



## ESSENTIAL LEADERSHIP QUALITIES FOR HIGH PERFORMING VIRTUAL TEAMS

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### Abstract

*In today's global organizations, virtual teams have become the sine quo non of the workplace enabled by the advanced information technologies. Actually, recently for many, it is the only way of work due to the outbreak of the coronavirus pandemic. Besides the advantages of virtual teams, team leaders face unique challenges caused by remote working. This study examines the leader's expected qualifications for high performance both from the leader's and the team members' perspectives. The qualitative data is collected from five senior virtual team executives and five virtual team members from different organizations through online semi-structured interviews. Our findings suggest that effective communication, accessible technical infrastructure, team design as a supportive factor of team trust and predefined job descriptions are the main components of a performant virtual team. Furthermore, our study shows that facilitating role of the leader is significant in understanding the local conditions and harmonizing cross-cultural differences of the team members. The democratic and humanistic approach of a leader is highly appreciated in virtual teamwork.*

**Keywords:** *Virtual Leadership Roles, Virtual Team Performance.*

**Jel Classification:** *L2, M12, M54*

## YÜKSEK PERFORMANSLI SANAL TAKIMLAR İÇİN TEMEL LİDERLİK VASIFLARI

### Özet

*Günümüz küresel organizasyonlarında sanal takımlar ileri bilgi teknolojileri sayesinde iş ortamlarının vazgeçilmezi haline gelmiştir. Son zamanlarda yaşanan Koronavirüs salgını nedeniyle pek çoğumuz için çalışmanın tek yolu olmuştur. Sanal takımların sahip oldukları avantajlara karşın, takım liderleri uzaktan çalışma koşullarına özgün zorluklarla karşılaşır. Bu çalışma hem lider hem de takım üyelerinin bakış açısından, yüksek performans için beklenen liderlik vasıflarını araştırmaktadır. Nitel veriler, farklı örgütlerde çalışan beş sanal takım yöneticisi ve beş sanal takım üyesinden yarı yapılandırılmış mülakat yoluyla elde edilmiştir. Bulgularımız etkin iletişimin, erişilebilir teknik altyapının, takım güveni oluşturmada destekleyici bir unsur olarak takım oluşturmanın ve önceden belirlenmiş iş tanımlarının, performansı yüksek bir sanal takımın temel bileşenlerini oluşturduğu yönündedir. Ayrıca, çalışmamız liderin uyumlandırma rolünün yerel şartları anlamak ve farklı kültürlere sahip olan takım üyelerini uyumlandırmak için önemli olduğunu göstermektedir. Liderin demokratik ve insancıl yaklaşımı sanal takım çalışmasında son derece takdir edilmektedir.*

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** *Sanal Liderlik Roller, Sanal Takım Performansı.*

**Jel Sınıflandırması:** *L2, M12, M54*

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## **1. Introduction**

The impressive improvement in information and communication technologies, rapidly changing market conditions led the organizations to be transformed into virtual, more innovative, flexible, and dynamic structures (Çetinkaya and Güleç, 2018). Virtual teams enable the organizations to be a part of strategic and global projects by overcoming cultural, geographical, organizational boundaries. These teams conduct innovative and cost-effective responses to competitive market challenges with the synergy of expert team members (Caulat, 2010).

“Virtual”, can simply be expressed as “not real” or “felt as real” commonly, but virtual organizations are much more than this definition. We may identify virtual organizations as settings in which the team members may be located in different geographies and time zones but acting as a unique organization to achieve the common goal by communicating via technology (Cindiloğlu, Özyer and Canbek ,2017). Virtual team members can be located in different countries and time zones, or in the same country (Wakefield,Leidner and Garrison 2008). Such teams enable organizations to work with the experts from different locations with limited resources by saving set up, maintenance and travelling costs (Cascio, 2000). Hybrid settings where team members are not meeting face to face regularly can be described as partly virtual as well (Fiol and O’Connor, 2005). Today’s organizations have evolved into partly or fully virtual manner by the increasing demand to more adaptable and innovative settings (Liao, 2017). In these settings the flow of information, feedback and new ideas can be rapidly shared or stored by team members through technology and allow members to be aware of existing commercial advantages of other geographies (Cascio, 2000).

In today’s modern lifestyle people would rather choose different work styles like ‘home office’ or ‘remote work’ that are mostly possible in virtual or hybrid organizations (Yeşil, 2011). Although virtual teams reserve many opportunities for organizations, they encounter various kinds of difficulties and conflicts with cultural heterogeneity and dispersed location. The issues of virtual team performance are still arguable, but it is agreed that virtual teams perform better with a leader guidance. Leading virtual teams which has greater operational difficulties compared to co-located teams, shifts traditional leadership issues to a paradoxical process (Bekmezci, 2018).

