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In Search of Zorba – Part II

Myths, Realities, and Assorted Bedtime Stories about Leading Open, Online and Distance Education

‘Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans’
John Lennon, 1980

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Abstract

This paper explores the complexities and challenges of leadership in open, online, and distance education (ODL). It aims to differentiate myths from reality and provide insights into effective leadership practices. Despite extensive scholarly literature and practical experiences, effective leadership remains elusive and difficult to define. The paper presents a view of selected leadership issues, offering a synthesis of innovative practices and experiences. It identifies myths such as the consistency of visionary leadership styles, the effectiveness of leading from the back, and the equivalence of leadership and management. The realities highlight the need for adaptability, front-line leadership, and the distinct roles of leaders and managers. The paper also discusses the limitations of theoretical frameworks, the importance of experience over talent and training, and the challenges of decision-making and embracing change. Through a series of research questions, the paper seeks to provide new vantage points for future empirical research in the field of leadership in ODL.

Keywords

Leading Open, Online and Distance Education

Introduction

Indeed, is it possible to envision a future digital university landscape where we could ‘*future proof*’ against poor leadership? Perhaps this is a rhetorical (and comical) question, but sometimes we need a satirical slant on important issues. A sense of humour and having fun have shown to be essential attributes of good leaders. We are all interested in expanding our effective leadership approaches for creating thriving organizations that are agile, innovative, and responsive to the range of shifting trends, market demands, and stakeholder needs of the 21st century. A brave new world right – not so fast.

The cold hard truth, however, is that we live in a complex, uncertain, ever-changing world where leadership is simply hard. Just when we think we got it – it’s gone; just when we think we understand it, we are perplexed; and just when we think we know how to implement it, we don’t have a clue! We seem to know good leadership when we see it; and we are certain we know what poor leadership looks and feels like and yet trying to define, describe, and adapt leadership it is quite another matter (Burns, 1978; Olcott, Arnold & Blaschke, 2023).

We have a century of scholarly literature and theory about management and leadership and a vast experiential repository across a continuum of different types of organisations; and despite having more information and knowledge at our fingertips than at any time in human history, effective leadership often seems as elusive and enigmatic as ever (Olcott, Arnold, & Blaschke, 2023). The brave new world of leadership was supposed to be easy according to legend. The legend was a myth and the reality is leadership was never supposed to be easy.

The purpose of this paper is to present a helicopter view of selected leadership issues in online, open and distance learning with the goal of identifying some key, and perhaps new, *research questions* for the future. This article is aimed at offering a synthesis of innovative practice and experience for discerning the myths from the realities. This is not a definitive commentary or silver bullet analysis of the leadership field. On the contrary, it is an attempt to identify some tangible and intangible leadership issues that may give us new vantage points and reflective lightbulbs to consider in our teaching, research and practice of leadership. The format for the article

is 1) identify the myth; 2) present the reality; and 3) formulate a reasonable research question (RQ) for further empirical research.

Myth 1: Visionary leaders consistently implement their preferred style of leadership.

Reality: Leaders most often follow an enacted style of leadership that may be very different from their preferred leadership style (Lamond, 2004). Why? Leaders must continually confront new trends, shifts in market conditions, economic downturns, budget restrictions, and more. The complexity of the modern world gets in the way of the best laid plans. Does this mean leadership style is irrelevant? No. It just means that as a leader you must learn to adapt and create a response strategy that remains on the side of being proactive – not reactive where your followers wonder whether you really know what you are doing? Followers look for consistency, they look for common sense, and they don't expect their leaders to be perfect (Author 2020a, 2020b).

RQ: What strategic framework and/or mindset do leaders employ when complex situational contexts neutralise one's preferred leadership style and strategies?

Myth 2: Great leaders lead from the back and/or on the side

Reality: Visionary, dynamic and inspirational leaders lead from the front.

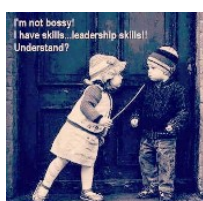


Describing a leader as a sage on the stage or a guide on the side is clever rhetoric but it is not a valued trait of genuine leadership. We can continue to deceive ourselves by believing that great leaders make everyone feel good, sit around the camp fire and sing folk songs but the truth is followers want leaders who are front and centre, stand up for their organisation, and go to bat for them in difficult situations. And, followers don't see this if the leader is sitting on the side or hiding in the back.

