Chapter 13

Technology’s Impact on Higher Education: Implications for next Generation Leaders

Sandra L. Gupton
University of North Florida, USA

ABSTRACT

An increasing awareness reflected in the literature, research, and among practitioners is the need to reassess leadership skills and attributes most needed for today’s technologically savvy organization. The majority of models of organizational leadership emanated from the industrial era’s thinking on organizational productivity, long before the technological tsunami’s global impact, and in many aspects have less applicability today. This chapter considers the shift taking place in what constitutes leadership for organizational effectiveness—and even survival—in the digital era and explores emergent ideas and research on a new paradigm of leadership, particularly for higher education, befitting today’s digitally based, information age.

INTRODUCTION

The mushrooming of distance learning in the past two decades in higher education has created a sea of confusion for institutional leaders and students alike as they grapple to deal with this growing phenomenon. Institutions of higher education—battles of hierarchy, tradition, and remarkable resistance to change—have been catapulted by the global technological revolution into a dramatic and complex shift from focusing primarily on traditional, face-to-face education delivery venues to providing more and more online learning options. Needless to say, the leadership of these institutions today often find themselves overwhelmed and ill-equipped to cope, much less to lead with a sense of competence, vision, and strategy in the tsunami of change catalyzed by today’s technology. After completing this chapter, reader will be able to
describe the state of distance learning in this country, its impact on higher education’s leadership in particular, and emerging perspectives on the concept of effective leadership retro-fitted for the high-tech, information era.

BACKGROUND

The world today continues, as it always has to one degree or another, to flounder in a sea of change. The stages and ages of mankind’s evolution provide rich fodder for academic study, artistic interpretations and creations, and ample folk speculation on the meaning of life and how best to negotiate change as part of it. Historians and forecasters analyze humans’ past in search of lessons learned and their applicability for dealing more ably with the future; writers seek to understand mankind’s past to give meaning and purpose to present day life in their stories and rhymes; prognosticators attempt to forecast future trends to prepare us for changes ahead by better understanding the events of the past. Time marches on with nary a “beat” missed accompanied by its inevitable and much less predictable partner, change. So what’s new about change?

Today’s “seas of change,” however, differ significantly from those of the past; these turbulent seas are fueled by the technological revolution and thus, are riveted with a “lot of bizarre weather” making them less navigable and often wildly unpredictable. Environmental activist and scholar Joanna Macy calls these times in which we live “The Great Turning”—a time of upheaval and far greater consequence than former times of dissettling flux, change, and revolution (Macy & Johnstone, 2012). “Since the dawn of the industrial revolution some two hundred years ago,” note Bolman and Deal in the fifth edition of their seminal book on organizational leadership, “explosive technological and social changes have produced a world that is far more interconnected, frantic, and complicated” (2013, p. 6).

Although humans—and especially those who would be “leaders”—often seek to be proactive and attempt to shape change, more often than not, they are unable to predict or control much of what happens. In the roiling seas of today’s faster and faster-paced change, decisions made and actions taken are less strategic than reactionary and “by the seat of the pants;” rarely do people have time today to reflect deeply upon their actions, much less grasp their long-term, personal or global implications.

Donald Tapscott, best-selling author, teacher, and chief executive of the think tank, New Paradigm, and his partner Anthony D. Williams, describe how technology is changing the economy and workplace around the globe and ultimately conclude:

*We are in the midst of a paradigm shift. New paradigms cause disruption and uncertainty and are nearly always received with coolness, hostility or worse. Vested interests fight against the new. Consequently, a paradigm shift typically causes a crisis of leadership... While hierarchies are not vanishing, profound changes in the nature of technology, demographics and the global economy are giving rise to powerful new models of production based on community, collaboration and self-organization rather than on hierarchy and control.* (2006, p. 8)

It is within this unprecedented context of change and uncertainty that the author explores what today’s leaders of higher education most need to be effective as traditional models of leadership become less and less relevant and globally all types of organizations and their leaders struggle for meaning, direction, and oftentimes sheer survival.