In this study, the basic dynamic of team performance is evaluated through the diverse conflicts faced by virtual teams. Expected leadership behaviors are examined to understand coping with the complex structure of virtual environment. The study was conducted during the pandemic period when most organizations transited to home office or hybrid settings. Although virtual teams come in many forms, in today’s organizations, limited local and international research on virtual team performance and virtual leader qualifications is available. The main purpose of the study is to find clues of performant virtual teams and major roles of an effective virtual leader.

## **2. Challenges of Virtual Teams**

Virtual work settings operate differently than the traditional organizations with their dispersed and independently working experts. In traditional teams, the workforce is usually constant and team members are co-located. They have a designated leader who clarifies the common goals and task details while encouraging team trust and team identification. However, in virtual environment team members are in diverse locations and changing rapidly. Multi-tasking is quite common and working on different teams with different leaders creates task ambiguity and weakens team identification where team trust becomes more delicate. Lack of face to face interaction is another barrier to demonstrating team cohesion. Furthermore, virtual team communication is not possible without technology which is susceptible to communication errors (Yeşil, 2011).

### **2.1. Trust Paradox in Virtual Teams**

Paul, Drake and Liang (2016) emphasize the importance of trust for an effective teamwork and claim

that teams cannot show optimal performance unless optimal trust and coordination is maintained. In traditional organizations co-located members have shared places, body language, social and personal interactions while working together. Dispersed virtual teams with self-autonomy are far from personal connections (Kirkman et al., 2002). As the usage of technology for communication increases, trust becomes even more important for the leaders where the members have greater independence (DeRosa et al., 2004). Additionally, team members are chosen for their technological talents rather than social skills since technological communication is essential for virtual teams. These preferences exaggerate the challenge of a positive communication climate. Another important issue on trust is the positive attitude of team members just as in traditional organizations. Sharing social messages, providing personal backgrounds before focusing on the task process will also contribute to trust in virtual teams (Cascio, 2000).

Since team members have roles in different projects, they cannot foresee how long they will work together. Ambiguity of team cohesion causes a delicate trust among team members. They need to feel confident that each team member will fulfill their responsibilities in order to improve trust, because the task achievement of members directly impacts overall team performance. In this respect, well designed and capable virtual teams have greater advantage of maintaining trust over time (DeRosa et al., 2004).

Another important trust factor in virtual teams is the issue of the source of power to be exercised. In traditional organizations leaders use their position power for performance evaluation or administering penalties. In virtual environments position power is not the right option in itself. The organizational rank of some members may even be higher than the formal leader's, in this case, they can easily offset the position power of the leader and carry conflicts to higher management level by personal network connection. Lack of position power weakens the influence power since they cannot shape the long-term path of team members and cannot present awards or motivational issues. Leaders are more influential when they are popular inside the team and with subordinates. Popularity is related to good established personal relations, otherwise establishing team trust and cohesion will be more difficult. The formal position of the leader should be in line with the organizational rank for a trustful virtual working conditions and better coordination (Zhang and Fjermestad, 2006).

## **2.2. Conflicts within Virtual Teams**

Considering the different structure of virtual teams as mentioned above we may underline four types of conflicts that need to be managed to achieve high performance.

### **2.2.1. Task Conflict**

Task conflict arises due to lack of knowledge or disagreement on task assignment. In some cases, the necessary actions are not fully understood although the task and the common goals are well defined (Wakefield, Leidner and Garrison, 2008). Virtual team members are usually given the basic deadlines, but no further details related to task accomplishment are determined. Task processing steps are usually clarified by the project leader that require a high level of communication and information flow. Most common task conflicts arise from workflow delays among team members (Kayworth and Leidner, 2002).

### **2.2.2. Relational Conflict**

Virtual team members cannot share common places like cafeterias, lunch spaces, and activities such as social events regularly. Limited social interaction and isolated working environment may hamper willingness to share and communicate with other team members (Cindiloğlu, Özyer and Canbek, 2017). In traditional organizations, people share the same location, get to know each other in time and improve trust while working together. Even when they have different cultural backgrounds, they can find a way to improve common understanding, build friendships and establish common behavioral norms (Yeşil, 2011). Dispersed virtual team members who are deprived of social and

personal cues, may develop different expectations. Additionally, communicating via technology causes time lags, misunderstandings and delays. As a result of disrupted or delayed responses, team members may think that their comments have not been considered or ignored that can cause relational conflict (Hinds and Bailey, 2003).

