
Applying Leadership Theories to Distance Education Leadership

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Abstract

The instructional delivery mode in distance education has been transitioning from the context of a physical classroom environment to a virtual learning environment or maintaining a hybrid of the two. However, most distance education programs in dual mode institutions are situated in traditional face-to-face instructional settings. Distance education leaders, therefore, operate in a transition mode which requires some level of flexibility as they authorize and manage change and regularly upgrade their knowledge and skills base to adapt to the constantly changing environment. It is obvious that online distance learning is an evolving learning environment that requires leaders of traditional learning environment to acquire new skills and assume new roles. The requirements for distance education leadership and the dearth of research on how educational and leadership theories influence leaders of distance education programs calls for an examination of leadership theories. Examining various leadership theories provides a theoretical framework for current and prospective distance education leaders. This paper examines theories that can impact distance education leadership. These include transformational, situational, complexity, systems, and adoption and diffusion of innovation theories.

Introduction

Technology has played a major role in changing how higher education institutions operate (Cornford & Pollock, 2003; Ertl, Winkler, & Mandl, 2007; Irlbeck, 2001; Kozeracki, 1998; Portugal, 2006). Largely due to Internet technologies, distance education has witnessed massive transformation as many higher education institutions developed distance education (DE) programs and policies and have included DE in their mission and strategic plan (Folkers, 2005; Lewis, Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008; Wagschal, 1998; Williams, Paprock, & Covington, 1999). Institutions with substantial commitments to distance education are perceived as leading the effort in adopting new technologies (Taylor, 2001). Scholars and practitioners are in agreement that distance education has emerged from an inconspicuous position among various academic departments, has gained acceptance in higher education, and is continuing to expand (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Davies, Howell, and Petrie, 2010; Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008).

From an obscure position, DE has moved to a place of prominence and become a major initiative for both for-profit and non-profit colleges and universities. Various factors have contributed to the growth of distance education, including the desire to carve a niche market; competition among higher education institutions to increase their enrollment; developments and emerging trends in digital technologies (Allen & Seaman, 2010; Chen, 2009); a shift in higher education priorities; the need to provide access to a growing and diverse student population, especially adult learners returning to school; increased competition among institutions for a significant role in global education; a need for individualized instructional structures; and economic realities have all contributed to higher education institutions embrace and implementation of DE programs (Berge, 2001; Cornford & Pollock, 2003; Folkers, 2005; Milligan & Buckenmeyer, 2008; Wagschal, 1998). Issues of higher education massification, a term used by Scott (1995) to describe the rapid increase of student enrollment in higher education, and the commodification of higher education (Noble, 2002), which relates to higher education as a commercial enterprise that subjects learning to business practices, without consideration to issues of learning and scholarship, have also helped to escalate the development and evolution of distance education. Rovai & Downey (2010) add that while some institutions have achieved a measure of success

through DE, others have failed to realize their goals when considered from educational and cost effectiveness points of views.

Although DE is an important sphere of higher education with strong growth potential, few studies specifically focus on DE leadership (Beaudoin, 2002) compared to the wide variety of literature on DE in general (Beaudoin, 2003; Chang, 1998; Irlbeck, 2001, 2002; Lape & Hart, 1997). Beaudoin (2002) recommended further research to identify the kind of skills required for effective distance education leadership. Following an extensive review of available DE literature dealing with DE leadership, which included major national and international distance education journals, conference proceedings, and other publications, *Beaudoin (2003) found that about 70% of the literature reviewed related to case studies of specific programs and other aspects of DE. Only a small fragment was devoted to DE leadership. Similarly, not much work has been done in the area of articulating the theoretical base for DE leadership.* Irlbeck and Pucel (2000) acknowledge that distance education leadership is a comparatively new area of research in higher education; hence it has not been a focus area for research. DE leadership does not seem to hold much appeal for researchers (Beaudoin, 2003; Marcus, 2004). Beaudoin suggests that the scarcity of literature on distance education leadership might be the result of attention by researchers to other areas such as a focus on media comparison studies, which looks at how distance education technologies compare with traditional instructional methods; obsession with emerging new technologies and their applications; and the focus by researchers and authors, who are long-time academics, on pedagogical rather than leadership issues.

