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Attributes and Issues
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Introduction

Education, or the opportunity to learn in a defined setting, has been the cornerstone of edification

throughout history. The advent of sustained long distance transportation of educational materials opened

the door to the method that we now call distance education (DE). That door, once opened, grew wider

and DE is now not only an accepted way to learn, but is becoming the desired method for learning. As

Michael Beaudoin (2005) observes, "whether or not it embraces the trend, the academy is shifting from a

campus-centric to a distributed education model" (p. 74).   This shift to DE requires a solid foundation in

the form of pedagogical support and technical understanding with transformative leadership providing

direction, supporting innovation and managing change.

Distance Education Leadership Attributes Defined

As Michael Moore and Greg Kearsley (2005) observe in Distance Education: A Systems View, "we are in

the middle of a Copernican revolution as it becomes ever more apparent that the learner constitutes the

center of the universe, and that teaching no longer drives learning; instead, teaching responds to and

supports learning" (p. 20). This shift requires a new kind of leader who can effectually bridge the distance

between traditional academia and DE (Beaudoin, 2005, p. 75).

The skills or attributes that DE leaders require to meet the aforementioned challenges are vision,

credibility (both pedagogical and technical credibility), openness, humility, courage, and change

management champions/communicators. Otto Peters (2002) identifies various educational paradigm

shifts, in Distance Education in Transition: New Trends and Challenges, which speak to the need for DE

leadership. The emerging DE leader must, therefore, have characteristics that not only support DE as it

continues to transform, but also the paradigm shifts occurring in the educational arena today.

Vision

Vision, or being able to anticipate the future, is a relevant skill in any field. In the current digital age,

vision takes on even more importance because "nothing like this radical and far-reaching restructuring

process has happened before in the history of education, or even, with a slight touch of pathos, in the

history of mankind" (Peters, 2002, p. 26). Vision must not only anticipate what is coming in the field of DE with its constant technological opportunities, but must also fight to open the minds of many who believe that knowledge can only be transmitted in a traditional brick and mortar environment with knowledge transfer requiring a teacher and a face-to-face environment (Peters, 2002). Thus vision is not only required, but the ability to create acceptance for that vision is also important.

Credibility

Another required characteristic is credibility. Understanding the shift to a student-centered paradigm and the impact of that shift on the foundation of education and what it means to learn is critical to DE leadership. Recognizing the connection between pedagogy and technology is just as important because technology can either hinder or help depending on how it is applied. Technology for the sake of technology can and does adversely impact the learning experience (Moore & Kearsley, 2005, p. 7). Thus, technology must be balanced on a pedagogical foundation and a credible leader will understand this requirement, communicate the importance of this balance and create credibility (or evidence of understanding) with both die-hard educators and technology zealots. Credibility in DE is uniquely important because are costly to both the financial investment in technology and the reputation of the institution involved.

Openness and Humility

Openness and humility are connected leadership characteristics because being open provides the illusion of humility whether it is there or not and active humility provides an important example of openness to followers. Openness is not limited to the ideas of others, but should encompass a willingness to evaluate without prejudice those ideas that are antithetical to the leader's own ideas and beliefs. That willingness gives followers the impression that a leader is not arrogant or unable to see the perspectives of others. Humility, then, is the act of consciously choosing not to overestimate one's importance in their leadership role. These attributes are not somehow specific to DE in the digital age, but cross boundaries and are valuable to leaders in any arena.

Courage

Courage is a requirement for the DE leader in this digital age because DE leaders "need to be risk takers" (Latchem & Hanna, 2007, p. 12). Risk-takers can also be defined as "New Millennium" strategic thinkers (Beaudoin, 2005, p. 86). Anytime anyone goes against the prevailing norms, they are taking a risk and their willingness to do so in the face of opposition. The warrior mentality that Beaudoin (2005) describes as a necessary past response to further the cause of DE can transition now to courageous leadership because we have seen success within the field of DE (Beaudoin, 2005, p. 86). However, no matter the label, both the warrior and the courageous leader must take risks to gain ground in the fight for pedagogically supported DE change.

