Leadership and Distance Education

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Introduction

Distance education (DE) is not a new idea; the first generation of DE was delivered through correspondence study, in the early 1880s (Moore & Kearsley, 2012, p. 23). Distance education continued to evolve, to broadcast radio and television, open universities, teleconferencing, culminating in the "fifth generation" which we are currently enjoying today. The introduction and widespread use of the internet has revolutionized DE (Moore & Kearsley, pp. 40-42). In Fall 2013, over 5.5 million students were enrolled in a distance education course at a degree-granting postsecondary institution in the US (Fast Facts Distance Learning, 2016).

Despite the explosion in DE, there are concerns that DE is not as effective as traditional face-to-face education, and that students are isolated and not as well supported (Advantages and Disadvantages – Why Choose Distance Learning, 2016). To assure equity in education, and support to its learners, institutions must choose leaders wisely. This two-part paper considers the characteristics of effective leaders in DE (Part 1) and current challenges leaders must content with in DE (Part 2).

Part 1 – Leader Attributes

An attribute is defined by Merriam-Webster as "a usually good quality or feature that someone or something has (Merriam-Webster, 2016). What attributes are desirable in a leader, especially as it pertains to distance education? While there are many potential attributes, five of the most important are **trust, communication, passion, empathy/compassion, and vision**.

Trust – Trust is the glue that creates a bond between leaders and followers, and allows for organizational and leadership success (Mineo, 2014, p. 1). Mineo further explains that the path to developing trust is to "under-promise and over-deliver" (p. 4). Specifically, this includes demonstrating "a genuine concern for others, being willing to acknowledge areas of weakness, and compensating by sharing or delegating responsibility" (Mineo, p. 4).

Rupp (2016, pp. 34-38, citing Handford, V., Leithwood, K., & Fullan, M.) states that to establish trust, four core elements must be met: respect, openness, reliability and integrity. In any relationship, including distance education, mutual respect is critically important. This includes respect between teachers and learners, and between leaders and teachers or learners. Openness, and acknowledgement of shared goals (e.g., students achieving learning outcomes or meeting criteria for degree attainment) allows a sense of "confidence through collaboration" (Rupp, p. 36). With the rapid changes in distance education, particularly the use of technology, the ability and confidence to ask for help from the leader is critically important. Reliability is a two-way street as well. Leaders must follow through on promises made to followers, and followers must keep up their end of the bargain. Rupp (p. 37) discussed the need for reliable high speed internet access 24-7 from a distance education program, and the accessibility of support personnel when problems arise as one example of reliability.

Integrity speaks to an additional set of characteristics including morals, ethics, values and honesty (Rupp, p. 38). Basically, these values collectively represent the ability to believe that others (including a leader) is telling you the truth; to do otherwise invites distrust. Dr. Alan Tait claims his motto for leadership is "to tell the truth, with energy!" (Tait, A., personal communication, 2016).

Leaders must gain the trust of followers so they may "implement changes and maintain the momentum that success provides" (Rupp, p. 40). Rupp cites Bryk and Schenider (p. 41) regarding the consequences of high relational trust for school organizations include an improved teacher attitude and likelihood to take risk, enhanced teacher outreach to learners, enhanced commitment to the school, and enhanced professional engagement in the community. High relational trust for students results in better academic performance and social outcomes for learners.

Communication – When we consider the concept of communication in distance education, we tend to consider the teacher-learner connection, learner-to-learner connection, and collaboration with online course content. In this scenario we could consider the teacher a leader. Whether we are considering the teacher as a leader, or the leader of the overall DE program, it is critically important for leaders to communicate frequently with followers, and in a variety of platforms (e.g., oral, written, video, blogs, etc.).

Interestingly, effective communication is fundamental to building trust, the first attribute of effective leaders mentioned here. Bill Black is quoted in an article by Beslin and Reddin (2004) as saying "a very substantial part of your accountability as a CEO is to communicate with stakeholders such as employees and customers. People want the CEO to communicate the strategic issues – the 'big picture' questions" (Beslin & Reddin, 2004, para. 6). To this end, leaders in DE, whether the teacher, or the CEO, must optimize communication with followers to engender trust, and demonstrate transparency.

