E-ethical leadership for virtual project teams

Margaret R. Lee *

Capella University, 225 South Sixth Street, Minneapolis, MN 55402, United States

Received 30 March 2008; received in revised form 21 May 2008; accepted 27 May 2008

Abstract

This paper presents a review of current literature on ethical theories as they relate to ethical leadership in the virtual business environment (e-ethics) and virtual project leadership. Ethical theories are reviewed in relation to virtual project management, such as participative management, Theory Y, and its relationship to utilitarianism; Kantian ethics, motivation, and trust; communitarian ethics, ethic of care and egalitarianism; Stakeholder Theory; and the use of political tactics. Challenges to e-ethical leadership are presented and responses to these issues discussed. The conclusion presents four propositions for future research. The purpose of this paper is to identify secondary literature on e-ethics and how this new area of business ethics may affect the leaders of virtual project teams.

Keywords: E-ethics; E-leadership; Virtual project management; Virtual teams; Project management; Ethics; Project leadership; Ethical project leadership; E-ethical project management; Sensitive material; Code of conduct; Social isolation; Virtual community; Stakeholder involvement

1. Introduction

The need for ethical leadership in project teams has always been important in organizations, but the need for ethical leadership in virtual project teams has become increasing relevant as businesses move toward more non-traditional and international work environments. The term e-ethics describes ethical leadership in the virtual business environment. Ethical issues for virtual team management may be different from traditional project team management, and how they might be different is still an emerging study. Virtual project teams are increasing in business today, and understanding ethical management of virtual teams is an important part of the new e-business ethics.

This paper defines virtual teams, the project manager's role as an ethical manager and leader, and the ethical responsibilities of the project manager to lay a foundation for a discussion on e-ethical project management. Ethical theories are discussed in relation to virtual project management, such as participative management, Theory Y, and its relationship to utilitarianism; Kantian ethics, motivation, and trust; communitarian ethics, ethic of care and egalitarianism; Stakeholder Theory; and the use of political tactics. Several issues surface under the topic of e-ethical leadership for virtual project teams. Among these are: unethical use of sensitive material; unethical behaviors; superficial codes of conduct; ethic of care and developing a caring environment; social isolation in the virtual community; and the lack of stakeholder involvement or dissatisfied stakeholders in project work. Responses to these issues are discussed and four recommendations for future research are made.

1.1. Definition of the virtual team

Virtual teams reflect the ever-increasing non-traditional work environments of the 21st century. According to Her tel et al. [1], virtual teams are work groups with members collaborating from geographically distant locations, using electronic communication media, and reflecting recent trends of globalization and interdependent teamwork. Fernback [2] suggests that computer-mediated communications, such as project team work, “can assert victory in humanity’s ancient struggle with nature by overcoming
the constraints of geographical boundaries . . . ” (p. 39). Ariss et al. [3] further define the virtual team as a group of skilled individuals who “communicate via computer, phone, fax and video-conference” (p. 22). Worldwide, North America is the most active in e-business, according to McClenahen and Jusko [4]. Ethical virtual project management has become increasingly important as the trend in virtual work teams continues.

1.2. The project manager’s role as both the ethical manager and ethical leader

Project managers are often required to be both managers and leaders. Managers initiate (project initiation), administer (project planning and scope management), improve efficiency (time, cost, quality and resource management) and control (risk monitoring and procurement management) project work. Leaders innovate (project initiating processes), take risks (risk management), provide vision and direction (communication, strategies development, and goal setting) and motivate (align resources, help overcome political, bureaucratic, and resource barriers) project team members [5]. Many of these tasks involve balancing ethical issues for the team – such as risk management, stakeholder management and resource management. Flannes and Levin [6] describe the different roles and leadership skills needed by project managers. The four roles they suggest are leader, manager, facilitator and mentor/coach. In addition to playing multiple roles, project managers, according to Verma [7], must be able to “get things done well through others” (p. 145).