If ever an example was needed, spend one day following the actions of President Volodymyr Zelenskyy of Ukraine (Olcott, 2023). An important distinction is warranted here. Good leaders give all the credit to followers; and yet stand front and centre to take responsibility and blame for organisational failures. Leading from the front has nothing to do with 'sharing the credit,' it is about being the role model that the leader is expected to lead from the front.

RQ: What are the key leadership attributes of leaders who effectively lead from the front? Why? What are the minefields of trying to guide an organisation or unit sitting on the sidelines or a management office in the rear?

Myth 3: Great leaders were great managers.



Reality: Leadership and management are not the same thing and hence some good leaders were actually terrible managers. However, the one thing

good leaders have is a clear understanding of managerial functions, how key positions fit together and how to hire the right people for the right positions that complement rather than duplicate managerial roles. Indeed, the characteristics of leadership and management overlap and a cursory review of the research has well documented this (Fayol, 1949; House & Aditya, 1997; Mintzberg, 1975; Burns, 1978). **Are you fit to lead (See Appendix A)?**

Perhaps Warren Bennis and Bert Nanus said it best: *Managers do things right. Leaders do the right things (Bennis & Nanus, 1985)*. The examples from practice are numerous where good managers of small units were elevated to leader of the larger organisation and soon it was clear they were out of their depth. Leadership is not synonymous with management.

RQ: What are distinguishing leadership factors for your leadership style? Do these overlap with management role or are they separate?

Myth 4: Theories are mental roadmaps and reference schematics to leadership practice and decision making that provide definitive solutions.

Reality: Theories are frames of reference for the leader - they do not provide answers nor are they definitive (Senge, 2006). Theoretical constructs provide leaders frames of reference for leading but even the best leaders rely over time on a few theoretical/practical constructs that serve them well. The myth that leaders dive in to this vast swimming pool of unlimited theories to find the perfect answer is daft and naïve. This is not the real world.

Moreover, this capricious reliance by leaders on a new strategy for every situation actually can create uncertainty and ambiguity amongst staff. We want to know our leaders, how they approach problems, and

what their 'core values' are of their leadership style. Situational leadership theory (Hersey & Blanchard, 1977). has some practical relevance but leaders who use a different approach to every situation under the sun will create confusion.

RQ: What are core principles derived from multiple theories that could form the mental framework for leaders to bring to most organisational situations?

Myth 5: Leaders are effective when everyone is happy, content and likes the leader. `



Reality: The Water Cooler Blues: The leader has only one job – to lead.

Indeed, employees do gather and chat around the water cooler or in the lunchroom. One afternoon I went to get a glass of water and one of my directors is at the water cooler in tears. I asked if she was alright and she shared she was very distraught because some of her staff were talking behind her back and some comments were very critical. I ask her if she would like to discuss this in the my (Dean's Office). She said yes, that would be good. She shared some of the comments that had got back to her as we talked. Finally, she said I can't think of anything worse for a leader than staff talking behind her back.

I was silent for a moment and then said, actually there is something much worse than staff talking behind a leader's back. She looked up

and I said when people quit talking altogether. When people stop talking or complaining, then they truly don't care anymore. I asked her if she had ever complained about her bosses over the year. She smiled and said yes, of course. The truth is none of like to have people talking behind our backs but this is one of the normative outlets for people in all organisations. The real question is there also formal channels for followers to share their candid and open ideas. As a leader, I consider the water cooler blues just one more avenue for communication across the organisation. As Steve Jobs' quote reminds us the role of the leader is to lead, not to make everyone happy. As a leader the only metric that matters to your bosses is the success of your unit or university.

RQ: What is the optimum mix of staff formal and informal communications channels?

