Chapter 5
Factors in Fluidity of Leadership in Emerging Contexts: Technology Access and Use

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ABSTRACT

Using the definition of Hesselbein, Goldsmith, and Beckhard (1996), leaders are defined as those with followers and who garner influence with and among those followers. Mobile technologies, social media, and other computer-mediated communication tools have changed how those followers are connected to leaders and organizations as well as how influence can be exerted by the followers themselves. Leadership in political, economic, and educational contexts is examined through examples taken from research and current events. Three common themes emerged within each of the leadership sectors examined: time and place, the role of the individual vs. the group, and interactivity. These themes are explored through a framework of questions and leadership actions.

INTRODUCTION

In the foreword of Drucker Foundation’s The Leader of the Future: New Visions, Strategies, and Practices for the Next Era (Hesselbein, Goldsmith, & Beckhard, 1996), a leader is defined as someone who has followers. Leaders have to have influence over or with individuals and within or among groups in order to have followers. Some readers may argue that this definition is too narrow because it fails to speak to character or purpose of leadership. The relationship between followers and influence are key to leadership in a multicultural world in which technology is the conduit for information and is at the core of the discussion in this chapter.
Factors in Fluidity of Leadership in Emerging Contexts

How individuals and organizations get and use information, either as leaders or as followers, feature prominently in this examination of leadership. Since the publication by the Drucker Foundation of that seminal work on leadership, much has happened in terms of technology, and, as a result, in terms of leadership. The process of reaching and creating followers certainly now reflects emerging technologies such as those of social networking. The creation of influence has been changed, too, as a result of the changing technologies. Who has influence and how it is measured has changed drastically. Leaders who understand that technology has produced broader audiences, consisting of self-selecting individuals are the leaders who have used the technology successfully, whether for the larger good or personal enhancement. Either way, leaders create and, in some ways, manage followers by managing the technology, thus creating and using influence among those followers. Followers also have some sense of self-direction in their choices and, as followers, have technological means for influencing leaders, also as a result of technological changes.

This chapter explores how leaders can use technology to create influence and, thus, inspire followers in the fields of politics, economics, and education while acknowledging that the unique interactive nature of today’s technology empowers followers with influence in ways not possible in previous decades. Some of the resultant issues are identified in the emergence of leadership and the role of leaders in managing interactive organizations in a multinational, multicultural context. Leadership must be considered in terms of the factors of time and place, individuals vs. groups, and interactivity in determining leaders and followers.

BACKGROUND

Retired General Collin Powell, United States Army, was interviewed by Piers Morgan on CNN (November 10, 2011) and, among other topics, he discussed the difficulties experienced by today’s leaders in reaching compromise on any issue. He described how, with access to media, extremists at either end of the spectrum can become immediately engaged in the situation whereas in the past, leaders had a chance to work together quietly and privately to reach common ground before experiencing broad involvement of others. Leaders’ efforts today are under constant exposure to scrutiny and discussion by anyone with access to the information through the technologies available. Leaders today sometimes have to weigh and perhaps defend decisions before those decisions are even fully developed. The multitude of voices entering any decision-making process has changed the process of leadership as well as its timing. There is no longer time for that leadership and its decisions to emerge, considered and mature. The other side of this issue is the transparency being imposed on decision-making events and the policy makers because of the potential interactivity resulting from both leaders and followers having access to information.

Successful leaders now realize that these broader audiences, official or otherwise, impact how they function as leaders. Followers also realize their power, implicit or explicit, in influencing the decision-making process. Clearly, there are both positive and negative implications of open access to information by masses of individuals and groups. It is this balance of broad exposure to the widest range of audiences ever encountered by leaders as well as transparency with the need for measured, considered decision making that is at the heart of this chapter. The reader is reminded that the definition of leader used in this chapter is an individual with followers as a result of influence garnered.

Among factors contributing to the shortened time frame for the emergence of leadership decisions include the presence within an organization or culture of the digital natives (Prensky, 2001a, 2001b). Palfrey and Gasser (2008) provide insights into this unique generation in Born Digital, from