

# **Virtual Esprit de corps, Team Work and Team Trust in Distance Learning Environment: An Analytical Study**

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## **Abstract**

This study aimed at exploring students' perceptions of virtual esprit de corps, teamwork and team trust in distance learning environment based on team structure, team leadership, team situation monitoring, team mutual support and team communication. Descriptive survey design was used for research methodology. A self-constructed 5 point likert scale questionnaire containing 30 statements was administered to 100 randomly selected graduate level students enrolled in distance education. Results revealed that esprit de corps, team work and team trust need to be addressed rigorously if highly motivated team members are to be produced through distance education. Teachers may introduce online discussion forums, reflective videos and reflective blogs to enhance team work. In addition to this, teachers may serve as team leads and provide a base for esprit de corps.

*Key words: Esprit de corps, Team work, Team trust, Team structure*

## **1. Introduction**

In organizational setup employees have to perform certain task in which they need to cooperate with other employees so that ideas can be share for the accomplishment of certain task. Creative efforts need collaboration among organizational members. This cooperation and collaboration is considered as team work. Employees use their knowledge, skills and abilities to perform collaborative task. The base of such collaborative skill and knowledge stems out of college/university level education where students are trained to become an efficient and effective workforce.

Teamwork, team trust and esprit de corps(team spirit)are considered as essential skills that the potential employee must possess in order to work effectively and efficiently (Kyzlinkova, Dokulilova & Kroupa, 2007). People need to work as teams so that mutual efforts are fruitful and people are helping one another instead of hindering or blocking others efforts. A productive team allows group of peers to exchange information and relevant material with each other. This practice

adds a unique feature to problem solving, commonly known as synergy (Benrazavi & Silong 2013).

Team building helps in engaging multiple ranges of activities and these activities are arranged for the encouragement of team performance. The basic purpose is ensuring self-development, effective communication and enhancing leadership skills. Basic advantage of the teamwork is to improving growth in productivity of work. An organization can be able to generate that type of environment in which knowledge sharing can be facilitated among employees by the adoption of teamwork. But it is an admitted fact that working in collaboration does not come naturally to employees. Researchers have augmented that it is an irrational assumption that people entering labour market today come with collaboration skills and fully developed teamwork. It has been concluded by many researchers that team work is a learnt skill and must be improved continuously over a period of time. Team work is a complicated process and does not come naturally to students. It has to be provided through ongoing trainings so that optimum team performance is achieved (Desmond, Ruissen & Eyes 2017).

Research has shown that building team culture and team spirit is a difficult task even when approached in face to face environment. Furthermore, working in a virtual environment, this task becomes more challenging due to separation of team members in space and time. Technology has totally changed team building environment from that of face to face interactions. Informal, immediate, verbal and visual feedbacks are not always present in the on line settings the way that many are accustomed to having in a face-to-face communication. It has been observed that students may feel lonely and isolated in the online environment due to the lack of normal social and face to face interactions (Walker, 2003). Sensitive topics may be misinterpreted and there can be lack of immediate feedback in online environment. For such reasons, online atmosphere is more demanding than the face-to-face learning environment because conversation is separated by distance, time, language and the lack of other general modes of communication such as body language and facial expressions (Yoo & Citurs, 2002).

Distance learning programs are innovative in nature as they provide flexibility in entry qualification, age, time and space. Such mode of learning adopts unique ICT support as well for facilitation in teaching learning program. Teachers and students of distance learning environment enter a vanguard for on-line learning platform (Alavi & Gallupe, 2013) Distance learning institutions strive to produce trained intellectuals to be a part of country's successful labour force. Concerned campuses have not only to provide cutting edge technology for facilitation of learning process but have to adopt novel practices of producing stable, beneficial and socially equipped alumni which can and be able to compete at par with global trends of labour force (Boyt, Lusch and Naylor, 2001).

It is an admitted fact that all the students entering in distance learning programs have not received the needed skills for working in teams. Although students today are skill full in using virtual collaborations for social and personal needs, yet they are unable to transfer this knowledge in professional settings and the resultant is they need training and instruction to make them capable to manage working in team in virtual environment. Grzeda, Haq and LeBrasseur, 2008 have advocated that team building on-line exercises are effective learning activities in distance education but still need proper incorporation.

The present study was conducted to explore whether virtual 3pirit de corps, teamwork and team trust are existent in on line learning trajectories of virtual students or not. These were explored through students' perceptions based on team structure, team leadership, team situation monitoring, team mutual support and team communication.

