Research In Progress Leadership Development In The Post-Covid Era: Investigating Leader Behaviours For Future Workplace

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Abstract

The rapid digitization observed during the pandemic and the post-COVID realities impact the nature of work thus causes work-skills to turn obsolete faster than before. In turn; there arises a need for a leadership development approach and strategy that can ensure that the employees are not left wanting for skills needed for success: and in turn, the organization too is prepared for the challenges of the future. This issue can be partially addressed by making sure that the organization is prepared and investing in digital leadership development. The role of digital leadership is considered to be important here to drive digital transformations to success and ensure the profitability of the enterprise via agility and responsiveness.

The present study focuses on identification of leader behaviours pertinent for digital leadership in Indian IT organizations. Leadership development aims to develop leaders that can address the challenges of the current digital era. The COVID-led disruptions have further accelerated said digital transformations and digitization. The practice of effective leader behaviors can facilitate successful digital transformations in the post-COVID era of accelerated digitization.

Starting with a structured literature review, and based on interviews utilizing the grounded theory method, this research endeavors to identify behaviors demonstrated in the practice of digital leadership. In this paper, the author presents exploratory research involving digital leadership practitioners and leadership development experts. The research aims to explore 'digital leader behaviors' using the revised GT approach.

Keywords: Digital Leadership, Grounded Theory, Leadership Development, Digital Leader behavior(s)

Digital Transformation and Digital Leadership

"Digitalization is the main reason just over half of the Fortune 500 have disappeared since the year 2000"

Pierre Nantermee (2016), CEO of Accenture, at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos.

"COVID-19 has escalated digital initiatives into digital imperatives, creating urgent pressure on HR leaders to work with their CEO, CFO and CIO to rethink skills needed as business models change at light speed" (Gartner 2020).

DT (digital transformation) and DL (digital leadership) are directly linked to the ongoing success and profitability of a majority of today's organizations, whether being an IS entity, or other (Sattler, 2016; WEF 2021; Koumelis, 2008; Zupancic, Herneoja et al. 2018). Studies observe that transformations of this digital era are contingent upon leadership in the context of the digital transformation (Gartner 2020).

Imperatives

The coming together of Business4.0, rapid digitization, Post-COVID realities, and the changing nature of work thus causes work-skills to turn obsolete faster than before. In turn; there arises a need for a leadership development approach and strategy that can ensure that the employees are not left wanting for skills needed for success: and in turn, the organization too is prepared for the challenges of the future. This issue can be partially addressed by making sure that the organization is prepared and investing in digital leadership development. The role of digital leadership is considered to be important here to drive digital transformations to success and ensure the profitability of the enterprise via agility and responsiveness.

The role of digital leadership is considered to be important to drive digital transformations to success, and to ensure the profitability of the enterprise. Westerman, Tannou, Bonnet, Ferraris, and McAfee (2017) found that digital transformation is what digital leaders do, and thus the mainstay of research around digital leadership. This presents an opportunity to explore key leader behaviors that digital leaders should personify while driving digital transformations.

Concept of Digital Leadership

Digital leadership is a complex mix of mindset, attitudes, and skills used to transform organizational culture through strategic technology use (Sheninger, 2012). Digital leadership considers developments like omnipresent networking, open-source technology, artificial intelligence, robotics, smart devices, and customization (Sheninger, 2012). These methods "rapidly become as infrastructural as electricity" (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016). At the macro-level, the move to various technologies is setting the pace for developing new market processes, business structures, work systems, and relationships. Digitalization has changed market structures, procedures, practices, and expertise at the micro-level (Cascio and Montealegre, 2016).

 "Digital leadership is the preferred corporate leadership approach to lead in the digital age", (Gartner 2018). Sow and Aborbie (2012) define Digital Leadership as the demonstration of strategies adoption influencing digital transformation processes positively. They perceive Digital

Leadership as a combination of leadership approaches, which when implemented, can lead to a disruptive, large-scale digital transformation process across corporate. While project and program management involve elements of Digital leadership, DL is the overarching framework that incorporates a forward-looking leader mindset that incorporates innovativeness, risk-taking, design thinking, and dealing with VUCA (volatile, uncertain, complex, and ambiguous) business environment. Digital leadership is also customer-focused, and this engages both technology and human interface insights (Westerman 2018). Thus, leaders must inspire and rewire workforce culture and talent into a new way of thinking/collaborating/connecting. Hence, Digital leaders must typically act, counter, and think differently than traditional leaders (Abbatiello et al. 2018). This is of particular interest for IS leadership research to define the characteristics of a successful and effective leader.

Preparing Leaders for Digital Transformation

To stay relevant and profitable in the Business4.0 & Post-COVID Digital era, organizations will have to be led by a set of leaders that are adept at 'digital leadership'

Leadership development is concerned with ensuring the availability & readiness of effective leaders who can lead the workforce for the continued business success of the enterprise. Studies note that a misalignment between the two leads to actions that could negatively impact the organization in negative ways for a long time, Allio, (2015). DT (digital transformation) and DL (digital leadership) are directly linked to the ongoing success and profitability of a majority of today's organizations (even if not an IT company itself) (Sattler, 2016; WEF 2021; Koumelis, 2008; Zupancic, Herneoja et al. 2018). An in-depth industry study by Gartner (2020) observes that when it comes to the success of digital transformation- outcomes are contingent upon leadership.

