
Effective Leadership--An IT Perspective

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Abstract

This paper presents the author's definition of Information Technology (IT) leadership and assesses its relevancy in today's fast-paced technological environment. The author describes the essential qualities and contrasts the content knowledge needed by today's IT leader, as compared to essential characteristics common to all leaders--past, present, and future.

Introduction

"You can't teach what you don't know, and you can't lead where you won't go"
Jesse Jackson

Today's education world is information and communication intensive, and Information Technology (IT) professionals need to be empowered with the knowledge, skills, and abilities that technology offers. Even with the enormous potential and academic advantages that innovation and improvement of communications afford, without the direct participation and support of an institution's leadership, this power cannot be pushed to its full potential. IT leadership requires many of the characteristics common to all leaders, but also requires special abilities and insights into technology's impact.

According to Retired General Colin Powell (1996), leadership in the new millennium will be essentially the same as that of Thomas Jefferson, George Washington, or other great leaders of yesterday-it will require that people have a vision of where they want to lead, how to choose the right people, and how to accomplish objectives that flow from visions. Powell goes on to state the one major difference affecting leaders of the 21st Century - the transformation occurring in our nation's industrial, political, societal, and economic realms. Accordingly, this transformation is occurring due to the fast-paced and globally centered information and technology revolution. All leaders positioned within this new era must be able to use the powerful tools offered by this global revolution.

An Emerging IT Leadership Paradigm

Some people see the leader as a motivator, while others define a leader as one having extraordinary vision and decision-making power. Several noted authors in the field offer sound definitions of leadership.

Senge (1990) defines leadership in this manner:

Leaders are designers, stewards and teachers. They are responsible for building organizations where people continually expand their capabilities to understand complexity, clarify vision and improve shared mental models--that is, they are responsible for learning (p. 340).

Dede (1993) states that the true nature of leadership is exemplified by four attributes: envisioning opportunities; displacing cherished misconceptions; inspiring others to act on faith; and encouraging followers. Cronin (1989) presents a list of important leadership qualities: intelligence, wisdom, judgment, self-confidence... character (pp. 15-16). The National School Boards' Association (NBSA) (1998), stresses that the IT leader must foresee leadership ability in others, as technology mentorship has become increasingly important.

Dubrin (1997) defines leadership as the "key dynamic force that motivates and coordinates the organization in the accomplishment of its objectives" (p. 2). Dubrin further states that leading is an art that influences by example or persuasion to effect action. Bennis and Nanus (1985) argue that leadership is "the pivotal force behind successful organizations" (p. 2) in developing a new vision. White (1997) states that the most effective future leaders will build upon the skills of the past and present. White adds that to successfully lead others in the midst of constantly changing environments, leaders need to capitalize on the best strengths of past leaders, while staying flexible to explore unexpected byways, and taking calculated risks. IT leaders will be learners who constantly test themselves, because learning is a pivotal force and the gateway to survival for the future.

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 (1994), 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.

A view of leadership offered by Burns (1978) argues that leadership is better understood as a political relationship emerging from the "chaotic, reciprocal interaction among people with potentially conflicting goals, values and ideals" (p. 8)--all of which impact the new technological era in which we are immersed. Thus, IT leaders should focus on ways that organizational structures and systems, human nature, moral order, value development, effects of personal choice, and personal similarities and differences have upon ability to effect change.

A new definition of leadership, stressed by White (1997), is that effective leaders will identify productive areas of confusion and uncertainty that exist in society, will demonstrate that they do not have all the answers but are willing to learn, and will be able to "act differently, think differently, and seek inspiration from different sources" (p. 2) than leaders of the past. A combination of inherited leadership traits combined with effective leadership training, deep insight into new technological tools and advancements and their impact on the future, strong corporate nurturing, and repeated practice could yield the best result--a well-rounded, skilled, and instinctive IT leader.

Essential Qualities of the Effective IT Leader

In describing the qualities of an effective leader, Winters (1997) admonishes that organizations are in need of "bold, visionary and spiritually-grounded leaders who are prepared for the

challenges of the 21st century" (p. 1). Among a list of desirable traits, she characterizes a leader as being one who has the audacity to take a stand on the unpopular or unheard of, takes a creative position for the well-being of his/her team, empowers others to become a part of a vision, and exhibits the faith and stamina to effect a change simply because it is right. An effective leader is a model for the rest of the organization: i.e. a "self-achiever" whom everybody admires, an innovator and an early-adopter of IT.

