
Leadership in Distance Education: Is It a Unique Type of Leadership - A Literature Review

Sara Marcus, MLS, EdS

Online Instructor

No full-time affiliation

<http://www.saramarcus.com/portfolio>

According to McLendon and Cronk (1999),

Numerous articles and documents have been written about the management of distance education. The International Centre for Distance Learning (ICDL) Distance Education Library and the Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC) alone contain hundreds of such documents. Most of these documents, however, examine distance education policy, institution management, student support systems and student administration relevant to the first three generations of distance education delivery models [correspondence, multimedia and telelearning]. Surprisingly little appears to have been written about the academic management and administration of what Taylor (1996) labels as fourth generation distance education delivery [flexible learning].

Beaudoin (2002), in his commentary essay - "Distance education leadership: An essential role for a new century," argues for the research and examination of the specific type of leadership needed in distance education leadership. Beaudoin (2002) states that "a reasonable amount of attention has been given to the planning and administration of distance education for quite some time (138)." Beaudoin (2002) goes on, however, to state that this might be considered adequate enough without discussing the more esoteric domain of leadership (138). Lee (2001) agrees, stating,

Although the organizational behavior theorists and researchers have investigated perceived organizational support in many different organizational environments, higher education institutions have rarely been examined. Yet, no studies have investigated the perceptions of faculty with regard to instructional support, and whether their perceived organizational support has a relationship to faculty motivation, commitment, and satisfaction in relation to distance technology (p. 154).

According to Case and Scanlan (2001), there are specific attributes of administrators in a university in relation to distance education, "Senior administrators in universities and colleges must invest in a strategic plan for distance education. Management must provide leadership in developing this plan for the institution as a whole. Unit administrators (Deans, Directors, Department Heads) can then adopt the strategic directions that best suit their needs." According to Cyr, s,

'Just go in there and teach the way you have always taught. There isn't any difference between traditional classroom teaching and teaching at a distance.' This often-repeated statement by poorly informed administrators perpetuates the myth that no additional traditional training is necessary to go from the classroom to the studio. This is exactly what some administrators want to hear. They reason that if

there are only minor differences, their instructors don't need additional training, and this keeps the budgets down. This reasoning leads to telecourses that simply shift the same pedagogy currently prominent in traditional college classrooms, the passive lecture, to teleclassrooms. The 'talking head' predominates (p. 15).

Dede (1993) also supports the idea of leadership in distance education being different from traditional education leadership, "Creating and conveying technological visions powerful enough to displace traditional educational models is one of the most challenging aspects of leadership." Care and Scanlan (2001) add, "There is a general lack of understanding regarding the experiences of administrators, faculty, and staff from other departments in the development of distance education courses."

Does knowledge of planning and administration automatically make an effective leader? According to Dede (1993), there is a difference between a manager and a leader stating that "one of the most important attributes that distinguishes leaders from managers is "vision. ... Leaders create and convey compelling images of how our reach is much less than our potential grasp; they redefine people's paradigms about what is possible. In contrast, competent managers are adept at organizing operations so that an institution's efficiency in accomplishing plans is optimized. This is a vital task often neglected by leaders who do not understand management." According to Beaudoin (2002), "leadership is not widely recognized as distance education has been based both on traditional education leadership and business/industry leadership." Pahal (199) agrees with Beaudoin (2002), stating that "IT leadership requires many of the characteristics common to all leaders, but also requires special abilities and insights into technology's impact." The lack of specific distance education leadership might be due, as Beaudoin states, to the fact that some do not see distance education as different from traditional education in terms of leadership (138). Beaudoin (2002) disagrees with these "some," as he states on page 135,

As traditional and distance education institutions converge, leaders who have been dealing with discreet programs identified with their institutions where proprietary lines between programs and students are merging, and participants shift among multiple formal and informal learning venues. ... It all argues that bold and creative leadership is required to manage as well as evaluate these emerging new structures, driven in large measure by networking technology (1998).

Pahal (1999) also notes the vagueness of what a leader is, "some people see the leader as a motivator, while others define a leader as one having extraordinary vision and decision-making power." Wunsch (2000) states,

Directors of instructional technology centers are especially prone to nurturing the belief that key administrators (for our purposes this refers to presidents, vice presidents, deans, and directors) do and should think about instructional technology as a key to the campus support system. It is difficult to believe, let alone accept, that our personal values and interests may not be those of the institution and its administrators.

