
Six Questions for Entrepreneurial Leadership and Innovation in Distance Education

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Abstract

Institutions offering distance education courses and programs may benefit by encouraging administrators, faculty, staff and students to be more entrepreneurial. Organizational cultures designed to support this type of environment are characterized by entrepreneurial leadership, innovation and change. This article provides information on how distance education institutions can incorporate entrepreneurial leadership and innovation into their organizations. Six questions for administrators of distance education to consider are presented in an effort to provoke discussion and thought on the importance of incorporating entrepreneurial leadership and innovation throughout distance education organizations.

Introduction

Entrepreneurial individuals and continuous innovation are vital components of successful organizations. Therefore, the public and private sectors must develop the entrepreneurial characteristics and actions of individuals with a focus on innovation. Institutions of higher education have an especially important role in the development of entrepreneurial individuals because innovation is and will become an even more essential component of success to employers, employees and business founders in the emerging entrepreneurial economy. Further, educational institutions must become more entrepreneurial themselves in order to compete in an increasingly competitive industry. This requires entrepreneurial leadership.

Research has shown that entrepreneurial individuals (Krueger, 2000), learners (Reimers-Hild, 2005), educational institutions (King & Cornell, 1992) and leaders (Gupta, MacMillan & Surie, 2004) are needed to address the complex global issues associated with the continuously evolving knowledge economy. Entrepreneurs are needed to establish new ventures and to employ others while developing new products, services and solutions. Entrepreneurial individuals, who may or may not start a business, are needed because they are innovators who behave or act in a proactive manner and move organizations forward. In general, entrepreneurial individuals have the ability to recognize and capitalize on opportunities, innovate, take calculated risks, adapt to rapid changes and marshal resources to achieve their goals. Entrepreneurial leaders are the individuals who have the ability to create dynamic, competitive organizations where innovation and change are as common as employee, clientele and stakeholder support (McGrath & MacMillan, 2000).

Entrepreneurs and entrepreneurial individuals are vital components of 21st century communities and organizations because they have the ability to advance themselves, other people, their businesses or places of employment and even the economies and societies in which they live. Therefore, countries, communities and individual organizations as well as educational institutions benefit by developing the entrepreneurial learner and leadership capabilities of individuals (Reimers-Hild, 2005).

The characteristics and actions of entrepreneurial leaders are unique and complex but critical to the success of organizations, including institutions focused on education and training. Leaders of educational institutions must become entrepreneurial leaders in order to create effective organizations that move their goals and visions forward (Peck, 1991). Administrators, faculty and staff in both the public and private sectors can integrate the concepts of entrepreneurial leadership throughout their institutions to strengthen the entrepreneurial inclinations of individuals while also enhancing recruitment and retention efforts.

Distance education administrators can become entrepreneurial leaders by recognizing that leadership and innovation are critical throughout every level of the organization. Leadership must no longer be defined solely by the position or traditional rank someone holds within the institution. Leadership must become everyone's job (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). The fundamental goal of entrepreneurial leaders is to create an atmosphere of innovation while helping constituents themselves become more entrepreneurial. Innovation and entrepreneurial leadership are complex and challenging; however, both can be supported by creating and communicating a relevant vision, motivating and empowering individuals, leveraging human and social capital and developing a global mindset in their institutions that embraces change, values diversity and cultivates continuous innovation.

Creating and Communicating a Relevant Vision

Many leaders admit that developing and communicating a vision, which is relevant to others as well as the organization itself, is one their biggest challenges (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). A vision should provide clarity about the organization's future directions while providing a sense of harmony that empowers individuals to accomplish their goals and dreams (Hall, Barrett & Burkhart-Kriesel, 2005; Hines & Bishop, 2006). Vision should be a component of a distance learning organization's strategic planning model (Pisel, 2008) and is an essential element of leadership. In institutions of education, entrepreneurial leaders must develop and communicate a vision in such a way that it becomes a powerful tool used to achieve common goals (Peck, 1991).

To effectively communicate vision, a leader must share their vision in a variety of ways. Leaders should talk about and coach others towards the vision (Hall, Barrett & Burkhart-Kriesel, 2005). Environmental and cultural reminders repeatedly convey a vision. Vision statements should be physically present in buildings, on web sites and in virtual classrooms. Administrators, instructors, staff and students should be provided with materials that convey the vision of an institution in an effort to create a sense of belonging and personal fulfillment, which intrinsically inspires and motivates individuals.

Research recognizes that some of the most effective leaders are truly passionate about what they do and have a genuine interest in helping their constituents or followers. Their effectiveness is characterized by relating the dreams, hopes and future aspirations of constituents to the vision of an organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2007). Effective leaders, who relate to constituents in this manner, also motivate, empower and inspire them because they feel like an important part of the organization. They feel a sense of personal fulfillment by being integral to the organization.

