

Five Attributes of an Effective Distance Education Leadership and Five Issues Distance Education Leaders Must Consider

Distance Education (DE) is a dynamic, emerging and constantly updating and upgrading educational field. Globalization has significantly affected the enrollments in distance learning. Flexibility, convenience, and affordability have helped distance learning getting more popular amongst students. Many adult learners opt for distance learning programs to remain competitive in today's economy. In addition, many choose distance education to learn new skills or to sharpen existing expertise. Thus, Audience for distance education ranges from young generation in college to adult professionals.

Any organization needs a strong set of leadership skills to make and carry out important decisions, maintain and improve work culture and keep in order the overall organizational development (Satyanaryana & Meduri, 2007). According to Michael Beaudoin (as cited in Satyanrayan & Meduri, 2007) leadership is “a set of attitudes and behaviors that creates 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.” The first part of this paper describes five attributes for an effective leadership and the latter part outlines five crucial issues that DE leaders must attend to in order to successfully guide their organizations.

Five attributes of an effective DE leadership

A successful leader is capable of producing a dramatic change in an organization (Kotter, J., 1996). An effective leader should have strong leadership skills and ability to guide an organization. Five attributes of a successful DE leader are listed as below.

Developing and implementing a strong Vision

Leaders should have a strong and clear vision about the organizational goals (Reimers-Hild, C., & King, J. W. 2009). A definite vision about organizations objectives serves as a solid foundation for future planning and development. A good vision provides better guidance towards the organizational goals and serves as a blueprint to accomplish the tasks. Kotter identifies three important aspects of having a good vision as it gives clarity to goals, it motivates people to take the right path to achieve goals and it helps co-ordination in organizations (Kotter, J., 1996). In distance education too, the leader must have a strong sense of organizational goals and objectives. The world of distance education is constantly expanding. The technological innovations are continuously updating and upgrading. Hence, a DE leader should have a strong vision for the present objectives as well as a sense of futuristic development.

Strong entrepreneurship

A strong leader must be a strong entrepreneur. A leader should be able to organize and operate as well as should be able to take risks to develop and achieve organizational goals. A leader is different than managers. Managerial duties include staffing, problem solving, budgeting, and organizing while a leader shows definite goals, guides people towards those goals and motivates them towards achieving those goals, ultimately produces change in spite of any

difficulties (Kotter, J. 1996). The DE field has many emerging ideas and not all of those can be successful or achieve desired results. A DE leader should be a risk taker and a self-motivator to venture out new ideas, and plans.

Effective Communication skills

A good leader should be able to communicate his/ her ideas and plans effectively across the team. A great vision motivates and inspires people and gives a definite direction. However, it is not much of use if the goals and objectives are not communicated effectively. An effective leader should be able to use all means of communication to develop well-defined organizational objectives. A simple and clear communication with examples and repetitions is as effective (Kotter, J., 1996). In DE field, a good communication plays an important role. Some DE programs can serve globally, with different instructors and organizers spread out throughout the world. It is essential to connect all DE participants efficiently. Hence, a DE leader should possess strong communication skills.

Innovative

A good leader should always be open to new ideas. A good leader takes new ideas and with his leadership skills, produces a great outcome. At the same time, a leader should have a sense of culture of organization. Kotter defines culture as “norms of behavior and shared values among a group of people”. Therefore, it is essential for a leader to have a good balance between new ideas and existing culture. A DE leader should be able to incorporate new technology, teaching methods and modes of communication effectively along with the existing curriculum. A

DE leader should be always looking for new technologies, assessment, validity, and evaluation on current programs to remain competitive (Portugal, 2006).

Collaborative

A leader's job is to guide and motivate the team, to be able to solve any problems and to provide a sense of direction. A group of people can achieve successful results by sharing common goals, vision and values. It is a leader's job to bind a team together and to keep it intact. Good communication skills and strong entrepreneurship are thus important and essential qualities of a leader. Team building and team maintenance are also critical aspects of DE field.

Five Issues DE Leaders Must Consider

According to Beaudoin (as cited in Portugal, 2006), a DE leader should have up to date skills in different areas that include technology competency and assessment, strategic planning, program evaluation and accreditation, training and support for faculty, collaboration and market analysis, developing and maintaining online infrastructure. Putting all this together can be challenging sometimes. Listed below are five issues or challenges a DE leader may face.

Team Organization

It is more challenging for a DE leader to create and maintain a DE organization. Most of the times, a DE field is a sub-division of a large organization. The team members of a typical DE organization could come from the parent organization and are most likely to have some set work procedures and work environment. To develop a good team, a DE leader first has to make sure that every team member shares the common vision and that everyone is on the same page. If senior staff or faculty is in the team, a DE leader may have to face ego issues and differences of

opinions. Thus, a DE leader has to handle such situations carefully and tactically, bring together, and maintain a successful team. Moreover, a typical DE team can be spread globally. A DE leader must accomplish given task taking into consideration cultural differences, different time zones, different communication methods, and available technology. It is critical for a DE leader to tie a team together keeping in mind diversity of an organization.

Budgetary restraints

DE field is increasing in popularity and is continuously growing. However, it is still not a preferred method of education for many. Most students still opt for face-to-face classroom settings. Hence, the priorities are given to the traditional form of education. This can be a challenge for a DE leader if the DE field fails to receive enough funding or student enrollments. Technology is the biggest component of DE field for instruction delivery. Testing the latest technologies requires funding. If a DE organization does not receive sufficient funds, innovative technology cannot be tried out and implemented. This can be a major setback for a DE leader.

Technology and Technology Support

DE field is technology dependent as technology delivers instructions. Technology is necessary for today's DE field, as it is the fastest way of communication. Organizations invest considerably in expanding technological infrastructure (Beaudoin, M., 2005). A DE course can be delivered across the globe and selection of the right technology plays a crucial role here. A DE course developed in one country may not necessarily work in another country. Therefore, it is important for a DE leader to keep in mind to design a course and to use technology such way that it can be delivered and conducted globally. DE leader must also keep in mind the ever-

changing use of technology. The new technology should appropriately serve the purpose of designed lesson plan. Any innovative, modern technology is useless if it does not deliver appropriate instructions or fails to achieve desired results. A DE leader also must adhere to organization's vision and mission when introducing new technology. A DE leader faces challenges such as convincing stakeholders about new technological changes. A technological support is essential for existing technology and a strong technical team should be put in place for anytime needed support. A DE leader may face challenges in providing adequate technical support.

Diverse Audience

A typical DE field has a variety of audience. Most of the DE courses are now offered via Internet. DE instructors and learners can have various cultural, social, economic, as well as political variations. Moreover, a typical DE course group is separated by distance as well as by time. A DE leader should keep in mind all this diversification. A DE course should be designed such way that it is easily adaptable and deliverable. Since technology is always changing, a DE course should be flexible enough to accommodate new changes. A DE leader should also adhere to appropriate political and social norms.

Time and patience

DE courses take longer to develop and implement than face-to-face courses. The main aspect for this delay could be newness. It may take several trials and errors to produce an effective, traditional grade DE course. DE leader has to have patience with his team. The leader should also make sure that the team members maintain patience too.

Conclusion

A DE leader should have excellent skills in different areas that include strategic planning, program evaluation, program accreditation, training and support for faculty, technology competency and assessment, collaboration and market analysis, developing and maintaining online infrastructure. A DE leader should be exceptional in handling above-mentioned tasks. In spite of all the issues and obstacles, DE leaders can prove to be successful if they correctly implement transformational as well as situational leadership skills along with other leadership practices.

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