

# The qualities of leadership required in distance education

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**ABSTRACT.** The managerial functions of leadership differ, according to the particular settings and situations. Leadership in distance education is variously different from leadership in traditional education. Creating and conveying a technological vision, which be powerful enough to displace traditional educational models, is one of the most challenging aspects of leadership in distance education. This paper looks at the role of leadership in distance education, and finds that being a specialist is not a prerequisite for being a successful leader. Rather, the qualities of leadership are the personal attitudes and behaviours, which create and advance the conditions for innovations and their operationalization. Moreover, no specific best leadership style or set of attitudes and behaviours have yet been found in distance education.

**KEYWORDS:** *Environmental application, Online learning, Situated management, Style of leadership, Transformative distance education*

## Introduction

The classical concept of leadership has been changing quite radically across space and time. Grint highlighted the paradigm shift from the classical concept to a perspective vision of the desirable leadership traits. He listed important traits, characteristics and behavioural patterns, that a person should possess, to become an effective leader in an organization (Grint, 1997). Leadership takes precedence over other things, in an organization, because leaders decide what needs to be done, and make things happen. Leaders also create new working cultures and ethos in an organization's development. A quotation from John W. Gardner tells us that: "Leaders have a significant role in creating the state of mind that is the society. They can serve as symbols of the moral unity of the society. They can express the values that hold the society together. Most important, they can conceive and articulate goals that lift people out of their petty preoccupations, carry them above the conflicts that tear a society apart, and unite them in the pursuit of objectives worthy of their best efforts" (Gardner, 1968).

Beaudoin defines it as "a set of attitudes and behaviours that create conditions for innovative change, that enable individuals

and organizations to share a vision and move in its direction, and that contribute to the management and operationalization of ideas" (Beaudoin, 2003). The history of distance education proves that it is possible to play a leadership role, without necessarily being a specialist in the field. William Rainey Harper, founding president of the University of Chicago, Water Perry, founding Vice Chancellor of the British Open University, and William Leavitt, Governor of Utah, promoter of the Western Governors' University, were not experts or specialists in the field of distance education, but endorsed, articulated and facilitated distance education goals crafted by others. It is also important to note that effective leadership practice has not been confined to those in administrative roles. Indeed, there have been influential thinkers and theorists, who significantly impacted their organizations and fields they newly operated in. The importance is thus on attitudes and behaviours, which create and advance the conditions for innovations and their operationalization.

## Methods

### *The paucity of literature on leadership*

Despite its growing importance, leadership in distance education is not achieving its due place, in the research literature on distance education. Beaudoin argued for the research and examination of the specific type of leadership, needed in distance education (Beaudoin, 2003).

Beaudoin reviewed the literature which was published in the 1990s, by conducting a content analysis of: (1) the titles and abstracts that appeared in the *American Journal of Distance Education*, and *DEOSNEWS*, an electronic journal, both published by the American Center for the Study of Distance Education; (2) 1998 and 1999 issues of *Open Learning*; and (3) 1997-1999 issues of *Distance Education*, and found only a few articles related to distance education leadership. He concluded that "over a four-year period, several widely read sources of research and writing in distance education theory and practice offer us very little indeed on the topic of leadership". Beaudoin also conducted content analysis of presentations at: (1) the European Distance Education Network, Bologna, Italy (1998); (2) the Distance Education Conference, sponsored by the University of South Africa (2000);

and (3) the ICDE World Conference on Open Learning and Distance Education, held in Düsseldorf, Germany (2001), and found that “the interest and attention focused on the general theme of distance education management, in general, and leadership, in particular, was conspicuously thin” (Beaudoin, 2003).

There is an increasingly steady supply of new books on distance education, many offering a chapter on aspects of administration and organization. An examination of the new books on open and distance learning which were reviewed indicates no titles primarily dealing with leading distance education activities. The subject indices of ten prominent books on open and distance education, published since 1993, do not include any title under the subject of leadership (Beaudoin, 2003). The review of a database on open and distance education publications, edited by Keith Harry, listed three book titles devoted to open and distance education leadership and management (Harry, 1999):

(1) Paul (1990); (2) Dunning et al. (1993); (3) Freeman (1997). In 2001, another addition to this genre was *Leadership and management in open and flexible learning*, edited by Latchem and Hanna (Latchem, Hanna, 2001). These works partly close the gap in the literature on leadership in distance education.