Personal fulfillment is also an important issue to consider with respect to the recruitment and retention of students (Reimers-Hild & King, 2006), faculty and staff. Instructors and students may be more likely to decide that they want to be part of an organization if they see how they fit into the organization and buy into the vision of the institution. Leaders working in the area of education must communicate the vision of the organization to constituents, including administrators, teachers and students. Further, leaders must help constituents see how their hopes, dreams and aspirations are fulfilled by the institution and its vision.

Some of the most important reasons adult learners enroll in education include career advancement, earning college or advanced degrees and personal fulfillment (Kramarae, 2001; Merriam & Caffarella, 1999; U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2002, 2004). Persistence in their programs is influenced partly by motivation associated with personal fulfillment. Reimers-Hild (2005) found a statistically significant relationship ($p = .002$) between personal fulfillment associated with learner motivation and credit hour completion in a population of learners enrolled in distance courses at a large Midwestern university ($N = 342$). Credit hour completion increased as learner motivation associated with personal fulfillment strengthened. This key concept may help retain students who are already enrolled while recruiting learners who are searching for programs that best fit their needs.

Strengthening and Leveraging Human and Social Capital

Human capital is an individual's knowledge, skills and abilities and is a key characteristic of entrepreneurial individuals (Reimers-Hild, Fritz & King, 2007). The theory of human capital is based on the premise that educational investments translate into economic advantages (Becker, 1964; Killeen, Turton, Diamond, Dosnon, & Wach, 1999; Langelett, 2002), including innovativeness (Becker, 2002; Drucker, 2001). Human capital has also been linked to increases in non-economic indicators such as better health and well-being (OECD, 2001, 2003).

Social capital is the “who you know” factor and consists of networks and relationships. Social capital is different than human capital because it is relational in nature and is mostly considered a public good that is shared. “Social capital resides in social relationships, and as a capital, may be conceived as a resource in which we invest to provide a stream of benefits” (OECD, 2001, p. 39).

Trust is an essential component of high quality social capital. Mentors, supervisors, colleagues, coaches and acquaintances all offer different sets of beneficial expertise, experiences and networks. Human and social capital are key elements of success in the knowledge-based economy; therefore, entrepreneurial leaders must help other individuals invest in and leverage human and social capital. This is an important concept in the distance learning environment.

Effective online teaching and learning includes constructing environments that strengthen social capital by facilitating relationships between all participants. People are participating in online communities to enrich their lives (Scott & Johnson, 2005). Further, many adult distance learners already serve in various leadership roles outside of their classroom responsibilities (Garland, 1994). High-quality interactivity provides opportunities to learn content while building important relationships inside and outside of the class space (Hopkins, Thomas, Meredyth, & Ewing, 2004; McLure Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Misner, 2005). Human capital is strengthened through content and skills development while social capital is enhanced by providing robust online communities and discussion forums. Entrepreneurial leaders, including administrators and instructors, must work to create teaching-learning environments with structured social networking designed to strengthen and leverage human and social capital in academic environments.

Developing a Global Mindset and Cultivating Continuous Innovation

The constant evolution of globalization creates the need for entrepreneurial leaders and learners who have a strong ability to look to the future, which requires a holistic approach to innovation and change. Entrepreneurial leaders are needed to help foster a global mindset throughout institutions characterized by innovation, change and risk taking propensity while valuing social responsibility.

Innovation is more than being creative or coming up with ideas. It is the ability to do things differently, which generates change and pioneers new paradigms (Engle, Mah & Sadri, 1997; Kirton, 1976, 1978). Innovation is about coming up with new ideas, products, collaborations, services and solutions that can be implemented and used. According to a study conducted by IBM’s Global Business Services (2006), innovation is vital to growth and sustainability in the current era of rapid change and globalization. Innovation has become essential to the success of individuals as well as new and existing organizations.

Innovation is not a new or mystical concept. An organization should have a unique vision as well as a unique innovation strategy. Innovation strategy should match the culture of an organization (Davila, Epstein & Shelton, 2006). Further, leaders must work to integrate innovation into the very core of an organization (Skarzynski & Gibson, 2008). Leaders must realize that innovation is work. It is a constant process (Schramm, 2006), which requires knowledge, focus, persistence and purpose (Drucker, 1985). Innovation also requires the ability to lead and execute continuous change.

Educational leaders, including administrators, instructors and staff members, must integrate innovation into their organizations, programs and courses to grow and maintain enrollments and programs. Further, students must be taught the importance of innovation and have the opportunity to innovate in educational settings. There are many aspects of innovation, which include fun, creativity, diversity, collaboration and the ability to trust intuition. Time must be dedicated to the innovation process. However, one of the most essential elements of innovation is risk taking.

Risk taking propensity, a person’s level of comfort with risk, has been associated with innovation, the process of learning (Clifford, 1990; Robinson, 2002) and learning style (Robinson, 2002). Risk taking propensity may also be a characteristic of successful distance learners (Latanich, Nonis, & Hudson, 2001; Reimers-Hild et al., 2005). Reimers-Hild (2005) determined that there was a statistically significant relationship between participants’ risk taking propensity ($p = .023$) and credit hour completion. As risk taking propensity scores strengthened, credit hour completion increased.