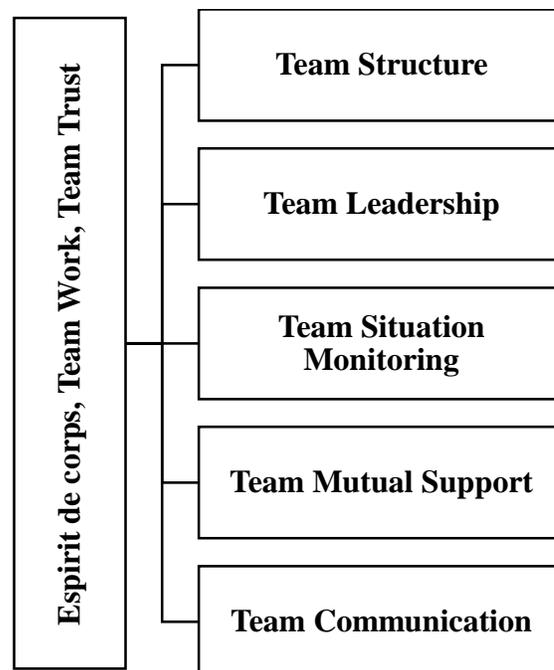
### **1.1. Objectives**

1. Explore students' perception of virtual 3pirit de corps, teamwork and team trust in distance learning environment.
2. Develop a viable model for virtual 3pirit de corps, teamwork and team trust in distance learning environment based on gaps observed through research study.

### **1.2. Research Questions**

1. What are students' perceptions of virtual 3pirit de corps, teamwork and team trust in distance learning environment based on team structure, team leadership, team situation monitoring, team mutual support and team communication?
2. What can be a viable model for virtual 3pirit de corps, teamwork and team trust in distance learning environment based on team structure, team leadership, team situation monitoring, team mutual support and team communication?

### **1.3. Conceptual framework**



## 2. Methodology

Descriptive quantitative survey design was adopted to explore the objectives of this study. 100 students randomly selected at graduate level enrolled in faculty of social sciences from three public sector universities offering distance education were selected as research sample. An on-line survey with 30 statements on 5 point likert scale was used as team work attitudes scale (TWAS) to explore the objectives of study. Study was delimited to distance learning programs of Islamabad region only. TWAS was further divided into five sub scales with sub titles as team structure, team leadership, team situation monitoring, team mutual support and team communication. Before final administration of the tool, it was pilot tested on a sample of 30 distance education students enrolled in graduate programmes of social sciences.

## 3. Data Analysis

Statistical results related to psychometric properties of the Team work attitudes scale (TWAS) are as under:

**Table 1: Alpha reliability coefficient of TWAS (n=30)**

Subscales	Items	Alpha Coefficient
Team structure	06	.89*
Team leadership	06	.87*
Team situation monitoring	06	.84*
Team mutual support	06	.85*
Team communication	06	.86*
<b>Overall Reliability ( Cronbach's Alpha)</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>.90*</b>

Table 1 shows that the Cronbach's Alpha Coefficient of TWAS yields a high consistency internally with .904 for 30 items. It also shows the alpha coefficient of all the five subscales of the TWAS, with highest coefficient of .89 on the sub scale of team structure. Split half reliability analysis of the scale reconfirms the internal consistency of the self-constructed research instrument. The results are displayed as follows:

**Table 2: Split Half Reliability Analysis (n= 30)**

Cronbach's Alpha	Part 1	Value	<b>.889**</b>
		N of Items	15
	Part 2	Value	<b>.898**</b>
		N of Items	15

Table 2 indicates the split half reliability of TWAS on 5 point likert scale.. First half constituted of 15 items and its reliability was .88 whereas second half of TWAS had a reliability of .89 on 30 item statements. Result shows that two halves of the instrument have high internal consistency at  $p < 0.05$ , thus making it highly reliable for collection of the required data.

**Table 3: Results from subscale of team structure of TWAS (n= 100)**

Team Structure	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Team members do not like to ask for help from others.	10 (0.1%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)	65 (0.65%)
The team leader tries to keep order.	66 (0.66%)	09 (0.09%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
Team members accept each other's weaknesses as well as strengths.	56 (0.56%)	29 (0.29%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
The goals of individual team members have a lesser importance than team goals.	45 (0.45%)	30 (0.30%)	05 (0.05%)	05 (0.05%)	15 (0.15%)
Needs of other team members can be anticipated by effective members.	66 (0.66%)	09 (0.09%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
High performing teams share common characteristics with others.	65 (0.65%)	10 (0.1%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)

Table 3 shows the perceptions of students related to team structure. Most of the students (66%) strongly agreed that team leader is responsible to keep order. Similarly students strongly agreed (66%) that effective teams anticipate other's needs. Another statement on which students agreed mostly(65%) was that high performing teams share common characteristics with others also.

