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Ethical Credo for Virtual Teams: A Case Study of a Long-Term Virtual Team

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Abstract: Virtual teams have become indispensable to organizations. This research study examines ethical and behavioral communicative practices that promote flourishing long-term virtual teams. From a communication ethics perspective, this study uses a thematic analysis of responses from a qualitative, in-depth written interview. The findings point to values that support ethical communication within a long-term virtual team. The results are operationalized and presented as a credo of ethical practices to be used by organizations as a tool for discussion among virtual team members. The Credo for Ethical Communication in Virtual Teams includes principles of care, commitment, respect, adaptability, authenticity, valuing the other, and trust.

Keywords: communication ethics; ethical credo; virtual teams; small group communication; authentic leadership and followership

In a world of globalized technology, virtual teams[1] are integral to organizations and have made the ability to work with people in different geographic locations an everyday reality. Barrero, Bloom, and Davis (2023) report that 40.9% of the global workforce is either completely online (12.7%) or partially working from home (28.2%). Upwork (Ozimek 2021) predicts that there will be 40.7 million fully remote professionals in the United States by 2025. This prediction corresponds to the data on employees' desire to work remotely. A 2023 State of Remote Work Report indicates that 98% of workers desire to work remotely in some capacity (Griffis 2023). In response to this report, *Forbes* contributor Kathy Haan (2023) explains, "This overwhelming figure reflects the workforce's growing affinity towards the flexibility, autonomy and work-life balance that remote work offers" (Haan 2023, para. 6). Scholarly work by Meluso et al. (2022) asserts that two-thirds

[1] We acknowledge that there are multiple definitions for "teams" and "small groups" across different disciplines. For this article, we use them interchangeably.

of organizations consider the change to remote work permanent. The pivot to virtual work creates significant changes within organizations that include revisions to strategic plans, hiring, onboarding practices, performance reviews, and leadership structure (Ozimek 2021). With these changes, virtual teams are a mainstay of organizations. Thus, there is an ongoing need to understand them.

Virtual teams are defined by El Idrissi and Fourka (2025) as "groups of people who work interdependently towards a common goal across geographical, temporal, and organizational boundaries, using technology to communicate and collaborate" (El Idrissi and Fourka, 2025, 1). Similarly, Yael Zolfi offers a simpler definition in A Manager's Guide to Virtual Teams: "A virtual team—whether across the street or across the world—is a team whose members simultaneously work together to a common purpose, while physically apart" (Zolfi, 2011, 7). The appeal of virtual teams is twofold: first, the ability to manage one's personal and professional life becomes easier, and second, there is greater opportunity to interact with colleagues from around the world (Ferrazzi 2014, para. 2). However, there are drawbacks to virtual teams. In comparison to face-to-face teams, virtual teams are more likely to experience decreased collaboration (Jing et al. 2021), less trust (Ackerman 2000), less cohesion (DeRosa et al. 2004), less satisfaction (Cicei 2012), less creativity (Brucks and Levav 2022), and decreased commitment (Blaskovich 2008). In a review of empirical studies of remote work, Olson and Olson (2006) indicate that, although there is improvement in understanding virtual teams, issues such as these remain a challenge and must be addressed.

This study aims to help improve the performance of long-term virtual teams by providing recommendations that address the challenges members often encounter. In this paper, we show the need for research on virtual teams by drawing on scholarship from multiple disciplines. We explain our methodology, which takes a "bottom-up approach" (Hill and Rapp 2014, 621) through a consensus driven thematic analysis. The results are presented as a Credo for Ethical Communication in Virtual Teams (hereafter "Credo") which provides useful guidelines for ethical communication among members of virtual teams that can be easily shared by practitioners. We then discuss the values imbued in the Credo to provide insights from multidisciplinary perspectives. We conclude with implications, applications, and benefits of this study.

Literature Review

Communication Ethics

Virtual teams can be complicated and produce a high amount of uncertainty. For this reason, we draw on communication ethics as a resource to inform our understanding of them. Scholars argue that communication ethics is a "pragmatic necessity" (Fritz et al. 2023, 1) and a "vital resource in an ever-changing world" (Ballard et al. 2016, 155). Communication ethics has been defined in various ways. This project relies on the definition of communication ethics by Fritz, Bell McManus, and Kearney (2023) as "the study of philosophy of communication

brought into engaged communicative application" (32). The philosophy (why) and the applied (how) work together to protect and promote various goods in a diverse world. Communication ethics is central to the communication discipline (Ballard et al. 2016) and has been applied to many facets of communication, such as organizational (Seeger 2004), interpersonal (Fritz 2016a), small group (Gastil and Sprain 2011), intercultural (Evanoff 2020), health (Hyde 2016), and media (Christians 2019). Moreover, communication ethics is seen as an essential component within our everyday interactions with others. As Jovanovic and co-authors (2021) state, "communication ethics requires asking questions, thinking about the possibilities, and reflecting on the consequences" (1). A communication ethics perspective frames this research as we inquire about virtual teams and study the ethical and behavioral communicative practices that support them.

