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Article *in* Computers in Human Behavior · January 2015

DOI: 10.1016/j.chb.2014.11.026

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Influence tactics in virtual teams

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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 18 December 2014

Keywords:

Virtual teams
Influence tactics
Status characteristics
Lower status
Peer influence
Influence strategies

ABSTRACT

Most current studies of influence tactics in virtual teams assume that these constructs operate in a similar manner as they do in the face-to-face (FtF) environment. However, important differences between these contexts may alter how influence tactics are expressed in virtual teams. Using status characteristics as the theoretical lens, this study intensively examines how influence tactics are manifested in virtual teams and which are most successful. Twenty-three members of different virtual teams were interviewed about their previous attempts to influence team members. The main findings are that while some influence tactics are present in both FtF and online environments, there is a tendency to use harder (i.e., more assertive) influence tactics in virtual teams. Second, some influence tactics used in both FtF and virtual environments are enacted in novel ways in virtual teams. Further, virtual team members have developed a new technique which reduces the ambiguity of virtual communications in order to influence their team members. Finally, status affects influence success in novel and unexpected ways.

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1. Influence tactics in virtual teams

Influence is ubiquitous in social interactions (Kemper & Collins, 1990) and, therefore, is ubiquitous in virtual team interactions. Influence may, however, be *different* in virtual teams. The information and communication technology (ICT), the dispersion of members around the world, and the relationships between team members of different status may affect the use and effectiveness of influence tactics in virtual teams. We are in the beginning states of understanding the use of influence tactics in virtual teams and how they succeed.

The purpose of this study is to understand the influence tactics that are manifested and enacted within virtual teams. We will identify virtual teams influence tactics and compare their similarities and differences to face-to-face (FtF) influence tactics. Guided by status characteristics theory (Berger, Cohen, & Zelditch, 1972; Wagner & Berger, 2002), we will identify which influence tactics are most effective as virtual team members seek to influence members with less, equal, and more status than themselves. This study adds to the nascent research of influence in virtual teams by providing insights into the complexity of virtual team influence.

1.1. Research

Influence tactics are how people enact power over others (cf., Lines, 2007; Yukl & Tracey, 1992). Influence tactics are used in formal and informal groups by people with and without formal power. Much research continues to examine how people with formal power influence others (Lines, 2007; Barbuto, Fritz, & Marx, 2002; Pierro, Kruglanski, and Raven (2012)). However, using influence tactics, power can be asserted in multiple directions (i.e., upward, downward, and lateral) (Yukl, Chavez, & Seifert, 2005; Yukl & Falbe, 1990); that is, influence tactics can help individuals have power over others. Although both the formal and personal bases of power are relatively stable (Bass, 1960), influence tactics enable all individuals, regardless of whether they have formal power, to influence others.

In their original work, Yukl and Falbe (1990) identified eight influence tactics: pressure tactics, personal appeals, exchange tactics, coalition tactics, ingratiation tactics, rational persuasion, inspirational appeals, and consultation tactics. In 2005, Yukl and his colleagues identified two additional influence tactics: collaboration and apprising (i.e., explaining how the target person will benefit by complying). The most commonly used tactics in the FtF context are rationality, ingratiation, and coalition (Kipnis, Schmidt, & Wilkinson, 1980; Yukl & Falbe, 1990). These tactics are also divided into hard, assertive approaches (e.g., pressure, exchange, and coalition) and softer approaches (e.g., personal appeals, exchange, ingratiation, rational persuasion, and consultation) to influence others.

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The choice of a tactic depends on individual differences, the expected success of their influence attempt and the relationship between the team members (Steizel & Rimbau-Gilabert, 2013). For example, Pierro et al. (2012) examined how leaders' need for cognitive closure affects the use and success of their influence tactics. They define cognitive closure as an individual's desire to firm up decisions and clarify ambiguity. They found that a need for closure was positively related to the use of harder influence tactics even though softer influence tactics were more effective overall. Van Knippenberg and Steensma (2003) found that influencers are likely to use softer techniques when they expect to have a prolonged relationship with their influence targets.

While our understanding of influence in FtF environments remains important, the growth of ICT, the challenges of communicating through ICT, and the ubiquity of influence in interactions suggest that we should also explore influence tactics in virtual teams.