**Table 4: Results from subscale of team leadership of TWAS (n= 100)**

Team Leadership	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neutral	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
Leaders must share information with team members.	70	10	05	10	05

	(0.70%)	(0.1%)	(0.05%)	(0.1%)	(0.05)
Leaders must create informal channels for information sharing.	62 (0.62%)	09 (0.09%)	14 (0.14%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
Effective leaders' viewpoint about honest mistakes is as meaningful learning opportunity.	56 (0.56%)	29 (0.29%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
Leaders must model appropriate team behavior among members.	75 (0.75%)	10 (0.10%)	05 (0.05%)	05 (0.05%)	05 (0.05%)
Leaders need to discuss with their team members' future plans.	66 (0.66%)	09 (0.09%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
Team leaders must ensure that team members help each other when required.	65 (0.65%)	10 (0.1%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)

Table 5 shows that students strongly agreed (75%) that their teachers as leaders should model appropriate team behaviour so that others may follow. In addition to this 70% agreed strongly that leaders' prime responsibility is to share complete information among team members. Students strongly agreed (66%) that it is important for leaders to take out time for discussion about their plans with team members.

**Table 5: Results from subscale of team situation mentoring of TWAS (n= 100)**

<b>Team Situation Mentoring</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
Mentoring provides an important contribution to effective team performance.	70 (0.70%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05)
Individuals can be taught how to scan the environment for important cues.	05 (0.05%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)	25 (0.25%)	55 (0.55%)
It is important to monitor the emotional and physical status of other members.	56 (0.56%)	29 (0.29%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
It is appropriate for one team member to offer assistance to other member.	45 (0.45%)	30 (0.30%)	05 (0.05%)	05 (0.05%)	15 (0.15%)

Team members who monitor their emotional and physical status are more effective.	66 (0.66%)	09 (0.09%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
Mentoring helps in monitoring student learning.	65 (0.65%)	10 (0.1%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)

Table 5 illuminates the results related to team situation mentoring. Mostly the students strongly agreed (70%) that mentoring provides an effective base for team performance. 66% students strongly agreed that team members need to monitor their emotional and physical status whereas 65% strongly viewed that mentoring ultimately leads to monitoring of students' learning.

**Table 6: Results from subscale of team mutual support of TWAS (n= 100)**

<b>Team Mutual Support</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
To be effective, team members should understand the work of their fellow team members.	70 (0.70%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)
Asking for assistance from a team member is a sign that an individual does not know how to do his/her job.	62 (0.62%)	09 (0.09%)	14 (0.14%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
Providing assistance to team members is a sign that an individual does not have enough work to do.	56 (0.56%)	29 (0.29%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
Offering to help a fellow team member with his/her individual work tasks is an effective tool for improving team performance.	75 (0.75%)	10 (0.10%)	05 (0.05%)	05 (0.05%)	05 (0.05%)
It is appropriate to continue to assert team rules to others.	66 (0.66%)	09 (0.09%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
Personal conflicts between teachers do not affect student learning.	77 (0.77%)	13 (0.1%)	03 (0.3%)	02 (0.02%)	05 (0.1%)

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Above mentioned table indicates that 70 % students strongly agree that each person knows the work of others in effective teams. Whereas 75% students strongly viewed that offering help to other team members serves as an effective tool for improvement of team performance. 77% students strongly agreed that personal conflict of teachers affect student learning negatively.

**Table 7: Results from subscale of team communication of TWAS (n= 100)**

<b>Team Communication</b>	<b>Strongly Agree</b>	<b>Agree</b>	<b>Neutral</b>	<b>Disagree</b>	<b>Strongly Disagree</b>
Teams that do not communicate effectively significantly increase their risk of committing errors.	70 (0.70%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05)
Poor communication is the most common cause of reported errors.	72 (0.72%)	09 (0.09%)	04 (0.04%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
Adverse events may be reduced by maintaining an information exchange with all team members.	56 (0.56%)	29 (0.29%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
I prefer to work with team members who ask questions about information I provide.	75 (0.75%)	10 (0.10%)	05 (0.05%)	05 (0.05%)	05 (0.05%)
It is important to have a standardized method for sharing information.	76 (0.76%)	09 (0.09%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)
It is nearly impossible to train individuals how to be better communicators.	65 (0.65%)	10 (0.1%)	10 (0.1%)	05 (0.05%)	10 (0.1%)

Table 7 illuminates the importance of team communication and 70% students strongly agreed to it that those teams which do not communicate effectively significantly increase their risk of committing errors. 72% agreed that poor and weak communication is the most common cause of reported errors in teaching learning situation. 76% strongly agreed to it that it is very important to have some kind of standardized methods for sharing information.