General management literature shows that the manager’s leadership style and competence has a direct and measurable impact on the organization’s performance [8]. Hertel et al.’s [1] study correlated team effectiveness to management practices related to goal, task, and outcome interdependence. They found that the more ethical and effective the leadership of the team, the higher the quality of goal setting processes, task interdependence and the project deliverable.

1.3. Ethical responsibilities of the project manager

Ethical problems can often be traced to dysfunctional project leadership and project managers are responsible for routinely reviewing the project processes for ethical challenges [9]. Kliem [10] suggests that project managers must emphasize ethical behavior in all dealings with stakeholders and reduce or eliminate any conditions that might encourage unethical behavior in project work. In addition, Kliem proposes that the project manager is responsible for creating a positive atmosphere and should encourage accountability for results. Project managers, he insists, must “focus on doing the right things rather than doing things right” [10, p. 177]. Verma [7] re-states this as “leadership focuses on effectiveness (doing the right things) where managership focuses on efficiency (doing the things right)” (p. 218–219). As with all business, unethical behavior in project management carries with it costs, both hidden and immediate [9]. Ethical leadership in virtual project teams, therefore, is ultimately the responsibility of the project manager.

2. Ethical theories as they relate to virtual project management

2.1. Participative management, Theory Y, and the relationship to utilitarianism

A traditional ethical management approach relies upon the right to participate and the right to participative leadership, both important aspects of interdependence in project teamwork. Interdependence, according to Scott and Davis [11], involves the elements of the work, and how changes in any element may affect another area. Participative leadership depends heavily upon having Theory Y project team members. Theory Y employees, according to McGregor [12], prefer to accept responsibility for their work, support the organization and its goals, and have the ability to analyze the best methods by which to achieve those goals. Generally, individuals chosen for project work (work that involves analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation) are those who are well suited to participative management and have a basic Theory Y inclination. Project managers with project teams that exhibit Theory Y behaviors could use a participative leadership style. This would include delegating decisions and expanding job responsibilities within the team as needed.

Participative leadership may be considered a utilitarian-type style of leadership because it increases worker satisfaction, therefore increasing the possibility for better performance and productivity, making a more productive organization [13]. Utilitarian theory, a consequential theory of ethics, emphasizes that one should do good or right for the greatest number of people as determined by the consequences of the action [14]. If participative leadership is used with employees who exhibit behaviors that McGregor [12] states are Theory Y behaviors and in the right organizational context, then managers could be considered managing ethically. The increase in worker satisfaction and resultant organizational performance should indicate that this style of management will reflect increased benefits to society, maximize utility, and positively influence economics [13]. A participative utilitarianism approach reflects the leader’s ability to produce benefits for the virtual workers, the organization (including efficiencies of human resources), and, ultimately, society.

Participative management as a management theory includes the rights of the employees to be included in the decision-making processes through discussion, consultation or participation [13]. It is based on the basic theory of the principle of equal liberty, which states that an individual’s liberty must be equal to others and must be protected [15]. Rawls’ principle of fair equality of
opportunity states that all individuals should be given the same chance to show their initiative, aptitude and contributions [13]. Deutsch [16] suggests that individuals will be more likely to accept decisions and consequences if they have had an opportunity to be democratically involved in making them. Therefore, every team member under participative management has the right to be involved in the management of the project – an excellent goal for any successful project team.

2.2. Kantian ethics, motivation, and trust

Kant’s ethical guidelines emphasize a universal standard of behavior whereby individuals are treated with respect and never exploited as a means to an end [14]. The virtual participative leader of the project team would measure performance and productivity to encourage more participatory response from the team to increase efficiencies and productivity, which might be considered in contrast to the virtual, religious, social, economic and civil rights – for all people. This includes equality in all areas of life – political, religious, social, economic and civil rights – for all people.

The first formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative principles focuses on the individual’s moral reasons for actions, unlike utilitarianism where the focus is on the outcome or consequences of the actions [17]. The second formulation of Kant’s categorical imperative principles focuses on exploitation. This categorical imperative states that people should not be used or exploited to serve the self-interests of another person or organization [17]. Exploitation of the efforts of team members by another team member, including the project manager, would be morally wrong under Kantian principles.

