

Digital Leadership: A Primer

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ABSTRACT

Digital transformation is the process of re-building a business from scratch using digital technologies. It is key to becoming more customer-centric. Organizations that go through digital transformation emerge with new opportunities, new purposes, new practices, and new products. Digital leadership is the set of skills, knowledge, and behaviors that individuals exhibit to successfully lead the digital activity of an organization. Required leadership skills include communication, project management, team management, finance, and conflict resolution. Digital leadership involves challenging traditional models and approaches. Digital leaders are the people responsible for managing digital transformation. They understand the disruptive potential of technology. This paper provides a primer on digital leadership.

KEYWORDS: digitalization, digital technology, digital leadership, digital leaders

INTRODUCTION

Leadership is one of the most extensively studied topics in social sciences. It is as the heart of every group or organization. It is needed to introduce change and innovation. It may be regarded as a process of leading followers. Today effective leaders are needed more than ever. For decades, people have been asking the question: are leaders born or made? In the past, individual differences such as cognitive intelligence, traits of personality, and demographic characteristics dictate who leads. This approach suggests that “leaders are born.” Today, leadership is regarded as a process of social influence in which one person can work cooperatively with others in order to accomplish of a given task. Leadership is an art and something to be learned over time. Leaders are needed in many social contexts including the workplace, religious and secular communities, schools, colleges, business, healthcare, government, politics, law enforcement, military, organizations, and families. Leadership in these areas often influences the way we work and live. Leaders are aware of the fact that they are not perfect, are aware of their

strengths and weaknesses, and strive for continuous improvement [1].

Leadership styles and behaviors have direct impact on employee productivity and satisfaction. There are different types of leadership. These include transformational leadership, transactional leadership, servant leadership, charismatic leadership, pastoral leadership, primal leadership, innovation leadership, authentic leadership, inspirational leadership, etc. The most important aspects of a leader’s job [2]:

- Making decisions
- Motivating and inspiring others (e.g. employees)
- Setting the tone
- Creating a collective vision
- Designing an environment where people can grow and succeed

Digitalization offers almost unlimited opportunities for organizations, businesses, governments, and citizens. Digital transformation affects the role of leadership and the overall organization. It apples emerging technologies like Internet of things,

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artificial intelligence, big data, blockchain, mobile services, and cloud computing. It requires active participation from the support staff to top management. In the digital era, any business that is not digitally transformed will not survive. While the core traditional leadership skills are still relevant today, there is a need to shift focus through a digital transformation. In the world of uncertainty, leaders can no longer rely on traditional behaviors that led to past successes. Although some companies have achieved trailblazer status, others are lagging because they find the transition difficult. Unfortunately, a majority of small and medium sized businesses struggle to get the most out of the technology opportunities. As illustrated in Figure 1, successful organization will embrace transformation rather than simply change [3].

WHAT IS DIGITAL LEADERSHIP?

Effective leadership is extremely important in any system. Digital leadership employs digital tools and is concerned with leading digital natives. It is a balancing act that requires a unique set of skills to drive success for the leader, their organization, and workforce. It takes into account recent changes such as ubiquitous connectivity, open-source technology, and mobile devices. Plans for change, strategies, and business models based on innovation is what differentiates digital leadership from traditional leadership. Digital leadership revisits the established culture and challenges ideas and practices. To do this requires that the digital leaders must first understand the new opportunities available through new technologies.

Digital leadership has become a requirement for a business to survive in the fast and ever-changing environment. In addition to being a transformative leader, a digital leader have a digital mindset to deal with disruption and digital skills that can be leveraged as a role model. A digital may be regarded an “architect” who develops and executes the organization’s digital strategy; a “coordinator” who brings together people with disparate skills to work together and collaborate; a “relationship builder” who connects with third-party technology providers with the organization’s digital strategy; an innovator” who is willing to take risks, and fail, and learn; a “strategist” who envisions the future and creatively leverages technology; and a “driver” who builds trust and collaborates across the organization [4]. Such a leader is known as an agile leader, as illustrated in Figure 2 [5].

The following acronym described digital leaders [3]:

- P Position yourself as a digital leader
- E Evolve your technical skills,

- take Ownership of community,
- P Promote what you are doing,
- L Love what you do,
- E Engage offline to online to humanize the technology

CHARACTERISTICS OF DIGITAL LEADERS

Good leadership is partially based on know-how and intellectual capabilities. The characteristics of a digital leader include the following [6]:

