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In Search of Leadership: Practical Perspectives on Leading Distance Education Organisations

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Abstract: A major leader shift is needed in open and distance learning. Leaders must think differently about their approaches to leadership. This paper discussed five major leadership challenges, provided mini-cases for each challenge and targeted key strategies and lessons from these cases. They are based on actual situations; identification of the institution and leader is anonymous in all cases. Do you have the right staff around you and do they create the optimum fit? Is your vision viable for growth and agility? Are you willing to accept the leadership deal – all successes to your followers; the leader takes responsibility for all failures? Can you change the way you think about leadership, the organisation and the world? This aligns with Maxwell's (2019) leadership framework as well as one of Peter Senge's (1992) disciplines – mental models. Finally, with all your talents and abilities can you operationalise your vision? Can you design, lead and implement change? More succinctly, can you go the distance and stay the course for your vision and your organisation? The author suggests that intangible value-added attributes of effective leadership may need more focus in the future. The paper concludes with a summary discussion of a few observations about leadership in open and distance learning organisations post-pandemic and future research. The author argues that leaders that display empathy, common sense, sound judgment, calm under fire, cultural agility and the capacity to lead and implement effective change can use these value-added attributes to assist in executing and leading effective organisational transformation.

Keywords: Leadership, transformation, online learning, leading change, empathy, distance education.

Introduction

'Winning has a price. Leadership has a price.' Michael Jordan (2020)

Leadership is at a crossroads. The new normal from the post Covid-19 global crisis is still emerging but we all live in a different world that we did a few months ago (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Ice, 2020). Going forward change continues to be a constant, uncertainty is pervasive, and we adapt at home, at work, and within our communities. A brave new world on the educational horizon? Only time will tell (Bozkurt, A. & Sharma, 2020; Huxley, 1932).

Indeed, although the crisis has served as a catalyst for online education given the global restrictions of mobility due to stay-at-home lockdowns, this is not the purpose of this paper (UNESCO, 2020; <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>). Without question, the educational community's response from primary schools through major universities to major ODL associations was inspirational, motivating and certainly reframed the potential of digital technologies in society.

At first glance we may opt to celebrate until we recognize that action is not synonymous with great leadership nor great performance. Leaders make decisions and act every day; but many of these are indicative of poor judgment and justification. The scorecard on how effective and qualitatively sound the online mass migration was is incomplete; and it will take time to sort out some of the long-term transformational effects (Bozkurt et. al. 2020; Olcott, 2020a, 2020b; Ice, 2020, Monash, 2020) particularly on sustainable and innovative leadership models. As in any crisis and certainly one of the magnitudes and global reach of Covid-19, questions of leadership emerge. We ask what should our leaders have done? How should they have they responded? What were their failures or weaknesses as leaders? Finally, what did we learn for the future? Moreover, we also pause and ask do our approaches



to leadership work, are they sound, do they reflect the arsenal needed to lead complex 21st organizations?

This paper revisits selected leadership attributes that are linked to various organisational challenges that the author argues is a sound base from which existing and aspiring leaders can re-assess their leadership style. Each challenge will discuss leadership attributes and will be followed by a mini-case. These are practical and derived from research and practice. They are based on actual situations; identification of the institution and leader is anonymous in all cases. These will be followed by a preliminary assessment of leadership within the Covid-19 pandemic and what this means for organisations post crisis. The paper concludes with a summary discussion of the six (6) intangibles of effective leadership and preliminary yet fragile observations about leadership in open and distance learning organisations post-Covid-19.

Literature Review: A Selected Synthesis Approach

The literature review in this paper will take a synthesis approach of integrating key studies with the challenges and mini-cases presented. The scholarly literature on management and leadership is exponential and is beyond a comprehensive review for this paper. The author will draw upon classical research considered by scholars and practitioners to have moved the field forward and proven leadership attributes that have permeated the literature since the 1970s (and before). J. M. Burn's work on *Leadership* (1978); Harvey's (1974) article *The Abilene Paradox* on organisational communications; Mintzberg's (1975) classical article on what managers really do; Schein's ground-breaking organisational culture model presented in *Organisational Culture and Leadership* (1985); and Senge's (1992) *The Fifth Discipline* identified as systems thinking are all examples of major contributions to the fields of management and leadership.

