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DE Leaders: Required Attributes & Critical Issues They Face

The changing global environment, ongoing advances in technology and increasing

demand for educational access and quality has created lifelong learning and skill development

for organizations and individuals. From an organizational perspective distance education (DE) is

an educational reform model serving "as catalysts for systemic change" (Diamond, p. 34). From

an individual lens lifelong learning is an ongoing experience achieved formally or informally

through education, workplace or personal lives. It is in these transformative environments in

which effective DE leaders function requiring them to possess certain attributes to do so. The

first part of this paper discusses five attributes of effective DE leaders while the second defines

and discusses three critical issues DE leaders need to address to successfully guide their

organizations in today's climate and the future.

Part I – Five DE Leadership Attributes

Pisapia (2006) offers that postmodern leaders operating in an ever changing environment

must balance leading for both change and stability requiring them to constantly rethink, revise,

and restructure (as cited in Diamond, 2008, p. 35). To do so means using many skills including

people (emotional intelligence), technical (educational technology), organizational (management

leadership) and appropriate application of leadership styles (situational, transformational,

cultural, and strategic). It also requires certain leadership attributes.

According to the Encarta World English Dictionary (2009) an attribute is defined as a

quality or characteristic of a person. Newtzie (2002) suggests that important attributes of DE

leaders are:

- Self-confidence in their shared vision;
- Performing duties with "drive, energy, stamina, and an infectious positive spirit;"
- Passion representative of "disenchantment with the status quo;"
- Value-centered principles and;
- Exhibit "honesty, integrity, trust" positively impacting relationships with followers (p. 26)

Weick (1995) describes leaders as "sense-makers" with an interpretive quality enabling them to help followers see things from a new perspective in order to develop an organizational shared vision (as cited in Newtzie, 2002, p. 39). Bass and Avolio (1994) offer that effective (transformational) leaders feel personal responsibility for the growth of their followers. Burge (2007) reflects that attributes of effective DE leaders include personal beliefs, persistence, caring, asking questions and enduring change (p. 152).

This author suggests the five key attributes of successful DE leaders are vision, influence, people-focus, values and passion. This is based on the concept that passionate, goal-oriented visionary leader(s) can influence people through their value-based principles and behaviors in order to motivate their followers to make a difference.

The first attribute of vision requires remaining informed about factors or opportunities impacting distance education and translating that within an organizational context. Kotter (2011) calls this a sense of urgency while Oblinger cautions it is vital to "monitor your environment and be ruthlessly realistic" (as cited in Burge, 2007, p. 139). Hillier also offers it is important to "remember that you possess agency and use it" (as cited in Burge, 2007, p. 119). Newtzie (2002) found vision encompasses leaders' willingness to learn, using proactive thinking and taking risks (innovation), while being clear, goal-oriented and communicated to others.

Aligning with vision is the DE leader's second attribute of influence. Newtzie (2002) found that influence is not a person's position within an organization rather what people accomplish in any position at any level. Newtzie (2002) also found that influence requires

flexibility, participative communication style and willingness to be accessible and nurture followers (p. 113).

Influence also requires leaders to possess the third attribute of being people, rather than technology, or process focused. As Hillier notes distance education is a "community of practice" (as cited in Burge, 2007, p. 118). Transformational leadership in the form of influence can be used to "challenge mental models, set direction, enable self-management and prioritize learning" to mobilize people as organizational change agents where technology and processes are means by which to stated goals (Diamond, 2008, p. 36). Influence includes providing positive support, listening, brainstorming, collaboration and learning from failures without risk. Newtzie (2002) offers that by people-focused leads can engage in "sensitivity to faculty needs, listening, and collaboration with faculty in the decision-making process and providing an atmosphere to experiment and fail" (p. 113).