### **2.2.3. Process Conflict**

Process conflict is usually experienced due to disagreement on delegation or task completion. Since dispersed virtual teams are located in different geographies, the details of task accomplishment are designed according to local applications (Mannix, Griffith and Neale 2002). In some cases, responsibilities of team members change unexpectedly. Ambiguity in responsibility assignment takes extra effort and time to resolve because of different perspectives of team members and communication challenges. Process conflict absorbs team efforts and disagreements affect the quality of outcome negatively (Hinds and Bailey, 2003). Early detection of process conflict and effective management is crucial for team success, otherwise team members may focus on irrelevant, time wasting issues which delay the completion date of the goals (Mannix, Griffith and Neale 2002).

### **2.2.4. Multi-Tasking or Multi-Teaming Challenge**

Multi-tasking or multi-teaming is the basic characteristic of virtual teams. It helps retain team members by assigning different responsibilities on different teams. Different teams add synergy to the teamwork and increase the efficiency by improving members' capabilities. However multi-teaming means different team dynamics, workflows and discipline. Being a part of different teams and accomplishing diverse tasks often leads to task, process or relational conflicts with other team members. Conflict types in virtual teams interact with each other and have a joint effect on team performance. For instance, task conflict may cause process conflict or relational conflict that hampers team success and sometimes causes the members to quit the project (Mannix, Griffith and Neale 2002).

## **2.3. Essential Leadership Qualities Needed**

### **2.3.1. Monitor Role and Task Conflict**

The monitor role is quite challenging for a virtual team leader since unclarified roles and position responsibilities have a big impact on task and relational conflicts (Wakefield, Leidner and Garrison, 2008). The leader emphasizes measurement, information flow and analysis of the project within the monitoring role. This role is supposed to keep consensus towards the appropriate team tasks to reach team goals. It focuses on clarifying roles, positions, and performance evaluation criteria.

Fiol and O'Connor (2005) found that team members define themselves according to their position requirements. Besides, role and goal clarification, they focus on goal related issues rather than irrelevant matters that increase team performance. It also has an energizing function that improves persistence and indirectly leads team members to schedule an action plan (Pazos, 2012). Well defined performance criteria and providing sufficient rewards are also effective on team performance. Motivation factors tend to change as per team member's experiences (Cascio, 2000).

### **2.3.2. Coordinator Role and Process Conflict**

The coordinator role focuses on work-flow problems, task alignment, problem solving and structure maintenance. In virtual teams, members tend to act more independently rather than understanding the team perspective. Remote communication and physical dispersion also support independent working aspects. Therefore, team norms and relations develop in time. Cross-cultural boundaries may lead team members to have different assumptions about how the proper team process flows. Task alignment is another issue which team members do not agree. Since the coordination role is directly related to team processing, performance of coordination role directly affects the level of process conflict (Wakefield, Leidner and Garrison, 2008). The leader is expected to do an overall evaluation

to define the priority of resource allocation among the teams (Gibson and Gibbs, 2006). Also being technologically talented is significant since technology related problems commonly faced by virtual teams that arise from infrastructure insufficiency or lack of training sessions for the members (Yoo and Alavi, 2004).

Team leader is responsible for establishing a common organizational culture and creating efficient team processing norms. Consensus among team members encourages them to obey the norms and help establish a common understanding and team cohesion (Wakefield, Leidner and Garrison, 2008). Virtual teams need more coordination to acquire knowledge from different locations. For efficient information flow team members need to be aware of detailed task allocation and how sub-tasks can be assigned and interrelated with others (Kanawattanachal and Yoo, 2007).

Adaptability of organization and team cooperation are also related to efficient coordination. Adaptability describes how team deals with unexpected situations that require pre-planning and immediate coordination. Such teams are more willing to ask/accept help, to exchange ideas by facilitating supportive behavior (Fiore et al., 2003).

### **2.3.3. Mentor Role and Relational Conflict**

The mentor role engages team members by listening, providing support, appreciation and helping them understand their roles. This role involves establishing team cohesion and belonging and reducing role ambiguity of members, encouraging the socialization of team members including satisfactory relationships and well-being. The leader is expected to have excellent interpersonal relationships and treat members with concern and empathy through situational circumstances. Although, individuals like and understand each other they may be disagree over task goals and processing. Studies show that team members who handle multiple roles mostly faced role ambiguity and dissatisfaction. Besides, mentoring from a distance prevents observing members while processing (Wakefield, Leidner and Garrison, 2008).

