

Chapter 4

Methodology–Case Study

Introduction

The focus of this study was to obtain information on leading virtual teams. Leadership may also be thought of as a management or coordination function. A case or field study was used to explore a specific virtual team in more detail than the teams studied using the Delphi technique. The primary difference between the two studies was that only one person from a virtual team in the Delphi study was interviewed whereas several team members from the specific case study were interviewed and each contributed his or her unique perspective of the same team. These multiple perspectives provided greater insight into the dynamics of a virtual team.

Introduction to the Case Study

The Case

The case study was about the team of people responsible for planning and hosting a computer conference in 1996, the ABC 96 Conference. The team was primarily distributed throughout major corporations and universities in the United States and setting up this conference was a volunteer effort over and above their primary work responsibilities.

Qualitative Methods

There are a variety of terms used to describe qualitative methods such as ethnography, field methods, qualitative inquiry, participant observation, case

study, naturalistic methods, and responsive evaluation (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 1). Some researchers such as L.M. Smith (1992) consider them to be practically synonymous. Field studies are frequently used by social psychologists and anthropologists to study a group or organization in their natural environment. This field study may be considered a case study (a type of qualitative method), where a single entity or case is studied by collecting detailed information using a variety of data collection procedures over some period of time (Creswell, 1994). The social group in this “case” is the virtual team that planned and hosted the ABC 96 conference.

Data Collection and Analysis Process

The case was studied by interviewing team members. Thirteen of the team of 34 people on 24 committee chairs granted interviews and these were conducted from August 1996 to February 1997. There were three types of interviews: (1) two face-to-face interviews which were tape-recorded; (2) four telephone interviews during which the researcher took notes; and (3) seven interview responses using electronic mail.

Each interview consisted of 13 major questions, see Appendix G, plus a few additional questions where probing or clarification was needed. Each respondent was assured of confidentiality.

In addition, over 250 pages of collected artifacts were reviewed and selected items were included in this paper. These artifacts included notes, organization charts, conference brochures, and electronic mail. The reason to

analyze these artifacts is to ascertain evidence of leadership through statements that indicate leadership styles, shared purpose, team direction, effectiveness, problems solved, and so on. Comparing both interviews and artifacts provides a better overall description of leadership, especially if there is consistency. If the comparison indicates conflicting information, additional probing may be required for clarification. Yin (1989) regards the primary modes of data analysis in case study as:

(a) the search for “patterns” by comparing results predicted from theory or the literature; (b) “explanation building,” in which the researcher looks for casual links and/or explores plausible or rival explanations and attempts to build an explanation about the case; and (c) time-series analysis in which the researcher traces changes in a pattern over time (Creswell, 1994, pp. 156-157).

In this instance, the data collected was analyzed for patterns or categories of information on leadership practices. These patterns “form the basis for the emerging story to be told by the qualitative researcher” (Creswell, 1994, p. 154). In addition, data collected was searched for “unusual or useful quotes that can be incorporated into the qualitative story” (Creswell, 1994, p. 155).

Confidentiality

Responses to the case study interviews and subsequent analysis of artifacts from the ABC 96 virtual team were treated with complete confidentiality.