The Kantian right to the freedom from injury, fraud and personal freedom [13] plays an important role in stabilizing the interdependence of a team, and, therefore, the ability of the project manager to motivate the team. Motivating the team is a major responsibility of the project manager. Being able to mentor and motivate project team members is recognized as one of the major personal competences (behaviors, attitudes and core personality characteristics) that play a part in a project manager’s success [18]. Elton Mayo, an industrial psychologist in the mid-1990s and part of the human relations school of thought of organizational management, determined that feelings, social groupings and group norms, positive reinforcement, and informal hierarchies [11] motivate workers. Hertel et al. [1] studied the challenges of virtual team motivation. Their field study of 31 virtual teams showed that motivation can be achieved with virtual teams, and that when management practices related to goal setting, task structure and team-based rewards are interdependent, they were positively related to the effectiveness of the team. They also found that trust was a major contributor to positive motivation in virtual teamwork. They define trust as the “... expectancy of team members that their efforts will be reciprocated and not exploited...” [1, p. 8]. In the absence of trust, indications of exploitation are directly opposite the Kantian principles.

Trust is particularly important because fear and misunderstandings can escalate very quickly in virtual environments where face-to-face communication is not possible. Ethical management is based on the well-being of the team members, and three principles apply: “following exemplary behaviour, helping employees to value the consequences of their actions in other persons, and not betraying employees’ trust” [19, p. 329]. Behaving ethically is the moral responsibility of the leader, helping others is a Kantian value, and trust is the motivator behind the team members’ actions.

2.3. Communitarian ethic, ethic of care, and egalitarianism

The communitarian ethic, or way of social thought and policy-making, focuses on community or shared values. With the position that social rights and responsibilities, as they relate to society and our social conscience, this ethical approach derives much of its background from common law and social contract theory [20]. The communitarian ethic emphasizes not the individual, but the community of individuals and the relationships within the community. Velasquez [13] suggests that these relationships should be cultivated and preserved to maintain an ethic of care that extends throughout the entire community.

The ethic of care “emphasizes caring for the concrete well-being of those near to us” [13, p. 60] and nurturing relationships is an important part of the communitarian ethic. Fernback [2] asserts that communitarian behaviors in virtual communication tend to form personal relationships in cyberspace leading to communal spirit and social bonding, essential elements to successful project management. This, in turn, develops social communities that hold together moral order and social values in virtual space, where personal interaction is not possible. Fernback [2] suggests that the collectivity of those involved in computer-mediated communications leads to democracy and egalitarianism, and a concern for the common good. Kapor [21] concurs by stating that cyberspace “is more egalitarian than elitist, and more decentralized than hierarchical” (p. 53) and serves individuals and communities. This is exhibited by a community understanding of behavioral norms, such as netiquette and a tolerance of the necessity for moderators in online forums. In the decentralized community of virtual communication, hierarchical structures are substituted with egalitarian communities, more collectivist than individualistic [2].

Egalitarian principles are based on the belief that everyone should be treated equally and be compensated at the same rate [16]. Thus, egalitarianism should encourage cooperation, community and cohesion for the team. Egalitarianism is a moral doctrine that promotes all individuals as equals. This includes equality in all areas of life – political, religious, social, economic and civil rights – for all people.
In their study of 10 cases with 117 participants regarding appropriate public participation, including egalitarianism, Weber and Tuler [22] revealed distinct perspectives on what the individuals in the study felt public process should be. Much of their work is applicable to virtual team communication and the virtual decision process environment. Weber and Tuler found that in egalitarian deliberations, the fact that the participants were empowered was important. Other important factors from their study that encouraged an egalitarian approach were access to the process and information, encouragement of discussion, and the individual’s sense of empowerment to be involved in the outcome of the discussion. However, they also found that egalitarianism in public discussion was considered negative because it could limit those who might participate and the topics or impose other restrictions. This would be particularly negative in virtual communications, where all members need to feel the freedom to participate and discuss whatever ideas they think are necessary for the benefit of the project. Their study revealed a mixed emphasis on building social roles (often not necessary in a virtual community) but strong support for building trust among the participants (vital to the virtual project team).