With the exception of a few individuals who have a disciplinary or personal interest in technology, top administrators generally are not concerned with instructional technology per se (p. 61).

While various authors have described characteristics of a distance education leader, no one

concrete definition has been arrived at that covers all aspects addressed by the various researchers.

Beaudoin (2002) points out some specific characteristics that a distance education leader needs (p. 132), (1) create conditions for innovative change, (2) enable individuals and organizations to share a vision and move in its direction, and (3) contribute to the management and operationalization of ideas. While these traits are implicit in transformational leadership, the method of applying and utilizing them is unique for the distance education leader.

According to Wunsch (2000), "Autonomy can give a director a sense of personal control over daily operations, but the long-term results of isolation from the mainstream of campus process carries a heavy price (p. 65)." Wunsch (2000) goes on to state, "Proactive, risk-taking leadership means that no director can stand alone or behind the scenes. A competent media center director is on the front line, integrated into other instructional support ventures, always in danger of attention, assessment, and critical opinion. Community, not autonomy, produces the high visibility that results in credibility and recognition (p. 65)."

As Mereba (2003) explains, "the critical issue facing many institutions of higher education today is not the need for allocation of funds for the procurement of technological hardware as much as it is their inability to properly align their technology initiatives with their strategic plans and mission in order to achieve their goals and move forward in their development (p. 43)." Leaders of distance education need to know how to implement these changes in particular to the education setting of this institution. The researcher recommends the CBAM methodology, as described by Rogers (1995) and Hord et al (1987). According to Rakes and Casey (2002), "The Concerns Based Adoption Model (CBAM) has become a change model widely used by those individuals planning for staff development accompanying any educational innovation. The composite of feelings, preoccupation, thought, and consideration given to an issue or task is called concern." Rakes and Casey (2002) go on to define the CBAM, as "a research-based framework that explains the process individuals follow as they undergo the process of change. The Stages of Concern Questionnaire is designed to capture teachers' current concerns about adopting such an innovation which, in this case, is instructional technology." Dede (1993) agrees, stating "Shifting communities to alternative visions for education that are based on more realistic, but less comfortable assumptions is a major leadership challenge. ... Leadership requires packaging alternative assumptions and paradigms as part of a larger vision that inspires new roles for educational stakeholders." According to Pahal (1999),

The changing nature of the workforce, one that is increasingly diverse and facing new issues such as downsizing and declining corporate loyalty, requires a new type of leader - one who can unite a nation lacking confidence and one who can become flexible and mindful of the constraints of living in an increasingly borderless environment brought about by advanced telecommunications. According to Capowski (194), leadership for the IT era must focus on encouraging and sustaining corporate nurturing and provide an atmosphere where innovation is encouraged and creativity is rewarded.

The distance education leader is a transformational leader, helping stakeholders to realize the benefits of distance education. This does not necessarily mean monetary rewards. As Lee (2001) discusses,

It is rare to find studies that investigated whether the faculty perception of their organizational support has a relationship with faculty commitment, motivation, and

satisfaction toward distance teaching. Two studies were located in which the relationship between extrinsic reward, as a way of instructional support, and faculty motivation was investigated. These studies reported that the faculty motivation toward teaching at a distance seemed to rely primarily on activities associated with the act of teaching, per se, rather than extrinsic or monetary rewards (Peirpoint and Hartnett, 1988; Taylor and White, 1991; Wolcott, 1999). However, this result does not necessarily mean that faculty do not appreciate the extrinsic reward at all. In fact, Dillon (1989) and Jackson (1994) claimed that incentives provided by higher education institutions are critical to motivate faculty members in distance education (p. 154).