Conversely, the scholarly literature to date that examines leadership issues, frameworks, and approaches in open and distance learning is relatively scarce. There is no formal theory of leadership for ODL. We draw upon the main body of leadership/management literature for addressing ODL leadership issues and challenges. There are some notable resources that have focused on leadership and management related issues (see *Leading the e-Learning Transformation of Higher Education* by Gary Miller et al. (2014) and *Online Distance Education: Towards a Research Agenda* (2014), edited by Olaf Zawachi-Richter & Terry Anderson) however, most scholarly articles examine a specific ODL leadership issue (e.g., leading change, creating a vision, leading learning design teams, etc.).

Michael Moore's & William Diehl's (2018, Eds.) *Handbook of Distance Education* focuses a section on policy and management and Michael Beaudoin's chapter on *Leadership in Distance Education Revisited* provides a solid review of DE leadership literature. However, again it accentuates the need for more scholarly research in this arena. In general, the research literature on ODL leadership can be categorised under administrative, instructional and support service leadership.

This author would also suggest that single versus dual-mode institutions present some similar leadership challenges and yet some very different leadership challenges. Comparing leadership at the Open University with leadership at a dual-mode university like Penn State World Campus would show these contextual leadership differences. Unfortunately, most of the literature provide snapshots in time rather than formal frameworks or models of leadership specific to ODL. The leadership rhetoric amongst ODL leaders and practitioners is common; a commensurate level of empirical research is not.

Leadership Challenges and Mini-Cases

Let's look at some practical leadership challenges for the 21st century leader in open and distance learning. These are also particularly important for leaders planning to integrate online learning in to their organizations as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Leadership Challenge 1: Are you surrounded by the right lieutenants? Do you have the right staff with the right talents for the right reasons to help you achieve your vision? Do you have full confidence in these talented people to give them their marching orders and then step-back and let them do their jobs? There is no more demoralising effect on talented organisational staff than to micro-manage. Without question, it is the death of leadership and often organisations (Schein, 1985, 1996; Lacerenza, Marlow, Tannenbaum & Salas, 2018; Phelps, Tomlison & Gillespie, 2006).

Mini-Case 1: Leaders often inherit their staff, particularly in the university-HE sector where administrative policies and protections, whilst necessary, prevent flexible staffing within certain constraints. How do you deal with this challenge? One leader at a major dual mode university started by re-assessing staff qualifications and experiences compared with actual needs of the unit. What emerged was not the need to replace and hire new staff, but a realignment of current staff duties. Simply stated, some people were in the wrong jobs.

This leader responded in a very positive manner embedded in trust and inclusion. He asked his staff to consider their positions and to propose how some duties and organisational work could be realigned. He also asked staff candidly if they were receptive to learning new skills and areas not necessarily in their current job descriptions. His approach of trust, inclusion and respect empowered staff to accept new flexible duties. Indeed, staff will leave, and replacements will be necessary. Leaders must examine their staffing mix to build complimentary talent mixes and to consider 'fit' when assessing key roles. The goal is a staff capacity (group) that is greater than the sum of the parts (individual staff).

Leadership Challenge 2: Institutional Vision and Growth. A vision is an ideal state of affairs for your organization at some point in the future – usually 3-5 years (Bass & Riggio, 2010; Hogan & Coote, 2014; Phelps et al., 2006; Wesley & Mintzberg, 1989; Yukl, 2013). This takes consistency and resolve to stay the course. Many leaders confuse strategic plans, mission and values statements with vision; these are important but tend to be short-term focused. The result is that vision ends up looking much like the status quo. What is your organisation's vision and most importantly how will you manage this vision?

Mini-Case 2: The university ODL programme was growing too fast. The idea of managed growth was not considered because no-one expected the unexpected – accelerated growth where enrolment exceeded the capacity of the institution to add faculty, maintain quality sustain student support services and pay for digital upgrades in software and infrastructure. The government refused to expand funding for the excess students, new tuition revenues were insufficient to cover needed staffing and services. The institutional chief executive noted to the author 'we failed to heed the obvious, be careful what you wish for unless you can respond effectively.' In sum, even if your institution has been given the mission of expanding access you must still manage access, quality and costs (Daniel, J., Kanwar, A., & Uvalic-Trumbic, S., 2009).