Organizations draw upon codes of conduct as a guideline for ethical decision making. For example, the Public Relations Society of America, the American Advertising Federation, the American Medical Association, and the National Communication Association all have standards for professional behavior. This research uses the term "credo" as distinct from a code of conduct, exemplifying core values and principles not as a mandate but as a worthy pursuit (Engleberg 2004). These guidelines act as ethics in praxis or theory informing action (Meloncon et al. 2020) to help people understand the relevance and importance of ethics in everyday communicative interactions (Strawser 2019). With a rise in remote work, credos that address the unique setting of virtual teams can be a valuable resource for guiding behavior and shaping culture.

Ethics and Virtual Teams

The study of ethics in virtual workplaces is limited. Gupta and Pathak (2022) describe it as "scarcely researched" (para. 1). However, the need for this research is evident, with journal special editions focusing on ethics in virtual organizational contexts such as education (the *Journal of Literacy & Technology* in 2020) and training and human resources (the *European Journal of Training and Development* in 2022). In a 30-year review of the *Journal of Business Ethics*, Calabretta et al. (2011) point out three primary topics within business ethics publications: ethical decision making, corporate social responsibility, and the theoretical discussion of business ethics as a moral foundation. Although all three are important to the field of business ethics, Calabretta and co-authors argue for future studies to include more research that affects practitioners. They found that research relating to managerial practices "remains mostly unexplored" (521). Additionally, Cabana and Kapstein (2018) identify the importance of studying ethical organizational culture at a sub-organizational or team level. Their research indicates that, even within the same organization, teams can have differing ethical cultures that influence "the frequency of unethical behavior and employee responses to unethical behavior" (761). As a result, the individual's behaviors within those teams shape the team's ethical culture. Evidence of this is seen in the literature on leadership (Martin et al. 2022; White and Lean 2008) and group members (Barnett and Karon 1987; Deng et al. 2021; Martinez et al. 2021; Swenson-Lepper 2005) wherein individual behaviors

influence the team's decisions and ethical culture. Ramachandran et al. (2022) summarize their research:

> [We found] both personal and collective virtues are significant for organisations to emerge as good citizens. Good corporate citizenship indicates the roles of individuals in the organisation to look beyond rules and compliance, to demonstrate ethical individualism which then forms an ethical culture. (76)

This article answers the call to be practitioner focused and highlights the importance of addressing team versus organizational culture. It does so by providing results in a credo that gives ethical principles and corresponding behaviors, allowing team members to recognize the personal and collective nature of ethical team membership.

Overall, this study is designed to deepen our understanding of the ethics of virtual team communication and provide a credo that can help organizations optimize the performance of long-term virtual teams. The following research questions guided our study:

RQ1: How does a long-term virtual team describe the ethical values that support their team's efficacy?

RQ2: What behaviors do team members suggest to operationalize ethical values?

Methods

Virtual Team Composition

Nine members of a virtual team participated in this study. Although they share a common interest in communication ethics, they differ in academic ranks and professional perspectives, including academic and practitioner foci as well as divergent methodological commitments. Of the eight women and one man, seven self-identify as Caucasian, and two identify as members of racially or other historically marginalized groups. All are members of the National Communication Association (NCA) and the Communication Ethics Division of that association. At the time of the study, the group had worked together for over 11 years and produced 14 conference presentations, a textbook (Jovanovic et al. 2021), and two scholarly articles (Ballard et al. 2014; Swenson-Lepper et al. 2015). Because the members of this group teach and research communication ethics, they are apt to engage in communication practices that support ethical communication and small group communication. Although this makes the group unique, it also means that the group provides valuable insights about how to succeed in a diverse, ethical, and effective long-term group. The range of these collective experiences enriches the quality of the analysis and increases transparency in the research process.

Qualitative Research Approaches

This project used three qualitative approaches that work together to safeguard the integrity of the research. They include an overarching self-study method (S-STTEP), collaborative qualitative data analysis (CQA) for coding agreement and reliability, and thematic analysis methodology. Since participants were both the researchers and subjects, it was important to have strong controls. For guidance, we turned to Pinnegar and Hamilton's (2009) work on self-study as a genre of qualitative research. In the wake of the crisis of representation—the struggle to adequately capture lived experience in qualitative research (Denzin and Lincoln 2005)—Pinnegar and Hamilton explore the notion of self-study of teaching and teacher education practices, or S-STTEP:

> Research using this methodology allows researchers to document not only what they learn about teaching and teacher education from the study of them, but also the tacit and personal practical knowledge they possess that contributes to our knowledge and understanding of teaching. (3)

Key to a self-study methodology is to "rigorously [take] into account the researchers' position as both the researcher and researched and as having a central role in the practice being studied" (v). Although S-STTEP is primarily used in teaching, it shares common aspects of other qualitative approaches, such as the recognition of the self in the researcher/researched dynamic and a commitment to improvement. Pinnegar and Hamilton outline five elements of self-study: "it is self-initiated and focused; it is improvement-aimed; it is interactive; it includes multiple, mainly qualitative, methods; and it defines validity as a process of trustworthiness" (82). This project incorporates the elements of a self-study. The research was initiated within the team and focused on improving virtual teams. Throughout the process, we used consensus-building discussions; furthermore, in coding and analysis, we used qualitative methods of a written interview, observations, and discussions. To ensure trustworthiness and the minimization of individual bias (Richards and Hemphill 2018), we followed collaborative qualitative data analysis (CQA) in the coding process.