### ***The usefulness of literature in other fields***

The availability of material in other areas of educational theory and practice, including adult and continuing education, which is closely related to distance education, would be helpful to the discussion on leadership in distance education. The contributions of Simerly and others, in the absence of a more fully articulated body of work on distance education leadership, would be relevant to the understanding of leadership (Beaudoin, 2003). Simerly evolved the following strategies as critical to effective continuing education leadership, and these seem greatly to be applicable to distance education (Simerly, 1987):

- Analyze systems and conduct environmental scans.
- Be aware of power; manage both conflict and agreement and reach consensus.
- Understand the impact of institutional culture.
- Function with ambiguity, complexity and decentralization.

- Utilize tactical and strategic planning.
- Demonstrate the value of the educational organization to multiple constituencies.

Besides the useful literature in continuing education, there are useful studies in other areas, for understanding the distinct elements of distance education leadership. For example, Schön's important study on reflective practice has significant implications for distance educators. Schön made a strong case for developing professional practitioners, by insisting that they actively engage in a process of ongoing systematic reflection on their own work, during their performance of it, rather than at a later point in time (Schön, 1983).

## **Results**

### *Transformative leadership*

Bennis and Nanus put forward "transformative leadership" as a good model for distance education leaders today. A transformative leader in education should be capable of assisting its stakeholders (administrators, faculty, students and trustees), and recognize that he can no longer afford the luxury of adopting new ways of leading, and learning in an old fashion (Bennis, Nanus, 1985). In addition to transformative leadership, "situational leadership" is also required (Hersey, Blanchard, 1977).

### *The characteristics of effective leaders*

Paul, based on his experience, suggested that the following were the essential characteristics of strong positive leadership, in distance higher education institutions (Paul, 1990):

- A clear vision for the organization, and the ability to articulate it and inspire commitment to it.
- A passionate belief in the organization, and the directions it is pursuing.
- A positive view of people, one holding that people can achieve, if they are given the opportunity and support.
- Dedication to excellence, and the unrelenting pursuit of the organization's goals.

- High self-esteem and self-knowledge, about both strengths and weaknesses, so as to capitalize fully on the former, and to compensate for the latter, by finding people, who are excellent in these areas.
- A sense of humour, integrity and perspective, that temper the strong leadership drive, with sensitivity to colleagues, and ability to lead a happy life, both on and off the job.
- A commitment to learning and change, first of all for his or her own lifelong development, and secondly for the organization.

#### ***Leadership styles in Asian open universities***

Reardon classified leadership's styles into four types, as follows (Reardon, 1995):

1. commanding
2. logical
3. inspirational
4. supportive

Leaders with a commanding style tend to “take charge and make rapid changes”. Leaders with a logical style are more analytical, and carefully formulate plans for incremental changes. Leaders with an inspirational style are creative, and empower others, by inviting them to share visions. They introduce radical ideas, and persuade others by creating trust. Leaders with a supportive style want to please other people. They facilitate work, encourage openness, and seek staff consensus in decision-making. Zhang and colleagues conducted a survey on selected open universities in the Asian region, and characterized them on the basis of Reardon's classification of leadership styles, as presented in Table I (Zhang et al., 2000).

Open University	Country	Leadership Style			
		Commanding	Logical	Inspirational	Supportive
RTVUs	China	3.16	3.20	3.15	3.15
OUs	India	3.54	3.28	3.25	2.27
OUIHK	Hong Kong	3.13	2.90	3.25	3.41
KNOU	Korea	2.60	3.10	2.80	3.20
AIOU	Pakistan	3.20	2.80	2.90	3.10
STOU	Thailand	2.55	2.48	2.30	2.23
UPOU	Philippines	4.00	4.00	4.00	4.00
OUSL	Sri Lanka	2.88	2.98	2.90	3.10
BOU	Bangladesh	3.45	3.10	2.60	2.60
PNU	Iran	3.20	3.40	3.45	3.55
UAJ	Japan	3.30	3.40	3.00	3.00
NOU	Taiwan	3.50	3.30	2.90	3.50