Social interaction helps decrease relational conflict that mostly arises from the communication styles of team members (Baruch and Lin, 2012). The leader's effort is crucial in keeping the dispersed and rapidly changing team members socioemotionally connected (Hinds and Bailey, 2003).

### **2.3.4. Facilitating Cultural Differences**

The leader facilitates and values key differences of team members. When cultural distance increases, different nationalities, gender, ethical values make remote sites less comprehensive and personal influence is mostly dismissed with distance. Cultural differences include the degree of inequality among members, masculinity versus femininity, the degree people prefer structured or unstructured situations and long term versus short term orientation. Virtual team leaders should be sensitive to cultural differences, variable perceptions, and communication habits (Zhang and Fjermestad, 2006).

### **2.3.5. Effective Communication**

The leader's communication skills are critical for team success. Giving feedback, encouraging team members for common goals, motivational talks, the convincing tone of voice are just some examples. As the communication distance increases in virtual teams, leaders should be more skilled at using media related technologies in various forms, so good expertise in using technological communication systems is a must. However, the simple nature of technological communication hampers leaders from understanding the subtle needs of team members, evaluating ideas inoffensively, and sensing personal clues. The team leader is expected to transfer face to face communication skills into the technological environment (Zhang and Fjermestad, 2006).

Another impact of the virtual environment can be the team members' feeling of isolation due to dispersed work locations. The leaders have to improve communication skills to prevent team members away from the feeling isolated. Videoconferences, regularly scheduled team meetings and

face to face activities (if possible) highly contribute to team performance and team belonging. The leader should take care of the availability of team members considering time lags of different locations since attending regular meetings helps the members to develop team identity and team cohesion (Cascio, 2000). For better team identity, members should be aware that each member is unique for the team and an open environment is essential for brain storming sessions. The leader needs to allow each member to share their ideas and feedback with each other but in a positive manner for an innovative communication environment (Baruch and Lin, 2012). If communication tools are used effectively, technology even helps prevent delays, submit feedbacks and store shared data inside the team (DeRosa et al., 2004).

Environmental alertness means evaluating the current situation of team members and is another key area for virtual leadership efficiency. Scanning the team environment is also difficult from the leader's perspective due to limited information about the dispersed team members and individual work context. The leader is expected to be aware of the internal and external situations of the team in order to take necessary actions that require special leadership skills (Zhang and Fjermestad 2006).

### **2.3.6. Importance of Design in Virtual Teams**

The design of the team structure and positioning the appropriate team members are essential for virtual team success (Türel and Zhang, 2010). People who are self-starters, expertise in their jobs, technically sufficient, internally motivated, have a good match with virtual environment. If this is not the case, newcomers need an integration and training period to adapt to virtual teamwork (Cascio, 2000).

Unbalanced team connections cause frustration such as dysfunctional decision-making climate, the presence of someone with more expertise, lack of confidence in one's capability, unwillingness to commit to other team members. These teamwork environments lead the members to show self-limiting behaviors like hampering the connection with team members, refusal to share comments etc. Team design is also important on building team trust since virtual teams improve trust over time by focusing on successful task achievement of team members and effective communication. Task achievement is mostly related to the team members' capability and the proper match of team members with the assigned project.

Even when the virtual teams are well designed, they need to be redesigned constantly due to their flexible and dynamic nature. Redesigning can also be required against changing market conditions, workforce availability and new projects. Repositioning the roles of the members, quitting or adding new departments are routines of virtual environment (Vuran and Mert, 2017).

### **2.3.7. Paradoxical Behaviors Expected from Virtual Leader**

Leaders need to keep three main areas safe while managing virtual teams. These are virtual collaboration, virtual communication, and virtual socialization. The roles of virtual team leaders are different from traditional leader roles in that virtual leaders are expected to show more paradoxical behaviors to achieve high performance (DeRosa et al., 2004). The leader is expected to establish common team norms in a cross-cultural environment while nurturing diversity, showing authority when necessary but also demonstrating empathy, coaching the team members for self improvement as well as prescribing the task details. Therefore, the leader is expected to focus on the task for team success but also focus on relationships to motivate, train and realize the potential of the team members (Caulat, 2010).