Richards and Hemphill (2018) provide six criteria of CQA to ensure coding agreement and reliability. "These steps include (a) preliminary organization and planning, (b) open and axial coding, (c) the development of a preliminary codebook, (d) pilot testing the codebook, (e) the final coding process, and (f) review of the codebook and finalizing the themes" (226). The CQA method was selected because of its rigorous triangulation standards and fit within a self-study approach. The multiplicity of perspectives in the group worked to increase the trustworthiness and transparency of this qualitative research by taking into account stories generated by a wide range of experiences. The next section explains the procedures of CQA and the thematic analysis.

Procedure

In application of the preliminary organization and planning stage of CQA, two of the team members created initial interview questions that were sent to the group for comment and final revisions. Examples of the interview questions are: "What is the story you tell about this group?", "What do you see as the overall goal of the group?", and "What keeps you in this group?"[2] Team members sent their written responses to one group member for collating. Open coding took place through remote meetings to identify patterns in the data and note aberrations and outliners. The responses of the group were coded, which resulted in 21 open codes that were narrowed to 15 axial codes and used for the preliminary codebook. Later, the final codebook was tested for coding conventions and applied to all data.

Subsequent to the application of CQA to code the data, Braun and Clarke's (2006) thematic analysis was used to identify common themes. Their approach overlaps CQA and extends to the analysis of themes, which includes (1) becoming familiar with the entirety of the data, (2) generating key-word coding categories, (3) compiling resulting themes, (4) reviewing the themes, (5) defining and naming the themes, and (6) producing a report with selected exemplars of the themes. After data coding, the results were compiled, and initial themes were reviewed by individual members to ensure accuracy and intent of their own quotes. After considering members' quotes that exemplified the themes, the group revised the themes until all members were in agreement. During the refinement process, consideration was given to latent themes and results pertinent to the research questions (84). Following several iterations of analyses and reaching consensus, four preliminary themes stood out: support, commitment, respect, and fairness. Through discussion, it became clear that too much nuance was lost by narrowing the themes, and a decision was made to broaden the themes to seven. The group selected interview quotes to exemplify the themes and operationalize them in the behaviors listed in the credo.

Results

The research results are seven distinct themes that illuminate promising team member behaviors for virtual long-term small groups. For this team, distinguishing ethical communication themes include (1) care for the Other, (2) commitment, (3) respect, (4) adaptability, (5) authenticity, (6) valuing the Other, and (7) trust. Each theme is associated with behaviors that operationalize its meaning. These themes, identified as "principles," and their supporting behaviors are presented in the Credo for Ethical Communication in Virtual Teams.

[2] A complete list of questions is available from the first author.

Credo for Ethical Communication in Virtual Teams

Principle 1: Team members demonstrate CARE for one another.

- We actively pursue getting to know each other, professionally as well as personally.
- We show concern about the whole person and act on requests for help.
- We celebrate individual members' successes.
- We help when a tragedy occurs in a member's life.
- We are willing to go above and beyond what is expected to show support to an individual member.

Principle 2: Team members demonstrate a COMMITMENT to group and individual goals of the team members.

- We work toward an equitable workload as a demonstration of the value each person brings to tasks and projects.
- We all share responsibility through the completion of a project.
- We meet deadlines, keep agreements, and submit our best work.
- We help each other understand our contributions and roles.
- We take ownership of shared goals and respect if an individual chooses to leave the group to pursue other goals.

Principle 3: Team members RESPECT each other

- We utilize and appreciate others' strengths.
- We recognize each team member's ability to make decisions.
- We intentionally learn each other's goals, skill sets, and previous work.
- We honor and acknowledge differing perspectives.
- We are inclusive.

Principle 4: Team members are ADAPTABLE.

- We listen to alternative ways to accomplish a task and are open to change when the current way is not working.
- We take leadership initiative, regardless of role or contribution, in order to advance shared goals.
- We follow when another group member leads.
- We are open to feedback when our idea is not working and do not force our way on others.

Principle 5: Team members are AUTHENTIC with each other.

- We state what we honestly think about an issue in a respectful and caring manner.
- We strive for high task outcomes by expressing differences.
- We indicate when we are struggling with a task.
- We provide feedback for individual growth and to accomplish shared goals.
- We communicate our opinions in conflict with care and respect.

Principle 6: Virtual team members VALUE each person.

- We look for qualities to like about one another.
- We never take advantage of another member's generosity.
- We find time to laugh together.
- We find ways to enjoy our time together.
- We find commonalities with each other.

Principle 7: Virtual team members TRUST each other.

- We act with integrity by doing what we say we are going to do.
- We believe in team members' good intentions when interpreting behaviors.
- We do not usurp someone else's task.
- We communicate without manipulation and malice.
- We work interdependently to accomplish team goals.

Discussion

In the following sections, we discuss each theme with relevant communication ethics, business ethics, and social science scholarly literature to contextualize the findings. By using this multidisciplinary approach, we broaden the discussion of ethical communication in virtual teams.

Theme 1—Care for the Other: Team members demonstrate care for one another.