Empathy and Compassion – It might be easier to define what empathy is NOT – it's not sympathy. Empathy is about being aware of someone else's feelings (which you may or may not

agree with). Empathetic, effective leaders are said to exhibit three key traits: good listening

skills, nonjudgmental, and displaying emotional intelligence (Kettenhofen, 2016, para. 4).

Kettenhofen claims that empathy is a critical skills for leaders because it fosters trust. She

further states that "with an empathetic leader, the employee knows that their feelings will

never be simply overlooked or ignored" (para. 10).

Is empathy the same as compassion? No, but compassion is an equally important

leadership skill. Chandler (2015, para. 2) states that empathy is the gateway to compassion.

Compassion goes a step beyond empathy, in fact, compassion is empathy in action. Ray

Williams authored an interesting post titled "Why we need kind and compassionate leaders"

where he explained what kind and compassionate leaders do:

- "Communicate openly and transparently with their employees and customers;

- Are flexible and adaptable, willing to set aside rules, regulations and traditions for the
  greater good;

- Express their emotions freely and opening;

- Lead by example, rather than by direction;

- Remove or decrease judgment and criticism of others as a motivational strategy;

- Manage their emotions productively and positively;

- Are mindful to the effect their words and actions have on others" (Williams, 2012).

Williams cited the many benefits from the practice of kindness and compassion, including

promoting positive relationships, increasing optimism and hope, and building resilience and

energy levels. Distance education is hard work; arguably harder than traditional face-to-face

education, both for teachers and learners. Kindness and compassion resulting in greater

resilience and energy levels would go a long way toward reducing the dropout rate.

Passion – Followers seek passion in their leaders, otherwise, why follow? Passionate

leaders inspire followers to take on new, and sometimes, dangerous challenges. Vogan (2006)

describes how a passionate management team can "light the fire in their bellies" and enable

followers to connect to the leader's vision. She speaks further about how passion is infectious;

this is indisputable. When leaders speak about their vision, if they do so with great passion, it

inspires followers to get on board as well.

As leaders in education, there can be both passion for content, and passion for teaching

itself. Personal experience has shown us that teachers who are passionate about both the

content being taught, and their manner for teaching can be extraordinarily energizing for

learners!

Vision – A review of the history of distance education is one enormous example of

visionary leadership. Westley and Mintzberg (1989) make several assumptions about visionary

leadership: it is a dynamic, interactive phenomenon, it is multifaceted, and visionary style

comes in several varieties (p. 18). These visionary leadership styles include creators,

proselytizers, idealists, bricoleurs and diviners (p. 23). Regarding distance education, there are

two elements of visionary leadership. First, as Vogan describes (2006, para. 3-6), leaders must

learn to communicate their vision for the institution, such that followers are on board. She

advocates doing this by painting a picture with words, having followers reiterate this message

in their own words, and always keep the vision in your mind every day as you conduct your

business. More importantly, is leaders in DE having the vision to embrace change (Kanter,

1999). Kanter cites three key attributes of change-adept organizations, which are roles for leaders within the organizations. These include the imagination to innovate, the professionalism to perform, and the openness to collaborate (p. 259). In this era of continuously changing technology, leaders in DE must be visionary and prepared to embrace the characteristics described by Kanter.

Part 2 – Challenges for Distance Education Leaders

While there are always potential challenges within any organization, there are three that are particularly relevant in distance education. These include reducing learner dropout rates, re-evaluating faculty effort to provide DE (vs. face-to-face teaching) and maintaining quality in DE.

Dropout Rate in DE – While hard data is difficult to garner, it is clear that the graduation rate from DE programs is substantially lower than traditional face-to-face higher education institutions. For example, the graduation rate from a variety of DE institutions range from 0.5-20%, compared to more than 80% of full-time, traditional students in the UK (Simpson, 2013, p. 106). The author states that some of this could be the lack of qualifications for entry in the UK, and a significant cohort of students transfer to other institutions to earn their terminal degree. Also, the UK OU has developed many intermediate qualifications (e.g., diploma, certification), and many students choose to end their journey there. However, many students who intended to graduate from a DE school drop out because "life happened" – demands of work, illness, bereavement and other situations. Xu and Jaggars surveyed 147 learners who dropped out of, or finished an online course from a large Midwestern university. Those who dropped out

showed statistically significant differences in perceptions of family and organizational support,

and satisfaction and relevance (2013). The authors concluded that instructors and program

developers must find ways to enhance the relevance of courses, and adults learners need to be

supported by their organizations. Simpson (2013) argues that DE educators and leaders need to

find ways of "strengthening students' learning motivation, to make it more resilient in the face

of isolation and the inevitable problems that arise from part-time study" (p. 117).

