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## **MOBILISING LEADERSHIP FOR INNOVATIVE OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION IN THE 21<sup>ST</sup> CENTURY**

*Don Olcott, Jr., Charles Sturt University, Australia and Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany, Lisa Marie Blaschke, Carl von Ossietzky University of Oldenburg, Germany*

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### **Introduction**

The key to transforming the capacity of online and open education is leadership. More precisely, it is the capacity of leaders to transcend organizational and market barriers and lead change. Leading change requires a systematic approach to examining educational, economic, political, social and cultural factors that collectively create the optimum environment for systemic change (Hickman, 2010; Burns, 2010; Yukl, 2013). Conversely, failure to optimize an effective change strategy will result in failure regardless of the charismatic and perceived talents and skills of leaders (Kotter, 2012; Yukl, 2013).

Indeed for ODL universities to boldly go where no leader has gone before requires leaders to clear their experiential deck of processes and strategies that whilst effective twenty years ago are obsolete in the 21<sup>st</sup> century organization. This is a formidable challenge for all of us. It requires us to think differently about how we think, how we teach, and how we learn; and to resist a fundamental tendency of human nature – to retreat to the status quo where we feel comfortable and safe from ambiguity and the unknown. Transformation is entirely about leadership; digital technologies are simply enablers for this transformation in the hands of the right leader, for the right reasons, and the right partners (Burns, 2010; Hickman, 2010; Yukl, 2013).

Leadership, like learning, is about making connections. In the digital world the range of teaching-learning connections permeates the teaching and learning environment. We connect new knowledge to existing knowledge; we connect the digital world with the real world; we connect students to content, students to students, and students to teacher. We connect the classroom to the world, competencies to skills, individuals to groups, and groups to communities. And, most importantly, we connect technology to information – information to knowledge and knowledge to application in the real world. We connect students to life (Olcott, 2014).

Similarly, transformational leadership is about making connections (Burns, 2010). Leaders must connect to stakeholders and customers; leverage organizational staff capacity to compete and connect knowledge and emerging trends with strategy. Leaders must connect with communities and partners to define what differentiates their organization in the marketplace.

Most importantly, the new normal for 21<sup>st</sup> century leaders requires looking through a new lens from different vantage points at their organisations and the environments where their universities function.

This paper will examine the process of leading change within the context of online and open universities. The focus will be on the process of leading effective change drawing examples from the open and distance learning. Moreover the paper will offer a set of recommendations of how leading change in and of itself requires a new leadership mindset – open to new ideas, self-assessment, and re-distributing the leadership paradigm across the entire organization.

### **Defining leadership**

Before we can analyse the process of leading change, we need to set the stage for the discussion with a basic definition of leadership. Kotter (2012) articulated a sound distinction between management and leadership. He wrote:

*“Management is a set of processes that can keep a complicated system of people and technology running smoothly. The most important aspects of management include planning, budgeting, organising, staffing, controlling, and problem solving. Leadership is a set of processes that creates organisations in the first place or adapts them to significantly changing circumstances. Leadership defines what the future should look like, aligns people with the vision, and inspires them to make it happen despite the obstacles.” (p.28)*

Why is a working definition of leadership important for our discussion? First, it distinguishes the differences between management and leadership. In ODL, good managers (learning design, technology specialists, assessment experts, online tutors, etc.) are, in one sense, the management aspect of the ODL enterprise. Leadership, however, is the driving force for setting the organisation’s direction, future vision, and core values for staff. In ODL, good distance education leaders need to have a good understanding of education and distance education pedagogies and theories; are able to effectively manage conflict and transformational change; can plan strategically, create a distance education vision, and guide others toward that vision; can perform market analyses and environmental scans to identify areas for innovation and change; and can navigate institutional culture and complex, changing, and ambiguous environments (Nworie, 2012; Simonson, 2004; Beaudoin, 2002; Nworie, Haughton, & Oprandi, 2012; Irlbeck, 2002). Managers do things right. Leaders do the right things and take the organization where others lack the vision and foresight to aspire to a new level of optimum organisational efficiency and excellence (Bennis & Nanus, 1985).

Secondly, the fundamental responsibility for leading the ODL enterprise rests with the senior executive – whether a Vice Chancellor or President at a single – mode online learning institution; or the appointed leader within a dual mode institution. The leadership context within each is somewhat different but the overall leadership and leading change responsibility rests with this individual. For our purposes, here this does not mean the all-knowing single

leader is the sole guru of visionary leadership and approaches – it simply means the change process emanates from this individual.

## **Leadership at the crossroads**

Can we be so audacious as to say that leadership in higher education, specifically in open and distance learning, is at a crossroads? Yes, in fact, we can go a step further and say that the evidence in recent years clearly points to a failure in leadership at the highest levels. In deference and respect to our colleagues across the profession, institutional names and CEOs have been omitted here in citing some high profile examples (Keegan et al., 2007).