1.2. Influence in virtual teams

Virtual teams are teams whose members are mediated by time, distance, or technology and whose members are interdependent, working together on a common task (Driskell, Radtke, & Salas, 2003). Members of virtual teams communicate through various ICT including telephone, video and audio conferencing, chat rooms and instant messaging, file and application sharing, and other virtual reality options (Olson & Olson, 2000). These technologies vary as to how much they incorporate the media dimensions of co-presence, visibility, audibility, contemporality, simultaneity, sequentiality, reviewability, and revisability (Clark & Brennan, 1991). These dimensions are consequential because they are associated with the richness of the media (i.e., the capabilities of the technology and how much information it conveys).

Virtual teams exist on a continuum in which some teams are completely virtual and have never met FtF. Others are slightly virtual in which team members primarily interact FtF, but also spend time working with each other through ICT. ICT has become so pervasive that it is hard to imagine any team in which the members do not have some level of virtuality. In our paper, we focus on teams in which ICT represent the primary way in which they communicate and organize their work.

Within the context of these virtual teams, we are interested in how members influence each other. Influence tactics are the methods people use to translate power into action. One example of an influence tactic would be when employees use their expertise to lay out facts and statistics in order to persuade others to accept their solution. Another is when a manager threatens an employee who then does the manager's bidding.

Theory and research indicate that influence tactics and influence processes do not work in exactly the same way in virtual teams as they do in FtF teams. Avolio and Kahai (2003) point out that ICT provides everyone with the ability to reach out and touch everyone (e.g., through email), thus increasing opportunities for communication. However, geographically distributed team members can also easily withhold information from one another (Rosen, Furst, & Blackburn, 2007). Thus, ICT allows virtual team members to both argue their case to others and, alternatively, easily withhold information without detection to make their case more valid. In what other ways do influence tactics differ in the virtual environment?

In new virtual teams, limited familiarity with other team members is related to fewer and softer influence tactics (Elron & Vigoda-Gadot, 2006). Membership in the virtual team is also less central to participants' organizational identification and performance than membership in collocated teams, which Elron and Vigoda-Gadot

suggested made influencing members of the virtual team less pressing than influencing members of FtF teams.

However, as virtual team members get to know each other better, power relations may become the same online as FtF (cf., Walther, 1995). Once a team's history is established and members are more comfortable communicating with one another, the use of stronger influence tactics may become more common. Indeed, given the ambiguous nature of authority in the virtual environment (cf., Zhang & Fjermestad, 2006), influence may occur more frequently than in FtF teams (i.e., ambiguity may make influential behavior more acceptable or less prone to sanctioning).

Steizel and Rimbau-Gilabert (2013) are some of the few researchers who have studied influence tactics and specific status characteristics in virtual teams. They examined influence tactics of lower status virtual team members primarily influencing superiors in different countries. Their results show that lower level virtual team members are likely to use rationality, intermediation, and coalition building to influence upper status members. They identified intermediation as a new influence technique. In intermediation, a lower level team member contacts someone physically and socially closer to the higher status team member, who then successfully influences the target.

Like Elron and Vigoda-Gadot (2006) and Steizel and Rimbau-Gilabert (2013), we conduct an intensive examination of influence tactics in virtual teams. An intensive examination of the use of influence tactics allows us to identify which tactics are being used *in situ* and compare their similarities and differences from FtF influence tactics and previous research. We build upon their research by intensively examining influence in established teams and between members at higher, equal, and lower status. Therefore, our first research question is to identify influence tactics unique to the virtual environment.

RQ1a: What influence tactics are available to individuals who interact in virtual teams?

RQ1b: How are these similar or different to those available to individuals who interact FtF?

We ground our study in status characteristics theory. Status characteristics theory is a foundational sociological theory which governs human interactions. As we discuss below, we perceive an inherent tension between status characteristics theory and ICT, which makes this theory fruitful to use in virtual team research.

1.3. Status characteristics theory

Status characteristics theory addresses how initial status differences result in expectations for interactions (Wagner & Berger, 1997). A status characteristic is a socially established attribute, such as hierarchical level or ethnicity, on which people are differentially evaluated (Berger et al., 1972; Wagner & Berger, 2002). A key component of status characteristics theory is that status characteristics highlight status inequalities.

Status characteristics can be either diffuse or specific (Berger et al., 1972). Diffuse status characteristics (e.g., race, gender, and ethnicity) are generalized assumptions about a specific population (Berger et al., 1972). They create initial status differences that are stable and pervasive (Wagner & Berger, 2002). Specific status characteristics (e.g., math ability or occupation) also exist (Berger et al., 1972). These characteristics are used to evaluate people on their ability to succeed. Both diffuse and specific status characteristics determine which group members participate, have influence, and have prestige (Berger et al., 1972).

