Elfenbein, 2007). Environmental changes can also lead to cognitive disorders, confusion, anxiety and nervousness (Mckinley & Scherer, 2000). The distrust of organizational leaders’ competence can also affect an individual’s understanding of crises (Yin & Jing, 2014). In addition to the internal relationship, external relationships with the public and stakeholders are also very important. Research has shown that following a crisis, a transparent communication strategy can enhance the credibility and trustworthiness of a company in crisis (Albu et al., 2014).

Swift trust

Compared to co-located teams or traditional face-to-face teams, ICT enabled virtual teams experience more challenging issues when working together. In particular, building trust among members is one of the most significant challenges for virtual teams. For geographic, temporal, and physically dispersed teams, trust is essential for team members to work together toward their goals (Jarvenpaa, Knoll, & Leidner, 1998). Due to the loss of body language and non-verbal cues, virtual teams’ trust development is difficult when most of the collaboration and coordination rely on ICT.

Prior studies have found that effective virtual teams formed “swift trust” when teams are temporal and were working a time-constraint (Meyerson et al., 1996). Swift trust was found to be a special kind of trust unique to virtual teams when members with little to no co-working experience worked together temporally (Meyerson et al., 1996; Suzanne & Weisband, 1997). Distinct from social-interaction based trust, swift trust is not cognitive or affective and occurs in the early stage of team formation (Suzanne et al., 1997).

Swift trust is especially useful for understanding effective team operations during crisis (Curnin, Owen, Paton,

Trist, & Parsons, 2015). Prior studies have revealed that the establishment of swift trust in virtual teams cannot only affect how teams communicate and interact with each other, but also can affect how well the team accomplishes its goals (Henttonen & Blomqvist, 2005; Kanawattanachai & Yoo, 2002). In addition, swift trust is important for virtual team members to engage in sustainable cooperation under ambiguous situations (Hyllengren, Larsson, Fors, Sjöberg, Eid, & Olsen, 2011; White, Plotnick, Addams-Moring, Turoff, & Hiltz, 2008). Researchers have found that teams in crisis are more inclined to establish swift trust that accelerates the team process and task accomplishments.

RESEARCH MODEL

In the context of the use of virtual teams during crisis, Figure 1 presents our research model depicting the hypothesized relationships among individual's swift trust, sensemaking and team performance. In particular, we adopted three sub-dimensions of sensemaking proposed by Basu and Palazzo (Basu & Palazzo, 2008), i.e. cognitive development, linguistic development, and conative development.

With regard to operationalization of sensemaking, the study conducted by Basu and Palazzo (Basu et al., 2008) offers a viable approach. Basu and Palazzo propose three dimensions of sensemaking, i.e. *cognitive*, *linguistic* and *conative* (Basu et al., 2008). According to them, *cognitive* refers to thinking about the organization's relationships with its stakeholders and possible impact on key relationships; *linguistic* involves justifying, communicating and sharing the rationale of particular crisis response actions; and *conative* involves the actual behavioral posture the organization adopts and the commitment and consistency it shows with the activities conducted. Contrary to other studies of crises that predominantly focus on the role of the external environment in an institutions' reaction to crisis, Basu and Palazzo assert that attention to the institutions' internal cognitive and linguistic processes is also important. They argue that these are key processes and can affect how institutions view their relationships with stakeholders during crisis and how the institutions may engage during crisis response. Adapting Basu and Palazzo's (Basu et al., 2008) model to the team level, we propose studying virtual teams' reaction during crisis by going beyond a content analysis driven-approach. Thus, based on prior understanding of sensemaking, we assert that a particular **cognitive process (i.e., the team's interpersonal process)**, **two linguistic processes (i.e. team knowledge sharing, team mutual awareness)**, and **two conative processes (i.e. process conflict, shared temporal cognition)** mediate the relationship between swift trust development and virtual team performance (refer Figure 1).

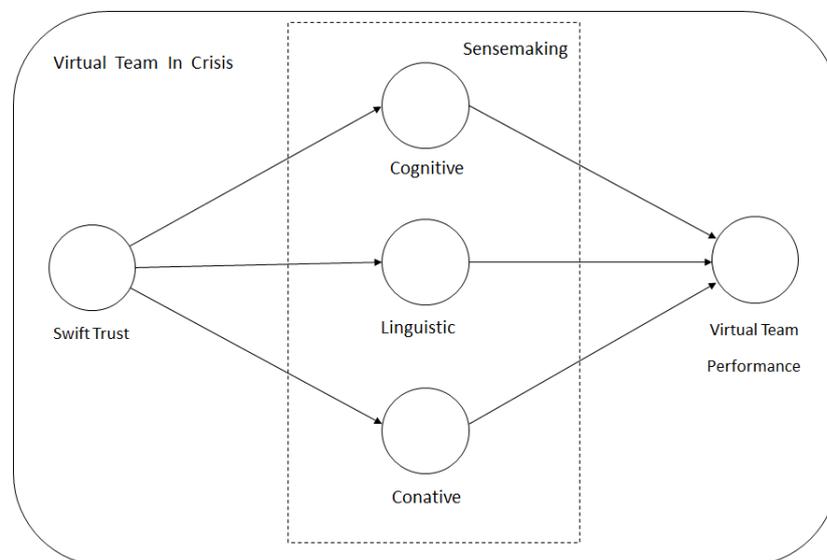


Figure 1. Influence of Swift Trust on Virtual Team Performance through Sensemaking

