

Leaderocity™:

M-Leadership: The Changing Nature of Leadership in a Mobile Digital Age

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Abstract

Many believe that leaders in the 21st Century face unprecedented challenges due to changes in globalization, diversity, the pace of organizations, systemic impatience, workforce trends and the advances in technology. These challenges are changing the workplace and demand new leadership competencies or at least an evolution of traditional competencies.

This research project involved interviews with leaders from more than fifty companies in the United States, United Kingdom, China and India in conjunction with a Fortune 20 company's research into "21st Century Leadership" and an extensive review of contemporary research of leadership trends.

Emerging from the research was the notion of Leaderocity™. It explores the intersections of leadership and the "speed of now" (velocity) to offer a set of competencies needed by leaders in this environment.

In this paper, the concept of "M-Leadership" or leader as communicator in a mobile digital world is explored.

Introduction

Effective communications have traditionally played a major role in transformative leadership. Almost by definition, a leader *must* be able to communicate in an effective way.

Nearly forty years ago, Mintzberg estimated that communication occupied over 70 percent of a manager's day [1]. With the advent of mobile communication technology, one can certainly postulate that the percentage today would be meaningfully higher. The central thesis of this paper is that it is the leader who makes the technology effective, not the other way around. Mobile technology is an important emerging resource in the toolbox of leaders, but mere access to the tool is not enough. This paper will explore how true leaders, utilizing mobile digital tools in innovative ways, are able to enhance their effectiveness.

Barrett [2] states "Through effective communication, leaders lead. Good communication skills enable, foster, and create the understanding and trust necessary to encourage others to follow a leader. Without effective communication, a manager accomplishes little. Without effective communication, a manager is not an effective leader."

Bennis and Nanus [3] stress that "Leaders articulate and define what has previously remained implicit or unsaid; then they invent images, metaphors, and models that provide a focus for new attention. By so doing, they consolidate or challenge prevailing wisdom. In short, an essential factor in leadership is the capacity to influence and organize meaning for members of

the organization. Communication creates meaning for people. Or should. It's the only way any group, small or large, can become aligned behind the overarching goals of an organization."

This is accentuated by Phillips in his popular *Lincoln on Leadership* [4], "Today's leaders would do well to embody Lincoln's simple, straightforward approach, especially when sending complex messages that can be easily misread. Messages are more often heard when the communicator is honest, sincere, and succinct. In other words, say what you mean, and mean what you say."

A leader must be able to communicate honesty, sincerity, and effectively with their followers. The challenge in an electronic/mobile environment is that the leader can become detached from their followers and is often not geographically in the same place. Since communications consists of more than just the content of a message, that poses a problem. As Drucker [5] said, "The most important thing in communication is to hear what isn't being said."

The central question that this situation creates is that while modern tools expand the opportunities to increase the quantity and accessibility of leader-follower communications, do they enhance or impair the quality of communications and the ability to "virtually" lead?

How then do modern business tools such as desktop computing and mobile computing devices affect the sender controlled and receiver perceived "organizational noise" so as not to obscure verbal and non-verbal communications?

Lickerman [6] makes the argument that it is difficult, if not impossible, to communicate through mobile devices as effectively as face to face.

"Making our meaning clear electronically presents extra challenges. For example, we write things like 'LOL' and 'LMAO' to describe our laughter, but they're no real substitute for *hearing* people laugh, which has real power to lift our spirits when we're felling low. I've also observed people using electronic media to make confrontation easier and have seen more than one relationship falter as a result. People are often uncomfortable with face to face confrontation, so it's easy to understand why they'd choose to use the internet. Precisely because electronic media transmit emotion so poorly compared to in-person interaction, many view it as the perfect way to send difficult messages: it blocks us from registering the negative emotional responses such messages engender, which provides us the illusion we're not really doing harm. Unfortunately, this also usually means we don't transmit these messages with as much empathy, and often find ourselves sending a different message than we intended and breeding more confusion than we realize."

Others, however, feel differently. Bauerlein [7] in "Why Gen-Y Johnny Can't Read Nonverbal Cues" makes the argument that the proliferation of mobile devices has had such reach that it has confused nonverbal communications even when two people are standing next to each other.

"In Silicon Valley itself, some companies have installed the 'topless' meeting - in which not only laptops but iPhones and other tools are banned - to combat a new problem: 'continuous partial attention.' With a device close by, attendees at workplace meetings simply cannot keep their focus on the speaker. It's too easy to check email, stock quotes, and Facebook. While a quick log-on may seem, to the user, a harmless break, others in the room receive it as a silent dismissal. It announces: 'I'm not interested.' So the tools

must now remain at the door. Older employees might well accept such a ban, but younger ones might not understand it. Reading a text message in the middle of a conversation isn't a lapse to them - it's what you do. It has, they assume, no nonverbal meaning to anyone else."