The distance education environment requires DE leaders to have a well-founded vision of DE and its place within higher education institutions, leaders who possess good people skills that will enable them to work with their staff, faculty, and administrators; understand the adoption process for emerging technologies and innovation; are knowledgeable about course design processes, essential teaching and learning theories, and characteristics of adult learners and traditional-age students; are able to manage change; and who understand and are able to apply salient leadership qualities (*Nworie, Haughton, & Oprandi, 2012*). These qualities are deemed necessary for effective and efficient for DE programs and are needed for creating successful learning environment and experiences for students. Distance education, it seems, is an area that does not require a specialist in a specific area, rather, it requires versatility, competencies in multiple areas, good leadership traits, and the ability to adapt to changes. The emerging distance education environment, the requirements of the evolving distance education leadership roles, scarcity of distance education literature on the DE leadership and enabling leadership theories, and the needs of higher education institutions call for the examination of leadership theories that will be beneficial to distance education leaders.

The purpose of this paper is to examine leadership theories that could be beneficial to distance education leaders, and such that would enable them grapple with the challenges of working in a complex and fast-growing work environment at a time of unprecedented change in higher education. The paper looks at DE leadership qualities, styles, and behaviors vis-à-vis leadership theories with the goal of identifying essential leadership attributes that can be of importance to DE leaders. The understanding of leadership theories and ability to apply relevant theories in their practice will enable DE leaders to navigate the complex fields of distance education and higher education; add to what they already know about essential DE leadership competencies; equip themselves with essential skills to work with administrators, faculty, and students in leading distance education programs; improve the teaching and learning processes; and assure the effective and efficient application of technologies in the instructional process (*Cornford & Pollock, 2003*). As DE leaders strive to acquire competencies that will enable them perform their roles, these pointers will be beneficial. This paper examines the following leadership theories that can impact distance education: transformational, situational, complexity, and systems theory. While there are other theories, these seem to apply to or are beneficial to DE leaders.

The distance education leader, as used in this paper, is a person in a higher education institution who has the responsibility for overseeing or directing all institutional DE programs and activities, including managing courses and/or degree programs, providing vision, and motivating others under his/her supervision to achieve the desired results within his/her sphere of authority. The person may hold the title of Coordinator of Distance

Learning, Director of Distance Education, Dean of Distance and Continuing Education, Director of E-Learning, Director of Instructional Technology and Distance Learning, Dean of Online Learning, or Assistant/Associate Vice President for Distance Education, or similar position titles. Williams (2003) suggests that leadership is different from administrative role, and is a vital component of organizational setup and individual change.

Leadership in Distance Education

The roles and responsibilities of the DE leader is a crucial one as higher education transitions to multiple instructional delivery modes. In many cases, most distance education programs currently operate alongside conventional learning environments and leadership of the two areas tend to vary in some aspects. Based on the paramount position that DE leadership holds on campuses, it is apparent that the success and sustainability of distance education in higher education does not rest on creating elaborate programs; in the use of the latest technology; or in generating funds. Rather, it depends on effective leadership that will guide institutions to offer distance education programs that meet the needs of diverse students and serve the goals of their institutions (Beaudoin, 2003; Irlbeck, 2002; Marcus, 2004; McKenzie, Mims, & Bennett, 2003; *McKenzie, et al., 2005; Moore, 1994*).

As institutions fill DE leadership positions, an unfolding notion among researchers and practitioners is that distance education leadership is different from leadership in other areas of higher education (Beaudoin, 2003; McKenzie, Ozkan, & Layton, 2005; Pahal, 1999; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2006). This notion arises from the fact that DE leaders are managing an evolving field that relies heavily on information technologies that are constantly changing; DE caters to both traditional-age students and adult learners who are geographically dispersed; instruction is delivered either synchronously or asynchronously; and DE students are diverse and as such learn under different cultural and pedagogical environments. DE leadership requires working effectively with instructors who need to have a good understanding of, and experience on the use of the right types of instructional technologies and strategies to enhance student learning. DE leaders regularly deal with rapid changes that take place in distance education environments and with the fast pace of technology development. Further, DE leadership requires an understanding of the adoption and diffusion process of innovation with technology and the ability to manage change. Distance education leaders, therefore, operate in a drastically changing environment that is often situated in a context that still uses the old paradigm (what Beaudoin (2003) referred to as the “old economy”), especially those that operate within dual-mode institutions.