1. **Vision:** Vision is everything. Creating a clear and unique digital vision for an organization is vital. Digital leaders stand out because of their vision and innovation. They need to constantly challenge themselves to stay ahead and set a good example. The leader must have a clear vision of what he intends to achieve. This is one of the pivotal traits that makes digital leaders stand out from the rest.
2. **Strategy:** The successful digital leaders must have a strategy in place that helps them to nurture a digital culture internally. Otherwise, they should develop strategies to drive and transform a business in the digital economy. The need to implement digital strategies at the right time, with the right results is great.
3. **Innovation:** This involves creativity augmented by an ability to challenge, collaborate, and commercialize a new idea. The leaders must be willing to try out new technologies that help their teams to grow. They must drive business value through innovation and experimentation. In order to do so, leaders need to be flexible and adaptable with their approach in creating a digital workforce. There will be calculated risks, e.g. but the rewards could be of great value.
4. **Risk Taking:** Risk taking is a crucial part of digital leadership. This is necessary in a rapidly changing world of digital transformation. Taking risks may involve adopting new tech before competitors. As things change, leaders must change and initiate sustainable change. Digital leaders play a pivotal role in digital transformation successes because they can inspire employee confidence in risky initiatives.
5. **Talent Spotting:** In any organization, people are just as crucial as technology. A digital leaders must be able to spot the areas where talent is lacking and try to attract the talent.
6. **Communication:** Communication skills are crucial to any leader. It is important that a leader clearly communicates his vision, mission, objectives, and strategy. Important information can be communicated through various free social

media tools. Digital leaders need to communicate in an open, honest and transparent way. They must effectively and consistently give the stakeholders the right information at the right time through a variety of digital devices. Leaders are required to continuously communicate with their team members.

- 7. Adaptability:** If society changes and if technologies change, people must adapt by changing in turn. Some see change as an exciting challenge, while others fear it because of the initial effort it requires. Flexibility and adaptability are essential elements of good leadership. A digital leader needs to be open to change and be flexible.

Some of these characteristics of digital leaders are displayed in Figure 3 [7].

APPLICATIONS OF DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

Digital leadership involves navigating an organization towards digital transformation in order to stay competitive. It is the strategic use of a company's digital assets to achieve business goals. Digital leadership exists across economies in different regions of the world. It is highly relevant in many areas. Some of these areas are discussed as follows.

- **Business:** In the digital age, every business is a digital business. In business, the bottom line is crucial and those in leadership positions (managers and executives) are always held responsible for successes and failures. Digital technologies are changing the way customers conduct business. A digitally-disrupted workforce has changed the way businesses operate today. To move the company toward a new mindset, digital leaders must understand and promote digital dexterity. Graham Waller once said, "Continuously changing digital markets will require continuously adapting leadership." To take advantage of digital transformation, digital leaders must adopt new behaviors. A digital business leader requires three essential skills shown in Figure 4 [8]. Digital Leadership provides an organization the ability to create success in digital business
- **Marketing:** Digital transformation in marketing is the norm. Marketing has been digitizing for longer than others. Hence, most marketing is now digital marketing. Marketing leaders must become digital leaders and inspire senior stakeholders to do the same. They can encourage digital transformation by developing current talent, who will leverage technology and their digital nativity to help improve the daily operations of the

company. Digital marketing leaders know customers act, what makes they like, how they make decisions, and what technologies they use. They act accordingly with the goal of making the business become more customer-centric [9].

- **Education:** Education is of central importance for the future of society. In education, everyone who assumes the mantle of teacher automatically becomes a leader. The most successful schools have rich, robust visions for how digital technologies will transform learning and empower students. In these schools, faculty, staff, and parents are committed to technology-suffused communication, collaboration, and creativity [10]. Digital leaders understand that we must put real-world tools in the hands of students and allow them to create artifacts of learning that demonstrate conceptual mastery. Teachers need to think critically about incorporating digital citizenship and digital leadership into their daily teaching. Parents need to teach their children how to behave positively both online and offline.
- **Healthcare:** Leadership in healthcare is essential because these leaders serve at the intersection of care giving and business realities. Leadership is basically regarded as a people-oriented competency that requires certain types of behavior and skills. Digital leadership applies to healthcare administration. It is regarded as an executive leadership skill that benefits healthcare leaders and organizations. Healthcare leaders include executive leaders, directors, physicians, clinical staff, supervisors, nurse managers, chaplains, psychologists, and psychiatrists. The pandemic is one of health statistics, masks, vaccines, and social distancing.

BENEFITS

In any business, leadership is the major factor in getting success in the digital age. Digital leadership is a leadership style that focuses on implementing digital transformation within an organization. It helps a business to leverage digital technology for solving lead acquisition, sales, and customer service challenges. A digital leader explores how emerging technologies can be used to help the organization become more responsive to the needs of their customers.

Digital businesses today are enjoying enormous success, which can be attributed to the driving force of digital technology and the value it generates. The digital natives entering the workforce will not relate to a company that is not digital transformed. New digital products and services enter the market as quickly as companies can conceive of them. Other

benefits of digital leadership include the following [11].

- It builds a digital culture
- It enables employee productivity
- It makes your employees more productive
- It improves customer satisfaction
- It increases revenue
- It assures and drives digital transformation, propelling the change
- It enables enterprises to digitize their work environments and learning cultures

CHALLENGES

The speed of competition in the digital economy is growing exponentially faster than it ever did in the analog economy. Today's working environment is changing rapidly and providing new challenges. Digital communication poses challenges on leadership. Common challenges faced by digital leadership include [10]:

- Lack of a collective vision for how digital learning tools will be used.
- Lack of concerted, aligned action on the part of leadership.
- Fear of change, of the unknown, of letting go of what we know best, of being learners again.
- Leery about giving up control.

