Leadership Group Project Analysis –

An Interview with Dr. Tait

Heather Michel, Mary Lynn McPherson, Shantel Smith, & Santiago Sere

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This paper sets out to provide findings from an interview with distance education (DE) leader Dr. Alan Tait. The interview was conducted on June 20th, 2016, by Mary Lynn McPherson, one of the collaborators of this paper. Throughout the paper, reflections and knowledge gained from the DEPM 604 Management and Leadership in DE and E-Learning course in the Masters of Distance Education and E-Learning (MDE) are included to analyze major themes in leadership.

Analysis

Dr. Alan Tait, as a leader in distance education, discusses many current issues in DE that can be generalized and applied to other fields of leadership as well.

First, Dr. Tait encourages DE leaders to be cognizant of the technology availability issues in developing countries before implementing DE environments (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). One can apply this same idea on a macro level in leadership when we realize that leaders and managers must be aware of the type of tools people have at their disposal before expecting people to complete tasks. Both leaders and managers want to provide the optimal chances of success for their employees to ensure the task gets completed well and that the morale remains high.

When discussing access to DE for people with disabilities, Dr. Tait shared that everything possible should be done to ensure that people with disabilities, including people who cannot see or hear, have access to DE (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). From a leadership and managerial perspective, it is essential that employees feel appreciated, valued, and know that

their contributions will be meaningful and respected. When one combines these ideas, it is easy to see that employees with disabilities are also seeking the same type of respect and value as people who do not have disabilities. Leaders and managers need to provide the support that employees need to ensure that the work can be completed.

A quality assurance system is needed to be put into place to ensure that instructors are participating appropriately and consistently with their students. Dr. Tait shared that this type of problem is not unusual but is something that is constantly being addressed (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). While some instructors might find this to be a bit overbearing, it is important for the DE organization to intervene so that student learning is not compromised. When looking at this through a leadership and managerial lens, it is similar to making sure that the client is happy and that his or her experience in the organization or business is not tainted or poor. Dr. Tait touched on Moore's theory of transactional distance and on Holmberg's approach to empathy (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). Transactional distance talks about the amount of interactions and support that a professor provides and how independent a learner needs to be. The approach to empathy is used to promote motivation and decrease the level of isolation that some students may feel in DE programs. As a leader, it is important to cultivate relationships so that employees are motivated and feel that they are part of a team.

When discussing his own leadership style, Dr. Tait joked that in order to get an accurate answer, one would need to ask a third party as he likes to present himself in a positive light (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). His answer is reminiscent of Baker's (2007) and Kellerman's (2009) idea of followership and how, although a leader is important, followers are what make the leader. Dr. Tait's point, although joking, touches on this idea that his role and his skill should be seen from the perspective of followers and their experiences of being led by Dr.

Tait. As for his own view, Dr. Tait sees himself as a leader that empowers others to do a good job, not one where his leadership position grants him any type of personal power (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). He provides an example that when he started being the Provost of a university, there was only one woman out of seven Dean positions and that by the time he left, four of seven Dean positions were held by women.

The course readings have presented various types of leaders and managers that range from people-focused to task-focused, as was the case in the Westley & Mintzberg (1989) article on different leadership styles. The discussion board threads have provided additional insights into leadership styles. One concept is that while the type of organization and position affects the type of leadership that is necessary to achieve strong results, also people gravitate towards certain types of organizations or positions where their strengths will bring them success. Another concept that was explored in the discussion threads is that people with differing managerial styles could work well together if there is trust and respect between them. For instance, an E-style leader is very concerned with employees and their well-being. A C-style leader is more concerned with and focused on the task, putting relationships aside. These two can work well together because as the C-style leader is focusing on the task, the E-style leader can make sure that people are well-supported and feel valued. At the same time, when the E-style leader is paying too much attention to people's feelings and allowing work to start slacking, the C-style leader can come in and re-steer the ship. This is a strong relationship of relying on each other's strengths, one where learning happens for both leaders.

Dr. Tait also imparts the importance of listening to others, as this is how a manager truly finds out what is going on. The course discussion board provided the insight that listening more about abilities and talents of individuals in one's group of followers increases trust and

confidence, as well as the opportunity to expose leadership in others. Dr. Tait discusses the importance of maintaining a balance between what a leader wants to do and what the leader's employees want and how this is one vital strength that DE leaders should have (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). On this note, the discussion board included thoughts on the benefit of bottom-up change rather than top-down change. It increases employee buy-in to the change and allows for a greater diversity of perspectives from which to implement the change. This ultimately leads to easier transitions, as many of the potential problems have already been thought of and ironed-out.

In order to gain faculty buy-in and to make change happen, Dr. Tait suggests looking for allies (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). It is more powerful for other people to realize that multiple people want change than simply trying to follow a sole individual. It pays to look for allies that may want to make the changes and recruit them to the cause. This idea of allies is similar to Raven's (2008) informational power as Dr. Tait would be going around probing people and explaining to them a better way of doing things. Dr. Tait also personifies the expertise power as he is extremely experienced and knowledgeable in his field having served as Pro Vice Chancellor of the OU UK (Raven, 2008). His expertise power makes it easier to gain allies for his recommended changes.