Is this an example of poor leadership? Yes, it is an example of failing to plan for contingencies. The institution's vision was not formalised, but growth was considered essential. Leaders often value growth as a natural positive but in this case, it was not embedded in a long-term vision. What could have been done? First, develop a vision of where the institution would be and how it would function five years from now – and work backwards from there to design your growth strategies. This approach would undoubtedly have mandated the institutional leadership team to consider growth patterns, resource needs, staffing needs, digital transformations and setting timelines and enrolment caps. Moreover, the vision in and of itself would have been proactive rather than reactive trying to catch up.

Visionary leaders need to manage their vision and growth targets. Secondly, ironically, the best way forward from a business model perspective would have been to cut enrolment by tens of thousands of students, re-organise and upgrade faculty, services, and the vision, and then gradually gear back up. The institution would have to go backwards to go forward. Politically this was not viable and hence the leadership will have to plan carefully how to go forward because moneys to accommodate the massive growth were not commensurate with the scale-up, and major new resource options were limited due to government caps and extreme limitations on charging student tuition. The leadership lesson is clear. If massive growth is not concurrently supported with commensurate resources then the primary burden for the scale-up is placed on existing staff, services and infrastructure. This is simply not a sustainable model and eventually the institution will be submerged under the pressures of growth.

Leadership Challenge 3: Are you willing to accept the Leadership Deal? – The leader gives all credit for organisational successes to followers and takes responsibility for all organisational failures? (Bass & Riggio, 2010; Kotter, 2012; Yukl, 2013). Life is often not fair – nor is leadership but this is the

deal. Re-read this and ask yourself if you accept the deal – success to followers, muck-ups are on you! Leaders are role models who empower others and shower praise and support on their staffs.’ Organisational success and impacts are the leader’s reward (Burns, 2010; Yukl, 2013).

Leadership is also about making difficult decisions often driven by the vision, institutional priorities and changing economic and social forces inside and outside the organisation. This characteristic is often very telling about how a leader is perceived by his/her followers. If you are an aspiring leader that needs to be popular and get the credit for your organisation, perhaps a career change as a greeter at a shopping mall would be a better fit for you. Either lead and accept the deal or get out of the way and let those who embrace this challenge lead.

Indeed, each individual has leadership capacity and thriving organisations tap leadership at all levels and from all staff in the organisation (Burns, 2010). Leadership is not simply about position, status, and authority – although these elements certainly play a role in transformational leadership (Javidan, Dorfman, Sully de Luque, & House, 2006; Raven, 2008).

Mini-Case 3: The new open and distance learning (ODL) leader had all the attributes we associate with effective leadership. She was smart, charismatic, a good vision, innovative, a delegator, had proven experience, integrity, was a trust builder, and empowered her leadership team and staff. The distance learning unit had a good reputation and the fit with the new Director seemed too good to be true. In the end it was. What emerged was one of those subtle yet salient attributes in leaders that often take some time and situations to come to the surface. She was terrific when things were going well and successful. She heaped lots of praise on her followers, acknowledged outstanding staff, and seemed to personify teamwork.

And then the perfect storm hit. First, the university cut her budget due to funding cuts by the government. She responded by rolling out 4 new distance programs, all which to be successful, would need to displace proven and reputable providers already offering the same degrees. She would have to create enough new moneys from student tuition and fees to off-set reductions from other sources.

Next, the distance education unit was preparing to upgrade to a new LMS system for their online operations. The research and market survey amongst staff, and most importantly teaching faculty had already been done. The consensus was for a very good proprietary LMS that despite moderate costs was reliable, flexible, and had support services built in to the service contract. The new leader decided to explore the feasibility of adopting an open source LMS to lower costs and deal with her loss of core funding. She delayed the adoption by three months as she tried to convince her staff and teaching faculty to support her. They did not and they would not be swayed. She accepted their input and the unit upgraded successfully with the new system over the coming months.