These challenges can be thoughtfully addressed by proactive leadership.

CONCLUSION

Leadership is an important quality in organizations. It is needed to introduce change and innovation. Digitalization is transforming all types of businesses and organizations. The digital world has moved from the shadows to center stage, creating winners and losers in all sectors and geographies. Leaders that lead the digital world, lead the world. Advances in digitalization place completely new demands on organizations and the society. In an era of digital transformation, a new leadership culture is needed. Digital transformation of organizations is helping to deliver services efficiently and at higher speed. Leadership is described as the capacity to guide a business toward achieving its objectives and establishing a sustained competitive advantage. Successful digital transformation requires digital-savvy leaders. Digital leaders must blend traditional and new skills to effectively guide their organizations into the future. They possess a wealth of digital knowledge and also demonstrate solid interpersonal skills that will help others share in their vision. A digital leader understands the value of networking.

As the business world relies heavily on digital technologies, digital leaders are in high demand. These digital leaders are tech savvy, explore new

areas of technology fearlessly, and create digital transformation. To meet the demand for digital leaders, an increasing number of universities are now offering programs and degrees on digital leadership. Courses in digital leadership provide the opportunity to gain understanding of how digitalization transforms industries and society [12]. More information on digital communication can be found in the books in [13-19] and the following related journals:

- The Leadership Quarterly
- Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies
- Journal of Leadership Studies
- Journal of Leadership Education
- International Journal of Educational Administration, Management, and Leadership

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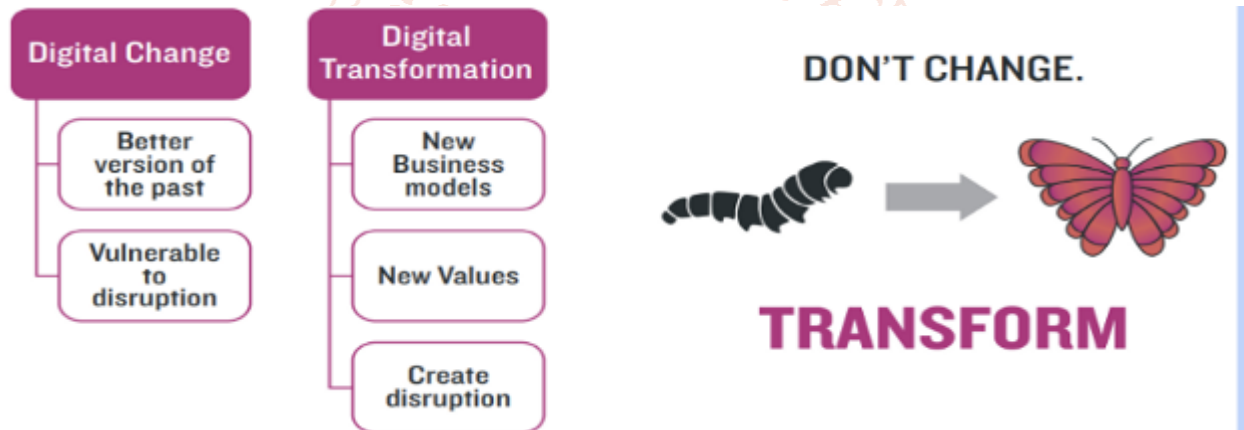


Figure 1 Successful organization will embrace transformation rather than simply change [3].

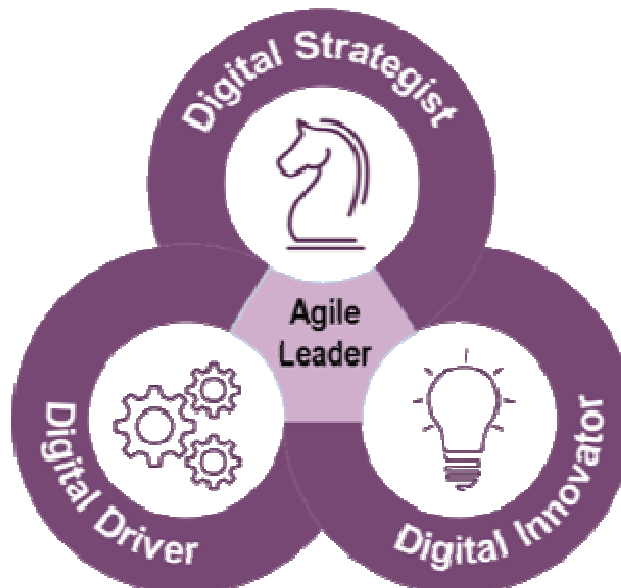


Figure 2 An agile leaders [5].



Figure 3 Some of the characteristics of a digital leader [7].



Figure 4 Three essential skills for a digital business leader [8]