Chapter 1
E-Leadership in the Digital Age

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ABSTRACT

This chapter argues that E-leadership emerged out of technological development among all other major developments in society. In the virtual environment, leaders are required to lead followers by using totally different approaches. This is not to say that traditional leadership has no place in the new virtual environment characterized by the constant use of technology. Rather, traditional leadership and leadership style studied and conceptualized by researchers and scholars enhance E-leadership supported by Rogers’ facilitative leadership. Leadership theories are meant to be applied to practice. Further, leadership theories can be applied in part or in whole. They are not ideologies that must be followed to the letter.

INTRODUCTION

About 40% of the workforce in the United States telecommute from home to their workplaces (Chafkin, 2010), and slightly more than 2% of the U.S. employee workforce (2.8 million people, not including the self-employed or unpaid volunteers) consider home their primary place of work (Lister, 2010). Not surprisingly, roughly one in six students enrolled in higher education — about 3.2 million people — took at least one online course in the fall of 2005, a sharp increase despite claims that growth in online learning is leveling off (Pope, 2006). Such numbers decry the necessity of e-leadership and its importance in the new century and this chapter encourages researchers and scholars reexamine leadership and leadership styles in relation to E-leadership.

Literature about leadership and leadership styles has not changed much in the 21st century. However, the situations and circumstances surrounding leadership and leadership styles have drastically changed in recent years. The business world has become more competitive and volatile, influenced by such factors as faster technology change, greater international competition, the
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deregulation of markets, overcapacity in capital-intensive industries, an unstable oil cartel, raiders with junk bonds, and changing demographics of the work force (Kotter, 1998, p. 40). Due to such changes, companies are downsizing, merging, restructuring and laying off of current employees if their leaders consider the skills of the employees obsolete. Most job descriptions for leaders include skills in the use of technology. Without the skills to use technology, leaders are not hired, nor are employees promoted to leadership positions.

Without a doubt, among other developments in the new century, technology has played a major role in reshaping the world. Technology has permeated society in general, and major government and economic stakeholders have recognized the importance of incorporating technology throughout education in order to prepare a competitive workforce in a global economy (Farmer, 2011, p. 230). Until recently, the United States had the largest number of Internet users. However, the number of Internet users (179.7 million) in China has now surpassed those of the United States (163.3 million) (Schonfeld, 2009). What are the implications of technology use for the leadership and leadership styles? Should leaders change the way they see themselves, others, and their environment (Cramer & Wasiak, 2006)?

Leadership in the past did not depend as heavily on technology. Individual secretaries or office associates may have been the ones interacting with technology. Today, leaders are required to do many things themselves through the use of technology. Does this shift require further changes in leadership and leadership styles? Although the basic tenets of leadership and leadership styles remain the same, regardless of the changes through the ages, our shifting environment requires further examination of today’s leadership and leadership styles. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss what constitutes E-leadership in the new century and to reveal its far reaching implications in this fast changing environment.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

There are many studies associated with leadership style. Most people are familiar with the Ohio State University study on leadership style (Northouse, 2007). Less attention has been paid to a class study by Lippit and White (1958) who examined the leadership styles of youth leaders. According to Jarvis (2002), Lippit and White (1958) highlighted a threefold typology: authoritarian, laissez-faire, and democratic. They found the following:

- Authoritarian leaders create a sense of group dependence on the leader. Their presence holds the group together, and no work was done in their absence;
- Laissez-faire leaders achieve little work whether they were present or absent;
- Democratic leaders achieve group cohesion and harmonious working relationships whether they were present or not. (Jarvis, 2002, p. 27)

Since then, their findings have been applied to the business world, higher education, etc. The threefold typology regarding leadership style appears to exist in every country where there are leaders and followers in organizations. Authoritarian leaders exist in both authoritarian and democratic countries. And it would be incorrect to claim that this kind of leadership style exists only in communist countries. Many leaders in democratic countries are more authoritarian than leaders in communist countries. Likewise, it is commonly argued that laissez-faire leaders are commonplace. These leaders do not seem to make each day “count.” Perhaps, these leaders are not internally motivated to achieve much. Democratic leaders do strive to achieve group cohesion. Based on this leadership style, new terms have been created in especially higher education. Shared governance, transparency, job rotations are just a few terms to show that these terms have been derived from this particular leadership style.