Change Management Champion/Communicator

The final attribute that is a requirement for DE leaders in this digital age is to be change management champions/communicators. The two are combined characteristics because "no success lasts forever" and sustained change is needed to address the changing educational landscape (Latchem & Hanna, 2007, p. 19). If Latchem and Hanna (2007) are correct and DE is moving the educational environment to an entrepreneurial culture, then leaders must be able to lead and engage "a culture which values proactivity and capacity to change and to change quickly, to be opportunistic and responsive to market forces, to connect with and generate support from external constituencies, and to introduce new ideas, programmes, delivery mechanisms, goals and purposes" (p. 33). All of which cannot be sustained without consistent and continual communication with both internal and external stakeholders, followers, supporters and naysayers. This particular attribute is, in a limited sense, unique to the Digital Age and its impact on DE because change occurs in every business. The difference in DE is that change must occur in an environment that has an entrenched and established brick wall and where faculty are averse to change (Latchem and Hanna, 2007; Beaudoin, 2005; and Peters, 2002)

Perspective on the Digital Age

Latchem and Hanna (2007) state it best when they say, "mere management is no longer enough to guide and shape organizational behavior. Organizations need leadership" (p. 53). In today's constantly changing environment, where technological updates occur with increasing frequency and customers become increasingly impatient for the latest technology (see http://news.cnet.com/8301-13577_3-9984288-36.html), managing the desire for the latest and greatest technology with pedagogical support is an area of leadership that is distinctive to the Digital Age and the DE environment.

Therefore, change champions, are uniquely suited to the Digital Age and the changes that are inherent in DE and the educational landscape as a whole. Paradigm shifts from students as receptors to students as directors require a level of leadership and a type of leadership not necessarily needed in an environment where change is normal even if objectionable. Leadership characteristics are important success indicators in diverse arenas, but change champions with a facility for communicating the vision and garnering support, while useful in other areas of business, are uniquely suited to the current digital environment and the field of DE.

Crucial DE Issues

There are three crucial DE issues that must be addressed by DE leaders now and in the future. The issues are resistance, balancing technology with pedagogy and managing the responses to educational paradigm shifts. Resistance is normal. Change, although also normal, is not perceived that way. Thus, resistance can be expected just as problems in any given endeavor anticipated. Technology has the potential to be a runaway train, but pedagogy can function as both conductor and engineer to manage technology and properly apply pedagogical theory to the use of technology. Educational paradigm shifts represent massive change in DE. Leading followers and stakeholders through the shift is necessary to success. Followers need good memories of making it through the experience if they are to meet the next shift with acceptance if not complete equanimity.

Leader Response to Crucial DE Issues

Mike Williams, my first manager at GE Healthcare, embodies those leadership qualities that uniquely favor DE success. Based on the crucial DE issues outlined above, the following description identifies those leadership attributes that connect to the aforementioned issues. Mike Williams manages resistance by fully supporting grassroots change. He balances technology with pedagogy by requiring pedagogical support for technology adoption and assisting on gathering data that will further clarify the benefits and drawbacks of the use of all media. Finally, Mike Williams regularly sends out email to apprise the team of what's next in the field whether it will be applied at GE or not. There is a perceived commitment to his followers and he sets a change champion example by embracing change and articulating the benefits of upcoming changes both verbally and via email. Interestingly, he addresses the negatives for upcoming change as well, but those occur in virtual meetings where everyone has a chance to ask questions. Thus, the opportunity to dwell on the negative in an environment that could further feed it is limited if not removed. Mike Williams is a transformative leader who moves "followers to new ways of thinking and doing" (Beaudoin, 2005, p. 94).

Conclusion

Leadership in the field of DE is essential in the transformation of this area of education. DE has gained credibility in recent years, but been challenged by paper mills; successful marrying of technology to curriculum has occurred and technology has been the nexus of failure in other educational endeavors; and charismatic DE leaders have emerged and positively impacted the field while staunch opponents have created fear in the hearts of change averse, status quo members of traditional brick and mortar institutions loathe to give up the face-to-face experience. All of the above have converged and created opportunity for a new leader where transformational must be employed if success is to be achieved.

The aforementioned positives and negatives are not limited to our current Digital Age, but prepare DE leaders for the challenges that the future will bring. Technology will continue to morph and create new challenges and resistance will continue to work against change. The DE leaders able to negotiate the

obstacles while providing an attainable vision are needed to drive DE forward even if only a few steps at a time.

The key constant for the DE leader is best expressed by Beaudoin (2005), "the distance education leader, whatever other roles he or she may assume, must always maintain the essential role of educator" (p. 87). No matter the leadership style or skills, the important constant in today's society and the future of DE is education. DE leaders must use their talents to continue to create critical thinkers, encourage self-directed learning and support inquiry.

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