## **3. Research Methodology**

The research focuses on the challenges faced in a virtual working environment and the leader's essential qualities to manage performant virtual teams. In this study, the dynamics of virtual teams and the leader's expected roles and behaviors in different situations are examined both from the

leader’s and the team members’ perspectives through a descriptive phenomenology approach.

### 3.1. Participants

Study participants are selected based on the critical case sampling which is a type of purposive sampling technique that is particularly useful in exploratory qualitative research (Patton,1990). They are comprised of five virtual team executives and five virtual team members from global companies located in Istanbul, Turkey. In qualitative studies the quality of participant is more significant than the quantity (Ollerenshaw and Creswell, 2002). Therefore, they were chosen on a voluntary basis by considering their prior work experiences which helped ensure the quality of the answers to the interview questions. Semi structured online interviews were conducted by voice recording to gather broader data. Participants were informed about the aim of the research and encouraged to share their personal business experience and perceptions by asking 16 open-ended questions. They were selected from different sectors with different levels of virtualized teams to keep away the basic sectoral practices from the research and obtain more unbiased information. They all were university graduates and fluent English speakers. Fig.1 shows the working profiles of the participants.

**Fig.1:** The Working Profiles of Interview Participants

<b>WORKING PROFILES OF PARTICIPANTS</b>			
<b>LEADERS</b>	<b>LEADING</b>	<b>REPORTING TO</b>	<b>CODE</b>
Partner	Local Virtual Teams in Istanbul	Virtual Leader in Head Office	L1
Country Manager	Local Virtual Teams in Turkey	Virtual Leader in Head Office	L2
General Manager	Local and Int. Virtual Teams	Virtual Leader in Head Office	L3
Regional Manager	Local and Int. Virtual Teams	Virtual Leader in Head Office	L4
Country Manager	Local Virtual Teams in Istanbul	Virtual Leader in Head Office	L5
<b>TEAM MEMBERS</b>	<b>WORKING WITH</b>	<b>REPORTING TO</b>	<b>CODE</b>
Marketing Specialist	Virtual and Co-located teams	Virtual and Co-Loc. Lead.	TM1
Junior Manager	Virtual and Co-located teams	Virtual Leader	TM2
Quality technician	Co-located teams	Virtual Leader	TM3
Merchandiser	Co-located teams	Virtual and Co-Loc. Lead.	TM4
Business Coach	Virtual Teams in Istanbul	Virtual Leader in Istanbul	TM5

Team members’ ages vary from twenty-four to fifty-five and work experience and sectoral settings are also quite different from each other. Different ages and work experience are supposed to present different aspects of team conflicts and leadership expectations. Leaders are over 50 years old; all have long term management experience both in co-located and virtual organizations and they currently have virtual leadership from the top management of their company. Three of the selected leaders and team members are female and two of them are males. The same questions were asked to both the leaders and the team members. The leader’s interviews took 250 minutes in total for 5 participants (50 min. per leader in average) and the members’ interview took 236 minutes in total (47 min. per team member in average). The interviews were recorded with their permission. This study was conducted with the Ethical Committee’s permission of Medipol University dated 15<sup>th</sup> of June 2020 with no 43037191-604.01.01-E.16705.

### 3.2. Data Analysis

Content analysis, a process characterized by multiple realities and the development of individual perceptions, was used for data analysis. (Graneheim, Lindgren and Lundman, 2017). The first step was to transcribe voice records. They were read and reread carefully to get a sense of the data; two coding schemes are used: Leaders and Members. All coding of the interview recordings was done manually, then the data was gathered under the main topics, based on the conceptual framework and according to meaning categorization from narrative structuring. Feedback and collected data were

crosschecked from both team members' and leaders' perspectives. The common points of different experiences and perceptions were considered prominent factors for high performing virtual teams. The statements of the participants with the related topics are placed as samples. The most significant codes were ranked in hierarchical order. Finally, the results were reported with the consensus of the researchers.

## **4. Research Findings**

### **4.1. Communication**

Communication is mentioned as a key point both by the leaders and team members. All leaders mentioned that they prefer face to face communication to better empathize with the emotions of the team members but somehow, they are used to read the team members' emotions, expectations and situation by various type of communication technologies. All leaders interviewed made a great effort to eliminate the challenges of remote communication and improve many technics for keeping the team members in touch with each other.

**L1** emphasizes the importance of the issue as; *“communication, communication, communication”*.

All team members emphasize the importance of communication, one to one meetings and regular virtual meetings.