#### **4. Discussion**

Group dynamics helps in understanding and implementing team development in the distance education or on-line learning environment. Fapohunda, 2013 argued that whether students meet in face-to-face or distance setting, they may encounter similar interpersonal problems at specific stages. In addition to this, researchers have clearly stated, “Computer-mediated communication creates a unique social climate that impacts interactions and group dynamics online.” A simpler prospective of group dynamics is that it refers to the energy, attitude,

interaction, and exchange of group members and leaders. It is a clear fact that whenever observing a team in action, opposing forces generally may be felt among the group members, such as group conflicts, subgroup alliances, power plays and lack of mutual trust. Froebe & Marchington, 2005 added that Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST) explains how interactions and communications influence processes and outcomes of a specific group. AST shows that social structures are formed by norms and values (e.g., rules, resources, and behaviors) and emerge within groups as they interact over time.

Team structure plays a vital role in effective teams in a distance education environment. Teachers require to introduce group assignments, discussion forums and structure teams accordingly. Findings are in line with the study done by Hartenian, 2013. He concluded that effective online teams can anticipate the needs of other team members and take actions accordingly. Team leadership provides a supportive pillar to the three dimensions of teams namely esprit de corps, team trust and team work. The more team members have trust in leadership, the more they will have a cohesive trust among their members. Results indicated that teachers serving as team leaders have to model appropriated team behavior. Students agreed positively that mentoring provides a strong base to monitor on line teaching learning process. Jiang, 2010 has advocated that team members who monitor their emotional and physical status are more effective as on-line team members. Effective team members understand the work of their fellow team members and proceed towards team mutual support in online environments (Merrit and Clauset, 2013).

Distance learning environments have a unique setting for learning as compared to face to face set up. To develop team structure in distance learning environment is difficult but not impossible. Research gaps show that team structure, team leadership and team mentoring may go a long way in developing esprit de corps in distance learning environment. Team leaders need continuous mentoring so that they become role models for team members. Similarly a viable model for team development may include group assignments, reflective videos for team building and on-line discussion forums (Yeh & Lahman 2007; Hammar, 2014 and Reeves, Caglayan, & Torr,2017). Thus, the second objective of this study which states developing a viable model for virtual esprit de corps, teamwork and team trust in distance learning environment based on gaps observed through research study is achieved. If teachers teaching in distance learning environments incorporate on-line discussion forums, group assignments and use of reflective videos for team development, it will go a long way in attaining esprit de corps in distance education.

#### **4.1. Conclusion**

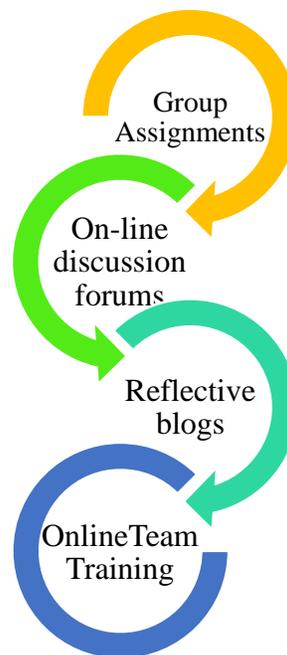
The present study is based on exploring students' perceptions of virtual esprit de corps, teamwork and team trust in distance learning environment based on team structure, team leadership, team situation monitoring, team mutual support and team communication. Team members are able to enhance the skills, knowledge and abilities for certain tasks during working in teams ultimately that brings improvement in their performance. Esprit de corps is a team spirit in that members of the team share their problem within the team members and also within the learning environment. Educators cannot perceive that students already possess team skills and would have worked within team scenarios previously. With the advancement of Distance Education and the irregular conditions of learning in a non-traditional environment, it becomes imperative that students learn how to build on-line learning communities in order to achieve

meaningful results to practical problem-based learning scenarios. Team building and training exercises can enable distance learning students to become better directors and contributors of their own learning through collaborative efforts. Teachers need to understand individual differences of students registered in on-line courses. It is a difficult task but not impossible one. Teachers need to have the capacity to use effective communication skills to diplomatically inject their own opinion to a group working in on-line/ distance environment. Teachers working in online environment must have expertise in conflict resolution to further positive direction for the team, ability to evaluate others objectively and be able to accept constructive criticism from team members. No doubt, it is a newer concept to work as team in an on-line environment at graduate level, but it needs attention of all stake holders of on-line courses and distance education.

#### 4.2. Recommendations

Major recommendations of this study are:

- i. Teachers may devise on-line discussion forums for collaborations and building teams for combined and group projects.
- ii. Mutual projects may be assigned to students studying in distance learning environment and teachers may assume the role of leader. Leaders need to model team behaviors through mutual discussion and development of team trust.
- iii. Reflective videos, reflective blogs and reflective journals related to team building, esprit de corps, team trust and team work may be shared with the students to motivate them towards collaborations and combined projects.
- iv. A viable model for enhancing team work in distance education environment may be as follows:



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