Egalitarian ideals, however, are difficult to achieve in the workplace due to the tenure of the individuals on the team, the differing skills and knowledge of the individual team members, and judgment of the team (if peer reviews are used) and management (if performance reviews are used) of the efforts expended for the project by each member.

3. E-ethical issues for contemporary virtual project teams

3.1. Unethical use of sensitive material

Unethical use of sensitive material is listed as a major issue for e-leadership [3]. Computer monitoring, they suggest, is not an avenue for eliminating this risk, as it often works negatively to lower employee morale and violates trust and privacy. Lack of trust indicates a Theory X approach to managing individuals. McGregor [12] states that Theory X employees require an authoritarian management style because they are self-centered, cannot take initiative, and are resistant to change (the opposite of Theory Y). Trust is a more positive solution to confidentiality on the virtual project team. Participative management with a Theory Y team in a trusting environment is an ethical approach to curtailing the misuse of sensitive materials.

3.2. Unethical behaviors

Cranford [23] notes that virtual communications, protected by computers and miles of distance, can create a tendency for more aggressive and disrespectful behavior. Cranford notes that the freedom from face-to-face interactions can encourage behaviors that otherwise might not be acceptable. However, Cranford found that these behaviors were also cause for reciprocity, which inhibits most virtual communicators to resist emotionally irresponsible and unethical behaviors. Freestone and Mitchell’s [24] study of 219 generation Y (those individuals born between 1964 and 1976) consumers determined 24 unethical behaviors ranging from ethically questionable activities to downloading music and movies. In the study, they found that 89% of the respondents felt that sending malicious emails was wrong. The project manager is responsible for monitoring for unethical behavior and guiding the team back toward a caring, trusting environment. The project manager also has the responsibility to eliminate uncertainty as to the appropriateness of online behavior in the virtual project team by responding quickly to unethical behaviors should they arise.

3.3. Superficial codes of conduct

So important are ethics in project management that the Project Management Institute has a code of ethics [25] and a code of professional conduct [26] for project managers. The Project Management Institute, an international membership organization for project management professionals, requires all Project Management Professionals (PMPs) to learn and be able to answer questions about the codes to pass the examination to become certified as a PMP. Other business organizations, such as the International Public Management Association for Human Resources (IPMA-HR), require a similar proficiency in ethical behavior to become certified [27]. The Professional Associations Resource Network (PARN) conducts leading edge research on ethics and codes of conduct to promote international professional good practice. PARN has published three books on professional ethics, one of which focuses on analyzing professional codes of conduct [28].

Many project teams write a code of conduct or team charter for their project, with the guidance of the project manager. A team that works together to build a code of conduct will more likely buy-in to the concept and the code than being presented a list of ‘rules’ by the project manager. According to Kuntze et al. [29], ethical codes regulate behavior, which can be especially important in the new roles involved in virtual environments. The project manager will then monitor the team’s status and bring the team together to review the code if problems surface. The code of conduct brings a sense of community and unity to the geographically diverse project team.

Milton-Smith [30] warns against superficial codes of conduct that suggest an ethical awareness that is not really present in the organization. True ethical behavior must be exhibited by everyone in the organization, from the leaders to the employees. Leadership and ethics are inseparable, and both create trust and positive relationships. It is the moral responsibility, therefore, of the project manager to abide by the code of conduct and to be an example of ethical behavior.
3.4. Ethic of care and developing a caring environment

The caring organization, as described by Liedtka [31], must focus on individuals, not profit or quality, as the ethic of care focuses on the connection between individuals. Velasquez [13] indicates that ethic of care describes caring “for the well-being of those near to us” (p. 60). Ethic of care also connects with the Kantian principles whereby individuals are treated with respect and never exploited [17]. Kant’s categorical imperative dictates that a person should treat others as he or she would want to be treated [17]. Therefore, to create a caring environment within a project team, the project manager must strive to care for the sole reason of goodness itself, not for the sake of the deliverables. This caring environment, then, should advance the project team toward growth and development within the project.