**TM1** clearly states; *“I think the first criteria for performance is to establish good communication”*.

**TM2** mentions the same statement as; *“I think the most important thing is communication”*.

**TM3** adds the necessity of technical infrastructure for communication; *“Lack of internet and technical instability directly affects communication”*

### **4.2 Cultural Differences and Geographical Distance**

Cultural differences are considered as one of the important challenges of the virtual environment. Leaders show modifying and facilitating roles to unify the cultural differences since the team members are mostly faced with communication challenges of different time zones and diverse working schedules of distant geographies.

**L1** puts her modifying role in front by saying; *“Every country has unique issues, and the global office knows the differences. I modify the rules”*.

**L2** is mentioning the same effect as; *“Cultural effects are the most important effect for all of us even when we work in a virtual environment”*.

**L3** focuses the facilitating role and states; *“The leader should consolidate the differences in order to become one voice when addressing the customer. Facilitating is the main role”*.

**L4** adds the company culture by saying *“First of all you have to understand the culture, if you cannot understand the culture you cannot connect them. If you do not respect the culture, conflict arises. It's a kind of a mixture of the country's culture and the company culture because it is a big umbrella”*.

**TM 1** experiences different working hours and working days *“Time zone is very important. This is a big problem since there are lots of people from other countries. Sometimes they set up meetings on our holidays “*.

### **4.3. Understanding Local Working Conditions and Work Processing**

Although the global rules of international companies are standard all over the world, market conditions, working hours, and problem-solving methods during task processing are different for each country. Sometimes they even vary within the same country.

**L2** mentions; *“In some regions especially in Eastern part of Turkey the relations are much more*



*important than in the Western part of Turkey. We have rules and reasons why we cannot do something. That is the most controversial part. Sometimes the local competition does not comply the global rules or they don't give it much attention”.*

**L4** is expressing the situation as follows; *“There are similar targets that need to be achieved by all locations but some of the tasks are country or region-specific. Expectations don't change but it is not the same to teach in China or in Thailand for example”.*

**TM1** is working overseas and mentions; *“The distance between countries actually matters, because when you are working with closer countries, they visit your country and see your market, your office, they see how things work and see the stores in Turkey. They can understand the problems”.*

**TM2** says; *“The most important thing is that the leader should be aware of the situation more than anyone else”.*

**TM3** talks about the different processes of countries; *“The first rule is, if the leader is from another country, he should be informed about the local conditions, for example in Egypt employees solve the same problem in a different way. If the leader is not from Egypt it can be difficult for him to understand. Decisions should be taken under the local conditions”.*

**TM4** states; *“Empathy is in the center and learning about the differences”.*

#### **4.4. Creating Common Team Norms**

It is mentioned that team norms are partially coming from the global company and partially established by the leader based on the market conditions. The leader is expected to customize the rules according to the local conditions.

**L1** mentions; *“Home office working requires extra attention from the leader since members may feel isolated and it is more difficult to keep team members in line with the team norms when they are at home”.*

**L4**, a leader of a big global company, emphasizes the global norms; *“So many operational norms are sometimes beneficial but sometimes they limit your flexibility. Internal rules are much more flexible. The most common ones are frequent department meetings, sharing task related difficulties with team members and customer-oriented approach.”*

Home Office workers complained about unclarified norms like working hours, coffee breaks, lunch time, weekend etc.

**TM2** mentions; *“For working from home establishing very clear break times is very important because with this new phenomenon everybody is working from home now and the lines become more blurred”.*

**TM5** agrees with **TM2**; *“We have our next day and weekly plan and scripts. We used to work 8 hours in the office. Now we work twelve hours”.*

**TM4** states the importance of basic norms; *“we have lunch time; we are celebrating special days and meeting once a week and we have happy Friday and quality standards”.*

#### **4.5. Team Trust**

There is a consensus about difficulties of creating team trust in a virtual environment. All interviewed leaders agreed that reliable leaders are essential for team trust and trust is created in time. Effective communication is the key factor for creating team trust. Giving and asking for feedback, scanning overall picture of the team performance, collaboration, clear goals, and responsibilities, accepting, and obeying common norms, coming face to face once or twice in a year are the most underlined issues.

**L1** describes the team trust as; *“If there is no trust there is no positive outcome. Trust doesn't mean that I trust my company because I can get my payment on the 5th of every month. Trust is sharing your mistakes with the team members without feeling embarrassed and finding the best solution together. In a virtual environment if you know how to teach, how to mentor, how to ask questions, how to coach, and how to listen then trust in the leader and trust in the team members will appear”*.

