

Digital Leadership in the New Century



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INTRODUCTION

Without a doubt, among all of the developments in the past century, technology has perhaps played one of the most significant roles in reshaping the world. Technology has permeated society in general, and major government and economic stakeholders have recognized the importance of incorporating technology throughout education in order to prepare a competitive workforce in a global economy (Farmer, 2011, p. 230). The United States used to have the largest number of Internet users. To date, the number of Internet users (179.7 million) in China has surpassed that of the United States (163.3 million) now (Schonfeld, 2009). The emergence of new communication technologies and the pervasiveness of connectivity has enabled changes in the way we work and learn. Among other things, information and communication technologies facilitate telecommuting. About 40 percent of the workforce in the United States telecommute from home to their workplaces (Chafkin, 2010), and slightly more than 2% of the U.S. employee workforce (2.8 million people, not including the self-employed or unpaid volunteers) consider home their primary place of work (Lister, 2010). According to the Gallup's annual Work and Education poll, conducted on August 5-9 2015, 9% of U.S. workers say they telecommute on average more than 10 working days per month – that's about half of workdays in the month, and 37% of workers say that they have telecommuted, this is up from the 30% in the last decade, and four times greater than the 9% found in 1995. (<http://www.gallup.com/poll/184649/telecommuting-work-climbs.aspx>). In the education sector there is a similar trend with increasingly numbers of students enrolling in online courses., Roughly one in six students enrolled in higher education — about 3.2 million people — took at least one online course in the fall of 2005, a sharp increase defying predictions that online learning growth is plateauing (Pope, 2006). In 2014 federal U.S. data shows over 5 million students undertaking distance education courses. Global Industry Analytics predicted the Global e-learning market to reach US\$107Billion by 2015 (http://www.prweb.com/releases/distance_learning/e_learning/prweb9198652.htm). The aforementioned statistics clearly indicated that there is significant and growing engagement in online environments for both business and education. What is the implication of this? One clear implication is that E-leadership is important and necessary in the new century, and thus researchers and scholars are prompted to re-examine leadership and leadership styles in relation to E-leadership.

Interestingly, when the literature about leadership and leadership styles is examined it seems that, despite the changes in technological developments and the changes in how we work and learn in the digital context, the literature has remained relatively unchanged in the 21st century. Leadership has been a topic of interest to researchers and scholars. Leadership and leadership styles have been studied for many years. Leadership has been well and deeply considered. Various Leadership theories have been put forward and have been tested in varying situations in different countries. For example, leadership theories by Karl Marx have been applied to countries such as the former Soviet Union, China, North

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Korea, and Cuba. Have these leadership theories worked for these countries? The answer is to a certain degree, yes. The answer can also be leadership theories are not ideologies that must be applied to the letter. Leadership theories can be applied in part or in whole, or they can be modified based on differing situations. Speaking of situations and circumstances, major economic developments from newly emerged nations and technological break-through coupled with the most recent wars in West Asia and in the Middle East have reshaped the world. They have changed the way people work, think, and, above all, react to leadership theories.

Although the definitions of leadership are many and varied, at its core leadership is about human behavior and activity, which is innately complex. Predictably then, leadership is a complex topic. Decades of research and numerous studies have failed to yield a generally accepted, singular theory of leadership – testament to the complexity of leader behavior (Weitzel, 2006).

Undeniably, the situations and circumstances surrounding leadership and leadership styles have drastically changed in recent years. Business organizations are operating in a dynamic context that is characterized by political, technological and economic changes. Business organizations commonly operate on a global scale and face increasingly competitive and volatile markets. Business is being influenced by such factors as faster technology change, greater international competition, the deregulation of markets, overcapacity in capital-intensive industries, an unstable oil cartel, raiders with junk bonds, and the changing demographics of the work force (Kotter, 1998, p. 40). Due to the changes in situations and circumstances, nowadays, there is a tendency for downsizing, merging, restructuring and even more laying off of current employees if their leaders consider the skills of the employees as being obsolete. Most job descriptions for leaders specify that leaders must possess skills in the use of technology. Without the skills in the use of technology, leaders are not hired, or employees are not promoted to leadership positions.

Bansal (2010) points out that business leaders are now faced with two interrelated challenges. Firstly, organizational leaders must be able to function in a global environment not just for the purposes of conducting business with international clients but also for the purpose of running the business itself. Especially in a large business organizations, it may be that the various divisions and suppliers to the organization are dispersed worldwide. Secondly, the availability of synchronous and asynchronous digital communication channels has led to a greater frequency of daily interaction with colleagues using tools other than traditional phone and fax machines. It is expected that leaders will interact with using tools such as email, bulletin boards, chat, forums and video conferencing (Bansal, 2010). Furthermore, the use of technology “to lead and to follow” (Bansal, 2010, p. 16) is likely to change the dynamics of the organization. How people interact changes when that interaction occurs across technological channels:

In the absence of physical presence of their leaders there is an impact on their behavior, thinking, efficiency, performance motivation and satisfaction. This will have serious implications for leaders and followers in teams and organizations where interactions are modified by information technology. The impact of the factor ‘e’ on the level of trust, motivation, commitment and performance of the employees has to be given a new look and new paradigm.” (Bansal, 2010, p. 16)

Bansal (2010) alludes to the need for re-examining leadership in the new information technology context as do other authors such as Avolio, Kahai and Dodge (2000). In agreement with Bansal (2010), Avolio, Kahai and Dodge (2000) recognize that new technologies are leading to an information technology enabled economy which is characterized by “real-time information availability, greater knowledge sharing with stakeholders, and the use of this information and knowledge to build ‘customized relation-

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