3.5. Social isolation in the virtual community

Social isolation and the lack of social interaction are issues with virtual teams. Kim et al. [32] believe that the behavioral consequences are not yet known, but might be socially detrimental. They suggest ethical leadership, instead of just managing the work, will be vital in managing ethical issues involving social isolation. In particular, the ethic of care, participative management, Kantian ethics, trust, and communitarian ethics are applicable to social isolation. The relationship between ethical employee relations, development and respect enhance the feeling of a caring organization. The ongoing community of the team matters to each team member because their own identity is tied to the virtual community [33]. A virtual community makes it difficult to secure an individual’s identity and is, therefore, constantly important. Kim et al. [32] indicate that this type of care regarding human development may be more important in virtual team management than in non-virtual team management. In the absence of a caring environment, individuals on the team may feel isolated, and lack motivation and loyalty to the team and the project goals. According to Kliem [10], project failure often relates directly to the lack of commitment and communication.

3.6. Stakeholder Theory and the lack of stakeholder involvement or dissatisfied stakeholders

Stakeholder Theory introduces the importance of the role of the stakeholder in the project work. In project management, stakeholders include individuals and organizations that are directly involved with the project and who have a vested interest in the resulting deliverables of the project [5]. The Stakeholder Theory implies that the responsibility of the organization includes shareholders, employees, customers, suppliers, creditors and others involved in the business [34]. The goal is not to subject the stakeholders to involuntary harm or loss, and is based on Kant’s notion of duty [17].

Meznar et al. [35] propose that the organization’s value is the economic and social performance (interrelated) that it brings to the stakeholders. The problem of stakeholder management is compounded when the stakeholders are physically located outside of the virtual team and have little or no personal interaction with team members due to geological distance.

5. Responses to ethical issues pertaining to project leadership and virtual project teams

Ethical theories are designed to help individuals in organizations make difficult moral choices and ethical decisions. According to Pinto et al. [9], developing ethical management skills is essential for project management because the project manager often has to deal with rapid change and uncertainty, key factors that lead to moral decision-making. In many organizations, project work tends to have a high profile and be highly visible. This, in turn, causes pressure and stress on the project team to do “whatever it takes” to make the project succeed. Ethical behavior is often the first thing compromised in a high-risk environment [9].

5.1. Response to unethical use of sensitive material and unethical behaviors

Helpful in the unethical use of sensitive material are new methods of monitoring ethics in the virtual environment. A software program called E-thics applies a policy-based review of all computer-generated messages to alert the sender of breaches of ethics [36]. In addition, the software provides a message regarding the ethical implications of the message and corrective instructions. The program is touted as a demonstrable force for corporate ethical values, fairness, responsibility, and stewardship [36]. This method is considered ethical because it does not secretly monitor messages, but immediately informs the sender of the breach. However, overt programs that monitor communications may also cause reliance upon the programs by the team members and relieve them from making moral decisions based upon their own belief systems. These programs may also imply a lack of trust between the project manager and the project team members, and trust in the virtual environment is essential to successful project team leadership.

Covert monitoring programs that “spy” on employees are considered unethical and immoral. Employees’ right to privacy is a complex issue, but requires consideration of relevance, consent, and reasonable methods of collecting information to be justified and balanced in the workplace [13]. Like the code of conduct, however, the system is only as effective as the information entered into it about the ethics and values of the organization, and must be fully supported by leadership. Exemplary behavior by the project manager and private discussions with team members who violate the ethics of virtual communications are required for a project manager to thwart unethical behaviors.
These activities require that the project manager have an adequate understanding of ethical issues and can articulate correct conduct. A competent project manager, as described by the Project Management Institute [18], should be able to demonstrate defined and accepted standards of personal behavior and be able to apply them to project activities. Project management competencies include ethical behavior “governed by responsibility, respect, fairness and honesty” [18, p. 24] and the ability to communicate what ethically correct behavior should be to the project team by accurate and appropriate methods. The professional project manager should have the training and development related to business ethics that will provide a strong background for understanding ethical issues and how to assist the team with ethical issues.