**L2** emphasizes the importance of trust by saying; *“You may produce the best product of the world, if people don't trust each other the success is not achieved in the virtual environment. If people are reachable and transparent then the trust develops”*.

**TM1** thinks that “everybody should be reachable in order to have team trust”.

**TM3** mentions; *“For all sectors communication is important for trust that is giving positive or negative feedback. Sharing situations and evaluations must be simple and transparent”*.

**TM5** touches the qualifications of the team members for trust; *“I trust them because I know they have the ability to solve problems. They are productive team members”*.

#### **4.6. Team Design**

Team design is important for effective teamwork in a virtual environment as agreed by both the leaders and team members.

**L1** mentions; *“For example, in our company helping people is our aim so the person we employ should also do this. Every organization has different needs, so you have to pick up the person with the same DNA”*.

**L4** agrees with this opinion; *“You should be very sure that you have the right team so you can start with trust and confidence that I believe is very important for success. The right person is expected to have experience, knowledge, capability and be competent”*.

**L2** emphasizes the structure of the team; *“The team should be lean. First of all, there shouldn't be so many layers in between because the message has to be conveyed properly without changing all the way down”*.

**L5** says that; *“I try to keep the team not too big like 5 people to 10 people. It is easier to communicate in the team so we can keep a level of trust in the company”*.

**TM1** underlines; *“The hierarchy is a must in a virtual team because someone should say who is responsible for any task. If the members have the same status one cannot make any task allocation”*.

**TM2** states; *“Team design is better when it is collaborative”*.

**TM3** also points out the flexibility of the members; *“You should keep all technological tools and team members should be flexible while solving problems in all ways such as working hours, finding simple solutions, being calm and improving communication skills for team performance”*.

#### **4.7. Task Related Issues in Virtual Teams**

In order to overcome task related conflicts, companies are suggested to carry their work processes into an online platform. When the virtual leader is located overseas or team members are multitasking, the members face more conflict and dissatisfaction.

**L2** emphasizes the transparency by saying; *“You have to acquire the right team members. You have to be clear and transparent in the beginning in terms of delegation of duties and authorization. Who is responsible, who is authorized, then you have to appoint a specific task? We have clear specifications for work”*.

**TM3** mentions; *“We directly talk to our leader transparently about positive or negative issues, we try to find alternative solutions for problems”*.

**TM1** explains; *“I multitask. Task assignments are not fair. Some team members have heavy work loads but others don't. We have an office manager who is not my manager on the organizational chart, but he has a position power, so I always have to report him as well”*.

**TM 2** expresses task related problems as well; *“Leaders don't act proactively in task conflict most of the time. Instead they wait for someone to complain. Most of the time they don't really know how much time the details of the task take because in their mind that is something not important and something easy to get done. It becomes important for them if it cannot be done”*.

**TM4** explains the reason behind the task related difficulties as; *“Sudden instructions challenges team members, and they carry on preplanned tasks”*.

#### **4.8. Essential Leadership Behaviors and Factors for High Performance**

Leaders' experiences and members' expectations are mostly in line with each other regarding what is required for high performance in a virtual team.

**L1** says; *“When necessary you should do micromanagement. If you first see the team members in a virtual world it will take more time to know each other so it will be more difficult. When you know the people, you know the personality of that person. Based on the personality you can change your leadership style. When you are together with the members as a manager it is easier to teach them but in the virtual world following the task is more difficult and cultural differences are harder to manage.”*

**L2** puts emphasis on trust; *“In the organization the conflict is due to misunderstanding of roles, functions and activities. Everybody should understand that everybody pursues the same goal. The first thing is trust. They have to trust you and they should feel comfortable so they can share easily, and they may come up with solutions instead of just complaining. Everyone's suggestion counts. As a leader you have to make sure that you respect their opinions and beliefs whatever they share with you. Since you are not face-to-face as a human being to be frank you are sometimes bored, but I am getting used to it. From the tone of the voice, facial expressions, we can get the message”*.

**L3** lists that; *“fair communication, fair management, trust, global vision, and proactivity is very important for team success You have to be open-minded. Virtual team mentality looks very easy, but it needs some characteristics and global vision. Trust is very important in the team for performance because it is a virtual team so you cannot talk, and you cannot touch each other every moment. Consolidation is important and facilitating is the main role”*.

**L4** says; *“With honest and open conversation, designing the relationship at the beginning is important. Predefined working principles and availability of technology are critical for success. Leading a successful business, you should have a plan which is in line with your strategy”*.