The reliance of online distance education on technologies lead to the introduction of newer technologies, processes, tools, tasks, and practices into the existing structures in higher education institutions. As a result, new hierarchies, functions, positions, activities, and role changes occur. These new arrangements result in an unbalanced coexistence of traditional structures and a continuing evolutionary trend of DE. The changes often result in altering existing structures, thereby redefining faculty and student roles and employing new methods that required different approaches to student learning and support structures. The evolving environment lead institutional administrators and faculty to seek out or develop appropriate policies, procedures, and practices that enabled them to adjust to and evaluate the distance education environment (Cornford & Pollock, 2003; Portugal, 2006).

Today’s higher education DE leader assumes many roles and acts as an intermediary between multiple internal and external constituencies; work in an evolving field that is part of an old system; and operates in a fast-changing environment (Beaudoin, 2003; Dede, 1993; *McKenzie, Ozkan, & Layton, 2005; Nworie, Haughton, & Oprandi, 2012; Otte and Benke, 2006; Pahal, 1999; Simonson, Smaldino, Albright, & Zvacek, 2006*). Moore and Kearsley (1996) notes that distance education requires special organizational and administrative arrangements. The nature of the roles of DE program leaders suggests a difference from *other service or academic departments, given their responsibilities for innovative course design and delivery processes; the use of appropriate technology for the delivery of instruction; preparation of faculty in their new roles as facilitators; and monitoring the shift in the role of students to interact and collaborate as they take a more*

active role in their learning (Holmberg, 2005; Moore & Kearsley, 2005). The different DE environment calls for the right kind of leadership based on appropriate leadership framework. Hence, the need to identify appropriate theoretical perspectives that will support and guide DE leaders in their roles. In recognition of the deficiency of valid theoretical framework that supports DE leadership, scholars and practitioners have encouraged the development of appropriate theories that will underpin DE leadership (Beaudoin, 2004; Portugal, 2006).

Theoretical Perspectives

Efforts have been made over the years to provide theoretical framework for the field of distance education. These include works by Anderson (2004), which provided the beginnings of a theory of online learning; Garrison (2000), which calls for new theoretical frameworks to position DE as a strong field of practice; Wedemeyer's (1971) work which provided the earliest theoretical framework for DE; Holmberg's (1989, 1995) theory of distance education practice, which was based on the concept of real and simulated conversations; and Moore's (1991, 1990, 1993) theory of transactional distance, which introduces the pedagogical element to DE theory. Moore (1991) posited that transactional distance is pedagogical, rather than geographic, and requires distinctive organizations and teaching procedures. While this paper is not an attempt at a DE theory, it suggests the application of existing leadership theory to DE leadership.

The complexity and evolutionary nature of the DE environment will benefit from an examination of valid leadership theories that could support DE leadership. In addition to previous efforts at providing a theoretical base for DE, a leadership framework for DE leadership would be appropriate. Distance education could benefit from established leadership and related theories, by applying relevant theories while the search for a more unique leadership framework for DE leadership continues. Knowledge of leadership theories will be of value to distance education leaders and other higher education administrators as they seek to establish viable and sustainable distance education programs (Bass, 1995; Beaudoin, 2003; Bennis & Nanus, 1997; Moore & Kearsley, 2004; Newtzie, 2002; Northouse, 2007; Portugal, 2006; Simonson & Schlosser, 2003). Understanding multiple theoretical perspectives provides guidance on how to operate as a leader in a variety of situations, especially during transitional periods, and how to function at different levels of authority within an organization (Northouse, 2007). In the absence of, and perhaps instead of developing new DE leadership theories, as some have advocated, applying leadership theories that have been refined and applied to other fields, including education, will help to fill the vacuum in DE leadership theory (Bass, 1995, 1997, 1998; Beaudoin, 2004; Bennis & Nanus, 1997; Burns, 1978; Kouzes & Posner, 2002; Portugal, 2006). It is essential to consider multiple leadership theories as personal traits and characteristics differ, leadership in the higher education and distance education contexts are complex, and also as one theory may not be sufficient to explain the complexities of leading people in an environment characterized by change (Tierney, Farmer, & Graen, 1999).