Chyung (2001) provides several reasons why adult learners drop out of an online course

or degree prior to completion, as follows:

- "They perceive that their interests and the course structure do not match

- They are not confident enough in learning in distance environments

- They have learned what they wanted and they lost motivation to continue to learn

- Online learning environment and instructional presentations are not attract to them

- What they learn from the online instruction is not relevant to their interests or goals

- They are not confident enough to become a successful online learner

- They have low satisfaction levels toward the online learning environment" (para. 3-4).

Interestingly, Chyung concluded that the work of John Keller in the ARCS model (Keller, 1987)

explains the four factors that influence a learners' motivation to learn – attention, relevance,

confidence, satisfaction). Using the ARCS model, Chyung provides an outstanding range of

suggestions for online learning activities and assessments to maximize student retention. The

role of the DE leader in this situation is to insist on faculty conducting learner analyses, and

developing pertinent, appealing, interesting learning activities in the online coursework. This

directive supports the second issue DE leaders must wrestle with today – that of maintaining quality in DE.

Maintaining quality in DE – It is critically important that DE leaders assure consistency and quality in the design and execution of courses offered online. There are several tactics that may be used for this, including Quality Matters, and the Universal Design for Learning framework (Robinson & Wizer, 2016). The National Center on Universal Design for Learning defines UDL as "providing a blueprint for creating instructional goals, methods, materials, and assessments that work for everyone not a single one size fits all solution, but rather flexible approaches that can be customized and adjusted for individual needs" (Robinson & Wizer, p. 19). The Quality Matters program is a faculty-centric review process that certifies online and blended courses meet established quality assurance competencies. A significant component of the QM review process is assuring that learning outcomes drive learning activities and assessments accurately and appropriately test the learning outcomes.

QM recommends that a course be taught two or three times before being reviewed; this is good practice and leaders should insist on this level of scrutiny. Also, it would be helpful for instructional designers and faculty of online courses to be familiar with QM (and UDL as appropriate) PRIOR to developing courses.

Faculty Effort – Increasingly in recent years, there has been a call for accountability of faculty effort at public colleges and universities. In response to this demand, colleges and universities are developing processes to calculate faculty productivity in teaching, research, administration and service (Hilton, Fisher, Lopez & Sanders, 1997.) At this author's institution, a

system has been crafted to give credit for creating teaching activities, the contact time of

teaching, and grading. Additional time is allocated for the first two years as a faculty member.

The allotted times are greater for new activities than repeated teaching activities.

Literature estimates of faculty time involved in teaching an online course vs. a

traditional face-to-face course show that the online course requires anywhere from 14.2 to

43.5% more faculty time (Tomei, 2006). This only accounts for the teaching time, not the

development time (which could potentially be considerably more). It is essential that leaders in

DE insist on an "apples-to-apples" comparison that accounts for the increased faculty workload

when teaching an online course. Conversations at this author's institution include an element of

"there's no class time so I guess that doesn't count." Clearly leaders need to educate the bean

counters about what goes into developing and teaching an online course so faculty get the

appropriate credit in their workload calculation.

Conclusion

This paper explored the attributes of an effective DE leader including: trust,

empathy/compassion, communication, passion and vision. Additionally, this paper explored

three contemporary challenges facing DE leaders today: reducing online student dropout rates,

maintaining quality assurance in DE programs, and appropriately crediting faculty for effort in

online teaching. DE has been, and continues to be a rapidly evolving area, and strong,

adaptable leaders are necessary to assure optimal experiences for students who look to

distance education as an opportunity to achieve their learning goals.

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Post script – here's the view from my home office – overlooking the Chesapeake Bay in Maryland as the sun sets. Appropriate as this is my last big paper this semester!