The new programmes were taking considerable time to build enrolments. Three months had been lost for marketing due to the director’s insistence on exploring an open source LMS. The unit’s budget was getting more challenging. The end of the budget period was coming and she had to prepare the next budget cycle proposal. Without any consultation with her senior leadership team she decided to downsize her staff and six positions were cut to ensure her budget stayed in the black. What became apparent very quickly is that this leader tended to make arbitrary decisions on her own without the benefit of input from key stakeholders and then exercising poor judgment. Anyone can make decisions, however, making consistently good decisions requires laser focused judgment.

The most disconcerting result of this scenario is that she began to focus on mistakes, errors of judgment, and blame – not hers – but everyone else around her. The institution let her down by cutting budget. The new programs did not create immediate enrolments – she wanted this in three months – 1 year minimum would be needed. In sum, everyone was to blame except her.

At that very vulnerable and uncertain time if she had stood up to the microphone and said I am responsible for our current crisis but we can over-come this but I need your help and suggestions. Asking for help and admitting one’s mistakes to their staff is not easy; but if it is sincere you earn your staff’s respect and they see you as a human being, not just the leader or boss. Instead, by blaming everyone

else as the leader she sealed her fate and was dismissed soon after. Are you ready to accept the leadership deal? It's a question that can make or break ODL organisations.

Leadership Challenge 4: Changing the Way You Think About the World. If you venture 370 miles south-southeast off the coast of Newfoundland to a depth of 12,500 feet/3800 meters you will find the *Titanic*. For all the technical reasons and human errors cited for this 1912 tragedy, the real culprit was *flawed thinking* in concert with an unshakeable belief that 'technology' is unsinkable. Indeed, this sounds similar to the rhetoric we often hear about the 'technology = progress' mantra of digital technologies. As a leader, you must think differently about how you think about these things (Maxwell, 2019; Mrak, 2020; Schein, 1985; Todnem, 2007; Yukl, 2013a). Your organisation depends on thinking that is relevant and practical for the challenges faced by the organisation not just today – five years from now. And, no matter all the affordances of these tools, it still takes sound human thinking and judgment to ensure they don't sink.

And part of this thinking transformation is the concept of *leadershift*. John Maxwell (2019) presents this concept defined by making leadership changes that focus on enhancing organisational and personal growth. Two of his eleven changes are that leaders must move from soloist to conductor and from trained leader to transformational leader. Moreover, leaders must develop the agility to move fast, respond efficiently using sound judgment and lead in uncertain times.

And, for the record, there is ample evidence that women are fully capable of being as good as or better leaders than men (Olcott, & Hardy, 2006). We have seen many reports recently in the Covid-10 pandemic crisis that countries that have responded most effectively have been led by women leaders (Germany, Belgium, Finland, New Zealand, and many more (Henley and Roy, 2020). We should have learned something from the multitude of failures of the old model of the all-powerful, all knowing, male leader who could surely be the only person capable of leading complex organisations.

Mini Case 4: The obvious case study on this topic is the Covid-19 pandemic. Every educational leader across the globe has had their preferred thinking and belief structures about the viability of distance and online learning challenged. Organisations that have resisted online teaching and learning were forced to either scale-up during the Pandemic or do nothing. Most were unprepared with leadership that still thought like it was yesteryear.

Olcott (2020) argues quite persuasively that leaders are now at a crossroads; change their thinking and face the decision before them. We don't live in the same world any more and a new normalcy will undoubtedly include a crowded competitive educational market. If you are not online you will be at a competitive disadvantage. For organisations new to online, the decision is do we plan long-term and restructure our organisation to go online permanently?

Organisations that already offered online programmes in concert with f2f (dual-mode universities), asked do we rebalance our capacities in each delivery mode now to scale-up more online programmes. Similar decision matrixes will face K-12 leaders except the pressures to go fully online will be less. Moreover, there are legitimate child development, maturation, and intellectual development reasons to defer online programmes for children K-6. This means leaders in middle schools and high schools will be the focus. K-12 scale-up to online will be at a more moderate pace given it is not a competitive necessity in most countries.