The personal qualities of a DE leader could lead to the identification and adoption of a choice of theory or the combination of theories. The application of the theories could lead to the development of a novel DE leadership theory that condenses various theories. The theories examined in this paper, which could explicate intrinsic qualities of a DE leader, are transformational, situational, complexity and chaos, and systems theories. Beaudoin (2004) encouraged the consideration of three leadership theories for DE leaders: transformational, transitional, and transactional. There are numerous leadership theories that could have been selected for this discussion, however, only a few that are deemed of more importance to DE have been selected. The nature of the emerging DE landscape requires distance education leadership to possess knowledge of the multiple characteristics as well as the requirements of an effective leader (Portugal, 2006). The examination of these leadership theories and their application to DE provides the framework and credence needed to offer insights to DE leaders who operate in multiple and ever-changing learning contexts.

Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational leadership theory is premised on the assumption that the actions of leaders are based on moral, ethical, and equitable consideration of everyone within an organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2002;

Northouse, 2007). Transformational leadership motivates followers as it defines and articulates a vision for the organization. Transformational leaders are charismatic, motivational, intellectual, and considerate and often display the qualities of self-confidence, honesty, and integrity (Bass & Steidelmeier, 1998; Dixon, 1998). This theory of leadership is perceived as a link between the old and new views of leadership (Rost, 1991). Transformational leaders are able to probe the current state of affairs, take a new approach to problem-solving and decision-making, encourage the advancement of ideas and philosophies that differ from the norm, and place emphasis on professional development. Transformational leaders inspire followers to be a source of inspiration to each other to enable them attain advanced stages of “morality and motivation” (Burns, 1978, p. 20), including justice and equality. While transformational leaders determine new methods of solving problems, they also convince others to follow the new approach. An ethic of care for those supervised by the DE leader is embedded within the transformational leadership theory, which is based on achieving socially acceptable goals. This calls for leaders to be guided by high ethical and moral standards. The qualities of transformational leadership include vision, inspiration, trust, care, passion, and commitment. Transformational leadership is perceived as a link between the old and new views of leadership (Rost, 1991). It is hierarchical and focuses on leadership, distinguishing leaders and followers.

Studies of transformational leadership have sought to understand how leaders develop and sustain vision, empower instead of manipulate followers, perceive the importance of organizational contexts, and create a cultural environment in which transformational leadership will thrive (Avolio and Bass, 1991; Bass, 1997; Schein, 1992). Transformational leaders develop a clear vision that is pleasing and germane to the needs and ideals of their followers and communicate that vision through emotional appeals, symbols, rituals, and metaphors (Kezar, Carducci, & Contreras-McGavin, 2006). Individuals who possess or acquire transformational leadership traits can be successful DE leaders as they have the ability to inspire others, exude enthusiasm, provide a vision of the future of DE, search for new ways of solving problems, and pursue programs that have value for their institution. Such DE leaders will be detail-oriented individuals who will faithfully implement the initiatives to ensure that various tasks are completed in a timely manner.

The inherent qualities of transformational leadership make it applicable to the distance education environment and one from which DE leaders will benefit (Irlbeck, 2000; **Tipple, 2010**). The qualities of transformational leadership that may impact distance education leadership includes vision, inspiration, trust, care, passion, and commitment. Portugal (2006) asserts that DE leaders must be transformational leaders and innovative visionaries with the ability to motivate, energize, inspire, and encourage followers “while fully articulating a shared and competitive distance learning agenda” (p. 9). Similarly, Bennis and Nanus (1985) recommend transformational leadership as a worthy model for leaders as they seek to assist institutional stakeholders, including administrators, faculty and staff, students, and other internal and external constituencies. The characteristics of transformational leadership have value for leaders as they go about their responsibilities of envisioning new directions for DE, designing and delivering courses, and leading their staff. Internal and external influences which impact DE include changes in course delivery methods, extensive use of digital and social networking technologies, convergence of media and technologies, and accreditation issues. Additionally, stiff competition from for-profit institutions increases the demand for accountability by stakeholders. Organizational structures that go beyond traditional education boundaries require transformational leadership.