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Crisis can lead to severe breakdowns of organizational norms that result in ambiguity and negative feelings among stakeholders, public, as well as internal employees (King, 2002). One challenge of virtual teams in crisis is to develop shared understanding, i.e. cognitive development, of the consequences of crisis on organization's internal and external relationships (Basu et al., 2008). Establishing swift trust enhances knowledge sharing and increases

frequency of interactions, which lead to greater level of cognitive development in virtual teams. In addition, in the virtual team context where effective leadership can be significantly different from collocated teams, swift trust contributes to cognitive sharing among team members (Al-Ani, Horspool, & Bligh, 2011). Therefore, as illustrated in Figure 1, **swift trust promotes the formation of cognitive structure**, which allows work in virtual teams to be coordinated and synchronized (Curmin et al., 2015).

Swift trust is critical for promoting free information flow and knowledge exchange in virtual teams. Prior research has shown that in virtual teams' context, members are more likely to build situational attributions against perceived negative behaviors of other members than collocated teams (Cramton, Orvis, & Wilson, 2007). One study found that during crisis, virtual teams' communication frequency dropped significantly resulting from the seriousness of the threat and time urgency (Kamphuis, Gaillard, & Vogelaar, 2011). Though during crisis, virtual teams may reduce level of social interaction and learning about one another's preferences and behaviors, swift trust promotes free interaction among team members in a short period of time (Radcliffe & Schniederjans, 2003). Further, based on free conversation, our research model incorporates the notion that **trust makes the team members more willing to interact and communicate both formally and informally** (Fischbacher et al., 2014).

Swift trust ensures commitment and consistency as virtual teams conduct activities in crisis, i.e. conative, dimension of sensemaking (Basu et al., 2008). Virtual team enter the conative stage when they start action following decision-making (Hazel & Kang, 2018). Researchers have shown a positive correlation between organization strategy consistency and organization performance (e.g., Bourgeois, 1980). Swift trust plays an important role by speeding up the decision-making process, eliminating obstacles in the process of knowledge sharing, promoting a win-win cooperation within the team, enhancing communication and cooperation among team members, and achieving consistency in problem solving strategies (Higgins et al., 2013).

Sense making can help resolve ambiguity, facilitate information sharing and mitigate negative feelings such as stress and fear during crisis. We expect that this generalized relationship will also hold true in the virtual team context. In complex situations, such as crises, teams cannot rely on intuitive decisions, which can be very risky without review and evaluation (Higgins et al., 2013). A good cognitive development of the crisis can enhance virtual teams' understanding of the full complexity of the crisis, forming a more thorough and correct picture (Waller et al., 2014).

Communication and transparency are two most discussed topics in crisis management. To achieve a better performance, effective and timely communication is critical (Cheng & Macaulay, 2014). With linguistic development, i.e. clear communication and appropriate information disclosure, virtual-teams are able to promote shared understanding the crisis and the rationale for the team's actions during crisis. Such shared understanding helps enhance team effectiveness and adaptability in crisis (Nemiro, Beyerlein, Bradley, & Beyerlein, 2008). Communication is also critical to distributed-team success in that the condition through which divergent members' skills and knowledge, and cognitive style can be integrated and leveraged to achieve synergies (Kroenke, 2011). Through efficient communication, virtual team members are able to build strong ties which was suggest to influence members' comfortableness of working together (Benetytė & Jatuliavičienė, 2014). Effective communication can facilitate the development of a conversational space where all perspectives are heard and discussed, all possibilities are explored (Benetytė et al., 2014; Harden et al., 2015; Harush, Glikson, Nouri, & Shokef, 2013).

CONCLUSION

The main objective of this paper is to propose a research model based on prior literature that allows us to examine the relationships between virtual team swift trust, sensemaking, and team performance in the context of organizational crisis. Specifically, we assert that the establishment of swift trust has a positive influence on the three sub-dimensions of sensemaking - cognitive, linguistic, and conative. Overall, our research contributes to both crisis and IS literature by offering a research model depicting the relationships among swift trust, sensemaking, and team performance. We are currently in the process of empirically testing the proposed research model.

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