The theme "Care for the Other" refers to the perception that team members—often working at a distance—genuinely care for one another. This sense of care can help individuals feel less isolated and less vulnerable. Note that the theme is care *for*, not *about*, denoting action. By taking this action, members minimize the dehumanization (Christoff 2014) that can occur within virtual teams. The importance of this theme is reflected in the virtual team members' interviews. One member points out, "Our care for the whole person is what makes this group work, what creates trust and openness, what keeps us going, and what makes it comfortable for us to background our egos and put the group first" (Group Member [GM] 7). Another member indicates, "The care-giving feature of this group is clear and dominant" (GM3). The team describes this theme as foundational to many of the other themes and as what contributes to the team's cohesiveness.

Carol Gilligan's (1982) "ethic of care" is reflective of this ideal. An ethic of care focuses on relational development and mutual understanding. Gilligan contrasts this to Kohlberg's (1976) "ethic of justice," which focuses on impartiality and equity. Applied to online working conditions, Lu (2015) discovered that "virtual team members tend to be more task-oriented and exchange less social-emotional information, which further depletes social rapport . . . Understandably, they consequently report less satisfaction with the group process than do members

of face-to-face teams" (56). In contrast to social distance, thriving interpersonal relationships in small groups are associated with stronger creativity, motivation, morale, decisions (Walther and Burgoon 1992), and strategic adaptability (Carmeli et al. 2016). Lawrence and Maitlis (2012) reflect on how an ethic of care can promote a sense of wholeness within groups through the use of narrative. They argue that "together, these [caring] practices foster an ontology of possibility—a belief system that emphasizes the socially constructed nature of both past and present and, thus, facilitates action and an appreciation of its limits" (641). Theme 1 (Care for the Other) meets a need within virtual teams that helps to compensate for lack of person-to-person contact.

When considering this theme in the context of small group communication, being cared for by other group members contributes to a team's cohesiveness. Cohesion is commonly defined as "a dynamic process that is reflected in the tendency for a group to stick together" (Cragan et al. 2009, 17) and is often categorized as "social" or "task" cohesion (Chang and Bordia 2001). Further narrowing the concept of how team members perceive cohesion, Bollen and Hoyle (1990) indicate two aspects of social cohesion: the "sense of belonging" and "feelings of morale" (485). The "sense of belonging" is clearly articulated by one group member in this study who reflects, "we have supported each other through tough and good times. We've celebrated people's tenures and promotions, births of babies, and worried about them when they faced personal struggles. We make sure that we catch up with each other when we talk on the phone and when we see each other at [our national conference]" (GM2). This blending of personal and professional communication reflects the findings of Gatti (2021), who investigated the construction of team ethics by examining its online discourse. Gatti's study reveals that "the blurring of private and professional life not only allows for the enactment of ethic-driven discourse strategies that result in enhanced cooperation and improved team performance, but also for high levels of interconnectivity and improved social interaction" (para. 1). Keyton (1999) adds that teams experience cohesiveness as a result of relationships in the group or task components or both. Building a team's cohesion has been found to influence a group's longevity (Bormann, 1990; Keyton, 1999), feelings of satisfaction (Frey and Barge 1997), commitment to the group (Chang and Bordia 2001), and a group's success (Beal et al. 2003). Furthermore, DeRue et al. (2015) found that perceptions of warmth in the group, defined as "feelings of benevolence, liking, trustworthiness" (1193), led to more people taking on informal and formal leadership roles. Care for the Other is thus a gesture of kindness and a pathway to effective, strong group cohesion in both the task and social dimensions.

Theme 2—Commitment: Team members demonstrate commitment to the group and to the group's goals.

Commitment highlights the interdependent nature of a virtual team. The point of being in a group is to work collaboratively toward a goal(s) whose results exceed what an individual could do alone. Effective group members work as an interdependent system, relying on each member to fulfill their own

responsibilities to reach the goal. Small group communication research regarding goals is clear: goals must be effectively communicated to everyone in the group (Adler and Elmhorst 2005).

Janie Harden Fritz's (2016b) work on professional civility and organizational ethics supports the importance of group goals. Her conceptual framework delineates how each sphere of organizational activity depends on communicative action that promotes the productivity and cohesion of workplaces. She describes such communicative acts as regularly articulating a commitment to the group's goals as "committed conversations" that protect organizational citizenship (140). This keeps group members accountable to themselves and one another through the creation and maintenance of professional identities.

This theme highlights how effective and ethical groups not only need goals to be clearly defined, but also require the commitment of each member to achieve shared goals. One member explains, "If we commit to doing something, we do our best to make that happen . . . we are committed to the work, and we have shown our commitment by following through on our promises" (GM5). Another member indicates, "[Our] group members continue to work together due to our commitment to the field of communication ethics, shared interest in researching communication ethics pedagogy, and the camaraderie we share" (GM4). Consistent with the findings of Stewart et al. (2021), commitment, trust, and team accountability surfaced in this group's development. This group shares the researchers' suggestion that "perhaps the strongest proof of the value of team accountability lies in members being keener to continue to collaborate after the end of the project" (13). Communicating commitment to the group and working to achieve shared goals contribute to an effective and ethical team, a critical necessity when the team is virtual.