Leaders must be able to cope with complex technological change in their organizations (Kotter, 1993). Kearsley and Lynch (1994) admonish that general leadership skills are not sufficient in IT enriched environments. They state that "specific technology-related knowledge is required" (p. 12), and it must directly relate to the tools, medium, strategies, and competencies found within this culture. Not only must the IT leader possess the competencies to use and evaluate these tools, but he/she must also have the insight into the impact these tools will have on the future of organizations. Horgan (1998) stresses the ability to develop a shared vision for technology within an organization. Kinnaman (1996) further admonishes that IT professionals must be "empowered and expected to investigate the enormous potential of technology" (p. 2) to bring about innovation and improvement with direct participation and support of an institution's administration.

Alter (1999) and Avant (1996) stress that today's IT leader must possess analytical and listening skills as true listening involves insight into what will work today, tomorrow, and in the future. The IT leader must take the initiative to try new methods without fear of failure--an enormous task facing the IT leader when deciding on solutions to technology-related issues within their scope of influence.

According to McAdams (1997), agility to succeed in a rapidly changing world requires cooperation, organization, enrichment of ideals, and strong commitment to change--all important skills that the systems-level thinking IT leader would do well to adopt.

According to the current literature, IT leaders for the new millennium--a world of vast technological advancements and high tech tools--should possess the following characteristics:

- VISION--a knowledge of the future and how to get there (Powell, 1996)
- INTEGRITY--absolute dedication to doing what is right (McAdams, 1997)
- TRUST--ability to nurture the "leader" in others (Dede, 1993)
- SELFLESSNESS--an idea that their existence is to serve their followers (NSBA, 1999)
- COMMITMENT--passion as seen through caring, concern, and building perpetuation (Horgan, 1998)
- CREATIVITY--seeing the world as a series of opportunities with fewer barriers than possibilities (White, 1997)
- OPEN-MINDEDNESS--always ready to try new ways of doing things (Kotter, 1993)
- TOUGHNESS--knowing in their heart-of-hearts what is needed and demanding that it be done (Cronin, 1989)
- ABILITY TO COMMUNICATE--keeping abreast of what's going on--connected (Elgin & LeDrew, 1999)
- ABILITY TO LISTEN--knowing how to keep quiet yet informed (Alter, 1999)
- CALCULATED RISK-TAKING--open to possibilities, questioning assumptions and taking a stand (Capowski, 1994)
- INNOVATIVE--without fear of failure (Avant, 1996)
- VISIBILITY--a sense of community (Fitzgerald, 1996)
- INQUISITIVENESS--constant questioning and probing for answers (Rosenbach & Taylor,

- 1993)
- INTUITION--possesses new insights and different perspectives (Bennis & Nanus, 1985)
- ACTION-ORIENTATION--willing to do something for the good of the organization (Kinnaman, 1996)
- CANDIDNESS--ability to be forthright yet still have compassion and empathy (Winters, 1997)
- TENACIOUSNESS--inability to give up or let others do so (Lambert, 1998)
- ABILITY TO NETWORK--a team builder (Wunsch, 1992)

Conclusion

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.

The field of IT leadership will be of extreme importance in the new millennium as technology (equipment, software, hardware, and infrastructure) continues to advance rapidly and change becomes imperative. The importance of 21st Century IT leadership can best be summed up by Fitzgerald (1998) in the following passage from *Living on the Edge*:

Complex events, and chaotic developments and trends in our modern world are confronting business leaders with a compelling mandate for change of unprecedented proportions. And not just any old change will do...In this world of turbulence and flux, no change short of profound transformation will suffice. It seems certain that the "new realities" of chaos, complexity, and discontinuous change are here to stay.

Globalization, fierce competition, the remarkably diverse workforce, the continuing explosion of information and technology, economic and social upheaval are only a few of a plethora of signals from the marketplace we must begin to heed. The message is clear: If survival is the aim, change is the game--change not only in how our work gets done, but in how we think about our work, our enterprises, ourselves and our lives. (p. 1)

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