

Preferred Leadership Style for Distance Education

Introduction

As leadership styles have been studied in OMDE 604, a course delivered by and studying distance education (DE), it has become clear that some styles are more appropriate than others for the leaders charged with designing and delivering learning at a distance. Some of the leadership styles and a brief description include:

- charismatic –leader gains followers through their personality and charm;
- participative –an overbearing leader may involve subordinates in decisions;
- situational –leader does not follow a single, specific style but looks at the situation to decide their leadership style;
- transactional –leader creates a clear structure for employees, who know the rewards for following instructions, and if things go wrong, the subordinate is often punished for the failure; and,
- transformational – leader exudes energy and excitement about a change, gives credit to subordinates, and knows being aggressive will not accomplish the goal.

(changingminds.org, 2012-a).

After studying these leadership styles, it is suggested that transformational leadership (TL) is well-suited for DE settings, although some aspects of other styles could also be utilized.

Key Features of Transformational Leadership

Marcus (2004) writes that DE and face-to-face programs are converging, and for leaders who have been overseeing inconspicuous programs, the roles of faculty and staff are also coming

together. Accordingly, creative and strong leadership is required to manage and evaluate these new types of learning. She notes that "some people see the leader as a motivator, while others define a leader as one having extraordinary vision and decision-making power" (p. 2).

Beaudoin (2002) suggests transformational leaders in DE need to be able to help the interested parties, which include the students, faculty and the leadership, to see the clear benefits of new ways of doing business; and to be able to break out of their comfort zone and learn to teach differently. However, he says the DE leader also needs to be a situational leader, who can diagnose the organization at a specific moment and determine the readiness of the organization or its stakeholders for change (p. 140).

Beaudoin (2002) points out some specific characteristics that a DE leader should have.

They need to:

- create conditions for innovative change,
- enable individuals and organizations to share a vision and move towards it, and
- contribute to the management and operationalization of ideas.

While these traits are understood in transformational leadership (TL), the method of applying and utilizing them is unique for the DE leader (p. 132).

Marcus (2004) suggests a number of circumstances are needed for success in DE, several of which are dependent on a transformational leader:

- recognized existence of need,
- identification of structure,
- leadership of the innovation,

- teacher participation and support, and
- appropriate technology (p. 4).

Yukl (1994) writes about TL and supports these stages, including how leaders:

- need to work with staff to develop a vision that is both challenging and attractive;
- translate the vision into actions;
- communicate decisiveness, optimism and confidence about implementing the vision; and,
- make small planned steps to achieve success for smaller wins before declaring success in the overall vision.

Boga and Ensari (2009) state “the transformational leader transpires an optimistic vision about the future” (p. 243).

Transformational Leadership – Effectively Used

Prabhakar (2005) studied leadership styles on project success on a global basis. His study used “the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire-6S (MLQ) by Bass and Avolio (1992) to measure TL behaviors of idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation and individualized consideration” (p. 54). Prabhakar suggested leadership styles could be switched as needed, but focused primarily on the TL style, and showed a high level of project success in his studies. He found that TL inspired and motivated others by giving them meaningful and challenging work and led to more project success. A team spirit was generated and employees showed “enthusiasm and optimism” for the tasks (p. 55).

Boga and Ensari (2009) studied the relationship between TL and a successful organization, and found TL present with effectiveness among the work unit (p. 237). They also

found their hypothesis accurate in that the organization was perceived as more successful as the level of TL increased. More importantly, supporting their prediction, the results revealed a positive interaction between TL and a higher level of organizational change rather than a low level of change (p. 245).

Newtzie (2002) studied the relationship between TL qualities in the Virginia Community College System and their system-wide conversion to DE between 1997-2001. Using surveys and focus groups the study looked at faculty resistance to DE and their newly defined roles in this format. The researcher generally found the presence of numerous points of TL during this period of major change; however, she was not able to directly relate these qualities to the successful institutional change to DE.

Assets of Transformational Leadership

Prabhakar (2005) suggests TL “builds relationships with followers through interactive communication, which forms a cultural bond between the two participants and leads to a shifting of values by both parties toward common ground” (p. 55). Inspired employees see the future in an attractive light as expectations are communicated to them, generating a shared vision and commitment.