5.2. Response to superficial codes of conduct

When addressing superficial codes of conduct, the project manager can capitalize on the ethic of care approach, establishing norms and organizational values of ethical behavior. Pierce and Henry [37] found that, in companies with leadership support, a formal code of computer ethics had an impact on ethical decision-making. Having the project team list values and norms during the planning stage of the project and writing a team code of conduct document can be an effective management technique. However, in surveying 356 information systems professionals, Pierce and Henry [37] found that ethical decisions related to computer use were influenced by the individual’s own personal code first, then any informal ethical code in the organization, and then the organization’s formal code of ethics. They determined that computer-using individuals had a personal sense of ethics that deterred unethical behavior more strongly than did an organizational code of conduct. A roles and responsibilities document can be used as an alternative to the code of conduct. The project manager, by clearly identifying the roles and responsibilities of each team member, can assist the team in understanding their roles in the virtual environment and the conduct considered the norm for the team.

5.3. Response to ethic of care, developing a caring environment, and social isolation in the virtual community

To encourage the ethic of care and develop a caring environment, the project manager can meet personally with the team members to discuss their personal and professional goals, and how the project work can help them obtain those goals. This will initiate the establishment of an ethic of care environment at the beginning of the project. It is also the responsibility of the project manager to provide a development plan for team members, and identify and work toward filling any competency gaps on the project team [18]. Similar is the project manager’s response to the lack of interaction on the team. The project manager can respond to social isolation in the virtual community with several demonstrable activities. Solutions include allowing team members to work from home part-time but still require periodic live interpersonal interactions. Also effective is allocating office space for visiting virtual workers, so their identity with the home office becomes a continual physical presence in the form of an office or cubical. Although identity is tied to the virtual community [31], a physical presence at the home office can help establish a strong feeling of community toward the virtual working by those grounded in the home office.

Communication is a key responsibility of the project manager [18], and facilitating the effective exchange of information is a method by which communication can further reduce feelings of isolation on the virtual project team. It is important for the virtual project team manager to find ways to connect the team, such as occasional face-to-face meetings, connecting to the team members’ personal lives and interests, talking about current events, and providing virtual activities outside of the project work. Focusing on individuals and connecting with them is part of establishing a caring organization [29]. Ford [38] indicates that virtual communities can become real when they are affective for people, and that the term virtual only demarcates the computer environment.

5.4. Political tactics and the response to lack of stakeholder involvement or dissatisfied stakeholders

Managing stakeholder expectations often involves political activities on the part of the project manager. Political tactics are generally viewed as negative and self-serving, including such activities as controlling, manipulating or deceiving to build support. However, in project management, good political tactics can be positive, ethical, and moral – and can prevent stakeholder problems. Project managers employ these tactics to obtain support for projects, promote communication, build the reputation of the project and its deliverables, and influence decision makers in favor of the project goals. This is part of the leadership role of the project manager. Velasquez [13] suggests that ethical use of political tactics includes four questions that will analyze the moral features of using political tactics in organizations. These can be applied to project management. The utilitarian approach involves asking the question, “Are the tactics used intended to advance socially beneficial or harmful goals?” [13, p. 393]. The utilitarian approach would weigh the social costs and benefits of the actions and policies against the benefits and costs to society. Another question Velasquez [13] asks involves the rights of the individuals: “Do the tactics employed treat others in a way that is consistent with their moral rights?” (p. 393). This involves a Kantian approach – that people should never be used as a way to a means, and that behavior should always be such that it would be beneficial if everyone behaved in that same way. Under the theory of distributive justice approach, a question that will help analyze the moral features of using political tactics is:
“Will the tactics lead to an equitable distribution of benefits and burdens?” [13, p. 393]. In other words, the use of the political tactics should indicate that all stakeholders are being treated equally or, if treated unequally are treated so in relation to the proportion of the dissimilarity. Velasquez’s [13] final test is to ask the question: “What impact will the tactics have on the relationships within the organization?” (p. 393). Obviously, the project manager will not want to alienate others within the organization or find that the political tactic has a long-range negative impact on the organization. This relates specifically to the ethic of care approach in moral and ethical considerations when using political tactics. Ethic of care indicates that the project manager must be consistent in valuing the well-being of all those on the project and in the organization. Kim et al. [32] discuss the ethical implications of ethic of care as treating employees with respect and dignity. Kim et al. use the term employee relations (both individual and collective, which includes stakeholders) ethics as interchangeable with ethic of care to analyze the negative human results from a moral rather than an economic perspective. The challenge of the project manager and project team, virtual or non-virtual, is to “identify the stakeholders, determine their requirements, and then manage and influence those requirements to ensure a successful project” [5, p. 16]. Activities such as listing all stakeholders, conducting a stakeholder analysis, soliciting feedback from stakeholders, including subject matter experts in stakeholder meetings for consultation and influence, providing status to stakeholders, and managing stakeholder communications can reduce stakeholder disgruntlement and increase participation [18]. Involving major stakeholders in developing and signing off on a project charter is also helpful. Positively and ethically managing stakeholders can increase stakeholder involvement and reduce stakeholder dissatisfaction.

