

Chapter 1

Leadership in the Digital Age: Rhythms and the Beat of Change

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ABSTRACT

*This chapter introduces the scope and focus of the new book. The reader is briefly introduced to the definitions and debates about leadership and management boundaries, differences, and overlapping responsibilities in the digital age. Drawing on both theory and practice, current issues and topics are covered in-depth, providing an introduction and overview of perceptible trends and scenarios relevant to the current post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) leadership outlook for global business. The editors then provide an outline and overview of the chapters, topics, and themes of each chapter and a coherent rationale for this new book as developing discussions and research from their first book, *Dynamic Models of Leadership for Global Business: Enhancing Digitally Connected Environments*.*

INTRODUCTION

There is a well-researched and growing recognition amongst many commentators today that it is an axiomatic that ‘Business as usual’ is no longer a viable option and it is not useful to continue with some of the failing models of leadership. There is a new, more urgent rhythm of business and social life. The beat has changed and the new high-performers are playing a different tune and using new instruments. We live today in a world rich in digital resources but share a poverty of leadership competence in exploration and exploita-

tion of these resources to their fullest it seems. We still have issues with environmental degradation and finite physical resources though some –but not all–of these ecological deficiencies might be attenuated with more judicious use of the digital abundance becoming more and more accessible to us globally.

Such emerging digital resources have brought demands for changes in many societies, which go beyond simply increasing access to the technology per se for consumers. For example recent research by Pew Global Researchers (2014) has noted that 20% of the world has mobile and online access

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and this has reinforced other social demands in particular from the younger generation who are usually the first to take up the newer technologies and access the web. As the report states:

Majorities in 22 of 24 countries surveyed say it is important that people have access to the internet without government censorship. In 12 nations, at least seven-in-ten hold this view. Support for internet freedom is especially strong in countries where a large percentage of the population is on-line. And, in most of the countries polled, young people are particularly likely to consider internet freedom a priority (Pew Global Research Center, March 19, 2014).

These and other changes also beg many questions about what leaders must do to succeed and what new ‘psychological contracts’ need to be negotiated between citizens, followers, employees and the formal and informal leaders in all organizations in order to sensibly and practically define what is allowable, acceptable, desirable, possible and mandatory in the workplace today. We have drawn on the research and practical expertise of authorities from across the world in this edited book. That is fitting since the changes that are emerging continue to widen their application and impact across even the most remote and seemingly inaccessible societies, businesses, governments and cultures, albeit in different ways and at different speeds. As mentioned above, the Internet has opened up the world and increasingly; mobile technology has diminished distances and expanded communication as we pointed out in our last book (Smith & Cockburn, 2013).

This first chapter in this new book gives a very brief overview of key definitions of leadership in organizations we discussed in detail in our first book. We also point the reader towards the flexible, gender-neutral leadership model we presented in our first book and that we believe will be required to successfully address current and future leadership in digitally defined contexts. At

the time of writing the Leaders of many nations and businesses are under threat and are failing. As many as 40% of all new leaders fail within the first 18 months according to recent surveys, thus the leadership crisis continues to grow more threatening and as leaders’ world of work grows more complex each year, the leaders’ own self-doubt about their skills is magnified (Newhall, 2011, Smith & Cockburn, 2013, xii).

As noted above, both organizations and leaders at all levels today have to work hard and to strive to continuously maintain a sharp, cutting edge profile in their organizations and in their markets (Pretorius & Roux, 2011) or else reinvent themselves to address the constantly shifting unpredictable opportunities and the constraints of operating in a global business environment. By the same token, so too must we search for more effective, dynamic leadership models in order to keep pace intellectually and practically with the heady pace and complex swirl of new socio digital media, devices and applications bubbling to the surface of our lives each day. The practical drawback here is that many current definitions of leadership continue to be a much contested and often confused area of academic research and practitioner debate as well as the often lagging public perceptions fuelled by the popular media (Kets de Vries, 1993; Higgs, 2003; Ruettimann, 2011; Krohe, 2011).

In general, as we have noted before, many definitions are either so broad that they become bland, so narrow that little of any practical significance can be elicited or, in the case of the public perceptions tend to refer to historic or military metaphors of heroic leaders (Smith & Cockburn, 2013). In addition, many of these definitions often seem to be based on versions of leadership activities and competences that are out of touch with a globalized world of cloud computing, viral marketing, ecological disasters, and emotional contagion of flash mobs using social media to self-organize a form of collective leadership and the Volatile, Uncertain Complex and Ambiguous (‘VUCA’)

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