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Developing Leadership Skills for IS Professionals

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Abstract

After briefly discussing the changing roles of IS professionals, in this tutorial I introduce participants to some conceptual foundations of leadership on which most leadership training, education and development programs rest. A distinction is made between leadership attributes such as character, intelligence and moral courage, which may not be teachable, and leadership skills such as decision-making, conflict management and communication, which are teachable. I then present a three level skills model and a three-tier model that links self-development and self-leadership to the development of leadership skills and discuss sources of leadership training. The tutorial includes several exercises intended to help participants to gain some insight into their own leadership skills and capabilities.

Introduction

Organizational effectiveness and survival are directly linked to our ability to develop, train, and cultivate leaders. The purpose of this tutorial is to clarify participants’ assumptions about leadership and gain some insight in their own leadership. The purpose here is not to teach leadership skills since it is well known that even extensive leadership training programs have a half-life of a few days or weeks after sessions end.

The tutorial begins with an examination of the changing roles of information systems (IS) professionals which indicates that existing and emergent information and communication technologies provide opportunities for IS professionals to expand their roles from technical managers to strategic leaders who need a different repertoire of competencies. First and foremost among them are leadership skills. The rapid pace of change of technological innovations coupled with the exigencies of global competition, changing employee relationships, deregulation and changing workforce demographics are transforming the roles of IS professionals. Yet, to this date, leadership training, education, and development have yet to be incorporated into management information systems (MIS) curricula to prepare today’s MIS graduates for their roles as tomorrow’s IS leaders.

Conceptual Foundations

This section of the tutorial reviews some fundamental leadership concepts, which provide the foundations for leadership training and development programs. These include: (1) definitions of leadership since teaching leadership requires defining it; (2) the “leaders-are-born vs. leadership-is-learned schools of thought; even those who believe that leadership cannot be taught, admit that certain leadership skills such as communication, decision-making skills, team building, gaining organizational power and influence and conflict resolution skills can be learned; and (3) the differences between leaders and managers. Graduate MIS curricula are calibrated to turn out managers, not leaders.

In transforming managers to leaders, I introduce a three-tier competency ladder to include technical, interpersonal, and analytical skills as they relate to IS leadership. Technical expertise is a necessary but not sufficient prerequisite for IS professionals who are seeking leadership positions. It has been well established that specialized knowledge (i.e., technical expertise) is a key contributor to leadership status. However, technical expertise does not transform a successful IS professional into an effective leader. In fact, IS professionals who fail to perform effectively in leadership roles tend to be “technocrats” whose technical expertise has been their sole path to career success at lower and middle levels of management. At higher levels of management this becomes a weakness because exclusive focus on technical expertise and preoccupation with technological currency interfere with attention to the interpersonal and analytical competencies necessary for effective leadership.

Leadership is an interpersonal process. Therefore, interpersonal skills are critical for IS/IT leaders who must interact with diverse constituencies ranging from end-users to CIOs. Leading multi-functional, multi-disciplinary teams requires an investment in interpersonal relationships as well as effective coaching and mentoring skills. The roles of the leader as a coach, facilitator, enabler, appraiser, advisor, architect of alliances and change agent are built around interpersonal competencies and effectiveness.

Finally, in today’s complex, uncertain, global environment IS/IT leadership requires sophisticated conceptual and analytical skills since concept formation and idea generation play a critical role in the design of ITs for competitive advantage. As strategic leaders, IS professionals must have the capacity to represent conceptually the highly complex, volatile, and probabilistic environment in which they are expected to operate. Conceptual leadership is what some of the most visible and popular management gurus like Tom Peters advocate now.
Learning to Lead

Development of Leadership Skills 101: Self-Development

The development of leadership skills, whether through education, training, or the lessons of experience begins as a process of self-development. Philosophers from Socrates to Confucius, Descartes to Foucault have taught us that only by knowing ourselves can we know others and lead them. Self-development goes beyond formal education. It is also derived from reflection, self-observation, self-determination, self-education and a commitment to lifelong learning. Developing one self as a person with character, moral courage, self-respect, integrity, trust and compassion, all of which are critical ingredients of leadership, is a lifelong task. There is no such thing as “just-in-time” leadership development. Instead people develop into leaders over time through skill acquisition, experience and insights, from novices to masters, usually incrementally and often with help. As one leadership researcher recently stated “even knights on white horses (i.e., individuals who presumably have the right stuff for leadership), have to learn to ride, master the skills to take on dragons, and suffer a few defeats.” Moreover, there is no cookie-cutter profile of a leader who embodies the best of these characteristics that can be emulated by aspiring leaders.