Hertel, Konradt, and Orlikowski (2004) point out a drawback in virtual teams: "it is often more difficult to implement and maintain common goals when persons are spatially and temporally distributed. Thus, the perceived commitment to team goals might be reduced in virtual teams" (3). Lenz and Machado (2008) indicate that setting, agreeing upon, and achieving goals is important in both face-to-face and virtual teams; however, doing so might be even more important in virtual teams, where trust is more difficult to establish and commitment is more challenging to maintain over time due to time and space distancing. As one member put it, "We are committed to the group; how many other groups are you a part of where members genuinely feel bad if they haven't contributed?!" (GM7).

It is important to note that not only groups have shared goals; members have individual goals as well. The more alignment between the individual and group goals, the better the performance (Bieleke et al. 2017). This alignment is articulated when one group member states, "There is an 'implied' commitment to one another that if someone asks for involvement, we respond . . . Everyone is responsible, another important group trait" (GM3). Commitment to help others with individual goals is noted from another team member:

> We also recognize that people are at different points in their careers . . . if it really matters for someone's professional advancement, we would help that

> person along in terms of author order and other things (recommendation letters, letters of support, etc.). (GM2)

In this group, there is close alignment between group and individual goals and a strong commitment by members in pursuing shared goals. Because the social dimension of a virtual team can be more difficult than the task dimension (Crites et al. 2021), it is important for members to offer a consistent articulation of their commitment to upholding the group goals and each other's individual goals.

Theme 3—Respect: Team members respect each other.

The theme of respect is also essential in team communication and was evident in members' commitment to honor each other's human dignity. One team member describes, "I think we all have a high level of respect for everyone in the group. We are willing to go above and beyond for the other members in the group" (GM6).

A founder of the field of communication ethics and author of the original textbook on human communication ethics, Richard L. Johannesen (2002) views respect as integral to human communication, especially in interpersonal, small group, and public communication. Johannesen elaborates on Karl Wallace's (1955) guidelines for ethical communication in a representative democracy and advances the value of mutual respect, or the "belief in the dignity and worth of the individual" (24). Mutual respect is apparent in how the team valued members' contributions regardless of the stage of their academic careers and scholarly interests. One team member articulated an observation that the others agreed with: "We are all different and distinct, bringing our own set of experiences and expertise. And we respect those differences. Our team works because we have different ways of looking at the same thing, and we respect the levels of experience, research commitments, and perspectives we bring" (GM7). This approach not only imbues respect; it is also a catalyst where care for the Other emerges organically (Theme 1).

Current scholarship differentiates between two types of respect (Grover 2014). Recognition respect is grounded in others' humanity and rights, whereas appraisal respect is afforded to others in response to their individual characteristics (34). In the team, both types of respect were evident. Recognition respect occurred throughout the process of working together by team members consistently communicating with one another about shared projects. Appraisal respect was apparent when team members appreciated each other's professional strengths and intentionally learned about others' goals, skill sets, and previous work.

Johannesen (2002) highlights the importance of cultivating virtues like respect in his discussion of White and Wallace's model of organizational integrity. White and Wallace outline habits, ethical commitments, and practices to develop these virtues. The habit of interacting responsibly demonstrates respect for others' views and endeavors to build trust in organizational groups. By practicing the virtues of communication, the team grew in their respect for the human dignity of

the other. For example, a member acknowledges the positive role of respect: "We respect and value multiple perspectives because our goal is to have the best outcome possible" (GM1).

Examining the relationship between respect and learning, Edmondson (2002) claims that respect is vital in a team's communication for interpersonal risk-taking and psychological safety. Psychological safety, members' perception that the team is a secure environment to take interpersonal risks, is essential for learning to occur naturally in a team. It allows team members to acknowledge mistakes, request feedback, and work together to find solutions. Psychological safety is a catalyst for teams to engage in conflict that results in positive outcomes such as increased innovation (Deng et al. 2021). Respect, psychological safety, and learning were evident in the team: "I was able to find a home in a division [of a professional organization] that welcomed new scholars into research opportunities. I still feel like a student LEARNING from everyone in the group" (GM6). This statement reveals learning and psychological safety because members on the team respect each other.

The social science research regarding respect in teams is consistent with our findings. Virtual teams encounter demanding situations of technological constraints and needs (Robey et al. 2000), a lack of connection (Rice-Bailey 2014), and isolation (Larbi and Springfield 2004). Researchers of effectual teams discovered the importance of respect and psychological safety (Edmondson 2002), self-discipline (Larbi and Springfield 2004), and communication practices (Robey et al. 2000) to address these challenges. This study's research team found that when they honored the human dignity of each member and valued members' perspectives and expertise, their respect for each other deepened, and they more effectively achieved their goals.

Theme 4—Adaptability: Team members are adaptable and share leadership.

Virtual teams can be described as controlled chaos with multiple time zones, varied skill sets, and different languages, cultures, and physical contexts. Theme 4, "Adaptability," then, is essential. Priest et al. (2002) define adaptability as "the utilization of knowledge, skills, and attitudes that enable members to recognize deviations from expected action and then readjust actions" (562). The compelling aspect of virtual teams is that they are not constrained by a physical location or time zone. Horwitz, Bravington, and Silvis (2006) state, "A virtual team is an easily adaptable entity into which processes and people with new skills can be deployed as required" (473–74). One group member described examples of this type of adaptation:

> When a fire destroyed a team member's home, when another team member's parent died, and when still another team member's mother faced emergency surgery, the others provided words of encouragement through personal emails and group chats. They gave grace to one another, paused deadlines, and readjusted work duties to allow those who needed it to attend to personal affairs without being shamed. (GM1)

In these instances, the group addressed the wellbeing of the individuals and maintained the group process.