M-Leadership

As noted earlier, the challenges of a leader incorporating new technology into their toolbox are not merely technically based. They require an understanding of how leadership goals and vision are affected in ways that go beyond technical tactics.

Peterson and Fairchild [8] studied how IT executives, often the first to adopt "new technology" in their work, viewed these leadership challenges.

"The main challenge I face is developing a shared vision between the different constituencies on the strategic importance of e-business and promoting and initiating change throughout the organization. In this IT complex environment I have to be a chameleon, a jack of all trades; I need to focus on developing a shared vision and a sound strategy, while also maintaining good relationships and making sure my organization is running smoothly." They conclude "The results suggest that the adoption and use of e-business tools, whether this is intra- or inter-organizational, requires a balance among task, relationship, and change orientations."

As noted by Budvytyte [9] "A technological breakthrough is occurring [and resulting in a] dramatic change in leadership development...Instant download, television quality audio-video transmission are commonly available to leaders around the world. People are connected, synchronously and asynchronously through both wired and wireless networks...We have to identify how the design, selection and usage of rapidly changing technologies affects a leader's relationship, communication process, trust and interactivity among team members...Organizations don't adopt technology infrastructure, leaders - human beings - do that."

This concept is expanded upon by Mohammad [10]:

"The digitization of information is fundamentally changing the way we work and create value. Now significant human interactions are mediated through information technology. Consequently, new organization forms and new work environments are reconstructing the concept of leadership...The distinguishing feature of E-leadership is the new interface between the leader and his followers. The traditional face to face interaction is being replaced with one mediated by information technology. The global leadership traits considered necessary for traditional leaders are equally applicable to e-Leaders. What distinguish e-Leaders are the skills, attitudes, knowledge and their professional and personal experiences. E-Leaders are neither 'technology guru's' nor 'business wizards'. They know technology, its effective use, and the business direction of the organization."

Executives have been adapting to computer-based technologies for decades; varying their techniques to match the increasing sophistication of its development. It has been theorized that

the evolution of information technology in business organizations has passed through four stages (Tassabehji, Wallace, & Cornelius) [11]. These are:

- Stage 1 - Data Processing
- Stage 2 - Management Information Systems
- Stage 3 - Strategic Information Systems
- Stage 4 - E-Technology

In stage 1, computing was focused on the collection, storage, and retrieval of data at speeds that far exceeded manual processes. Data was not widely collected and was used, instead, for highly specific tasks (inventory, accounting, etc) with limited data sharing throughout an organization. Operationally, to the leader, greater information meant greater organization influence and power. Leaders could retrieve data on a more timely basis and utilize the data in the decision-making process.

In stage 2, changes in MIS (management information systems) led to a major breakthrough for the time. Technology began to progress from mainframes to microprocessors. This resulted in greater levels of information availability within organizations and the beginnings of distributed networks.

Zhang and Galletta [12] characterize this stage as, “In the early days of computing, the boundaries of the user, technology, and task were fairly obvious. Systems design focused on satisfying the needs of distinctive user groups, such as financial analysts, accountants, or general managers, confronted with fairly bounded decision tasks...In the early days of organizational computing, designers attempted to accommodate variations in user preferences where possible, but for the most part users were treated as common collectives. Indeed, individual differences and their implications for design were not center stage in systems design for several decades; research focused instead on designing technology to fit work task demands and assuring user motivation and acceptance.”

As a result, although largely standardized and controlled centrally, leaders at levels increasingly dispersed throughout an organization began to have access to information to assist them in their own decision-making processes. Continued computing developments improved the power of systems and helped them to achieve widespread penetration within the corporate environment. Information technology began to be seen as a strategic resource for creating and sustaining competitive advantage (Venkatraman & Zaheer) [13]. This is characterized as stage 3 in the model.

The result is a new approach to strategic planning that is: Integrated, Holistic, and Sustainable...The business groups responsible for Intel product lines conduct annual long-range planning activities. This year, for the first time, IT received recognition as a services organization that could help to enable the product lines to deliver specific business objectives...As Intel IT becomes more tightly linked to the corporate planning process, our influence and credibility throughout Intel will continue to expand, earning us the position of a trusted partner” In this manner, managers from across the organization could review common pools of data to structure recommendations used by top leaders and designated corporate planners at the corporation.