Leadership Challenge 5: Can you lead and implement effective change? Having strong leadership attributes is not synonymous with the capacity for leading effective change? (Burns, 2010; Bass & Riggio, 2010; Kotter, 2012; Lamond, 2004; Yukl, 2013a). Charismatic, smart, and innovative leaders often fail because despite a great vision and sound personal values, they have not developed the art of leading change (Kotter, 2012). Leading change is much more than writing a vision statement and appointing a team – it's about empowering every member of the organisation with a 'benefits continuum' of why the change will lead to that higher state of affairs referenced above (Baker, 2007; Kotter, 2012); Hogan & Coote, 2014; Javidan et al., 2006). In short, your vision should lead to a better future than the present for all your stakeholders.

Mini-Case 5: If we return to Mini Case 3, we immediately see that the leader in that case lacked one essential ability: the capacity to develop, communicate, lead and implement effective change. This may be the single-most important leadership skill for 21st century leaders. Most change initiatives fail and they fail during implementation. Why?

The leader in Mini-Case 3 failed on a number of leadership levels.. First, she got flustered when things didn't go well. Instead of focusing on leading change and remaining calm under fire, she panicked and blamed everyone around her and lost any sense of laser like judgment. She had come to the job with relevant leadership experience and seemingly good common sense but subsequent developments demonstrated she really could not put herself in the shoes of her followers. She could not demonstrate empathy – understanding others and their views. A leader cannot inspire rapid responses and change unless they have the trust of their key stakeholders. This leader lost this sacred bond of trust when she blamed the situation and failures on everyone except herself. And her demeanour revealed that under challenging, stressful situations with a high level of uncertainty and ambiguity, she lacked the essential ability to lead and affect real change. Calm under fire was not in her leadership repertoire.

Cultural agility, though not an apparent issue in the above case, refers to the leader's ability to effectively work in cross-cultural environments (Randall, (N.D.); Sager, 2019). This author contextualises this to leadership and the capacity to manage a very diverse staff or to manage in a foreign locale in an organisation of primarily of foreign nationals. In today's work and educational sectors leaders must often manage very diverse staffs' in terms of age, gender, ethnicity, race, experience, nationality, and more. It means bridging multiple cultures and values to create a dynamic and vibrant multi-cultural environment. We will discuss this in more detail below in the future of international online teaching and learning.

Leadership and the Covid-10 Pandemic Response:

Indeed, the Covid-19 pandemic has not provided extensive data on how and when it may transform sustainable leadership models in the future. It's like being in the second round of the World Cup football tournament, it's too early to make futuristic platitudes on leadership. The onest and most appropriate answer is we truly don't know its impact on leadership long-term. This article is not about leadership and the pandemic, it is focused on leadership issues and cases that leaders face primarily in university level ODL (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Olcott, 2020a, 2020b)

The Covid-19 Pandemic provided a unique vantage point for the need for a leadership shift by today's ODL leaders. Mrak (2019) suggested that two of the benefits of leadership shift is the capacity to seize opportunity, to be ready for success in shorter time frames and to lead teams in uncertain conditions. During the pandemic, educational institutions across the world responded by going online but were not agile enough do it fast with efficiency, quality and consistency (Bozkurt et al., 2020; Olcott, 2020).

The response was fast but there was only one option to a lockdown – go online or do nothing. It is likely that the post pandemic assessment will provide data that shows uneven successes in this response. Leaders didn't really have to make any decision other than go or no go. It was an international health crisis and failure to respond was not an option. There was only one option – lockdown = online. We can engage in another definitional and futile debate about the differences between online and remote learning, but this gets us no-where and is counter-productive. The issue was a leadership issue, not a technology issue during the pandemic.

Olcott (2020a, 2020b) suggested that most organisations will go through three phases. Phase 1 was a digital call to arms and this one is in effect and was the emergency response of educational providers. Phase 1 was still in effect as of the writing of this paper in June 2020.

Phase 2, the core leadership phase, will occur over the next few months where organisations new to online will have to decide whether to go forward and transform their organisations for integrating online

capacity for the long-term. This will require a complete rethinking of their organisational mission vision, staffing, infrastructure, technologies, competition, etc. This is a major decision crossroads for leaders.

Moreover, this leadership decision is not only a leader shift, but it is imperative that this is not undertaken by reluctant leaders and/or with half-hearted implementation or the online plan will fail. Leaders fail at organisational change usually during the implementation stages. Why? Because leaders lack the conviction and vision to go the distance and stay the course (Kotter, 2012; Olcott, 2020a, 2020b; Orlikowski & Hoffman, 1997; Yukl, 2013). As Maxwell (2019) suggests, leadership requires new thinking and insights to changing landscape and trends, but it also requires consistency.