Social science literature reveals shared leadership as a key feature of adaptability. Shared leadership, defined by Wang, Waldman, and Zhang (2013), is "an emergent team property of mutual influence and shared responsibility among team members, whereby they lead each other toward goal achievement" (181). The researched team often demonstrates the properties of shared leadership. One member explains: "Usually in groups this is a dominant conversation: who leads? Who gets first author? Who is dominant? . . . That being said, in this group leadership tends to coalesce around ideas" (GM7).

Shared leadership is demonstrated as well when team members shift roles. This supports DeRue's (2011) Adaptive Leadership Theory, which posits that the "leading-following process is fluid such that actors can be leading and/or following at different points in time" (131). One of the members recalls: "In terms of leadership, the majority of members have taken leadership roles at different times depending on the project and our areas of expertise" (GM4).

Shared leadership in teams is enhanced by leader humility. Chiu, Owens, and Tesluk (2016) define humility as "a willingness to see oneself accurately, acknowledgement of the strengths and contributions of others, and openness to new ideas and feedback" (1708). Based on a meta-analysis of shared leadership studies, Wang, Waldman and Zhang (2013) believe that

> by sharing leadership roles in a team, members work toward a common goal and lead each other's behaviors. These activities may, in turn, generate trust toward each other and enhance cooperation and cohesion . . . In this way, team processes and the emergent states resulting from shared leadership may subsequently result in higher levels of team performance. (191)

Research specific to virtual teams supports this assertion. Hoegl and Muethel (2016) indicate that "team leaders tend to underestimate the team members' capacity to lead themselves . . . preventing the team members from unfolding their true potential. Paradoxically, it is the team leaders themselves hindering leadership effectiveness in virtual teams" (7). Adaptability is evident in the researched team's shared leadership and contributes to the productivity of virtual teams.

Theme 5—Authenticity

Business ethics scholars have called authenticity a "necessary starting point for ethics" (Freeman and Auster 2011, 99). Contemporary scholarship in group communication also supports the idea that authenticity, a type of social honesty, is important for the success of a team. Emmerich et al. (2019) note:

> Authentic self-expression means individuals act in accordance with their values, preferences, and needs and that they are open in their relationships (e.g., disclose personal information, including potential weaknesses, and

> negative traits). Notably, self knowledge is proposed to be a prerequisite for authentic self expression. (178–79)

Further, when people perceive their coworkers as authentic, it "positively affects [the] employees' own well-being [and] the well-being of their teammates" (192).

Authenticity is also associated with "authentic leadership," defined as leaders who "act in accordance with deep personal values and convictions, to build credibility and win the respect and trust of followers" (Avolio et al. 2004, 806). The research indicates that authentic leadership positively influences their followers. Authentic leadership has been tied to followers' lower propensity to engage in unethical behavior (Tang and Liu 2012), greater organizational commitment and worker performance (Leroy et al. 2012), and increased optimism and trust (Stander et al. 2015).

The counterpart to authentic leadership is authentic followership. Crawford et al. (2018) describe authentic followers as individuals who, "through their capacity for authenticity and positive organizational engagement, are self-managing and follow leaders with whom they share values" (274). Authentic followership has been linked to increased organizational commitment (Leung et al. 2018), job satisfaction (Gardner and Avoli 2005), and creativity (Wang and Liang 2020; Jing et al. 2021).

The idea of being an authentic follower and leader seems even more pertinent in groups who participate in a "shared leadership" structure similar to the structure of this research team. As previously stated in Theme 4 on adaptability, shared leadership values mutual influence and responsibility for the organization's goals (Wang, Waldman and Jhang 2013). This type of structure is increasing in organizations (Avolio et al. 2009) and within virtual teams (Han et al. 2021). Studies in the social sciences and business research report the benefit of shared leadership in virtual teams over the traditional structure (Drescher and Garbers 2016; Hoch and Kozlowski 2014). Connecting shared leadership with authentic followership and leadership changes the traditional perspective of a leader's influence on followers to one of mutual influence.

The significance of authenticity, reflected in authentic leadership and followership as well as shared leadership, is evident within the research group. When asked to describe the communication of the group, one member wrote, "honesty, vulnerability, transparency" (GM7), and another indicated that the group was "open and honest" (GM6). Another aspect of authenticity is the freedom to be oneself with the group. Reflecting upon what it was like to be a member of the team, one member states, "This group allows me to be more of my authentic self" (GM1). Authenticity contributed to the success of a virtual team through members' openness and honesty with one another.

Theme 6—Valuing the Other: Team members like and value each other.