Effective transformational leaders seem to function well in change environments as they must define and articulate a vision of the future for their organization and communicate such to their followers in order to motivate them. DE leaders with sound change management abilities will anticipate unintended results of change and plan to avoid consequences that will diminish the intended positive results of change (Nworie & Haughton, 2008). Transformational leadership requires DE leaders to see themselves as custodians of a new vision of learning, in the present and for the future, within a broader academic environment (Portugal, 2006). Visionary DE leaders are innovative and able to operate in symbolic situations, motivate followers, and have the flexibility to adapt to evolving organizational contexts (McKenzie *et al.*, 2005; Portugal, 2006). As institutions shift from traditional methods of operation toward a new environment of integrating emerging technologies, realigning existing structures, and developing policies and other supports mechanisms for feasible DE programs, a new vision of the ensuing college and university environments and leadership

approach are necessary.

Situational Leadership Theory

The situational leadership theory proposes that effective leaders play the roles of leadership and management. It relates to a condition in which leaders assess situations to determine how they can be effective in contexts that present a wide array of organizational tasks (Northouse, 2001). Based on the level of each of the acts that is required, the leader can apply four different styles of leadership: delegating, coaching, directing, and supporting. An effective situational leader will be conversant with these styles and be able to utilize the appropriate style by correctly determining a follower's level of readiness and choosing a leadership style that informs "how you behave when you are trying to influence the performance of someone else and is a combination of directive and supportive behaviors" (Blanchard, Zigarmi, & Zigarmi, 1985, p. 46). Blanchard et al. describe directive behavior as "clearly telling people what to do, how to do it, where to do it, and when to do it, and then loosely supervising their performance" and supportive behavior, which "involves listening to people, providing support and encouragement for their efforts, and then facilitating their involvement in problem-solving and decision making" (p. 46).

Leaders apply this theory to analyze the needs of the situation in which they are involved, then select the most appropriate leadership style. The leadership style will vary contingent on the competencies of followers or staff members. The development of situational leadership theory is credited to Paul Hersey and Kenneth Blanchard (1996). The central features of situational leadership theory (SLT) include the interaction between task behavior and relationship behavior, the readiness or maturity of followers to perform certain tasks, and how different leadership styles relate to the followers' confidence or abilities to perform a task.

Situational leadership theory has longevity as it addresses both the changing complexity of the tasks performed by followers and the changing abilities of the followers as they work together to reach the intended goal. As the followers' levels of maturity increase as they perform specific tasks, leaders begin to reduce their own task behavior and increase their relationship behavior until the followers advance to a moderate stage or higher level in their maturity. As followers reach above average levels in their maturity, leaders decrease their task and relationship behavior.

Key strengths of situational leadership are that it is directive and flexible in nature, as it informs the leader how to respond in different situations. Having a knowledge of the expectations of the leader and followers under different conditions and circumstances is crucial to leadership. Leadership involves change, and situational leadership is based on how leaders adapt to change in different contexts. Situational leaders respond promptly with appropriate interventions when different conditions that are either external or internal changes in an organization resulting in changes in the workplace and in people, the situational leader responds promptly with appropriate interventions. Situational leaders help to structure the development and continuous refinement of followers or staff members to help them acquire the skills needed to meet the objectives of the organization.

Change constantly occurs in organizations and situational leadership addresses how leaders adapt to the constant change within organizational contexts and situations. This has implications for DE leaders who operate in a constantly changing environment requiring adaptation to emerging technologies and pedagogies and adoption of various innovations and who work with highly technical and professional staff who are at various competency levels in their careers. The nature of some changes are rapid, eliciting adroit and skillful management of personnel and resources.

According to **Tipple (2010)**, situational leadership is relevant in DE as the distance education environment encounters far-reaching changes on several fronts. Tipple identified some of the changes that are taking place in DE in higher education:

1. A highly competitive global environment in which customers (students) can easily switch from one online university to another.

2. Increasing customer (student) demands for higher quality of education at reduced costs.
3. Redefining the mission beyond the geographical proximity.
4. Shifting the organizational structure from a face-to-face centralized academic setting to a (global) virtual environment.
5. Training, motivating and directing an ever expanding adjunct faculty population.
6. Constantly changing technologies (p. 5).

Situational leadership attributes are relevant to management of rapid environmental change that involves varied cadre of staff members, such as the one that obtains in a DE environment where effective integration of the skills of followers with institutional processes and systems is required to meet the needs of higher education (Beaudoin, 2002; Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2008; Pahal, 1999; Portugal, 2006; **Tipple, 2010**).