Myth 6: Talent and training are the key to leadership

Reality: There is no substitute for experience. Experience, in the main, is the one thing that universities cannot teach. Moreover, despite all the sound bites about getting the right talent and the right people in our organisations, the fact is most organisations have plenty of talented people. The problems are often because staff are in the wrong jobs and usually for the wrong reasons. Leaders must find ways to put the right people in the right roles for the right reasons for the right outcomes. In every field of human endeavour, the ultimate game changer is usually linked to experience by leader and key followers.

RQ: How do leaders create the right mix of talent and 'fit' for success?

Myth 7: The Quest of Decision Making is to Find the Perfect Solution

Reality: The 005 Axiom: Every important issue has five (5) reasonable solutions and the final one is usually a synthesis of one or more of these five. Good leaders understand the subtle benefits of creating options. The challenge of course is to identify the key criteria demanded by the problem and then analyse potential solutions or strategies. What factors must be considered? Some of these include cost, timeline, competitor response, stakeholder inputs, staffing needs, and preferred outcomes.

One of the 005 options might seem obvious but it is based on a two year timeframe and stakeholders want this done in three months. Another option is terrific but it costs three times what the organisation can afford. The idea here is that a synthesis of our 005 options often ends up being the realistic option than can be employed. As a leader, how do you and your team make decisions? What criteria are used? What are your typical success metrics for change management?

RQ: What is the key decision making criteria used by leaders in open, online and distance learning universities? What are the core assumptions of these approaches and how is success measured? What are the precise metrics?

Myth 8: Organisations are ready to Embrace Change



Reality: Most leaders and organisations find change very challenging (Brown, 2023; Kotter, 2012; Daniel, 2023.) The fact is most leaders fail to lead systemic change – some because they do not understand the process and that talking and writing about change is not the same as implementation. Secondly, leaders don't truly understand that a change process is immersive, long-term and ultimately starts with the dance of organisational culture (Schein, 2004). And whilst a leader does not have to shift the formal organisational culture in the change process; he or she does have to manage the culture and its core values in ways that provide a clear benefits continuum that followers can visualise as potential incentives and rationales for change.

RQ: What does a change benefits continuum consist of for change in your organisation? What are its specific components and why?

These myths and realities are not all-inclusive. At the same time, they are important and are common challenges for most leaders. There are other myths such as men are better leaders than women; digitalisation and A.I. is your panacea for all things; leaders are great at managing innovations; and even the absurd view that organisations do not face challenges around the Abilene Paradox and GroupThink in our sophisticated 21st century distance learning universities.

The realities, however, are quite revealing. Women, in fact, not only bring better natural attributes (collaboration, communications, calm under fire), in practice they are as good as any male leaders (Olcott & Hardy, 2002). And, let us not forget that the most fragile thing on planet earth is the male ego. Good leadership and ego often lead to dysfunction. 😊

Digitalisation is invaluable for the 21st century university but it will not make a poor leader a great leader anymore than it will make a poor teacher a classroom/online maestro. Digital tools are exactly that – tools with great potential when implemented and managed effectively. The fact is if A.I. is our future then we had better start

formulating alternative futures right now. At least this is the advice given by AL – you remember him from the film *2001 – A Space Odessey*.

Universities leaders are truly magicians at creating things. Whether a new online programme, an Institute to save the whales, an international research partnership with China and Russia the list goes on and on. What university leaders are terrible at are getting out of initiatives-partnerships that simply are not working. Leaders feel compelled to try harder, give it more time, invest more money, hire and fire staff . . . when the only clear option is to cut one's losses and exit the partnership. The problem is that to exit something you have to have an exit strategy and many leaders are reluctant to develop this at the outset. They don't want to hurt anyone's feelings or insult a partner in the partnership or arrangement – it's good business to have an exit strategy in writing for any university partnership. This is good judgment and *common cents* – yes it can save you lots of money in the long-term.

The Abilene Paradox is where people agree to something they really don't want to do or happen. Your entire staff wants a specific LMS but the boss wants something else so everyone goes along to get along (Harvey, 1974). And everyone ends up miserable. Welcome to the asylum. GroupThink (Janis, 1972) is a process that can be even more devastating. The 'Group' agrees to a proposed decision when, in fact, members within the group know it's wrong and go along anyway. Example: Expand the Vietnam War and number of troops. We all understand there are group pressures that all leaders deal with but going to Abilene and GroupThink are potential landmines for all leaders and organisations. Both are lurking in the shadows just waiting for a poor communication environment to create an opportunity for them to disrupt the organisation. Leaders must create open, candid and healthy communications environments to counter these dysfunctional group behaviours.