Changingminds.org (2012-b) suggests that employees will follow a leader who inspires them and that a leader with “vision and passion can achieve great things” (Sec. 1, para. 1).

Liabilities of Transformational Leadership

Changingminds.org (2012-b) implies the passion and confidence of TL can be confused for reality and truth. Just because a leader “believes they are right, does not mean they are right.” Although many great ideas have been achieved by passionate people, there have been

times when the transformation has taken an organization over the cliff. Sometimes the initial energy that excites employees can also lead to them giving up if it is applied relentlessly.

Transformational leaders also are known to miss the trees for the forest – or the smaller, but important details. It is important that the transformational leader has reliable staff to handle the important details – otherwise failure can result. Lastly, transformational leaders want to transform, by definition. However, if the company, employees and customers are happy with the status quo, then a transformational leader can become frustrated (Sec. 7, para. 3).

Application of Transformational Leadership

The Smith School of Business at the University of Maryland is embarking on a distance delivery for their Executive MBA program next year, and there are some high-ranking senior faculty members who are championing this program. They are looking at models from peer business schools, but it is uncertain how thorough their knowledge is or where benchmarking currently stands. They are considering primarily a synchronous program, and appear to have the notion that the professor has to see the students' faces to make sure they are paying attention. This suggests they are considering a synchronous video/telepresence format, which will lead to a “talking head” syndrome. This will not produce a highly successful program, in this writer's opinion. Although the leadership knows they have a staff member studying in the MDE program at UMUC, they have yet to tap the resource for advice or recommendations. While a decision has not been finalized, the leadership is looking to outsource the management and hosting of the program to an outside vendor. The University of Maryland is strongly encouraging colleges to consider some distance delivery courses – whether cohorts of specialized programs, such as the

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EMBA, or individual undergraduate classes to utilize valuable classroom space and offer more sections of particular courses (both face-to-face and distance delivery).

Outcome of Transformational Leadership Style

It is this author's opinion that a TL style is already somewhat in place, because the senior faculty have the vision of DE, but they have not done enough research and outreach to tap resources available. As Beaudoin (2002) suggests TL in DE must point to the clear benefits of distance delivery and help faculty get out of their same old way of teaching in a face-to-face environment. However, he also suggests the leaders of this new program must have some traits of the situational leader, where they can evaluate the organization at a specific moment (i.e., now) and determine the readiness of the organization or its stakeholders (i.e., faculty, staff and students) for change (p. 140).

Impact on the Smith School

There are numerous peer business schools who have implemented successful DE graduate programs. Although some benchmarking has clearly been done, more needs to be done to determine what type of DE program these schools are offering: synchronous, with a video/telepresence format, asynchronous or some combination of these programs.

There has been only one recent DE course, and it was a blended learning experience at the undergraduate level. It was reasonably successful, and was led by a faculty champion who has the vision to try new ways of teaching. This professor applied for a grant from the University of Maryland and was able to secure a teaching assistant from the campus IT department. She was pleased with the outcome of the class, but made it clear she would not have

been able to do it on her own – without the assistance of a T.A. who also was the instructional designer. This is an example of Kotter's (1996) step six – generating short-term wins. This successful class needs to be written about and communicated not only as a small win but also as an example of what can be done on a larger level.

As suggested by Yukl (1994) the Smith School's TL needs to work with the staff – who are the likely program directors, instructional designers and technology support – to develop both a challenging and attractive vision; lay out the vision into manageable actionable steps; and communicate to all current stakeholders (faculty and staff) the decisiveness, optimism and confidence about the vision.

Conclusion

It appears to be clear to this writer that TL is needed in a situation where a program of DE is being considered, because it is such a major organizational change for an institution that previously has only delivered courses in a face-to-face environment. A vision needs to be seen and communicated throughout the organization but especially to the key stakeholders who will be involved in the change effort. Through the enthusiasm displayed by the leader, both faculty and staff will become excited about the change. However, the leader also needs to be able to diagnose the situation currently and see the obstacles to the change – both cultural and people, to have DE a successful part of the educational offerings.

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