Stage 4 is a level that emphasizes and develops further the integrative aspects of computing. E-technology involves a synthesis and evolution of MIS and Strategic Information Systems to the degree that they create an E-environment that enables users to determine the

information they need, who they need to collaborate with, and the best mechanism to process and share that information without central IS mediation. This should not be confused with the Virtual Office (which may be a form of E-environment, but is not the totality of it). Instead, the E-environment involves an integration of systems into office functioning to the point that it is an essential component of operations and becomes a significant artifact of corporate culture.

It is proposed in this paper that E-technology has evolved further with the development and popularity of mobile tools. By moving the E-environment away from a fixed office location and into an “always on” location that follows the end user, I believe that we have reached a new stage 5, M-Leadership. This “m-leadership” follows the organizational digital nervous system identified by Gates, but updates it to extend the organizational and societal reach of the technology.

It is a reflection of the “always on” executive with constant access to the information and tools that help support additional leadership functions beyond decision making. These include task management, relationship building, cultural sharing, inspiring trust, and demonstrating emotional literacy.

One can readily contrast this extension of e-leadership into m-leadership by looking at the writings of Kurland & Egan [14]. The authors identified three main leadership challenges posed by the E-environment. These were professional isolation of workers, distance monitoring, and perceptions about workplace ‘justice’ when employees are not physically present. With the technology available at that time, it was not easily thought that such barriers could be overcome.

Avolio et al [15] identified four sets of organization changes reflective of the E-environment that posed new opportunities (and challenges) for leaders.

In their view, access to information and media had changed drastically in the corporate environment. It had become common for followers to be able to access information that previously might have been the specific domain of the leader (Avolio) [15]. While this potentially extended decision-making downward within an organization, it also created new challenges for the leader, who now is required to justify their decisions in a more detailed and convincing manner.

The second major organizational change due to the E-environment was workforce connectivity. The internet provides opportunities to link workers in global corporations across time zones, national boundaries, local cultures, and even to incorporate suppliers as an extended workforce. Modern leadership has an expectation of an ability to lead and inspire across this global web of interconnection and cultural differences.

The third significant difference identified by the authors was in the area of top down reach. CEO’s and divisional leaders may now establish a presence that is not bound by location. Email, blogs, distributed videos and presentations provide the opportunity for a sense of familiarity to be created in locations that the leader has never visited. The strength of personality of a Jobs, a Buffett, or a Spielberg was able to inspire followers in locations far away from the CEO’s main office. With the touch of a button, the global workforce can be reached.

Avolio’s fourth issue was that communication in the E-environment is more indelible than before. As communication patterns shift away from phone calls towards email, a leader’s remarks may be memorialized - for better, or for worse. This required a behavioral change on the part of the leader to adjust their communications patterns. The world is full of stories about people who seemingly forgot this (i.e. the Andrew Weiner incident) and has sparked numerous “tweets” that executives, politicians, and celebrities wish they could take back. For a leader, misuse of the technology could result in a career ending mistake.

As Laubry [16] writes, “The better the technology, the fewer barriers to communication; the more opportunities for sharing than there ever would be if limited to who you could get into a room or information you could find in a physical library; and the more colorful and complex the kaleidoscope of perspectives from which the group can draw.”

Johnson [17] points out “The next generation of company leaders will be digital natives - those born in the digital age and who have so fully embraced smart devices that they’re already integrating them into their work lives, with or without corporate blessings.”

Johnson stages the maturity of business mobility using a four level model: level one (reducing task time), level two (completing more task in the same amount of time), level three (reducing level of effort) and level four (eliminating tasks).

In Johnson’s mobile model, at Level 1, mobility initiatives are implemented primarily to reduce task times. Through simple applications and the transmission of wireless data, decision makers are able to interface with a company’s core systems to speed transaction processing. This level is as much about getting data into central processing systems, as it is about getting data out.

At the second level, the goal is to increase productivity by accomplishing more tasks within the same amount of time. Building upon the processing speed gains of level 1, companies begin to redesign their processes and workflows on the assumption that managers are expected to do more and more work during the work week. Goals are adjusted and expectations increased about the quantity of work that can be accomplished in a given time period.

In level 3, concerns about workplace “burnout” emerge. “Tricks of the trade” are shared by end users as mobile technology is used to reduce the level of effort needed to accomplish tasks. New and better apps are sought out that integrate more completely with the growing capabilities of mobile smart devices. Larger strategic efforts are undertaken to automate, digitize, and modularize processes. When organizations reach the fourth level, the focus shifts towards collaboration with external partners. Value chains are altered and operations are viewed in a more holistic, extended manner. Efforts are made to improve integration with partners’ operations, systems, and data content.