- In one case a leading global ODL university attempting to take its university abroad resulted in failure. The leadership failed to do its homework and understand the markets and regulatory environment it was trying to enter. The institutional model worked effectively in the home country whilst failing in the new market. The institution was also unwilling to compromise and adapt its model for the new market (Keegan et al., 2007).
- Conversely, in another high profile ODL university the CEO decided that issues in support of overall faculty welfare and morale were not a priority. This approach increased enrolments and revenues at the expense of the faculties. This CEO was summarily dismissed without explanation to the public or to the institution's stakeholders.
- A third example stemmed from investing millions of dollars in the wrong things at the wrong times for the wrong reasons. Again, the flawed assumption that in today's complex markets, one single leader can navigate all the issues relevant to institutional sustainability. This assumption was and is a fallacy.
- A fourth example resulted in the CEO calling it a day and leaving voluntarily. The institution was globally re-known but political and economic winds changed in the home country – the leader had no insights into a change strategy to re-position the university to adapt. A key principle in this paper is that having all the requisite leadership skills and experience are irrelevant if the leader does not have the capacity to lead effective change. Action speaks louder than words and rhetoric will not save the ship – only a highly responsive and adaptive change strategy can do this. Relying on old leadership principles much like the ill-fated Captain of the Titanic ... the prevailing thinking could not avoid the market iceberg.
- In a final example, a dual-mode driven ODL system of universities that had developed over fifteen years and positioned itself as a leading global provider of open and distance learning was dismantled after the Board of Directors felt the system should rethink excellence. The supreme irony? Excellence was already there and was cited by numerous other developing universities across the globe. These leaders failed to understand what they had and dismantled a reputable, experienced, and proven provider of excellence. This system has never recovered nor attained its prior glory.

All these examples point in one direction – ineffective leadership usually due to poor decision making embedded in the wrong decisions at the wrong time for the wrong reasons. In all instances, the concept of a well thought-out change strategy was absent. The decisions were capricious and arbitrary. All resulted in failures – failures for the institutions – and failures in leadership.

## **A progressive model for leading change**

Kotter's (2012; p.23) eight steps of effective change provides a roadmap for examining the process of change management in an ODL enterprise. The following provides an abbreviated oversight of the process. Let's examine these from the ODL leader's perspective.

### **1. Establishing a sense of urgency**

- Examining the market and competitive realities;
- Identifying and discussing crises, potential crises, or major opportunities;
- Having a sound understanding of emerging and developing market trends.

Creating a sense of panic is not synonymous with creating a sense of urgency. The rapid changes in digital technologies have resulted in many ODL leaders confusing panic with urgency. The good ODL leader recognizes that an effective change strategy still takes time to plan, implement, and adapt. This first step cannot be separated from vision making in step three. What it does require is for the leader to understand the competitive capacity of his/her institution to enter new markets, maintain existing customers, and see the forest from the trees in identifying market opportunities. It means doing one's homework and research. It means making the right decisions at the right time for the right reasons.

### **2. Creating the guiding coalition**

- Bringing key stakeholder representatives on board;
- Empowering the group to lead the change;
- Getting the group to work together like a team.

ODL leaders are conditioned by the very nature of the university enterprise: Appoint a strategic planning team, (usually of executive institutional leaders), produce a plan, send it out for input from institutional stakeholders (faculty, staff, students, partners, etc.), then ignore certain aspects of the feedback and put the plan into action. The problem is that the plan is developed with no contingencies for leading change. The team presumes – incorrectly – that creating the plan is the same as a change strategy to ensure the plan is implemented successfully. Are we really surprised that so many strategic plans gather dust on the shelves in glossy covers and drift in to oblivion? The Guiding Coalition is not about senior positions in the institution – it is about bringing together people who represent the interests of all stakeholder groups of the institution and who have the power and project management skills to realize and formalize the change (Berge, 2001). This group does the vision making, not revision making, which will be discussed below.

### **3. Developing a vision and strategy**

- Creating a vision to help direct the change effort;
- Aligning vision and strategy with organizational culture;
- Developing strategies for achieving that vision and validating with stakeholders.

Vision making is aspiring to an ideal state of affairs for the institution 3-5 years in the future – 2020 for example (Hickman, 2010; Yukl, 2013). It is not the same as a mission statement, which describes what an institution does day in and day out. A vision is about what the institution will be to thrive, not just survive, in the long-term. A viable change strategy requires and underpins the achievement of this long-term vision. The change strategy is useless if you don't know where you are going. If you don't know where you are going, it doesn't matter which road you take. This is a reality check – the right roads lead to reaching the aspiring vision of the ODL university in 2020.

### **4. Communicating the change vision**

- Using every vehicle possible to constantly communicate the new vision and strategies;
- Having the guiding coalition model the behaviour expected of employees;
- Keeping communication open, continuous, and transparent.

