Chapter 14
Trends in Virtual Leadership:
An Interview with Elliott Masie

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ABSTRACT

This chapter examines emerging trends in virtual leadership through an interview with Elliott Masie, a futurist who has been following trends in learning, leadership, and collaboration for nearly three decades. The interview begins with a discussion of Elliott’s and the Masie Center’s interest in this topic, and then proceeds to explore some of the trends that they are seeing, attempting to separate hype from reality. The chapter then looks toward the future, envisioning what the workplace of the future might look like, and what kinds of skills and practices will be necessary for organizations to continue to be effective as the workplace setting evolves. Elliott brings a perspective to this topic that is grounded not only in his past experience with emerging trends, but also in his current and relevant interactions with global leaders. An interview format was chosen for this chapter in order to allow Elliott’s unique voice and personality to be shared with readers.

WHO IS ELLIOTT MASIE?

Elliott Masie is an internationally recognized futurist, analyst, researcher and organizer on the critical topics of workforce learning, business collaboration and emerging technologies. He is the editor of Learning TRENDS, an Internet newsletter read by over 52,000 business executives worldwide, a regular columnist in professional publications, and the author of a number of books. Elliott heads The MASIE Center, a Saratoga Springs, NY, think tank focused on how organizations can support learning and knowledge within the workforce. He leads the Learning Consortium, a coalition of over 240 global organizations cooperating on the evolution of learning strategies, including
Walmart, Allstate, Sears, Bank of America, Emirates Airlines, the U.S. Departments of Defense and Labor, and many others.

Elliott’s professional focus has been in the fields of corporate learning, organizational performance and emerging technology. He has developed models for accelerating the spread of knowledge, learning and collaboration throughout organizations. Elliott is acknowledged as the first analyst to use the term e-Learning and has advocated for a sane deployment of learning and collaboration technology as a means of supporting the effectiveness and profitability of enterprises. Elliott serves as an advisor to a wide range of government, education and non-profit groups. He serves on the Board of Trustees of Skidmore College, as a Board member of FIRST Robotics, and as a member of the CIA University Board of Visitors. He has served as a pro-bono advisor to the Department of Defense and on the White House Advisory Council on Expanding Learning Opportunities.

Elliott is launching a series of Learning Research and Development LAB experiments, focusing on the future role of video conferencing, video stories, social learning, and mobile performance support in the learning field.

**ELLIOTT MASIE INTERVIEW**

Kathy Milhauser (KM): Let’s start with how you became interested in the topic of virtual leadership.

Elliott Masie (EM): The topic of virtual leadership for me has been an evolving one. In many ways, people have been doing virtual leadership for as long as there have been a few people out in the “field.” So you had certain industries or certain sectors that were distributed.

But certainly the major increase in the need to talk about leadership evolved from a dramatic increase in the distribution of teams. So, now we have everything from people working from home, increasing numbers of people who are working on the road, and eventually even the concept that when organizations hire people, they have often stopped moving them, because they want to not have the disruption and cost of moving.

Finally, we have begun to develop the tools, technologies, platforms, and methodologies that allow people to authentically lead a team of people who are distributed. So it became a reality and what has concerned me and continues to concern me is that, we have been quicker to distribute teams than we have to build up these skills for leading distributed teams. So it has been my focus for about a year now to really say, what can organizations do to build the competency of managers and leaders to provide leadership for teams that they are not physically living next to, and in some cases may never (or at least very rarely) see face-to-face.

KM: Do you see this as a paradigm shift in how we manage?

EM: I don’t know if it’s a paradigm shift. I think it is a delivery shift, but in some ways I actually think a lot of the message that at least I have been conveying about virtual leadership is that it’s not different, but rather it’s doing what you know in a different delivery method, but it’s doing the same things.

If I am managing people who are in the same building as me, I mix a variety of formal one-to-one, formal one-to-many, and informal one-to-one, and then what I would call casual one-to-one, which is the walk down to get a cup of coffee or the wave as I am coming into the office in the morning. I actually think all of the things we need to do with people who are near us, if we are managing them or leading them in teams, are the same things we have to do with people we are leading in the virtual environment. I am not sure in that sense it’s a paradigm shift, and in some ways it is reminding people that it shouldn’t be different.

On the other hand, because of the tools, because of the distribution, I think it’s time for organizations to adapt. For example, if you have got 13 people and you are managing them, and 7 are nearby and 6 are distributed, you need to...

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