A Bedtime Story for Aspiring Leaders: Are You Ready for Your Leadership Opportunity?

It was a quiet Friday afternoon so Sam had decided to leave the university early and head to the pub to meet some friends and colleagues. And then the phone rang. It was the president's assistant who asked if he could come to his office in about an hour

to meet with him and PVC/VP Academic. Hmm . . . what was Sam going to say as an Assistant Director of University Outreach – no I can't make it, I am heading to the golf course and then wasting away in Margaritaville. Sam agreed and asked the assistant what the meeting was about. She said she didn't know. Right, Sam thought hmmm, assistants know everything. 😊

Sam arrived at the President's Office, and the president's first words after his welcome was 'Congratulations, you are now the Director of Distance Education for our university.' The PVC Academic looked at me perplexed and Sam was not sure whether he wanted to offer congratulations or condolences. Sam's mind was racing. The president then took about ten minutes to talk about what other regional universities were doing with distance education, the importance of our university being on the playing field, and the need to act now. His presidential counterparts at our competitor institutions had certainly got his attention at their executive meetings. And he didn't want to be part of any 'No president left behind' movement. Presidents and their pursuit of legacy – another story for another Friday or possibly pub.

Before we delve into the rest of the story, a little background about Sam for the reader. He had been in higher education for about six years, had a masters and was working on a doctorate. He had about as much technology proficiency and experience as his Aunt Mable (none). He could turn on a computer, use Word, and could throw those large floppy discs that doubled as little boomerangs as well as anyone.

At the same time, Sam was quite aware that university outreach and continuing education units were expanding distance education delivery capacity across the country. This was an indelible opportunity to be on the front lines. Sam's boss reported to the PVC-VP Academic and was informed about the nature of this meeting ahead of time, supported the appointment, but didn't want to influence my decision. Nearly forty years later Sam still believed his boss gave him an opportunity for leadership and Sam remains greatly indebted for his confidence. So, in sum, yes, Sam could have declined this opportunity probably without any fallout. Back to the story. As Sam's mind continued to race, he remembered something his father had taught him when he was a kid playing sports – anticipate the unexpected and be ready with a response at a moment's notice. In essence, Sam's father was teaching him to be ready

for when a leadership opportunity knocks. He was also teaching Sam another lesson from sports for his new job - great teams make great organisations not individuals. Collaboration would be essential and invaluable for Sam.



The President finished his mini-keynote, assuming Sam had agreed, which he had not, and then the PVC-VP Academic asked ‘What do you need to do this?’ Even in 2023, Sam is not sure where the words came but he said we need \$400,000 dollars a year for four years; two staff part-time from my outreach office; a formal reporting line that would put this new office as a joint partnership with the Video Technology Unit on Campus. Sam then proposed that it could be very beneficial if the three of us could create Distance Education Executive Committee for the campus that including deans, directors, faculty members, student services and tech people Sam later said he should have asked for more money and more staff.

Postscript: Many professionals plan out their careers over years. They work on advanced degrees, look for the next promotion, start families, coach football, and decide they will learn leadership along the way. No substitute for experience right – well what was not mentioned earlier is that sometimes this really means there is no substitute for the right experience. Essentially, we think we can plan and control our life’s destiny. The truth is John Lennon was right . . . ‘Life is what happens to you while you’re busy making other plans.’ Are you ready for your leadership opportunity now? Are you confident enough in yourself to take the leap of faith and lead. Leadership preparation is a lifelong continuum.

Epilogue: Leadership is a Choice

This paper highlighted some common myths and realities about leadership in distance education universities and organisations in general. Leadership style sounds

impressive to followers but the reality is complexity often shifts a leader's preferred style of leadership to an enacted style that is agile and adaptable to changing markets, competitors, and economic downturns. A leader cannot address these sitting on the sidelines or in the back. Genuine, inspirational and visionary leadership is front and centre. Followers want this type of role for their leaders despite the sound bite fallacies about guides on the side and sages on the stages.