Status characteristics interact with influence tactics to affect an individual's ability to obtain and maintain power. However, the

interaction mechanism is not always clear. One possibility is that influence tactics are constrained by status characteristics. In other words, the success of an influence tactic may vary based upon the status of the person employing it (Yukl et al., 2005). High-status individuals will, in general, be more successful at implementing influence tactics, and, as a result, will have more power than low-status individuals.

Another possibility, suggested by Vecchio (1997), is that status is a type of influence tactic and that those who have higher status—or simply appear high in status—exert greater influence. For example, high-status individuals will be more likely to have formal power in organizations (Walker et al., 2000; Willer, Lovaglia, & Markovsky, 1997). This power enables high-status individuals to use the influence tactics of legitimacy (i.e., reliance on organizational position) and pressure (i.e., threats, demands, or warnings) (French & Raven, 1959; Raven, 1992; Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Yukl et al., 2005). In addition, a high-status individual has more success using influence tactics such as inspirational appeals and exchange (Yukl & Falbe, 1990; Yukl & Tracey, 1992).

1.4. Status characteristics theory in ICT

What about status characteristics in ICT? ICT may flatten out status differences between people (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991; Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984; Siegel, Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & McGuire, 1986; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Early researchers believed that because virtual communicators cannot observe each other and, therefore, it is more difficult to make attributions or expectations based on diffuse status characteristics (e.g., ethnicity, age).

However, more recent researchers have determined that even if virtual team communication partners do not meet, status characteristics are still available (cf. Blanchard, 2008). Emails often contain email addresses and signature files that can potentially divulge diffuse status characteristics such as gender, ethnicity, and age. Specific status characteristics such as organizational position and education (e.g., executive vice president, administrative assistant, PhD, MD, customer service representative) are often evident in signature files as well. ICT that allow for audio or visual communication (i.e., pictures in signature files, telephone, SKYPE, conference calls, videoconference, etc.) can also convey the status characteristics of gender, race, or ethnicity. Nonetheless, researchers generally believe that ICT flattens out status differences and allows lower status individuals more power and influence.

Paradoxically, some research suggests that status characteristics have a greater effect over ICT (Driskell et al., 2003; Hollingshead, 1996; Pena, Walther, & Hancock, 2007; Saunders, Robey, & Vaverek, 1994; Silver, Cohen, & Crutchfield, 1994; Spears & Lea, 1994; Weisband, Schneider, & Connolly, 1995). Status cues are restricted so that some may be highlighted and others dampened. In other words, in the virtual environment, individuals base their expectations of others on fewer, more prominent status characteristics than they do in the FtF environment. More importantly, even in situations of complete anonymity communication partners attribute status characteristics to each other, although they are likely to make incorrect attributions about the status characteristics of their anonymous ICT partners (Hayne, Pollard, & Rice, 2003).

We perceive tension in these different research findings. ICT dampens status characteristics in general, but may highlight certain ones. Status characteristics theory demonstrates how fundamental these same characteristics are in human interactions. Individuals' choices of influence tactics depend on the perceptions of their own status and the status of their intended targets. These tensions and the importance of status in interactions suggest an

intensive examination of status characteristics in virtual team influence.

Our second research question, therefore, asks how status characteristics affect the use and success of influence tactics.

RQ2a: How does status affect the use of influence tactics in virtual teams?

RQ2b: How successful are these tactics for upward, peer, and downward influence in virtual teams?

2. Methods

2.1. Participants

Participants are 23 members of different virtual teams. Participants were recruited by snowball sampling professional contacts and online groups (e.g., a LinkedIn group for virtual team members).

The average age of participants was 43.64 years old, and their average tenure with their virtual teams was 2.28 years. Fifteen participants (65.22%) were female, and all participants were white. Eight participants (34.78%) were the leaders of their virtual teams, while the other fifteen participants were junior-level team members. We continued to interview new participants until the data reached theoretical saturation.

2.2. Procedure

We used a semi-structured interview protocol to ask participants about successful and unsuccessful influence attempts. Through a questionnaire, we collected demographic information about the participants and their teams to provide a better understanding of the context in which the influence attempts occurred. Interviews were then conducted by phone, recorded with permission and transcribed word for word. Participants were asked to describe their virtual team and then to describe an incident in which they succeeded in getting someone to do what they wanted for their job and an incident in which they were not successful in getting someone to do what they wanted for their job. We repeatedly probed participants for issues related to specific technologies they used during their influence attempts and for the status characteristics of their influence targets.