Complexity Leadership Theory

Complexity leadership theory (CLT) introduces a new dimension to how leadership is perceived as it shifts focus from the individual leader to the context, a shift which influences the performance of the leader and on outcomes. CLT is based on the belief that outside influences as well as the internal environment of organizations should be considered and examined in an effort to understand the role of leadership. According to Rost (1991), as the context for leadership has become more complex over the years, researchers and scholars have grown skeptical of earlier views of leadership that focused on the individual leader. The need to understand the complexities of organization context and the internal and external factors that affect leadership led to the development of CLT (Garrison & Anderson, 1999; Hazy, 2006; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Lichtenstein et al., 2006, 2007; Marion, 1999; Marion & Uhl-Bien, 2001, 2003; Uhl-Bien et al., 2004; Uhl-Bien & Marion, 2008).

Complexity theory has helped to broaden the concept of context and thinking in the study of leadership process (Hunt, 1999; Osborn, Hunt, & Jauch, 2002). The complexities of the modern world and ever-changing environment have made the hierarchical, traditional, clear-cut, and universalistic approaches to leading less effective (Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Marion, 1999; Wheatley, 1999). CLT does not perceive organizational context as stagnant, rather it views organizational context from the perspective of active and changing environments that affect leadership. CLT calls for a clear distinction between leadership and leaders, as it presents leadership as an emergent, interactive, and dynamic process that surpasses the abilities of the individual leader and is the result of the pursuit of adaptive outcomes (Heifetz, 1994).

Traditional leadership theories have over the years developed their units of analysis, which have most often included the leader, the leader and follower, the leader and the group, and similar structures. However, in CLT the basic unit of analysis is the complex adaptive system (CAS) (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). CLT proposes that leadership is the activity of individual leaders who adopt a dynamic approach that considers leadership as a set of processes and conditions that influence or are influenced by organizations. Complexity leadership suggests that relationships between parts are more important than the parts themselves, and the organizations that operate as complex adaptive systems permit the emergence of new and more productive leadership styles.

CLT challenges earlier views of leadership that are based solely on the idea that leaders have an inborn ability to plan futures and make wise and right decisions (Lichtenstein et al., 2006) and of leaders as great personalities who function independently (Gronn, 2002). Existing leadership models have been structured to include traditional hierarchical structures of organizations, leading some organizations to adopt hierarchical leadership models (Uhl-Bien, Marion, & McKelvey, 2007). Scholars contend that models of leadership designed over the past centuries that served different organizational conditions may not be adequate for the leadership dynamics of today's organizations that operate in a knowledge-driven economy (Lichtenstein et al., 2007). A core tenet of the complexity leadership theory is that "much of leadership thinking has failed to recognize that leadership is not merely the influential act of an individual or individuals, but rather is embedded in a complex interplay of numerous interacting forces" (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007, p. 302).

While CLT shifts leadership focus from the individual leader, it does not lessen the importance of leadership in an organization. Rather than relegate leadership to the background, CLT acknowledges that leadership is far more than the individual as it involves the organizational system (Hazy, 2006; Uhl-Bien et al., 2004). Based on complexity science, CLT offers an approach to leadership that is situated within a structure that borders on the concept of a complex adaptive system (Uhl-Bien et al., 2007). In complex adaptive systems (CAS), relationships operate differently from those that obtain in bureaucratic systems hierarchical structures. Instead, relationships emerge through interactions among the heterogeneous components of the system (Lichtenstein, et al., 2006; Marion, 1999).

CLT encourages collaboration, flexibility, systems thinking, reflection, innovative solutions, and adaptability of organizational structures. This well describes the essentials for the DE field within higher education, and the application of CLT has implications for the DE environment and leadership. The DE field is evolutionary and replete with changes that affect all the areas of the field, including leadership, course design and delivery, technology adoption, faculty support, etc. The changes that occur in the adoption of new technology, pedagogy, support mechanisms, and processes alters the DE context, which subsequently affects leadership within DE. Changes cannot be made in isolation as there are relationships that exist within and among the different areas that constitute the DE context. Online DE depends on technology; the adoption of new technologies alters the dynamics of the DE leadership, practices, and environment, all of which affect constituencies as they attempt to communicate and work together.