Many great leaders were disasters as managers yet in their leadership roles understood the importance of managerial positions, how to appoint the right people to positions, and the critical relevance of 'fit' in creating a complementary staff where the whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Theories are mental frames of reference for leaders to help them tap the core tenants of their own leadership strengths. Theories are not a panacea for definitive decision making that always results in good judgment and optimum solutions. As Will Rogers reminds us 'Good judgment comes from experience and a lot of that comes from poor judgment.'

The fundamental role of the leader is to lead. The leader's Board evaluates the leader's performance based on one criterion only. Either he/she has created a dynamic, agile, responsive, customer oriented thriving entity for success – or the organisation is a failure. All your people may be happy and they may like you, but this will not save your job. Of course, leaders treat people with respect and want people to be glad to come to work but leaders must lead first and foremost. Some idealists will argue if some of the staff go on to be successful then this was due to the leader's role even if the organisation failed. This is naïve and a special kind of Doublespeak. The truth is probably that some staff were successful later because they had the firsthand experience watching a poor leader do things that sunk the organisation. We often learn more about leadership from failures than successes.

Education and training are nice; but there is no substitute for experience. Leaders must inventory all their leadership experiences, learn from their successes and mistakes as well as those of others, and be prepared for unexpected opportunities to lead. Great leaders know every problem/situation has five reasonable solutions. These leaders, because of experience also know, that the optimum choice is a synthesis of two or more of the five. Experienced leaders know what the key criteria

are for analysing decision packages for their organisations and they help their leadership team work through this analytical framework.

Finally, at most of us know, change is great as long as it is not us who has to change. The reality is no-one really likes change and the status quo will fight for its life unless the leader brings a sound rational, benefits package and process to followers and stakeholders to embrace. Your game changer for leadership is your readiness to assume those unexpected opportunities to lead when your president interrupts your pub visit on a Friday afternoon.

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Appendix A

Are You Fit to Lead a Distance Learning Organisation?

The following *Fit to Lead Self-Assessment* (Olcott, 2020a, p. 19) is an informal questionnaire for leaders and aspiring leaders to reflect upon their leadership profile. The survey is informal but you can adapt it and apply a simple Likert scale 1-5 (1 lowest and 5 highest) to get a snapshot of where you are in your own leadership journey. The real test, however, is for you to share the survey with 10 colleagues and ask them to assess you.

1. Do I foster open, honest and candid communications amongst my followers and stakeholders? Do I inspire trust, integrity and character amongst my staff? Do I believe my staff colleagues are better than they think they are?
2. Do I have a vision for my organisation? Why should followers and stakeholders support me?
3. Do I accept the leadership deal? Why or why not? Note: The leadership deal is accepting responsibility for all organisational failures and giving credit for all successes to my followers?
4. Can I lead and implement effective change? This is more than just developing a strategy or charismatic rhetoric – can one actually lead change?
5. Do I have the right team for the right goals for the right reasons with the right talents around me? If not, how will I change this? If yes, how do I empower and delegate effectively for the good of the organisation? Thriving organisational leaders learn that in many instances ‘fit’ is more important than talent when it comes to bringing together the right organizational team. Do you have the right team on the field?

6. Do I genuinely delegate to my staff or do I disguise some tendencies towards micro-management as coaching or mentoring? (Hint: There is no effective disguise – staff know and feel micro-management like a lightning bolt is going right through them. It demoralises, it insults and destroys innovation and creativity by good people who ultimately will leave). Do I have good judgment, make consistently good decisions, and know when the answer is simply good common sense?
7. Do I understand the role of technology in driving my business strategy? Do you understand that all the digital tools in the world will not make you a great leader?
8. Do I know when to exit the stage? The view of the author is the effective life cycle of most leaders is 4-6 years and then it's time to move on and get out of the way for your successor. What's your leadership life cycle?
9. Are planning and contingency planning essential processes in my organisation?
10. The Zorba Factor – Can I bring all these leadership attributes and roles together in a humanistic, empathetic and engaging culture and environment?