2.3. Analysis strategy

The interview data were analyzed using a thematic approach. During open coding, the experiences of the interview participants were compared in order to uncover common influence tactics (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). During this phase of data analysis, we let codes emerge from the data through the use of in vivo and process coding.

The data was subsequently integrated using axial coding in order to create categories and themes that span many categories. Based on previous research, we expected that traditional influence tactics that are present in FtF interactions would persist in the virtual environment (Elron & Vigoda-Gadot, 2006; Hollingshead, 1996; Saunders et al., 1995; Steizel & Rimbau-Gilbert, 2013). As a result, during this phase of analysis certain codes became grouped as they had been in previous research of FtF teams. We then examined each construct created during axial coding and teased out key dimensions (Corbin & Strauss, 1990). Selective coding was used to unify all categories around a core category. Data continued to be collected and analyzed until the category set became theoretically saturated.

In order to ensure the integrity of the categories and constructs identified during data analysis, researchers familiar with virtual

teams were asked to confirm the appropriateness of the coding scheme. We also conducted negative case analysis in order to further strengthen our interpretation of the data, (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002).

3. Results

3.1. Influence tactics in virtual teams

Two categories of influence tactics emerged from the data. First, we identified influence tactics similar to those in FtF teams (e.g., rational persuasion). Nonetheless, some of these influence tactics were enacted in novel ways due to the ICT. Second, we identified a new category of influence tactics that reduces communication ambiguity. While this tactic likely occurs in FtF teams, it has high prominence in virtual teams.

3.1.1. Traditional FtF influence tactics also present in virtual teams

Table 1 presents the traditional FtF influence tactics enacted in the virtual teams in order of their prevalence. These tactics are clearly identifiable as previously established FtF influence tactics. However, the process by which they were enacted differed due to the ICT available for the team members. For example, Zen Mail with the word Urgent and the entire message in the subject line provides a quick jolt of pressure to get a target to realize the importance of a particular task. Highlighting text provides an easily noticeable way for someone to point out arguments and facts so that the receiver understands an important argument. Consultation as facilitated by ICT allows virtual team members to interactively share their ideas visually instead of requiring team members to focus solely on verbal or text communication. And finally, one participant indicated that emoticon smiley faces felt as though the communicator was expressing friendliness and support that influenced through a personal relationship. Thus, we perceive that the process by which one person attempted to influence another took advantage of the features of the ICT.

3.1.2. Ambiguity reduction

We also identified a new influence tactic, ambiguity reduction. In ambiguity reduction, team members clarify their request so that the target better understands the request. We identified three behaviors that exemplified ambiguity reduction. *Sharing information* is the first ambiguity reduction technique. It ensures that the

target has the necessary details to complete the request. As one participant said: “[Sharing information] makes people feel like they want to do what needs to be done.” Although sharing information is done in FtF teams, the use of technology makes sharing information necessary because there are fewer cues present to clarify meaning. However, sharing information is not always easy. Another participant shares: “That’s in fact one of the biggest problems in virtual teams that I’ve run across; what’s difficult is keeping everybody informed.”

Sharing information is different than rational persuasion. The intent is not to present an argument to persuade someone to do something. It is an empathetic perception that the target lacks understanding that would be simple in a FtF setting. Sharing information also demonstrates a belief that clarity by reducing ambiguity will be influential.

Creating accountability also reduces ambiguity. It ensures that the target will follow through on the request. Creating accountability is more explicit in virtual interactions due to the written record. According to a junior team member, these tactics also reduce any confusion that could exist surrounding the influence request:

[My supervisor] also has the very quick ability to hold people accountable. If you say, ‘Well I think it’d be a good idea if we brought cookies to the party.’ She would immediately say, ‘Will you take responsibility for that?’ So, you know, ‘And if not you, then can you find someone on your team? Okay, I’ll put you down as the one that’s bringing. And how many cookies will you bring? Great. And will you be there any earlier? Do you need, do you need a plate for the cookies?’ I think influence at the moment, but I also think it’s about influence over time. In other words, we’re not gonna have to revisit this. Nobody’s questioning who’s bringing the cookies; it was said on that call and we all heard it. It’ll show up in the minutes or on the project plan that way. So the influence is in that moment to get the information, but then it’s also the follow-through.

This tactic is different from legitimating because it is not telling the target what to do or assigning roles. Instead, it acknowledges that in communication over ICT, non-verbal cues of who is willing to do particular tasks are not available. By creating accountability both by team members being assigned to tasks and making sure their roles are recorded in the written record, the ambiguity of who is responsible for what is reduced.

