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DEPM 604
Assignment #4 – Attributes and Challenges

Distance Education Leaders:

Ardent Attributes and Crucial Challenges

Introduction

   Distance education (DE) leaders demonstrate personal integrity, loyalty, commitment, high standards, and foster a sense of trust. Transformational DE leaders are characterized by the ability to bring about change, innovation, and entrepreneurship. This is especially true in the corporate learning environment. Educating adults is an essential business that requires competent leaders who are cognizant of the need for continuous professional development (Muirhead, 2003).

   This paper will address five characteristics that the effective transformational DE leader possesses. While the attributes discussed transcend any distance education environment and apply to all leaders, the focus of this paper is on leaders affecting the corporate distance learning environment. This paper also aims to address three crucial issues that corporate distance education leaders must attend to in order to successfully guide their organizations.

Attributes of the Effective Distance Education Leader

Attribute #1 - BE TRUSTWORTHY

   Successful leaders are honest and are able to win the trust of others. Trust is the foundation of leadership. A distance education organization needs leaders with both

strong and good characteristics, people who will guide them to the future and show that

they can be trusted. A follower must have trust in his leader, and needs to be sold on the

leader's vision. According to Muirhead (2003), ethical leaders make a positive difference

in lives of others because they are thinking and working for a common good. They are

"servant leaders who foster trust and integrity" (p.5). They generate a good name for their

training institution, and establish honest and responsible relationships with all

stakeholders. According to Latchem and Hanna (2002), leaders can foster those

dependable relationships by showing "consistency in the substance and tone of their

policies and actions" (p.210). The quality and reliability of leaders is best estimated by

comparing their vision, values and goal statements with the structures, systems and

procedures they create or condone (Latchem & Hanna, 2002).

Attribute #2 - BE EDUCATED

   Successful leaders are educated and competent in the field of distance education.

Leading advocates for change and transformation in a distance education setting should

take advantage of all that distance education literature, management and organization

theory, and organizational change theory has to offer (Ulukan, 2005).

   Distance education leaders also know when to seek knowledge from supportive

resources. According to Latchem and Hanna (2002), "it is impossible for institutional

leaders to possess all of the knowledge, instincts, sensitivities, and judgmental capacities

to be on top of every agenda" in a distance learning environment (p 210). Leaders must

seek out a change activist team, who can support their vision and help make it a reality.

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At the same time, they need exhibit sound leadership decision making abilities and avoid

entrusting major decisions to others where this may be interpreted as leadership lacking

in direction or insight (Latchem & Hanna, 2002).

Attribute #3 - BE AN INSPIRATIONAL VISIONARY

   Successful leaders have a vision and possess the ability to make that vision a reality.

One of the most important attributes that distinguishes leaders from managers is vision,

which can be defined as the capability to communicate advantageous, attainable futures

quite different from the present position. Leaders create and convey gripping images of a

brave new world and redefine paradigms about what is possible.

   Leadership also involves designing a bridge that connects from a desired future to the

current financial and political gridlock typical of corporate training environments. In

evolving from its present state to a distant objective, an educational organization must

progress stage by stage. Each progression requires a vital accumulation of resources and

creates a stable, established, advantageous situation (Burich, 2004).

   Successful leaders inspire those around them. Leaders work as a team with others in

the field and build a network of support. They also train followers to be leaders and seek

out those in their organization who can contribute to the realization of their vision.

According to Latchem and Hanna (2002), transformational and entrepreneurial leaders

create visions of what they want to achieve, believe that they will succeed and 'see' the

steps to realizing their goals. They motivate and inspire others to think beyond their

current frameworks to what is desirable, necessary and possible (Latchem & Hanna,

2002).

Attribute #4 - BE COURAGEOUSLY INNOVATIVE AND AN AGENT OF CHANGE

Successful transformational leaders are agents of change. They are creative,

imaginative, and resilient. These leaders are courageous and constantly focus on

innovation. They have the perseverance to accomplish a goal, regardless of the

seemingly insurmountable obstacles, and they display a confident calmness when under

stress.

Latchem and Hanna (2002) state that leaders create "optimal environments for

innovation, quality and enterprise and gain collaboration and commitment, even in

environments where initially there is little trust and low morale. They redefine and reform

organizations. They point the way ahead and also say: 'This is not the way to go'"

(p.209).

Attribute #5 – HAVE A FLEXIBLE LEADERSHIP STYLE

The effectiveness of distance education leaders depends on how appropriate their

leadership style is to the situation in which they operate. This appropriateness comes

from the matching of leader style and follower task relevant maturity, or task readiness

(Hersey, Blanchard & Johnson, 2007). While they may gravitate towards and operate

heavily in one particular leadership style, distance education leaders need to be able to

take a personality and motivational inventory of the individuals in their circle of

influence and then change and move their own style to fit with followers so they can

foster trust, gain buy-in, and achieve the over-arching goal that much quicker.