The defining characteristics of the theme "Valuing the Other" are acknowledgement and friendship. A key aspect of demonstrating that you like and value someone is by acknowledging their work, questions, expertise, lived

experience, and differing perspectives. As Hyde (2006) notes, "Acknowledgement is a conscious act of creation that marks an origin, a beginning, an opening in space-time where people can feel at home as they dwell, deliberate, and know together" (10, emphasis removed). Hyde asserts that negative communication is also a form of acknowledgement and that all acknowledgement does not have to be positive. But when there is no acknowledgement, negative or positive, it can lead to a social death. For Hyde, acknowledgment is tied to a call of conscience, which is the intrinsic motivation to do the right thing not only for oneself but (perhaps first) for the other, whether we "like" the other or not. This takes courage. Team members, as conscience-oriented thinkers (Arnett 1986), begin from a position of valuing the other first as a prerequisite for doing their work, even during times of escalating conflict. In other research, Walther and Bunz (2005) found that "people liked working with one another to a greater extent due to affectionate-oriented than due to task-oriented communication" (840). Thus, people who like each other tend to perform better, provided other task expectations are met, such as meeting deadlines and being forthright in communication. As one team member reports: "I consider the people in this group my friends, people I can ask questions of, seek advice from, and talk through serious issues" (GM3). Another person notes, "I also tell people that I feel blessed to be a part of it. I really like and respect the other members" (GM1).

While some researchers question the value of friendship in relation to the productivity of groups, a meta-analysis of 26 studies about friendship in groups and group performance by Chung et al. (2018) found a small but significant relationship between the variables. They found that friendship was more important in groups of three to nine members, which is reflective of this project's research team.

Friendship is also discussed in the context of professional ethics and civility by Fritz (2016b), who says, "Human beings are social creatures; to be fully human, we need friends, groups of others with whom we can gather, and meaningful activity that engages our talents and abilities in worthwhile pursuits" (26). For example, one team member summarized their experience of our group: "The story I tell of our group also includes how we enjoy working together" (GM4). An interesting feature of Fritz's concept of friendship as it relates to professional ethics is how she positions "public friendships" to guard against the tendency by some professionals to look at coworkers as family. She bases her critique on the complications that arise when viewing coworkers as family because we generally expect family to tolerate behaviors that coworkers and supervisors would not. According to Fritz, coworkers should be spared the expectation of tolerating uncivil behavior, and it is more productive to view coworkers as "public friends" as a way to keep the focus on the shared goals of the group as opposed to personal matters. A public friend, however, as the name implies, is still a friend. A friend is someone whose humanity we recognize and respect and who we see as more than simply a means to an end. The key, suggests Fritz, is to cultivate public friendships in a way that promotes the well-being of professionals without turning the workplace into our personal spheres.

Tse and Dasborough (2008) found that communication about both tasks and relationships is important for team member exchanges (TMX); they point out that high quality team member exchanges are related to higher levels of performance. Their study notes that "workplace friendship may play a vital role in determining the quality of TMX" (210). The connection between task and relationship is exemplified by these team members' quotes:

> I stay in this group because it's connected closely to my work, and it doesn't require too much of me beyond what I would want to do anyway. And, as I said previously, "I love these guys!" (GM3)

> What I like about this group is that the things I like about myself are mirrored and augmented in this group. . . . I love this group not because I feel unique in it but because they feel like kin. They feel like kindred spirits. (GM5)

As these quotes demonstrate, members value each other through public friendship and acknowledgment, which strengthened their relationships and the team.

Theme 7—Trust: Team members exhibit and reinforce actions that inspire trust.

The final theme of "Trust" can be viewed as a culmination of the previous six themes that act in combination to embolden team members' choices to work together. A health communication perspective defines trust as "a willingness to be vulnerable, a feeling of being well taken care of, and knowing promises will be kept" (Scott et al. 2009, 2). This perspective, applied to Themes 1 to 6, allows insights into their cumulative effects: "willingness to be vulnerable" can be seen within the themes of adaptability (Theme 4) and authenticity (Theme 5). A team member's "feeling well taken care of" can develop through themes of care (Theme 1) and the value of each person (Theme 6). Finally, a team member "knowing promises will be kept" is established through commitment (Theme 2) and respect (Theme 3). Therefore, all the themes combined allow trust to be built and nurtured within a virtual team.

Martin Buber's (1923/1970) I–Thou communication encapsulates the underpinnings of trust and the other themes as well. I–Thou communication, found through dialogue, seeks mutual understanding. This interaction is contrasted with I–It communication, where the person is perceived as an object or a means to an end. It is within Buber's I–Thou dialogue that the other team members are perceived as whole persons whose worth is found by simply being human—not by their usefulness. Buber's I–It interaction is helpful in transactional situations needed to complete a straightforward task such as buying a cup of coffee. However, it is not helpful in long-term, interdependent relationships such as virtual teams. If a team member feels taken for granted, mistreated, or replaceable, then mistrust grows among team members. For Buber, "in mistrust one presupposes that the other is likewise filled with mistrust, leading to a dangerous reserve and lack of candor" (Scott n.d. , §2.f, para. 1). I–Thou communication allows members to know they are valued (Theme 6), cared for (Theme 1), and respected (Theme 3), which makes it possible for them to be

committed (Theme 2), adaptable (Theme 4), and authentic (Theme 5) within the team—all of which initiate and sustain trust.

Genuine dialogue cannot be forced, but when team members focus on understanding issues related to the team and learning from each other, dialogic moments can occur. Arnett (2015) asserts that not all is lost with I–It communication, as the I–It holds the potential for I–Thou communication. In addition, technical dialogue, or the sharing of information (Fritz et al. 2023), keeps the relationships among group members steady. The research team experienced the benefits of technical dialogue as they valued the uniqueness of the other, continued to learn from each other, and remained open to dialogic moments that emerged between members. For example, one member wrote, "I can't imagine anyone in this group saying 'no' to a request for support. . . . We know about one another's troubles and joys (divorce, promotions, physical ailments, marriage, travel, caretaking, births, etc.), which adds depth to the group" (GM3).