6. Future research issues

Understanding the positive impact of ethical political tactics in promoting virtual projects is an area for future research. How project managers can use political tactics to move project work forward is an important key to both traditional and e-ethical leadership. The use of political tactics, however, must be tempered by ethical business decisions and moral responsibility. In working with stakeholders, the challenge of the virtual project manager is to coordinate non-traditional geographically diverse stakeholders and provide solutions by which stakeholders expect new can be realized. More research on the methods by which successful project managers obtain this balance would be helpful to both the field of project management and ethics.

Ethical leadership is essential to successful project management. More research needs to be conducted to increase an understanding of ethical leadership styles and their impact on project teams and project management. This research should include the measurement of the leader’s impact on the project’s success [8]. In addition, specific research on e-ethical leadership styles and their impact on project management leadership styles is needed to support those project managers who manage virtual teams.

The emerging world of ethical monitoring of electronic systems leads to a multitude of ethical questions regarding privacy, trust and employee rights. The potential that management might have over employees with monitoring programs needs to be studied to determine if such programs are ethical methods of collecting information, require the consent of the employee, or are justified. Virtual team project managers need to understand the ramifications of monitoring programs on the dynamics of virtual project work. Research needs to be done regarding whether or not ethical monitoring would demoralize virtual workers and restrict communications or encourage more certainty about how ethical behaviors should be exercised in the virtual environment.

More research is needed on how the virtual project manager can build trust on the virtual project team. Trust is an essential element of ethical team management and vital for motivation within a Kantian context. In virtual environments where personal interaction and interpersonal relationships are limited by technology, trust becomes a significant challenge for e-ethical management. The establishment of trust in virtual environments is important to successful project team management. How virtual project managers show integrity, keep commitments, operate within all legal requirement for the project, disclose conflicts, provide consistency in communications, demonstrate fair treatment, and resolve issues [18] all point to building trust with the project team and stakeholders and the value of trust in the team member-project manager relationship. Virtual trust needs to be studied and understood in the context of e-ethical leadership.

7. Conclusion

This paper provides a literature review that may be used as a starting point for research projects that will help define e-ethical leadership for virtual project teams and how it differs from traditional project team leadership. As we move more toward virtual organizations, we need to understand clearly leadership’s role in defining ethical leadership behavior in the virtual project environment. Ethical management of virtual project teams will improve organizations’ ability to produce and distribute products and services, increase job satisfaction and efficiencies in employees, and provide valuable leadership to move the business forward.

By realizing how ethics differ in virtual teams from traditional face-to-face teams, individuals managing virtual teams will be able to provide positive, ethical leadership to virtual project teams, resulting in the leadership skills to discern moral dilemmas, prioritize values, assess risks, protect privacy, and make ethical decisions.
References


[16] Deutsch M. Equity, equality, and need: what determines which value will be used as the basis of distributive justice? J Social Issues 1975;31(3):137–49.