While influencing others through a people-focused approach the attribute of values serves as the fourth attribute by which to do so. Well-known DE leader Daniel states "First, be clear about the values that underpin your work" (as cited in Burge, 2007, p. 111). Kotter (2011) emphasizes that values can also be demonstrated in the forms of new behaviors required to accomplish change (p. 1). Newtzie (2002) offers such values include creating an environment of trust where leaders practice what they preach based on honesty, integrity and fairness. At the same time it's just as important for leaders to "gain the respect and trust of distance education faculty through credibility in actions" (p. 114). Burge (2007) notes that "Staying grounded in a personal and articulated set of values in a world filled with competing agendas and waves of technological marketing can be difficult, especially when the time available to step back and reflect . . . is fractured" (p. 152).

The other element tied to values is the fifth attribute of passion or what Burge (2007) calls "resilience." While Oblinger notes that having purpose is a good place to start Moore emphasizes how many passionate DE leaders are also "misfits" rebelling against traditional forms of education (Burge, 2007). This passion can be driven by ideological beliefs of expanding educational access to marginalized groups or innovative ways to educate within a global context. Passion requires patience, enthusiasm and a positive attitude which encourages and recognizes followers as a means of motivation to accomplish clearly-defined goals.

Passion also aptly describes how former DE pioneers successfully lead past "waves" of DE. One question is whether such characteristics have changed over time to which one can argue they have not; rather they have been reinforced and remain consistent regardless of how they have been applied. The reasons for this are based on the idea that DE itself is an educational transformative entity accomplished through risk-taking, pioneering, innovation, flexibility, adaptability, and inclusivity. Based on this one could argue certain requisite attributes are necessary!

Another important question is whether vision, influence, people-focus, values and passion are universal to most DE settings or only to certain ones. Burge's (2007) study highlights the various contexts of DE leaders worked in. The emerging theme is not the context as much as the need to continuously assess, reflect and realign through "strategic awareness of internal and external changes in context" (Haughey as cited in Burge, 2007, p. x). By doing so enabled them to implement their visions, use their influence, remain people-focused based on their their values while engaging passionately as DE leaders.

Part II – Three Critical Issues DE Leaders Face

It is important to use these attributes to address three important issues facing DE leaders today to successfully guide their organizations. These include ongoing changing learner demographics and expectations, faculty preparedness and perceptions about DE provision. While DE expansion has become more inclusive resulting in changed expectations many DE organizations have overlooked necessary organizational faculty support to promote buy-in and quality instruction thereby possibly impacting the overall perception of DE provision.

Learner demographics can be characterized as one's age, gender, language, culture, etc. Ongoing technological advancements have aided in DE expansion resulting in increased inclusion and changed demographics. DE leaders will constantly need to address in order to meet ever-changing learner expectations. Recent trends show learners come from younger "digital" generations; these learners are not only technologically-savvy but also consumers and workers who most likely base their DE expectations on these realities. DE learner expectations for demanding cost-effective and quality DE provision are heightened by ongoing advances in technology and their experiences in the real-world. As DE continues to become more inclusive, DE leaders most likely will continue to see such changing demographics therefore requiring the need to address changing learner expectations.

Ironically changes in learner expectations don't always internally translate to effective organizational faculty preparedness. Faculty preparedness can be described as an ongoing support structure encompassing faculty inclusion and feedback to address ongoing buy-in, workload assignments, contractual agreements, compensation, technical/instructional training and support, and other ongoing needs identified by faculty. It is an organizational cultural

commitment recognizing the important role faculty play in delivering quality DE by including them in finding ways to effectively address learners' ongoing and changing expectations.

However, one of the major issues related to faculty buy-in and learner expectations which DE leaders need to also address are the (un)founded perceptions of quality DE provision. This author experiences this in relationship to her current work environment. The challenge for this DE leader is hearing about negative DE experiences by friends, students and colleagues and figuring out a way to respond in order to "salvage" their perception of DE. In doing so, I often try to explain that there are several reasons possibly at play. For my friend (the traditional teacher) I explain that DE is not the same as traditional classroom teaching or is the learning experience. I also infer that perhaps the organization does not have a central DE vision, that the instructor lacks training and the fundamental pedagogical skills to deliver effective DE instruction. Essentially, however, I find it boils down to the three issues cited earlier – that learner expectations are challenging to meet, that if faculty are not adequately prepared this leads to a not-so-positive experience and impression of DE as a whole.

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