Some scholars point to the role of trust as central to the effectiveness of face-to-face and virtual teams (Gera 2013; Morrison-Smith and Ruiz 2020). Lusher, Kremer, and Robins (2014) confirm cooperative and competitive structures of trust relations in teams and demonstrate that the most effective teams also avoid trust-inhibiting patterns. Focusing on how leaders cultivate trust in teams, Roussin (2008) found that leaders increase trust, psychological safety, and team performance when they cultivate dyadic relationships with team members outside of the small group context. By contrast, Aubert and Kelsey's (2003) study of local and virtual sub-teams reveals that trust levels did not influence team performance until the final stage of work together when sub-teams with higher levels of trust were more successful on their project. They also found that ability and integrity are necessary for trust on virtual teams. In this study, trust can be seen to contribute to the effectiveness of the virtual team. One team member summarizes the importance of trust in both the task and social dimensions:

> Trust is also reflected in the support that has been offered [in addition to the] academic tasks by notes on email, contributions of money (following a personal tragedy), and letters of support for promotion and tenure. I think all these actions communicate "I've got your back" not just for professional reasons, but also for personal ones. (GM4)

Trust is built over time through consistent behaviors (as articulated in Themes 1–6), which indicate to team members that they are holistically valued as human beings, rather than being just a means to an end.

The discussion of the themes (care, commitment, respect, adaptability, authenticity, valuing the other, and trust) reveals the value of a multidisciplinary approach to understanding virtual teams. The disciplines of communication ethics, business ethics, and the social sciences have different perspectives and provide clarity of the phenomenon we are investigating. As a result, this article offers academics and practitioners insights into virtual teams.

Conclusion

This qualitative study investigated the ethical and behavioral practices of a flourishing long-term virtual team. Our findings contribute to an understanding of the communicative behaviors that support the virtual team's communication. The principles include care, commitment, respect, adaptability, authenticity, valuing each person, and trust. The Credo delineates values and behaviors that have the potential to strengthen teams and increase performance.

Strengths and Limitations

The specific characteristics of the virtual team studied can be viewed as a strength and limitation. The fact that this team had been working together for over a decade allowed the team to resolve many problems associated with group work. The length of time influences this group's discussion, but that will differ for newly formed groups. Additionally, all its members are trained in communication and communication ethics, providing them with insights into how to work together effectively. This expertise, albeit a strength, also distinguishes this group from a typical team where there may be varying degrees of expertise in group processes or communication ethics. This team also differs from typical groups in that they are connected by membership to a professional organization, but employed by different organizations and choose to voluntarily remain in the group. However, this group brings material and social rewards to its members in terms of publications and belonging. By using their expertise to evaluate themselves, they are able to provide insights and guidance about virtual group work.

As with any self-study research, there is methodological strength in developing a rich analysis as well as a limitation in its possible bias. Although the findings of this article cannot be generalized to all small groups, the Credo can be used by virtual teams to discuss their own ethical principles and behaviors. Another factor is that this group initially met face-to-face for two hours at a national conference prior to becoming a virtual team and annually after becoming a virtual team. Research indicates that teams are more successful, especially in the beginning, if they meet face to face to get to know each other (Hinds and Bailey 2003). This article supports that assertion and recommends policies and procedures for groups to participate in this best practice for virtual teams.

Recommendations for Future Research

The qualitative "bottom-up" approach to this study allows for many possible extensions of this research. We recommend future studies investigate its generalizability to other virtual teams and face-to-face teams. Generalizability studies should include different types of virtual teams, such as autonomous vs. dependent groups, culturally heterogeneous vs. homogeneous groups, and groups of different sizes and demographic characteristics. Future studies could also consider the themes and statements from the Credo independently in either experimental or bona fide groups. Investigating the bona fide perspective,

examining real, situated groups, either face-to-face or virtual (Hirokawa 1996), is particularly meaningful for ethical communication in groups because members have the potential to influence others' careers and lives in substantial ways (Stephenson et al. 2016). For instance, an interesting line of research would be to investigate the first theme of this study, Care for the Other, as it relates to Christoff's (2014) notion of "dehumanization" within organizational contexts.

Application

Credos shape organizational culture (Bagyo et al. 2022) by encapsulating an organization's beliefs and core values (Engleberg 2004). With an increase of organizations conducting virtual work, credos need to address the uniqueness of a virtual context. The Credo for Ethical Communication in Virtual Teams can be used as a guide for teams. Members of existing virtual teams could evaluate their current team based on the principles reflected in the Credo, or it can be used in the formation of teams to initiate a positive online culture.

Summary

This paper discusses multiple factors that contribute to challenges in virtual teamwork. Application of the Credo for Ethical Communication in Virtual Teams addresses these challenges by enabling long-term virtual teams to enhance ethical communicative behaviors that promote task effectiveness, relational satisfaction, and team viability, thereby highlighting the practical value of ethical communication guidelines for digitally mediated collaboration.

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