Finally, *providing examples* helps reduce ambiguity. Some participants reported sending their influence targets documents

Table 1
Changes in traditional influences process reported by participants in order of prevalence.

Influence tactic	Definition ^a	Modified by ICT
Pressure	Demands, threats, frequent checking, or persistent reminders to influence the person to do what you want	Zen Mail: Sending entire message in subject heading starting with the word Urgent
Legitimizing	Establish legitimacy of a request by claiming the authority or right to make it, or by verifying that it is consistent with organizational policies, rules, practices, or traditions	CCing and/or forwarding email to higher organizational members
Rational persuasion	Logical arguments and factual evidence to persuade the person that a proposal or request is practical and likely to result in the attainment of task objectives	Using technology to track and generate data as well as highlighting digital text to draw attention to particular information
Consultation	The person’s participation in planning a strategy, activity, or change for which [the employee desires] his or her support and assistance, or [the employee is] willing to modify a request or proposal to deal with the person’s concerns and suggestions	Whiteboard technology, electronic polling, and screen sharing to encourage the participation of their team members
Inspirational appeals		n/a
Exchange		n/a
Ingratiation		n/a
Coalition		n/a
Personal appeals	Employee appeals “to the person’s feelings of loyalty and friendship toward [the employee] when [the employee asks] him or her to do something	Emoticons making the communication more friendly

^a Definitions are from Yukl et al. (1995).

which provided examples of what they wanted. Others reported using specific ICT to give examples such as screen sharing. When participants used screen sharing technologies, the target could see what was being referenced during a phone conversation. A junior team member described how screen sharing provided additional clarity to requests:

We just used Communicator again, where I shared my screen and so I walked him through, 'Well this is how an item or a hyperlink is displayed on the Excel document and this is what I need, so whatever this title is in the Excel document, this is what it's referencing,' and showing him on the SharePoint¹ site the area and the section that I was trying to map it over to.

Screen sharing is different than rational persuasion or consultation because the goal is not to convince someone of the correctness of a particular plan or to get their opinion on it. The goal is to use the ICT make clear intentions which have been obscured by the ICT.

In summary, virtual team members used a wide variety of influence tactics to get their team members to do what they wanted. These influence tactics ranged from those identified previously in FtF teams to ones that were necessitated by the virtual environment (e.g., ambiguity reduction). Below we will discuss how the use of these influence tactics varied depending status.

3.2. Status and influence tactics in virtual teams

To understand how status affects the choice and effectiveness of influence tactics, we first analyzed the status characteristics of our participants' influence targets. The participants nominated hierarchical position as the most important status characteristic of their intended influence targets. Hierarchical position is a specific status characteristic and readily assessable by knowledge of the team members.

With probing, participants also identified other, diffuse status characteristics of their intended targets including gender and culture, particularly as it related to time zone. Nonetheless, participants reported that hierarchical position was the most important status characteristic they considered when trying to influence their targets. For example, in describing the differences between himself and his manager, a participant stated: "Can you tell me a little bit more what you're looking for? I mean, I can give you the obvious, obvious things like, uh, you know, my manager's a woman. I'm not a woman <chuckles>." For this participant, gender appeared less important than hierarchical position.

Time zone differences were often associated with cultural differences. Participants who worked in virtual teams that spanned multiple time zones often worked with team members from different countries and different cultures. In addition, regional culture differences could arise even when team members were in the same country.

Time zone differences affected when virtual team members were able to contact one another and when people could expect responses. If the time zone difference was too great, synchronous communication might not have been possible unless team members significantly altered their workday. Dorothy, a junior team member, described the impact of time zone differences on her virtual team:

I am working with people for example from Ireland who are five hours ahead of me. So at this moment, it's the end of their

business day. Um, so I have to be very conscious of where people are in their day, and I have to be conscious of, you know, what they're waiting for from me, when I communicate with them, how I communicate with them, that type of thing.

Therefore, in our discussion of influence tactics across status, we will focus on the most prevalent status characteristic: organizational position. We noted that influence tactics varied by the specific direction of influence and they were not equally successful for each direction. Upward and downward influence tactics were, for the majority of cases, successful. However, lateral tactics were only successful about half of the time.

3.2.1. Upward influence tactics

Over half of participants reported using traditional influence tactics in the upward direction. In addition, the majority of participants who described upward influence tactics reported that their influence attempts were successful. The most frequently used influence tactic in the upward direction – pressure – was most often successful. In addition, rational persuasion was successful each time participants reported using it in the upward direction.