As for behaviors or characteristics that one should avoid, he warns against leaders who are technology-led, those who are constantly looking for the newest technology and innovations without stopping to consider the learning implications of its use. These leaders fail to answer the question: How can this technology provide a better learning opportunity that meets a challenge? Leaders and managers in any organizations, including DE, must question choices to avoid making a trip to Abilene as Harvey (1974) suggests in his article. By stopping and asking the

question posited above, leaders are encouraging people who are led by technology to pause,

ponder the question, and deviate from going to Abilene, a metaphorical destination where some

organizations end up due to lack of communication and poor leadership. This ability to check in

with employees is an important characteristic that leaders must have as it also ensures that the

vision of an organization is true and remains intact. Once the vision of a program or organization

has been created and communicated, it is important that the leader walk the talk, or lead by

example as Kotter (2012) states.

In order to keep current in DE trends, Dr. Tait provided three strategies:

1.   Attend professional meetings, both national and international

2.   Read academic journals with research

3.   Spend time with people who know their craft. If possible, hire them (A. Tait,

       personal communication June 20, 2016).

It is important that all leaders, whether they are in academia or not, stay current with

recent publications, research, and best practices to stay innovative, competitive, and ahead of

other companies.

Finally, Dr. Tait puts a lot of focus on trust. Although we have studied Lewicki,

McAllister, and Bies' (1998) trust and distrust framework, the interview did not yield the depth

necessary to analyze whether or not Dr. Tait puts trust and distrust in the same individuals or if

he simply believes in just trust. One might imagine that although people may not think of trust

and distrust as existing outside of the bifocal spectrum, leaders and managers are able to place

trust where it needs to be and distrust the same individuals, but maybe in a different context

(Lewicki, et al., 1998). Dr. Tait finished the interview by sharing his quote, "Tell the truth with

energy" (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). Leaders must be transparent with the

employees because they need to know the truth even though a lie might be easier to take. By being energetic, the leader is providing opportunities and solutions to obstacles that can be addressed by a committed team.

Even as renowned a DE leader as Dr. Tait is, he is not able to provide answers to some of the biggest DE problems. Three that he mentions are affordability of postsecondary education, access to the Internet in rural areas, and access to the Internet for students in prison (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). As in the United States, tuition costs have gone up in higher education in England, including DE. While he promotes the idea that some of taxpayer money should be assigned to offset the costs, as it was in the past, Dr. Tait recognizes that cost of education is something that is above his realm of control. In terms of Internet access in rural areas, Dr. Tait notes that even some parts of England struggle with connectivity and that this is an even bigger issue for poorer countries. Still, he explains that even in some of the poorest countries, students living in the main cities do have access to a lot of technology. On the other hand, internet access is completely not permissible for students in prison as that can create security risks (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). This lack of access creates a problem as students who leave prison lack the appropriate technology skills that are integral to many jobs. These problems are not particular to a specific organization or business, as they are situations that are global problems where solutions are not simple. As such, leaders of organizations or schools are not able to enact change to alter and better the circumstances. They can only try to avoid the issues or work out an individual solution for a student.

Unfortunately, when asked about how diverse teams can work effectively with each other despite having different cultures, languages, and time zones, Dr. Tait was not able to provide any meaningful suggestions as to what could be done (A. Tait, personal communication June 20,

2016). Throughout the readings of this course in management and leadership in DE and e-learning, it has been evident that people working in groups want to feel valued and appreciated. This same respect needs to be given to members of a team who may speak with an accent or, as Dr. Tait puts it, who are not working in their primary language; "Some of the people that constitute a diverse team may be working in their second or even third language" (A. Tait, personal communication June 20, 2016). Language diversity is important to keep in mind as it may cause communication issues among the group members. It is important that communication be effective by being clear and concise. On the other hand, the diversity and experience that people from other countries bring to a group can add new perspectives and ideas otherwise not considered. As Hadary and Henderson (2010) note in their video, companies that have different perspectives, in their case, women in leadership, tend to do better because decisions are looked at through various lenses.

Conclusion

It is clear that Dr. Tait's leadership style is people-focused as he cares about his employees, listens to them, and empowers them. This focus does not mean that the tasks go uncompleted, as is clear by his vast number of previous leadership roles throughout his career. Dr. Tait truly embodies the strength of a leader that people can stand behind; he is a charismatic, empowering leader with a wealth of knowledge that has been used to promote distance education as a viable learning path for many around the world. Some leaders don't leave a legacy after they are gone because they have not trained anyone to follow in their footsteps. Dr. Tait has trained people all along the way, and his legacy has already begun in the work that his empowered and trusted people are already doing in the field of DE.

The interview with Dr. Tait provided many insights that can be expanded to the leadership realm as a whole. Through his responses to the questions created by this team, it is clear that some problems are too big even for strong leaders to handle on their own. Whether it may be access to the Internet in poor regions/countries or the high cost of tuition, these problems cannot be solved by one individual as they are infrastructure and/or governmental problems. They remain to be solved by the future leaders of the world.

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