Guest Editorial Preface

Special Issue on Exploring Virtual Leadership

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Digital and technology disruption necessitates shifts in leadership behaviors and practices to accommodate the increasing virtual nature of everyday life. Nomenclature suggests researchers and practitioners continuously search for universal truths in virtual behaviors as they examine remote, dispersed, digital and e-leadership practices across an array of contexts. As technology and circumstance drive expanded access and necessity of virtual work, learning and engagement communities, it is critical to equip leaders with knowledge and tools for success. Exploring virtual leadership across work, learning and engagement contexts is important to the advancement of knowledge, theory, and practice.

Leadership behaviors in virtual, digital communities were already of great interest before migration to virtual was mandated by the global pandemic beginning in 2019. It was explored in education as instructional designers, faculty, and administrators sought strategies for leveraging virtual tools to enhance student achievement. Business leaders sought models for managing virtual, global teams and virtual project management. Industrial-organizational psychologists searched for strategies to effectively use virtual work for organizational health. Military organizations sought strategies for leveraging virtual, global personnel in leadership development and knowledge sharing. Human resources professionals needed ways to apply virtual communities to strengthen human capital and organizational learning practices.

The rise of virtual communities for work, learning, and engagement makes our world figuratively smaller. Leaders regularly engage with peers and clients across international borders with the help of media platforms and technology tools. Learning institutions are creating global campuses that allow them to attract and engage students, faculty, and staff from all corners of the world. Social networking platforms allow people across generations to create meaningful interpersonal exchanges with friends and strangers across the globe. Virtual is our global reality as it connects people across nations, cultures, industries, and occupations.

We conceived this special issue long before the COVID-19 pandemic forced global shifts to remote, virtual, and dispersed norms. However, we cannot deny the pandemic's impact on the experiences of our editors and contributors. It forced us to contemplate new realities and anticipate altered experiences. The COVID-19 pandemic is not the only undercurrent of this curated discussion. In several instances, our contributors shed light on a parallel global phenomenon – social justice. This emerged as a major concern as scholars deliberated about what it means to exhibit virtual leadership. For some, it was the focal point of a virtual learning experience. In one case, it was an important factor in shaping the future of work. For another, it was the driver of leadership identity.

This special issue explores what it means to demonstrate and experience leadership with a virtual and social justice backdrop. These four papers represent leadership topics that emanate from

our growing experience learning, working, and engaging in a virtual world. While researchers and practitioners agree no single, traditional leadership approach fully meets the needs of virtual contexts, this special issue helps us grapple with the shifting attitudes, feelings, and behaviors that shape the journey.

First, Jayne Cubbage, Dakato Boodhoo, Priscilla Cotton, and Autumn Fletcher explore leadership and social justice through online learning with a particular interest in how inclusive leadership was demonstrated and strategized. Using a combination of meta-analysis and action research strategies, the authors and participants examined multiple data sources regarding civic unrest in response to police brutality against Black Americans. Findings suggest participants in the online learning environment developed greater awareness for inclusive leadership practices. They readily associated inclusive leadership with social justice practices such as community policing and civic engagement.

Next, Shawna Gann unpacks an important leadership function for both individuals and organizations – employee onboarding. With consideration for the expanding role of remote work, pre- and post-pandemic, the author invites readers to consider the complex nature of onboarding a virtual workforce. Introversion and organizational socialization frame this discussion of the critical leadership tools necessary to balance employee values, organizational support, and impression management in the new normal of virtual work.

In the third paper, Amanda Wickramasinghe proposes an effectiveness baseline for leading virtual teams. Empirical evidence was analyzed to understand the competencies, platforms and experiences associated with virtual teams, work and leadership. Transparency, openness and empathy emerged as elements of the virtual team leadership experience. Respect, trust, curiosity, and cultural intelligence were among the competences identified as core leadership traits.

In the final paper, Abiola Martins examined feminism and leadership in social media through a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Nigerian Twitter activity was analyzed to understand the influence of female leadership in the campaign to end SARS (severe acute respiratory syndrome). The results explore how social media (a) helps feminists become leaders and (b) showcases and rewards leadership competence.

In closing, the editors and contributing authors of this Special Issue sought to better understand how the realities of virtual experiences require leaders to enact different behaviors across a variety of contexts - work, learning, and engagement. The articles herein advance leadership theory, scholarship, and the call for social justice. It also equips leaders and practitioners with efficacious and actionable steps to enhance their ability to navigate an ever increasing virtual post-pandemic world.

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