Finally, organisations must go through Phase 3 of institutionalising their shifting vision, mission, culture and values. This often takes 3-5 years and solidifies a new culture and new normalcy across the organisation.

Future Research and Practice

This paper has drawn upon practical mini-case studies in concert with existing leadership research and theory to highlight lessons of leadership in open and distance learning. The author did not, however, argue that these lessons from practical mini-cases would necessarily play out the same way in a different situation. *Context and culture matter* and external validity of these outcomes must be approached with caution. As a result, the author identified six (6) intangible attributes that may influence effective leadership. Future research needs to reframe transformational approaches for distance learning organizations and to investigate more in depth these six (6) intangibles of leadership which are summarised below in the summary. The pandemic has also raised a major research question for the future pertaining to gender in leadership. Did women leaders manage the pandemic better than male leaders? What are the implications of this for leadership in general and in higher education (see Olcott and Hardy, 2006 for an earlier discussion of women, leadership and technology).

Summary

This paper discussed five major leadership challenges, provided mini-cases for each challenge and targeted key strategies and lessons from these cases. Do you have the right staff around you and do they create the optimum fit? Is your vision viable for growth and agility? Are you willing to accept the leadership deal – all successes to your followers; the leader takes responsibility for all failures? Can you change the way you think about leadership, the organisation and the world? This aligns with the Maxwell's (2019) leadership framework as well as one of Peter Senge's (1992) disciplines – mental models. Finally, with all your talents and abilities can you operationalise your vision? Can you design, lead and implement change? More succinctly, can you go the distance and stay the course for your vision and your organisation?

The paper presents (6) intangible attributes of effective leadership. First and foremost, can you lead change? Do you bring good judgment to your leadership role and empathy to see others – staff, partners, competitors, customers through their eyes and not just yours? This is called empathetic leadership. You don't train for it or read a book; you decide in your leadership that other people are vital resources and players for your organisation, and you respect and honour their feelings, emotions, needs, fears, and uncertainties. If they fail, you fail. They are more important than you.

Do you display good judgment? Anyone can make decisions, however, making sound and consistently good decisions takes a very talented leader. Where do you stand on the judgment scale? Do you have common sense? Are you offended by this question? This author has worked for leaders who had all the tools of the leadership trade except they had absolutely no common sense. They either over-analysed everything, under-analysed some things, or simply missed the issue all together. Make no mistake, this factor can be the iceberg that sinks your ship.

As the stress intensifies, ambiguity raises its head everywhere and pressures and demands for change from followers and stakeholders surround you for leadership, do you display calm under fire? This

means when the situation gets so stressful, uncertain, ambiguous, and people are looking to you for leadership you can respond calmly and prudently. This type of leader is rare indeed. Amazingly, in these situations these type of leaders seem to become calmer with a laser like focus on the situation and the result is very sound analyses, options, judgment and decisions. You are thinking right this moment, can I learn this skill? The answer is yes, but this a leadership intangible that some have a great propensity to do well. These leaders simply have this special psyche.

Lastly, have you mastered cultural agility? Can you lead across cultures? Can you bring multiple cultural staff together under one vision whilst maximising talents and empowering each of your follower's cultural tendencies? Javidan, Dorfman, Sully de Luque, & House (2006) reminded us that cross-border leadership requires immersion in to the culture, history, education, social and family norms, and geopolitical-socioeconomic facets of national life. Like Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, you're not in Kansas anymore. You are in the leadership hot seat.

The Covid-19 pandemic has been the catalyst for a new normalcy in all dimensions of the human condition. In the realm of online teaching and learning, this will require a fundamental leadership shift in how we think, how we respond, how we plan, and how we embrace a new resiliency for our collective work with teachers for students.

Indeed, whether the long awaited brave new world has finally arrived will likely remain elusive. Leadership shift is the future for effective open and distance learning organisational transformation. Leader agility and capacity to embrace new thinking will determine which ODL organisations survive; those that may leave the playing field; and those that are agile and committed to being competitive and thriving in the future.

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