This summary of the maturing of mobile technology primarily centers on understanding technological capabilities and describing user techniques. That understanding must be overlaid with leadership strategies to emerge as more than that. Just as accountants strive to be more than “bean counters”, leaders must work at being more than just proficient in the techniques of mobile technology.

How then, to exert similar qualities of m-leadership by business leaders? A solid step forward would be to identify some of the thoughts put forward by those who have been successful in this opportunity-laden environment.

Guy Kawasaki [18] was one of Apple’s early employees. A marketing expert who was fully committed to the Apple product product line, he took the title of “Chief Evangelist” which he felt defined his job better than Chief Marketing Director. Now a best selling author and venture capitalist, Kawasaki has acquired a huge following through public speaking and books like “Rules for Revolutionaries: The Capitalist Manifesto for Creating and Marketing New Products and Services” and “Enchantment: The Art of Changing Hearts, Minds, and Actions”.

Kawasaki advocates a unique use of Twitter (where he has 115,583 followers) as a means of exerting m-leadership. As he states (Hobsbawm) [19], “Twitter for me is a broadcasting tool. It’s not a ‘social medium’ at all.” Kawasaki is not looking to engage with people on Twitter, he is looking to inform wide numbers of people who are already interested in what he has to say.

He is comfortable in understanding the power of the medium in promoting his personal branding and the companies that he invests in. In so doing, his personal profile remains prominent.

Kawasaki has pioneered the policy of issuing 140 character press releases so as to promote Twitter re-tweets. When publicity require a fuller description (such as an investment in a previously unknown service or product) he has taken to including 140 character-long summaries on the bottom of standard releases. In this way, he seeks to inspire others to act and learn more about items where they share a common interest.

A 2010 SocialCast report surveyed executives to determine how they are using social media. A full 40% reported logging into social media “many times per day” while an additional 36% accessed sites at least once per day (SocialCast) [20].

What does this have to do with leadership? The top five reasons for logging into social media, as expressed in the survey, are quite a bit different from what people with a more social orientation to the technology might express. The reasons provided are quite conventional in the mainstream of leadership, only the tools are now different:

1. “Great way to keep track of peers and colleagues work activities”
2. “Easy access to thought leadership or information not easily found elsewhere”
3. “Good way to showcase themselves and their companies”
4. “Easy access to learning and professional development”
5. “Wish to find out what others think of products, vendors, or approaches (including crowd-sourcing)”

Summary

Mobile technology has a very significant effect on expanding the range of “who’s in the room.” Through m-leadership, remote advisors can fully participate in opportunities to evaluate data and strongly communicate their thoughts to the “true” executive team from any location. Whereas they might have previously been excluded from access to executive decision making, effective leaders who are able to add value through mobile communications are granted expanded access to the point of decision.

“[It is] time to free decision making and decision makers throughout your organization from the tyranny of the organization chart. The organization will get faster, better decisions and a higher level of organizational alignment in executing against those decisions. Team members, and the people who work under them, will achieve new levels of effectiveness - and even fulfillment - in being unleashed to do what they do best. And you and other leaders in the organization will see a dramatic drop-off in people coming into your offices and asking ‘why wasn’t I in the room’” (Frisch) [21].

How important is it for leaders to understand the power and pitfalls of m-leadership? Important enough that Solis believes that unless companies and executives understand and embrace these new processes they may be consigned to “digital Darwinism” (Solis)[22].

As Solis notes in “The End of Business As Usual: Rewire the Way You Work to Succeed”:

“In many cases, a digital presence is born before the child, with sonograms (23%) actively published and shared on social networks and blogs. A digital presence is now just a way of life. For these children, managing their online persona and relationships is all they know.” (p.5)

“Today the digital world pervades every aspect of our lives. I used to wonder what people did before call waiting. Now, phones are tiny laptops, and while you once had to be on a computer to engage online, you can now do it from anywhere, no wires required.” (Couric writing in the introduction to Solis) [22].

“With the rise of social media, people are connecting with one another to create vast networks rich with interaction. The social graphs that people create as a result are increasingly becoming interconnected, creating an audience that, too, boasts and audience with audiences. And guess who’s in control of the information that circulates within each network? It’s not the brand or its clever messaging, attractive promotions, or creative gimmicks. People are in control. The choices they make and the experiences they share through their words, relationships, and actions, influence those around them.”[22].

And as Solis concludes by quoting Charles Darwin, “It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is most adaptable to change.” (Solis) [22].

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