Technological changes, according to Rowley, Lujan, and Dolence (1998), are one reason that higher education institutions are going through a new phase in leadership. Irlbeck, (2002) agrees that leaders of higher education institutions are experiencing increase in rapid changes in their institutions. These changes are complicated by the rapidly changing environment ushered in by distance education. Moore (1994) suggested that many of the administrative systems in use in higher education were designed to meet the needs of an earlier era when traditional-age students engaged in learning in the conventional face-to-face environment. This reliance on the old view of administrative systems impacts higher education's view of distance education and how distance education leadership is understood and defined. The changes in higher education and DE require understanding of the changes and the ability to lead in a change environment.

Scholars have called for a type of *leadership for higher education DE programs that is different from that found in traditional-mode institutions with face-to-face classroom environments* (Beaudoin, 2003; Bunker, 1998; McKenzie et al., 2005; Pahal, 1999; Simonson et al., 2006). Portugal (2006) recommends progressive leadership qualities that would enable DE leaders to successfully lead distance education programs within traditional institutions that are hierarchical and bureaucratic in nature. CLT inherent qualities are adequate to examine the context of higher education and the impact of DE within that context. The knowledge of CLT would enable DE leaders to understand their contexts, the impact of internal forces, and provide them the ability to successfully navigate through the bureaucratic and hierarchical structures of their institutions, determine how contextual changes are impacting their roles, and redefine the existing leadership prototype.

Systems Thinking

Systems thinking and the related systems theory are not core leadership theories, but these concepts have been applied in leadership circles. Ludwig von Bertalanffy (1968) is credited with the initial development of the systems theory, which was intended as a thorough approach in explaining the structure and mechanisms of organic systems. He produced an early work that introduced the meaning and context of general systems theory (GST) and which explains the genesis of the theory and describes the potential benefits of the theory to the general public. Systems thinking is espoused by the complexity leadership theory. Siegel (1999) defines a system as an aggregation of parts that have unique functions and goals that are connected by common information channels and paths with which to achieve a common objective within a range of the whole operating environment. Checkland and Scholes (1990) describe a system as a complex whole. Systems are characterized by the interrelatedness, interconnectedness, and dynamism of the parts that make up the whole (Hutchins, 1996). Saba (2003) perceives systems theory as a prototypical tool needed for the understanding of relationships between different entities and discourages the idea of expecting a single answer to a problem.

While systems include the elements of interconnectedness and symbiotic relationship, Sterman (2000) adds that a dynamic system is one that intrinsically integrates two major types of feedback loops. These include positive and negative loops. Humans-in-the-loop can add to the complexity of any system, where the human is learning and consequently altering the system dynamics (Shaffer, 2005).

Scott (1961) suggests that the best way to study organizations is as a system. Similarly, Senge (1990) addresses the necessity of introducing systems thinking in an organizational context. Furthermore, Jewel and Jewel (1992) posit that a view of an organization as a set of systems helps to better understand the change process and its effects. According to Banathy (1996), systems theory presents a holistic and expansionist view of the world. Systems theory can, therefore, provide a better understanding of distance education as a subsystem of higher education. Sterman (1994) work provides an exhaustive and outstanding introduction to the application of systems theory in the field of education. Saba and Shearer (1994) provide a framework for introducing a dynamic model of distance education which has the capability of being empirically authenticated. Knowledge of systems thinking is an invaluable asset to DE leaders in understanding the relationships that exist within the context of higher education as a system, and how they can grapple with issues that are related to change management. Systems theory is useful to DE leaders because it has been recognized for its effectiveness in “synthesizing and analyzing complexity” in organizations (Simon, 1968).

An understanding of systems thinking can help in managing adoption and diffusion processes. According to Senge (1990), systems thinking provides the type of discipline and tools necessary to see the interrelationships and patterns of change rather than static “snapshots” and that a change in thinking is required to understand the complexities of dynamic social systems, which are component parts that interact in distinct ways. Leavitt, Pinfield, and Webb (1974) have recommended using the systems thinking approach to study contemporary organizations that exist in rapidly changing and tumultuous environments, a condition that describes the DE environment.

Systems theory would contextualize the implications of the adoption of technological innovation within a complex system of higher education or distance education, thereby providing background for investigating the experiences of DE leaders. Application of systems thinking will provide DE leaders a way of viewing higher education as a system, and how change in one area affects other areas as a result of the interrelatedness, interconnectedness, dynamism, and embeddedness of the parts that constitute the institution as a whole (Gustafson & Branch, 2002; Hutchins, 1996). Systems thinking theory could help DE leaders understand their roles in an institution and how system-wide change would impact the DE programs.