Participants using upward influence relied on traditional tactics. No participants reported using ambiguity reduction techniques in the upward direction to influence their targets. One explanation for this could be that low-status team members were more concerned that their influence attempt was received by the higher status target than that it would be misinterpreted.

3.2.2. Lateral influence tactics

Participants reported the successful use of influence tactics in the lateral direction a little more than half of the time. Two of the most successful lateral influence tactics were traditional FtF tactics: exchange and pressure. Further, many participants reported that if they had had the opportunity to interact FtF, they would have taken it. However, they did not feel that it would have affected how they approached the target or how the target would have responded. Others felt that it would have been beneficial to have the ability to read the target's facial cues or body language or to check the target's availability. They also felt that there were fewer communication issues and the influence process could be accomplished more quickly when people interact FtF.

3.2.3. Downward influence tactics

Downward influence tactics were reported to be successful a majority of the time. Pressure and rational persuasion were the most frequently used and the most successful tactics in the downward direction. Participants reported successfully using a wide variety of ambiguity reduction techniques in the downward direction compared to the lateral or upward influence.

3.3. Influence strategies

After analyzing the use of specific influence tactics, it became clear that some participants also reported more strategic use of influence tactics. We called these influence strategies because although they involved specific influence tactics (e.g., exchange and personal appeals) the participants reported using them as a best practice, a strategy that they tried to use at all times, regardless of the influence target. For each incident in which an influence strategy was explicitly identified, the participant was successful.

Two influence strategies emerged from the data were building relationships and documenting communications. Relationship building is a strategy establishing personal connections with virtual teammates whereas documenting communications is a strategy in which written records of communications are retained. It occurs over time with multiple influence events and is important

¹ SharePoint is a Microsoft product. SharePoint sites provide a single infrastructure for all of a company's websites. SharePoint allows employees to share documents with colleagues, manage projects with partners, and publish information to customers. SharePoint can also be used as a web application development platform.

in establishing trust between team members. Trust affects not only who people chose to influence, but also whether or not the influence attempt is successful. Influential team members were able to inspire a great deal of trust from their team members and were able to leverage this trust into power and influence. One junior team member described the results of her influence attempt: “She approved that request for me. That seems minimal but it was important and it took some time for me to build some trust and credibility with her for her to just do that without any questions.”

Documenting communications is an influence strategy best defined by the colorful emic code: ‘cover your ass’ email trail. Documenting communication creates accountability by using the ICT and is a new influence strategy available in virtual teams that is not possible in FtF interactions. Email trails provide, among other things, a record of what requests were made, when they were made, when the target agreed to comply, and what deadline was agreed upon by both parties.

Documenting communications is similar to the creating accountability influence tactic. However, documenting communications is categorized as a strategy, rather than a tactic, because it is an ongoing pattern of behavior for participants. Email trails are not necessarily kept for the sole purpose of influencing team members.

One influential members of a virtual team kept records of her interactions so that she could go back and use them, if necessary, to ensure that her influence attempt was a success.

I document everything electronically. And that’s the easiest way for me to do it. . . have something in writing saying, ‘This is how we contracted for this’ . . . not so much as if somebody doesn’t do something, but that everybody has a reference to go back to.

In summary, the virtual environment creates additional difficulties for influence attempts. Participant reported using a variety of strategies and technologies adapted to the virtual environment. Participants who reported using these strategies were more likely to report the influence attempt as being successful than unsuccessful.

4. Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine influence in virtual teams. First, we found that virtual team members use many previously identified FtF team influence tactics, albeit in new ways facilitated by the ICT. Highlighting particular parts of a document, communicating an important message entirely in an email subject line, cc’ing a supervisor, and taking an anonymous poll on a topic are all subtle but pervasive ways of using ICT to influence one’s team members. We suggest that this indicates the ubiquity of influence as well as the natural use of technology in team interactions.

In addition, we identified reducing ambiguity as an influence tactic in an environment in which confusion is common. Ambiguity reduction is a newly identified influence technique in virtual teams that creates buy in and action (i.e., influence) in targets. Ambiguity reduction is different than rational persuasion, legitimating, consultation or coalition building, because the goal is to make clear what is being requested and who is going to do it instead of convincing others of the logic of the request, the power of the person requesting it, asking the target for input or creating a coalition to convince others. It is a tactic to make clear what is needed so that the target buys into it, accepts responsibility, and acts.