However, the distance education leader also needs, according to Beaudoin (2002), to be a situational leader, one who can diagnose the organization at a specific moment and determine the readiness of the organization or its stakeholders for change (p. 140). Pahal (1999) agrees, stating that "The IT leader must be a self-achiever and should be motivated to become a proactive leader and role model. Changes in technology often produce a 'chaos situation' where change management in the use of instructional technology in teaching and learning becomes increasingly important (Fitzgerald, 1998). The IT leader must be ready to embrace that change." According to Lane (2001), "Human factors require as much or more planning than technical design to enlist user acceptance and create a sustained use of the application. The introduction of distance learning by an influential person prior to use is important for adoption and successful implementation." By being aware of change, and open to change, the leader in distance education is more likely to (1) recognize a need for change at any given moment, (2) acknowledge the probable reactions of the constituents towards change, and (3) react appropriately to the responses to the proposed changes. Lane points out nine conditions for success, many of which are dependent on this transformational and situational leader:

1. recognized existence of need
2. articulation of purpose and guide
3. identification of structure
4. leadership of the innovation
5. teacher participation and support
6. appropriate technology
7. evaluation mechanism
8. [left blank]
9. continuing adequate resources.

Additionally, a leader in distance education needs to use systemic leadership. According to Dede, "Leadership also involves creating steppingstones that bridge from a desired future to the current gridlock typical of many American schools. In evolving from its present state to a distant objective, an educational institution must progress stage by stage. Each step of evolution requires a critical mass of resources and must create a stable, desirable situation."

In summary, the question of what a distance education leader is, the characteristics of such, the requirements of such, and the actions of an effective distance education leader still have not been adequately defined by the current research. There is still a long way to go before an adequate definition of these aspects of an effective distance education leader will be reached. It is hoped, through this article, to bring the insights of various researchers together into one place to help future distance education leaders to best fulfill the still unstated requirements of their positions.

References

- Beaudoin, M. (1999). The Instructor's Changing Role in Distance Education. *The American Journal of Distance Education* 4(2) p. 21-29.
- Care, W. D., & Scanlan, J. M. (2001, Summer). Planning and managing the development of courses for distance delivery: Results from a qualitative study. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration IV (II)* Retrieved 26 October 2003 from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla/summer42/care42.html>
- Cyrs, T. E. (1997, Fall). Competence in teaching at a distance. In T. E. Cyrs, Ed. *Teaching and Learning at a Distance: What It Takes to Effectively Design, Deliver, and Evaluate Programs*. (New Directions for Teaching and Learning, 71). San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Dede, C. (1993) Leadership without followers. In G. Kearsley & W. Lynch, Eds. *Educational Technology: Leadership Perspectives* (pp. 19-28). Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Educational Technology Publications. (an abbreviated version was published in *The Computing Teacher* 20 6 (March, 1993), 9-11). Retrieved on 27 October 2003 from Wilson Education Fulltext.
- Hord, S. M., Rutherford, W. L., Huling-Austin, L. and Hall, G. E. (1987). *Taking Charge of Change*. Austin, TX: SEDL.
- Lane, C. Strategic planning: Providing interaction through mixed media in university distance learning programs. Retrieved on 21 October 2003 from <http://www.dlrn.org/library/dl/strategic.html>
- Lee, J. (2001). Instructional support for distance education and faculty motivation, commitment, satisfaction. *British Journal of Educational Technology* 32 (2), 153-160.
- McLendon, E. and Cronk, P. (1999, Spring). Rethinking academic management practices: a case of meeting new challenges in online delivery. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration II (I)* Retrieved 26 October 2003 from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/ojdla>
- Mereba, T. (2003, May/June). Managing transformation: Aligning technology initiatives with institutional priorities. *TechTrends* 47 (3), 42-44.
- Pahal, D. (1999, Summer). Effective leadership - An IT perspective. *Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration II (II)* Retrieved on 26 October 2003 from <http://www.westga.edu/~distance/pahal22.html>
- Rakes, G. C. and Casey, H. B. (2002, November). An analysis of teacher concerns toward instructional technology. *International Journal of Educational Technology* 3 (1) Retrieved 26 October 2003 from <http://www.ao.uiuc.edu/ijet/v3n1/rakes/index.html>
- Rogers, E. M. (1995). *Diffusion of innovations* (4th ed.). NY: The Free Press.
- Wunsch, M. A. (2000, Fall). Killing the old myths: Positioning an instructional technology center for a new era in higher education. *College and University Media Review* 7 (1), 51-71.

Back to the Online Journal of Distance Learning Administration Contents