Table 1.

subjective ratings from (1) most important to (4) least important

## Conclusion

### *The need for effective and enlightened leadership*

As found by Zhang and colleagues, the qualities of leadership required in distance education - though not extensively investigated as yet - have been found so far to range across the whole spectrum of styles, from all styles being relevant in Pakistan, inspirational and supportive in Bangladesh, to supportive and logical in Hong Kong, while a commanding style was not wanted in India, and no particular style was wanted in the Philippines (Zhang et al., 2000). Referring to the need for enlightened and effective leadership for distance teaching universities, Paul concluded his study with the following: "The success of open universities depends on leadership and vision - a value-driven commitment to the ideas of open learning, honesty and integrity, without rigidity - a flexible approach in a world of ambiguity, change and challenge. If every institutional leader strives for open management, leadership which encompasses the values of open learning, which we hold up for our students, the world's open universities will be much more effective institutions, and will increasingly be seen as models for the university of tomorrow" (Paul, 1990).

All URLs checked  
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## Sintesi

*I concetti di leadership e di management e la loro interpretazione scientifica si sono progressivamente modificati nel tempo a seconda dei contesti di applicazione. La nascita della formazione a distanza e online ha costituito uno stimolo ad approfondirne l'analisi a livello più generale.*

*Autorevoli studiosi attribuiscono alla figura del leader un ruolo fondamentale per il mantenimento dell'unità sociale, il superamento dei conflitti (John W. Gardner), lo sviluppo della creatività e dell'innovazione (Beaudoin). La storia della distance education evidenzia inoltre che il ruolo di leadership non deve necessariamente essere affidato a tecnici specialisti della materia; al contrario, qualità trasversali, come l'attitudine a creare e promuovere la creatività e la capacità di mettere in pratica e sperimentare nuove idee, garantiscono la buona leadership e, di conseguenza, lo sviluppo delle istituzioni in senso innovativo. Nonostante l'importanza dell'argomento, la letteratura di ricerca sulla formazione a distanza non dedica un'attenzione adeguata alla leadership. Uno studio di Beaudoin del 2003 ha rilevato la scarsità dei materiali disponibili, sia nelle principali riviste dedicate all'online learning che nelle monografie più recenti, con solo alcune eccezioni.*

*In mancanza di documentazione sulla leadership nella formazione a distanza, è possibile utilizzare studi elaborati da esperti di formazione in generale, degli adulti e di lifelong learning. Le strategie di leadership nella formazione continua sviluppate da Simerly, per esempio, sono applicabili anche alla formazione online e prevedono: analisi del sistema e dell'ambiente di applicazione; gestione del conflitto e del consenso; comprensione della cultura dell'istituzione e del suo impatto; gestione*



*dell'ambiguità, della complessità e della decentralizzazione; uso della pianificazione strategica; valorizzazione dell'educazione organizzativa.*

*Anche altri studi, come la ricerca di Schon sulle pratiche riflessive, possono chiarire gli elementi della leadership per la distance education che deve essere "trasformativa" e "situazionale". Altre caratteristiche essenziali sono individuate da Paul, in uno studio del 1990, e includono: visione e fiducia nell'istituzione; positività nei confronti dei collaboratori; ricerca dell'eccellenza; autostima e consapevolezza dei propri punti di forza e limiti; senso dell'umorismo, integrità e prospettiva; impegno per lo studio e il cambiamento.*

*Per quanto riguarda, infine, la tipologia della leadership, la classificazione elaborata da Reardon individua 4 stili di leadership: commanding, logical, inspirational e supportive. Seguendo tale classificazione, Zhang, Tsui, Jegede, Ng e Kwok analizzano gli stili di leadership nelle Open Universities asiatiche. Lo studio evidenzia alcune oscillazioni negli stili di leadership ritenuti più desiderabili a seconda dei diversi paesi: tutti gli stili sono considerati rilevanti in Pakistan; in Bangladesh è privilegiata la leadership inspirational e supportive; a Hong Kong, invece, quella supportive e logical; in India lo stile commanding non è ritenuto auspicabile, mentre nelle Filippine non si rilevano preferenze nette per nessuno degli stili proposti.*