Adopting the Right Theoretical Framework

The leadership styles suggested in this paper can be of benefit to DE leaders and others who have authority over DE leaders. The adoption of one or a combination of the leadership theories described in this paper depends on the choice and personality of the individual leader. The choice of theoretical perspective should enable the leader to navigate the terrains of higher education bureaucracy and navigate through the evolutionary trends in distance education as emerging technologies continue to change the distance education landscape. Higher education institutions that are fully engaged in distance education have profoundly altered how education functions (Simonson & Schlosser, 2003).

Trends in higher education suggest that leadership in institutions is going through a period of ambiguity amidst constant, rapid change. In addition, DE leaders most often operate in administrative structures that were designed for a different era and a different type of higher education institution. This complicates the environment in which the DE leader operates in. To lead in the new DE environment, a DE leader needs to assess the context they work in to correctly apply leadership theories and qualities to their environment in addition to having a good understanding of themselves and their core values. The theories discussed in this paper provide DE leaders and others who are interested a theoretical foundation that are helpful to lead within their context, helping leaders to understand, engage, and care for followers, enabling them to maximize their contributions. Leaders are effective when they enable followers.

Understanding the application of a variety of theoretical perspectives equips DE leaders for their role. As noted by Bolman and Deal (2003), leading through various perspectives provides a leader with the behavioral, philosophical, and theoretical operational models that will enable them to achieve their goals. Determining the most suitable leadership style for an individual DE leader within a particular institutional context requires the DE leader or institutional administrators to identify the skills needed by that individual to advance the goals of the institution. The role of top institutional leaders in the success of DE is vital. Beaudoin (2004) made a case for the importance of senior institutional leaders to champion the case of instituting effective DE leadership. As Wunsch (2000) warns, senior administrators who are not technology savvy or who do not realize the value of technology for the delivery of instruction are not likely to be supportive of technology acquisitions, units that provide technology services, or the need for a top leadership position in such areas. Similarly, Duderstadt, Atkins, and van Houweling (2002) hold the view that many top level institutional leaders do not seem to be aware of the threats, potentials, and benefits that accrue from deploying information technology. Duderstadt et al. suggest that the responsibility for institutions to do well in the area of information technology rests on institutional leadership at the executive level. DE is included in this as it relies heavily on technology. Institutional leaders at the top echelon who have the final authority in hiring DE leaders need to understand the unique nature of the DE context and the required leadership traits for DE leaders who will be successful in leading their institutions in times of unprecedented change and of rapid technological evolution.

Conclusion

The continuing success and future of distance education depends on effective leadership. Creating a vision for the future, providing direction for the effective use of technology, managing ensuing change, supervising DE staff, and guiding faculty in transitioning from face-to-face learning environment to the virtual environment and using the right pedagogy requires effective leadership. A leader in the DE environment must understand the application and consequences of leadership theories as an expression of themselves, their core values, and the needs of their institution. Effective leadership requires the leader to understand, engage, and care for followers and to enable those followers to maximize their contributions. Adopting the right kind of theoretical framework can lead to a better understanding of the context and equip the DE leader to function optimally within their institutions and in the evolving DE environment.

Leaders need a repertoire of styles when they are faced with challenges. A key skill in the DE leader's arsenal is the ability to diagnose problems. According to Hersey, Blanchard, and Johnson (2008), leaders need to have the ability to diagnose problems (p. 131). Before there is an intervention or a solution, the problems or issues must first be correctly identified. In DE programs, the leader needs to understand the context and the ability to diagnose problems. By understanding various leadership theories and styles, leaders can be confident in their ability to be more adaptable and instinctive and to accurately identify problems in their program and institution, assess the competencies and commitment of followers, subordinates, or staff before selecting the best method to intervene and provide future directions. An understanding of the theories will equip the DE leader with the choice of possible interventions, as well as the knowledge to envision and lead.

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imilarly, when the DE leader is envisioning the future, these theories can help to devise and implement viable strategies. Knowledge of the various leadership theories and styles could enable a leader to be more adaptable in a change environment. In addition to understanding the various leadership theories and styles, leaders must be aware of their preferred leadership style so that they can adapt better and more confidently to changing conditions.

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