**Characteristics of A Distance Education Leader**

According to Omiunu & Ngozi (2012), “Management in relation to distance learning involves a variety of sequential and related activities designed and carried out so as to achieve the goal of the programme” (p. 709). This includes allocating inputs (human and material capital), planning, organizing, directing, and controlling distance learning activities, and effectively and efficiently producing outputs. Effective management in the field of distance education requires skills and characteristics that may not be as important in other industries or areas. However, because of the evolution of distance education, a “new” phenomenon in our society, leaders have demanding tasks and jobs to fulfill. This paper briefly discusses characteristics that a good distance education leader may possess.

**Charisma**

Charisma, while also being considered a style of leadership, is also a trait that good distance education leaders should possess. According to the Kirby and Paradise, “Charisma is the leader’s ability to arouse devotion and involvement through personal dynamics such as self-confidence, ideological stance, and dramatic and emotional appeal” (p. 304). In this ever-changing academic arena, leaders have to be able to ignite and encourage change. They have to be able to convince followers—whether they are other decision makers, instructors, or students—that change is good.

**Flexibility**

Another characteristic that educational leaders should possess in order to be successful is flexibility. “The structure of today’s universities must be ‘changeable’ in order to integrate distance learning courses, and those institutions that will not or cannot change their structure to incorporate this technology may be bypassed by other educational providers…” (Mapuva, 2009, p. 5). Flexibility is key when it comes to distance education because factors of distance education can change so frequently. Changes from organizational structure to technology can require leaders to be flexible and understanding. Areas of flexibility can include functional, financial, temporal, legal, skills, job, location, work pattern, and wage cost (Mapuva, 2009). According to Mapuva (2009), “Research has shown that institutional leaders and administrators who have keen interest in adopting new technology have shown the desire to inculcate the same to their respective institutions by providing a supportive environment…” (p. 3). Therefore, a flexible leader is integral in the distance education field.

**Team Oriented**

According to Duncan, et al. (2012), team-oriented leaders emphasize “effective team building and implementation of a common purpose or goal among team members” (p. 79). Effective leaders must not only have the skills or characteristics to motivate others, but they must also be able to build effective teams with like goals. This is key because without a team that possesses similar characteristics, such as flexibility, it will be unlikely to successfully implement a program. Team-oriented leaders emphasize gender equality, reward collective distribution or resources and collective action, and are assertive, dominant, and demanding in their relationships with others (p. 80). A balance of charisma and team orientation will suit a DE leader well.

**Resilience**

A study conducted by Yick, et al. (2005), revealed something that many distance education leaders already know: online teaching is regarded as less credible than traditional face to face teaching (p 1). While the perception of credibility is gradually changing, many people, including instructors do not believe in the legitimacy of distance education. This poses a great problem for leaders interested in implementing programs in their institutions when decision makers are not supportive of the cause. Resiliency will be a key characteristic for a distance education leader who may face obstacles in the development of DE programs. It is important for DE leaders to remember than DE is not for everyone. That includes students, instructors, and institutions.

**Entrepreneurship and Proactivity**

Eyal and Kark (2004) found that distance education leaders should posses the ability to employ ‘vigorous entrepreneurial strategy’ (p. 228). Entrepreneurship is closely related to proactivity, which is a characteristic that DE leaders should possess. Proactivity denotes a leaders ability to take charge of situations and anticipate the need for intercession and leadership. Proactive leaders with an entrepreneurial spirit are able to foresee the needs of the department and make decisions and changes without instruction from others. They are able to make the tough decisions in short periods of time and are able to facilitate change when needed. DE leaders that are in charge of implementing new programs in their institutions are very much like entrepreneurs in that they are pioneers.

**Issues Facing Today’s Distance Education Leader**

“Despite the various debates on the adoption and implementation of e-learning as well as the accompanying challenges, e-learning remains an indispensible pedagogical phenomenon in the 21st century and beyond” (Mapuva, 2009, p. 11). It is imperative that educational leaders understand the forces that a shaping higher education today. With advancements in technology, society, and demand for education, educators need to master their skills and hone in on them so that they can effectively face these issues. This paper briefly discusses those issues and how leaders must be ready to face them.

**For-profit Institutions**

The emergence of for-profit institutions marked what Former Harvard President Derek Bok called, “the commercialization of higher education” (Cronin & Bachorz, 2005, p. 11). Because of the development of institutions such as University of Phoenix, now one of the world’s 10 largest universities, scholars and scrutinizers have questioned the issue of making profit at the “expense of quality face-to-face education” (Cronin & Bachorz, 2005, p. 12). This has a double meaning. For-profit leaders must strive to maintain the quality of higher education, leaning toward inquiry and exploration, rather than the mere transformation of information. Non-profit education leaders must also adjust, adopting a full understanding of these for-profit institutions and how they effect their own.

**Implementation of Distance Education Programs**

Since the inception of University of Phoenix, there have been a few other traditional institutions that were also able to implement full DE programs into their course offerings. While schools such as University of Maryland and The University of Massachusetts are able to serve tens of thousands of online students, other institutions have struggled to enter into the realm of distance education successfully. For example, Cornell and New York University attempted to implement these programs, aiming for the affluent community but found that there was little demand. Distance education leaders must do proper research and have a firm understanding of what a distance education student is and how to best deliver that education. They must understand, overall, that the goal is to grow “better, not bigger” (Cronin & Bachorz, 2005, p. 15).

**How Distance Education Works**

“One of the most crucial prerequisites for successful implementation of e-learning is the need for careful consideration of the underlying pedagogy, or how learning takes place online (Mapuva, 2009, p. 3). As stated before, it is imperative that leaders understand and believe in the pedagogy of online learning. Learning online requires much more than the transformation of information. Because of the absence of the classroom, distance education professionals must be able to create a community within the online classroom, provide asynchronous and synchronous communication, and cater the to needs of as many students as possible by employing multimedia learning tools. DE leaders must understand these concepts so that they can foster this environment throughout the institution. “This is the prerogative of institutional leaders to ensure that the right approach is adopted and the appropriate infrastructure and attitude is inculcated in those whose task it is to finally implement e-learning (Mapuva, 2009, p. 3).

**Cultural Preferences**

Another issue facing distance education leaders is the adjustment to cultural preferences, which may predict leadership preferences (Duncan, et. Al, 2012, p 71). Distance education has the power to reach students in various parts of the world with differing lingual and cultural practices. With classes that can include international students, leaders must be sensitive to the expectations of these students. Understanding cultural preferences is key in this regard. Project GLOBE, an international management research project, defines culture as “shared motives, values, beliefs, identities, and interpretations or meanings of significant events that result from common experiences of members of collectives that are transmitted across generations” (Duncan, et. Al, 2012, p 74).

**Organizational Structure**

One issue in distance education that could hinder the effective development of a distance education program is the ineffective organization of the structure (Omiunu & Ngozi, 2012). In many institutions, especially traditional ones, implementation of a de program fails because of the lack of proper structure. Ideally, distance education programs should have their own resources and potentially their own department. However, many programs are mere extensions of existing departments and therefore do not get the attention they need to grow and evolve. It is important that DE leaders, or those that wish to become DE leaders, are apart of a complete organizational structure that will foster that growth.

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