**L5** mentions; *“Culture, language, connectivity, the infrastructure and the transparency are the most important factors for a virtual team. There's a software program where everybody tracks themselves. Every team member can access to the other members' reports. Also, the team members can access their own reports. So, we have full visibility in the company. The size and the culture are very important for the team. I try to learn specific cultures to reach our members. I always try to be positive when I touch the people. Proactivity is important. I always reward the success”*.

**TM1** says; *“The leader should help me, improve and teach me otherwise it doesn't make any sense. He should understand my motivation and my emotional situation”*.

**TM2** thinks; *“For high performance it is important to have some attention and support from your leader. He should know your workload and giving feedback is essential”*.

**TM3** states the important factors as; *“a good software, experienced team members, managing the details, support and appreciation is important for a virtual team. You cannot fully grasp the personalities in virtual environment. Transparency, knowing the reality of the current conditions and knowing the details are important”*.

**TM4** summarizes the leader’s behavior as *“He should behave democratically and be good in relationships. I mean a humanistic approach is very important”*.

**TM5** emphasizes the micromanagement *“He has to follow up the team and makes things easy. Micromanagement I can say. At the same time, he should be democratic; he should listen to me and train me if I make a mistake”*.

#### **4.9. Other Comments**

The leaders mention that their relationship with their virtual leader is established on trust and they are free wheeling with their own management styles by considering the global restrictions of the company. They are not expecting to be motivated or followed up by their leader.

**L1** says; *“We should have enough energy to motivate ourselves. This is a part of being a manager or team leader. It does not come from outside. Of course, sometimes you feel exhausted. If I am exhausted, I call a friend, share my feelings and feel recharged. A leader should also be inspirational, otherwise you cannot be a leader”*.

**L3** is emphasizing trust; *“We manage our team freely. My boss does not get involved in our daily business. He sets the rules, strategy and instructions. Then we implement everything to our company, so we feel that he trusts us and that’s why we also trust him”*.

**L4** says the same thing with different wording; *“My boss is in Hong Kong. He is not able to check on me, but he trusts me. It's related to integrity”*.

**L5** agrees; *“I can say that I can make any decision needed for Turkey. Our CEO encourages us to take our own decisions. I have been in this company for 30 years and the CEO trusts that I can make the correct decisions. He really trusts us”*.

#### **5. Conclusion**

Developments in the field of information-communication technologies lead more businesses to enhance more or less virtual team structuring. The Coronavirus pandemic period emphasizes a new organizational design phenomenon called virtual working environment. In this paper virtual team functioning, challenges and essential leadership traits are investigated through semi-structured interviews with five virtual team executives and five virtual team members. Significant leadership roles and high-performance behaviors are examined. Basic findings of this study are outlined below:

- Open, transparent and regular communication with an accessible technical infrastructure is crucial for the better performance of a virtual team. Communication is crucial both from leaders’ and the members’ side to understand the environmental situation, local conditions and cultural differences which are reported as difficult to manage. In some cases, geographical distance and time zones are also a boundary for effective communication.
- Trust is mentioned as an essential factor both by the leaders and the members for cohesion and success and also it is agreed that trust emerges with the leaders’ efforts and then team trust is achieved in time. It is also considered by the leaders as a tough issue in a virtual environment.
- Team design is crucial as a supportive factor to establishing trust. The harmony of the team members, competencies, fitting into the organizational culture, flexibility and open communication are the highlighted points for a high-performance team design.
- Predefined job descriptions and task scripts are important in goal clarification. Open online task

platforms are a solution for follow up and fair workflow. Otherwise the time-consuming details of the work and the excess workload of disorganized multitasking can be missed in a virtual environment by the leader. Interpersonal conflicts are also mentioned as a difficult issue by the leaders.

- Home Office working members need extra connection with their leader and team members since they sometimes have a kind of isolation feeling. Undefined working hours and lunch breaks are also a big problem.

- Leaders' facilitating and monitoring roles are prominent in terms of managing cultural differences and adapting the global rules into local conditions. Interpersonal conflict is described as a difficult issue by the leaders. They agreed on the demotivating effect of a dissatisfied team member on team cohesion.

- Leaders are expected to know the local processing conditions in order to help, teach, solve problems and motivate if necessary. The leaders need to be well aware of the workload and task details of team members.

- The interviewed members appreciate the democratic and humanistic approach of their leader. Regular conversations, open discussions, a fair workload, and supportive team members are essential for high performance.

- The relationship of the leaders with their own virtual leaders is established on trust and the leaders are free to use their own managing style within the limits of global company rules.

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