By encouraging risk taking in the academic environment, instructors ultimately help increase students’ chances for success (Clifford, 1990). Some researchers (Burge, 1988; Clifford, 1990) believe that instructors should encourage adult learners to take risks in distance courses in order to encourage students to shape their educational experiences.

Risk taking propensity must also be appropriately supported by institutions. Risk is an essential element of innovation, entrepreneurial organizations and entrepreneurial individuals (Ramachandran, Devarajan & Ray, 2006).

Institutions offering distance education courses and programs must help administrators, faculty, staff and students become more entrepreneurial and innovative. Individuals must be able to take calculated and informed risks without jeopardizing their careers or programs. This type of organizational approach requires entrepreneurial leaders who help others develop their entrepreneurial abilities with a focus on innovation. Organizations must also realize that innovations either work or fail; therefore, institutions have to recognize and reward both success and failure while helping people learn from both (Skarzynski & Gibson, 2008).

Six Questions for Administrators of Distance Education Consider:

To develop innovation and entrepreneurial leadership, administrators in distance education settings can answer six key questions. Asking and answering these questions sets the stage for innovative change supported by entrepreneurial leadership.

1. How entrepreneurial is your organization? On a scale of 1-5, would you classify your organization as a 1 (not at all entrepreneurial) or a 5 (extremely entrepreneurial)?
2. How are administrators, instructors and learners in your organization learning to be more entrepreneurial?

Developing a global mindset throughout an organization characterized by risk taking, innovation and change should be encouraged, not discouraged. Further, these efforts should be celebrated and rewarded. Individuals should be encouraged to set and achieve goals, explore new ideas and control their own destiny. Professional development opportunities should focus on developing the entrepreneurial potential of individuals throughout an organization as well as their entrepreneurial leadership capacity.

3. Is innovation a priority? On a scale of 1-5, would you classify your organization as a 1 (not at all innovative) or a 5 (extremely innovative)?

Innovation and the future should be emphasized, encouraged, supported and taught. However, innovation processes and procedures should be unique so they fit the organizational culture. Examples of ways to incorporate innovation into an organization include designing workspaces and learning spaces to stimulate creativity and innovation. Some institutions have implemented innovation days, contests and coaches to help strengthen innovation throughout their organizations. Innovation should be integrated into all levels of an organization, and metrics should be established to measure innovation and its impacts on an organization (Skarzynski & Gibson, 2008).

4. In what ways can your leaders share the vision of their institutions with administrators, instructors and learners in an effort to create a sense of belongingness and personal fulfillment?

Can they use both face-to-face and online methods? Can they use both individual and large group settings? Leaders must work with individuals in distance education organizations to develop a vision that provides a credible and attainable futuristic picture of where the organization is headed. Leaders must also talk about the vision often and coach others to help them see how their dreams and aspirations fit into the vision of the organization (Hall, Barrett & Burkhart-Kriesel, 2005). Physical and cultural reminders should also be used to effectively and continuously communicate the vision (Kouzes & Posner, 2007).

5. How can you institutions connect employees and learners with their passions and their personal vision of the future?

How does an organization learn about its users? How do employees learn about the institution? How do distance learners come to understand and value the institution? Goal setting and visioning at both the organizational and individual levels shapes the future of an organization. A holistic approach to leadership must be used to move distance learning organizations forward. This includes investments and understanding of both technology and the human side of organizations (King & Cornell, 1992).

6. What is your organization doing to develop and leverage the human and social capital of its administrators, instructors and students?

What are your current and past strategies? What are emerging strategies you can identify in other organizations? Distance learning institutions must develop programs that provide access to human capital while also cultivating social capital. For example, interactivity may facilitate social networks between learners and instructors, which strengthens social capital (O'Neill, 2004). Human capital is strengthened through high quality learning and skills development. People can be connected physically and/or via the web. Online communities and other technologies are one way to build knowledge, skill and networks while increasing the connectivity of people to institutions, organizations and each other (Reimers-Hild, Fritz & King, 2007).

Conclusions

Entrepreneurial leaders must create a unique organizational culture that supports a global mindset and continuous innovation. Successful 21st century distance education organizations should develop the entrepreneurial skills of administrators, faculty, staff and students by encouraging entrepreneurial thinking and behavior. Entrepreneurial leaders must develop a culture throughout organizations designed to:

- Create and communicate a vision that is relevant to the dreams and aspirations of colleagues and constituents while encouraging individuals to develop their personal goals and vision
- Inspire and motivate others to make the organizational vision a reality by creating a sense of belonging and personal fulfillment
- Develop a global mindset in individuals and organizations that embraces innovation, which includes change, technology, diversity, fun, creativity, collaboration and a strong orientation towards the future
- Empower individuals by helping them develop a more internal locus of control, a higher need for achievement and increased risk taking propensity while tapping into their aspirations, passions, strengths and talents
- Leverage both human capital (knowledge, skills and abilities) and social capital (networks and relationships) at the individual and organizational levels
- Value social responsibility, time and intuition

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