Attending to Crucial Distance Education Issues in a Corporate Setting

Crucial Issue #1 – Use Appropriate Technology

Technology is a necessary part of distance education. According to Bates (2005),

technology is neither good nor bad; what really matters is how it is used. To make good

decisions about technology, leaders need to understand the comparative educational

strengths and weaknesses of different technologies. Successful DE leaders do their

research and learn what needs to be done to use technology effectively and to

successfully support it. They use technology appropriately, are technologically savvy,

and are not blinded by a premise that maintains that technology alone can do it all.

Distance education leaders need to ensure that their systematic plan for technology

avoids simply providing information. This would be a disservice to the learners, and

would foster a reduction in content and functionality. It is more beneficial to encourage

reflection and instruction. Distance education leaders should avoid focusing on

technology rather than the instructional design and support. Systematically planning to

use a technology that will support a learner-centric, constructivist learning community is

optimal. This is how best to attend to the issue of technology in distance education

systems.

Crucial Issue #2 – Assessing Business Value

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"The success and endurance of good corporate distance education programs is dependent on the strategies and strengths of good leaders" (Wasyluk & Berge, 2007, p. 1). And in business, it is all about the bottom line. Marrying appropriate leadership, good strategy, and financial constraints can be challenging, but it can also be very rewarding if it's done in a systematic way. According to Rumble (1997), educational and training providers are required to reduce their costs yet maintain quality. The cost of education and training is everywhere on the agenda. There is no substitute for management, for active involvement in planning and costing a project. Experience shows that it may not be easy but it is possible to design systems that will reap efficiencies and be cost effective.

How can this be done in a corporate setting? It is the job of the transformational distance education leader to prove the worth of the corporate online university and assess the business value of taking on such an endeavor. Where does the systematic plan begin? Market appropriately!

1. Promote the corporate online university to internal employees as well as external customers. Design the content based in corporate philosophy and business theory, and avoid a hard sell approach.

2. Offer the courses free of charge, which brings a wide audience from a variety of participants, who then provide pertinent details on themselves through a registration form. Depending upon how they came to the online university site, they may have a key code associated with their registration record, which indicates the promotion that initially attracted them to the site.

3. The participants' information is taken from the online university's LMS and provided to a team that can pre-qualify each registrant for any interest in company products or solutions, which then brings them to a conversation with a sales representative or reseller.

4. Since the data on each participant is loaded into a Customer Relationship Management (CRM) database, the company can associate the contact with the source from which they came. The CRM keeps all information on the user and the sales representative adds details when there is a business opportunity, so when the business finally closes, there is a dollar figure attached to it.

5. Every quarter, company leaders look at the total quantity of the leads that came as a result of the distance education program, and add up the dollars projected, and the dollars closed. This tells how they did in terms of business value. Additionally, online university surveys give a barometer of the customer satisfaction with the program and can be used as a different measure.

This is how best to address the issue of assessing business value of a distance learning program in a corporate setting.

Crucial Issue #3 – Managing Change

Distance education leaders need to be ready to plan for and manage "infrastructure changes, policy formulations, institutional commitment, strategic planning, resource allocation" and provide appropriate leadership focused on those efforts (Beaudoin, 2004, p.100).

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Wherever there is change, there is always the issue of resistance. Different parts of organizations will respond to environmental changes in different ways. Change processes have to attend to various points of inertia and resistance and have to be systemic. They necessitate clearly expressed and commonly acknowledged learner-centered teaching goals and values, the direct matching of these goals and values to policies, procedures and resources, and clearly recognized performance indicators and lines of accountability (Ulukan, 2005).

Nancy J. Burich (2004) offers an 8 step checklist for managing change in the distance learning environment.

1. Recognize the need for change.

2. Know your organizational culture.

3. Prepare yourself to lead change.

4. Design a new future.

5. Articulate the need to change with a vision.

6. Build enthusiasm for your vision.

7. Evaluate progress.

8. Report progress to leadership to determine next steps (pp. 38-40).

This is how best to address the crucial issue of change management for a distance learning program in a corporate setting.

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Conclusion

According to Wasyluk and Berge (2007), effective corporate learning leaders

skillfully combine relationships, process, and support while continually transforming

their organizations and expanding learning initiatives. "Transformation is a highly

complicated process in which new values and beliefs become part of people's hearts and

minds. Leadership is needed to broaden the vision of what can be accomplished, provide

guidance through uncharted waters, gain commitment and create systems that are

responsive, energizing and sustainable." (Latchem & Hanna, 2001, p 213).

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