The same study emphasizes that "COVID-19 has escalated digital initiatives (good to have) into digital imperatives (must have), and business models change at light speed". This change in turn creates urgent pressure on HR leaders to rethink the skills of leaders. This process involves working with the CXO level to identify the skills digital leaders must have. A Survey conducted on lack of digital skills found that only 51 percent of business leaders are already prepared for talent management in a digital world (Brecher, Laurenceau & Sloman 2016). Organizations have felt the acute need to develop leaders that can lead in the new normal. Consequently, leadership Development has shifted its focus to the development of 'digital leaders'. A secular trend being observed is the impact of technology and the pandemic on all types of organizations. Studies, reports, and consulting insights all report that regardless of the nature of the company – the demand to have new models to lead in the digital world stand.

This behavior-focused approach is of value to take theory to practice, and also an ally for action research. The leader behavior school has a large potential to be adapted as the bedrock of leadership development strategies. This school of thought propounds that behaviors can be conditioned in a manner that one can respond most appropriately to given stimuli. Votaries of behavioral leadership theory opine that leadership development should aim to facilitate the

learning and implementation of certain behaviors by existing managers, and thus develop effective leaders. Some observers have also viewed this as an efficient tool for the L&D (learning & development) industry.

Gaps Observed

The researcher notes that the in the existing body of knowledge:

• The methodology of a majority of studies has been purely quantitative in approach, using survey research, and utilizing questionnaires developed from existing constructs. Thus, they have only explored causal relationships between existing facets of leadership. Extant research has not sufficiently delved into emerging behavioral facets of leadership.

• Many studies are seen to be only descriptive only in their nature. These studies explain the changes that necessitate the need for a new leadership model but do not study behavioral facets of digital leadership relevant to the Indian context in the pandemic era.

• Few studies have gone beyond exploring causal relationships and developed grounded theories of behavioral facets of digital leadership. The studies where such attempts have been made have largely been by consulting firms.

• Comprehensive studies conducted by industry and consulting firms have attempted to find out the impact of digitalization on profitability & growth. These have examined the current business environment, the VUCA world and then explored the changes in leadership needed to address these challenges (Hesse, 2018; Libert, 2016; OECD, 2017a; World Economic Forum, 2015).

Behavioral theories of leadership study the specific behaviors of a leader. The behavioral theory school of thought evaluates the leader behavior as the most relevant predictor of leadership from theory to practice. This in turn is explored as the best determinant of success on the ground. While the facets of digital leadership have been the subject of academic research, a renewed exploration of leadership behaviors is warranted in light of recent changes.

Studies conducted in India have focused on the replication of western studies. Extant descriptive studies explain the changes that necessitate the need for a new leadership model. This is an open area of research of digital leadership behaviors in a post-COVID world. As leadership development is a time and cost-intensive activity- research into leadership behaviors will address the intellectual and practice perspectives of developing tomorrow's leaders.

Impact on Digital Leadership Development in Sustaining Businesses in a Disruptive World

To stay relevant and profitable in the Biz4.0 (Business4.0) and Post-COVID Digital era (hereinafter referred to as the digital era); organizations will have to be led by a set of leaders that are adept at DL (digital leadership). A Survey conducted on lack of digital skills reports that only 51 percent of business leaders are already prepared for talent management in a digital world (Brecher et al. 2016). To remedy this, organizations would have to invest in leadership

development to prepare digital leaders for the future. The conceptual and applied contribution of this research will serve as a key decision making aid towards strategic management for building and sustaining businesses in a disruptive world.

Themes observed in Existing Research

Attempts to explore theory to practice are observed to have been led by consulting firms or industry advisory firms.

Leader behaviors also find a mention in the framework depicting extant literature and showing potential new opportunities in the blue ocean opportunities scan (Shawosh 2018). Academic work asserts that the best leadership approach in the digital age is a combination of leadership approaches with broad leadership strategies and skills sets. Digital Leadership frameworks encompassing a combination of three macro leadership approaches (authentic, transactional, and transformational) have been a prominent theme in studies conducted in the recent past.

Research Method and Analysis

Literature Review

To address this need, the current study analyzed short-listed 60 contributions from the overall DL literature for a comparative approach. After scrutiny of the titles and, the abstracts, the analysis chose 60 relevant articles. Practice literature was also included in the analysis. All these articles were reviewed for the inclusion of behavioral keywords.

Data Collection

In phase 2 of research (in progress), the researcher plans to conduct interviews with participants drawn from IT/ ITES organizations and consulting firms based in India. The subjects include professionals with 15 - 35 years experience in Digital Transformation, IT services consulting, IT workforce effectiveness, Organizational Development (OD), and Change Management. The sample size of our study would be contingent on theoretical saturation. At this juncture- 10 interviews have been conducted.

Qualitative data analysis computer software packages NVivo 13 & QDA miner lite are been used for the text analysis. First, the researcher prepared the word cloud of both sets of data using Nvivo. The word cloud led us to the top 50 most frequented words.

Image 1: Word Cloud Top 50 Words Primary Data

- The most frequent words were digital, leadership, leaders, innovation, new and changing.
- These represent directly the tone about the pandemic accelerated impact on the nature of work, and leadership.

Way Forward
- Interview would proceed as per the proposal.
- Following the tenets of the GT methodology, memoing, open coding and constant comparison is being carried out in an iterative cycle.

Contribution of this Study
- This study is important and of interest from both basic and applied perspectives as for digital transformation there exists a need for new transformation path models for IT, ITES & Knowledge services firms; by developing their digital leader to enhance the culture and digital competence. The role of digital leadership is important to drive business model and collaboration through co-creation in the era of Business 4.0.
- The essence of this study is to: contribute more knowledge, and add transformation actions for management in managing digital transformation, develop new approaches to leadership development for the challenges posed by Business 4.0. The application of this study could be future-proofing of the organization by adopting the appropriate leadership development approaches for the coming era.
- The leader behaviors presented by this ongoing study can be incorporated into leadership education and training and thus future leadership skills.

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