It is quite likely that ambiguity reduction is present in FtF teams. Indeed, [Pierro et al.’s \(2012\)](#) research on some individual’s need for cognitive closure and the use of hard tactics demonstrates

that ambiguity is particularly difficult for some members of FtF teams. However, ambiguity affects everyone in virtual teams. The slower exchange of social and communication cues increases the ambiguity and the length of time it takes to reduce this ambiguity. These tactics were used by the participants to ensure that they get exactly what they wanted from their targets.

Our research adds to and complements this previous research to develop a comprehensive understanding of influence in virtual teams. In our research, the four most frequently used influence tactics in virtual teams we identified are pressure, legitimating tactics, rational persuasion, and consultation. The success of rational persuasion echoes results from previous research ([Kipnis et al., 1980](#); [Yukl & Falbe, 1990](#); [Steizel & Rimbau-Gilbert, 2013](#); [Elron & Vigoda-Gadot, 2006](#)). Clearly, rational persuasion is a common, useful, and successful influence technique in both FtF and virtual teams.

We note that the two most prevalent tactics we identified are considered harder influence tactics and were not as prevalent as previous research. [Elron and Vigoda-Gadot \(2006\)](#) found that virtual teams use milder influence tactics than we did (e.g., coalition building). [Steizel and Rimbau-Gilbert \(2013\)](#) found that lower status virtual team members used intermediation—a form a coalition building in which members built up support before the influence occurred. In addition, the harder tactics we identified were successful which is not always the case when they are enacted FtF ([Yukl & Falbe, 1990](#)). Further, pressure was successfully used in upward influence, which is uncommon in FtF teams ([Kipnis et al., 1980](#); [Yukl & Falbe, 1990](#)). We suggest that the virtual environment enabled the use of more aggressive influence tactics because it is easier for targets to ignore influence attempts. In particular, the pressure tactics helped lower status team members be successful because it helped them to be heard by their higher status targets.

We suggest the differences in the influence tactics we identified are related to the differences between our sample and the other research studies. [Elron and Vigoda-Gadot \(2006\)](#) were studying new team members who did not know each other well. [Steizel and Rimbau-Gilbert \(2013\)](#) were studying middle managers who were trying to influence superiors located outside of their home country, often not speaking their first language. Our participants were in long standing teams, most sharing the same culture. Some of the cultural sensitivities of influencing a superior in a different country that [Stiezel and Rimbau-Gaulbert](#) found are not relevant in our sample.

Second, we identified ambiguity reduction as an important new influence tactic, yet other researchers have not. In newly established teams or with team members new to ICT, there may be such a focus on getting to know the other members and the technology that members rely on the more established FtF influence tactics. Ambiguity reduction requires a certain level of empathy and perspective taking that necessitates a knowledge of the person being influenced or the potential areas of misinformation. Further, as we discuss below, we saw no instances of ambiguity reduction from lower levels to upper level team members, which was the focus of [Stiezel and Rimbau-Gaulbert’s \(2013\)](#) study. We also suggest that we did not find intermediation like [Stiezel and Rimbau-Gaulbert](#) because our team members generally share the same culture and, thus, norms of communication would be more similar.

Finally, we are curious as to why someone would allow themselves to be influenced by a team member of lower status. One potential explanation for the success of upward influence tactics comes from the task-oriented nature of virtual teams. This focus on the task, rather than on the team structure, might give more power to low-status members. Team leaders may have been more willing to listen to low-status members given that the teams consisted of experts and the leaders wanted to accomplish the task effectively and efficiently.

4.1. Status and influence tactics

Our research contributes to understanding the effects of status in virtual teams. First, diffuse status characteristics are not nearly as important as specific status characteristics. While participants noticed diffuse characteristics in their virtual team members (e.g., gender, nationality), the specific status characteristics were more important in choosing influence techniques (e.g., hierarchical position). This may explain some of the paradoxical results of status in previous research in which status differences are both flattened and highlighted. Our research suggests that diffuse status characteristics were flattened while specific status characteristics remained important.

Of course, it is possible that our participants, like most people, were reluctant to disclose the effects of others' diffuse status characteristics on their behavior. Status characteristic theory is a foundational theory of human interactions; these diffuse characteristics likely had an unacknowledged affect. Nonetheless, our analyses suggest that diffuse characteristics were less and specific characteristics were more important in influence attempts.

Second, the use of influence tactics also depends on status, specifically one's hierarchical level in the virtual team. Lower team members used harder tactics than we would expect from FtF team research. However, only higher status team members used ambiguity reduction. Indeed, ambiguity reduction was the only influence technique that higher status team members reported using that lower status members did not.