Like the strategic plan, a vision statement often has a major unveiling and then it is forgotten. Leaders must communicate this vision consistently, often, and with the reasons why this is the right vision for the right reasons for our future (Kotter, 2012; Hickman, 2010; Yukl, 2013). And, the guiding coalition has equal responsibility for communicating the vision – this is simply not just the Vice Chancellor or President's job. If institutional leadership is not singing the future vision in harmony, it will not happen.

### **5. Empowering broad-based action**

- Cross-checking across operational processes and strategic plans;
- Changing systems or structures that undermine the change vision;
- Encouraging risk taking and non-traditional ideas, activities, and actions.

Leaders must make many hard decisions – it comes with the job. Whether there are organisational barriers or senior staff who play the devil's advocates against everything, the visionary leader surround himself/herself with people who are aboard the vision train. Those who are not must be either convinced the vision is right or the leader must re-vamp the guiding coalition. Ask any ODL leader this question: Are you surrounded by the right people in your leadership team? Most don't know the answer because some senior people have been inherited or the leader won't ask the question in the first instance. A primary responsibility of effective leaders for leading change is establishing a strong leadership team of key people to communicate and realize the vision. Organisational structures that impede rather than leverage new opportunities and innovative thinking must be removed. Modifying these incrementally will not work. What happens is the structures end up looking just like they did before. What goes around stays around. In addition, there should be an ongoing cross-check

across operational processes and strategic plans in order to help ensure sustainability of the vision and formalization of change (Berge, 2001; Bates & Sangra, 2011).

### **6. Generating short-term wins with the long-term in mind**

- Planning for visible improvements in performance, or *wins*;
- Creating those wins;
- Visibly recognizing and rewarding people who made the wins possible.

We all can learn a valuable leadership lesson from psychology. Intermittent reinforcement tends to work more effectively than either little or excessive reinforcement. What does this mean? It actually means setting high expectations that lead to a targeted positive result for a specific component of the change strategy. Colleagues will feel they have accomplished something valuable towards the long-term vision. Morale will be sustained and demonstrated results are contagious. Future results will be more attainable and people will commit to the work and effort needed to make these come to fruition. Leadership breeds leadership. And, when these short-term wins are accomplished, the Guiding Coalition gives credit to everyone else as the price of leadership. Letting subordinates across the institution get the credit – and the guiding coalition celebrates the process and gains.

### **7. Consolidating gains and producing more change**

- Using increased credibility to change all systems, structures, and policies that don't fit together and don't fit the transformation vision;
- Hiring, promoting, and developing people who can implement the change vision;
- Reinvigorating the process with new projects, themes, and change agents.

We have heard it before. The only constant is change itself. Thriving organisations in 2020 will see leading change and planning as continuous and adaptable AND will even engage in contingency planning to increase organisation adaptability for those unforeseen changes in the markets, economy or even political changes from government agencies (Kotter, 2012; Hickman, 2010; Yukl, 2013). Leading effective change means building success upon success. The most effective and thriving organisations engage in more contingency planning and change strategies when the organisation is doing the best. This is proactive and unfortunately most ODL leaders and higher education leaders engage in contingency planning and leading change when things are at their low point. This is reactive and panic-drive and is usually unsuccessful in the long-term.

## **8. Anchoring new approaches in the culture**

- Creating better performance through customer- and productivity-oriented behaviour, more and better leadership, and more effective management;
- Articulating the connections between new behaviours and organizational success;
- Developing means to ensure leadership development and succession.

The change strategies that got you there in the first place don't automatically become part of the organizational culture by osmosis. In fact, even if the strategies are highly effective, they will tend to be thrown away easily unless the leaders constantly return to these when the winds of change challenge the strategy. The one sure metric of whether your change strategy has been embedded in the organizational culture is if the tenets that drove the strategy are fundamental to decision-making across the organization. The CEO's vision and strategy for leading change was developed based on consensus – agreement of the vision and key elements to make the vision a reality. If these can be discarded at the first sight of trouble, then the new approaches have not been anchored in the culture and will not be sustainable (Hickman, 2010; Yukl, 2013).

### **Summary**

Leading change and digital transformation takes more than technology. It will require a rediscovery of a new leadership and putting innovation back into the core of each leader. Building a community for innovation requires a synergy of the entire community – educators, government and ministry leaders, students, faculty, private providers, social service organizations, religious leaders, parents, and more. Indeed, what we should be developing are 'communities for innovation' that collectively embrace innovation in all its guises and creative capacities (Olcott, 2014; Rogers, 2003). Returning to Kotter's change model, innovation is inherent in all eight steps. We want to encourage, nurture and reward innovation and creativity. Leadership is at the crossroads. We will stay there in open and distance learning unless we begin to think differently about how we think about vision making and leading change.

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*Don Olcott, Jr., Lisa Marie Blaschke*

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