Development of Leadership Skills 201: Self-Leadership

Here, the fundamental premise is unless we can lead ourselves, will not be effective leading others. Self-leadership implies that we exercise control over ourselves, manage our own behaviors, incorporate intrinsic motivation to perform to the best of our abilities, and make a commitment to self-influenced skill development. Leaders cannot empower others unless they can empower themselves. IS leaders in a changing world need to take stock of their personal attributes that facilitate or impede change; they must understand that self-leadership is the cornerstone of all individual, team, and organizational change. Thus self-leadership is a fundamental pillar of leadership development and without it, even the most elaborate, carefully designed and delivered leadership training program will go bankrupt.

Learning to Lead: Leading by Values and Managing by Excellence

In addition to the two prerequisites above, acquiring the skills necessary for effective leadership and developing one self as a leader can be pursued through a number of different avenues ranging from formal academic programs offered by universities, executive development and corporate training programs to experiential leadership training such as Outward Bound. This tutorial focuses on those leadership skills that can be learned and offers a brief evaluation of the various approaches to leadership training and development.

It has been said that among the elements of teaching leadership, 80% is experience. If experience is the classroom of leadership, then most of the leadership training takes place in the trenches and leadership skills and competencies develop as a result of those accumulated experiences. However, conceptual and heuristic models that are taught in academic courses, workshops and seminars are useful in framing the leadership training and development experience and help attendees of these programs to transform leadership models and theories into applications that can result in high performance teams in which leadership is shared by team members and improve organizational effectiveness. In the delivery of this tutorial, I introduce a variety of models that link business challenges, leadership and personal effectiveness and discuss with participants how these models can be customized to meet their personal and organizational challenges. I will present examples of companies, which have created leadership programs that incorporate personal growth, skill building, feedback and conceptual awareness.

In my own model, developing oneself other leaders (leading by values) and learning to lead (managing by excellence) go hand in hand. For IS/IT professionals I would add a third component, namely currency in the latest technologies. I believe this component is separate from learning to lead because of its specific focus, that is, a commitment to life long learning and the ability of the IS leader to transform his or her team, project or organization into a learning organization. The tutorial will present some strategies and tools to help participants to build a learning organization in their current settings.

Implications

A perusal of the courses proposed by both the DPMA and ACM curricula models of MIS reinforce the perception of IS professionals as technical managers. Both curricula offer courses designed to help students develop technical, functional domains, organizational and application skills. Consequently, it comes to no surprise that a perusal of job titles (i.e., database administrator, systems analysis manager, CIO, director of IS/IT security) held by IS/IT professionals reiterate the preoccupation with managerial activities. I have yet to encounter a graduate program in IS/IT that prepares students to become change agents, motivators, decision makers; that teaches them how to craft, articulate and communicate a vision and how to build an organizational culture in which IT and leadership are interdependent and mutually reinforcing.

One of the challenges for IS professionals is to create roles that combine strong leadership and strong management. As transformational leaders, IS managers and executives must not only be technology champions but also be able to create a vision that includes the deployment of ITs to revamp the political and cultural systems within organizations. This requires not only technical skills but interpersonal, organizational and political skills as well. Some of today’s and tomorrow’s organization – flat, customer-focused, team-based and entrepreneurial pose very different challenges for leadership and leaders than the traditional bureaucracies.
Background and Qualifications of the Presenter

I currently am the President and CEO of the Leadership Development Institute (LDI) International, a consulting firm specializing in leadership education, training and development. My firm offers both public and company tailored, customized programs. In addition to the basic leadership program, we offer programs in the areas of developing global leadership competencies, leading change, leadership succession planning, information technologies as transformational leadership, team leadership and team development, entrepreneurial leadership and scenario planning as a means of mapping the future of leadership. I have served on the faculties of the University of Colorado, George Washington University and was one of the founding faculty members of the Jepson School of Leadership Studies at the University of Richmond.

I have produced a stream of research, which examines leadership processes in information intensive organizations. Specific topics included the development of a heuristic model of the relationships between technology, leadership, and emergent organizational forms, assessment of the relationship between IS team performance and leadership styles, leadership in virtual organizations, IS/IT leadership in emergent organizational forms, and information technologies as leadership substitutes. I have presented some my work at national and international conferences (i.e., TIMS, Helsinki, 1992, ACM/SIGCPR, 1993, IFIP, 1994, INFORMS, 1995, AoM/IAoM, 1996). My latest book, Women and Leadership: A Contextual Perspective was published in 1996. My most recent journal article on leadership dispersion in high performance IS teams appeared in the Journal of High Technology Management, 1997.