Finally, success of the influence attempts depending on the direction in which the influence was attempted. Specifically, we found a U shaped distribution in which higher-to-lower status influence attempts and lower-to-higher status attempts were successful most of the time, but peer-to-peer attempts were successful only half of the time. While the success of the higher-to-lower influence attempts is expected, the success of the lower-to-higher influence attempts is interesting. While we could argue that the flattening of status in ICT could explain their success, we suggest the success is related to the lower status team members' ability to get the attention of their higher status team members. Their use of harder tactics was not used to dominate but to get attention. In a communication medium in which it is easy to forget who else is "there," these tactics are highly effective. Low-status members need to be assertive in order to be heard in the virtual environment. They need to be clear as to why people should listen to them.

The marginal success of the peer-to-peer influence relied on exchange tactics. Participants may have been more willing to help their peers if they knew they could count on them when they needed help. Interestingly, in previous research on influence in FtF interactions, exchange and pressure were the two least used tactics in the lateral direction (Yukl & Falbe, 1990). Instead, in FtF teams, consultation and rational persuasion were the most frequently reported influence tactics in the lateral direction.

We finally note the emergent influence strategies in our study: documenting information and developing relationships. Documenting one's influence over others or others' attempt at influencing oneself takes advantage of the special features of ICT while developing relationships through ICT attempts to mitigate the deficits of ICT. In particular, effective virtual teams require more than task orientation; they also need an explicit relationship orientation. Virtual team members must decide how to best spend their time: focusing on the task or on relationships. Given the time-consuming nature of relationship building using ICT and the pressures to complete tasks (e.g., strictly enforced deadlines), there is little extrinsic motivation to spend time establishing and maintaining relationships. This makes the finding that successful influencers realize the importance of relationships even more important.

4.2. Limitations and future research

Although the qualitative nature of the current study produced valuable findings regarding the influence process in virtual teams, there are also some limitations to the research. The first limitation pertains to participant selection and characteristics of the participants. Data collection was limited to 23 members of virtual teams who self-selected into the study. Self-selection poses a potential problem because people who agree to participate tend to be those with positive views of their virtual teams and virtual team members (Rogelberg, Luong, Sederberg, & Cristol, 2000). Based on multiple comments by participants, who indicated frustrations with their virtual team members, this does not seem to be a concern. Therefore, it does not appear that the participants in the current study have an overly positive view of virtual work and their virtual teams.

Additionally, these participants were all white and were all members of Western cultures. Participants did belong to virtual teams that consisted of members of other races, ethnicities, and cultural backgrounds; however, given the focus of the current study on status differences, future research would benefit from a more diverse group of participants. Interviewing participants with more diverse backgrounds will lend further support to the current influence process model.

A third limitation of the current study is that all data was self-reported. Self-report data is subject to social desirability effects, which are even more of a concern given the sensitive nature of influence as a research topic. However, in order to prevent social desirability, participants were asked to report on specific behaviors that had occurred recently. Future research should use both agent and target accounts, as did Yukl and Falbe (1990).

While social desirability is also a possibility in the current study, several factors about the current study indicate that this is not the case. First, participants were asked to report on specific behaviors that had occurred recently in order to get a more accurate response. Second, participants in the current study were vocal about their reticence to talk about influence and power, but they nonetheless provided valuable information and insight regarding the influence process in their virtual teams. Third, participants reported using less socially desirable tactics more than socially desirable ones which indicates that they were not as concerned with responding in a socially desirable manner.

5. Conclusion

Communication technology and the virtual environment are changing how we work with one another in a variety of ways. How we influence one another in virtual teams is no exception to this transformation. Workers have adapted to the virtual environment in both creative and traditional ways. People must now work harder to get their coworkers' attention in order to even have a chance to influence them. They must empathize with others' perspectives to help them accomplish their work. And they must attend to the interpersonal while accomplishing the structural components of their work.

Virtual teams are as complicated as the world in which they function. Spanning an ever changing environment of new and experienced employees, hierarchical level, technologies, organizations, and nationalities, we expect that employees will necessarily adapt their behaviors to use the previously identified influence techniques and develop new ones to accomplish their work. When and if the pace of the changing nature of work plateaus, we need to continue our examination of employees to understand the ways they influence their co-workers in order to accomplish their work.

Acknowledgements

We would like to acknowledge Claire Sookman, Dr. Lisa Walker, and Dr. Shawn Long for their invaluable help in this project.

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