

## Ανοικτή Εκπαίδευση: το περιοδικό για την Ανοικτή και εξ Αποστάσεως Εκπαίδευση και την Εκπαιδευτική Τεχνολογία

Τόμ. 16, Αρ. 2 (2020)



### In Search of Zorba: Are You Fit to Lead an Online Distance Education Organisation?

*Don Olcott, Jr.*

doi: [10.12681/jode.9749](https://doi.org/10.12681/jode.9749)

Βιβλιογραφική αναφορά:

***In Search of Zorba:  
Are You Fit to Lead an Online Distance Education Organisation?***

*Indeed, to be passionate is to be Greek. Αλέξης Ζορμπάς*

**Don Olcott**  
Global Consultant  
Romania

[donald.olcott@uni-oldenburg.de](mailto:donald.olcott@uni-oldenburg.de)

**Abstract.**

Are you fit to lead an online distance learning organisation? Within the context of the Zorba factor, this is the focus of this paper. Ten key questions are presented for you to self-assess your leadership capacity in online learning. The questions address your capacity to build trust, create a vision, accept the leadership deal, lead effective change, create the right team, delegate with autonomy, deploy technology as tools, step aside and allow others to assume leadership roles, make planning continuous rather than optional and build and nurture all of these under the core foundation of the search for Zorba – the human side of enterprise. The search for Zorba is about putting humanity back in leadership and refocusing and reframing leadership with humanistic values that empower and sustain organisation and its members. The Zorba Factor is the glue that binds the organisation, its members, partners and stakeholders and society together. It gives the organisation and its members meaning and purpose. In the final analysis, the search for Zorba is about finding the passion and humanity in each of us.

**Keywords**

Leadership, online learning, humanity, leading change, empathy, distance education, Greece, culture, justice, freedom

*Nikos Kazantzakis*

*Ideal teachers [leaders] are those who use themselves  
as bridges over which they invite their students [followers]  
to cross, then having facilitated their crossing, joyfully collapse,  
encouraging them to create bridges of their own.*

**Introduction**

A major yet often overlooked lesson in transformational leadership is that context and culture matter and shape most social institutions within a national context. A nation's history, politics, and economics impact leadership approaches and styles. These also impact how followers like and prefer to be led. Moreover, to consider leadership in

higher education, particularly open and distance education in Greece, we must be cautious not to get lost in platitudes that might fit in Europe, the U.S., or Africa but align poorly in Greek culture and education. Conversely, with relative confidence we must remember that Ancient Greek philosophers such as Plato and Aristotle introduced the world to justice and ethics that still resonate today amongst leaders worldwide in all forms of human endeavour.

Indeed, to be passionate is to be Greek. Is this not the lesson Nikos Kazantzakis was sharing with us in his characterisation of *Alexis Zorba*? A zest for life and a zest for other people. This is not intended as an over-simplification of Greek life; and like any culture, all Greeks are not passionate about all things equally. But, when one raises issues of freedom, equality, justice, and mutual respect we think of these precious human values as very Greek. Free speech, tolerance for others views, and defending what is just all come to mind, though not exclusively, as very Greek attributes. As Epictetus wrote: 'Only the educated are free.'

The Zorba Factor in leadership is not an abstract or distant metaphor for leadership. On the contrary, it is refocusing and reframing leadership with humanistic values that empower and sustain organisation and its members. Leading a Greek educational organisation requires one to be passionate about the organisation, all of its people, and to inspire teachers and student alike to be the best they can be. The leader must believe with his/her heart and soul that this organisation makes a difference in people's lives. Reluctant leadership is seldom successful. The leader who embraces the search for Zorba never views himself/herself too important to be nice to his/her organisation family. People matter and are the most important resource.

The Zorba Factor is the soul of the organisation embodied in its leadership. The heart of the organisation is its followers. Together, this synergy sustains nurtures and builds the organisation around humanistic values, not simply organisational charts and formal positions. In a practical context, The search for Zorba (the Zorba Factor) is leadership that values and embraces teamwork, innovation, empowerment, knowledge, creativity, adaptability, compassion, passion and commitment that holds the organisation together through the highs and lows, the ebbs and flows and the unchartered waters that face all modern universities. The Zorba Factor is the glue that binds the organisation, its members, partners and stakeholders and society together.

The power of family, loyalty to friends and family, and help your neighbour and others in need are all valued in Greek society. Within this culture we also have a long history of the ebbs and flows that celebrate great achievements as well as great setbacks and suffering. Indeed, any informed outsider would likely characterise Greece within the mix of politics, economic austerity and corruption as a complex modern state. It is from this vantage point we must try to assess leadership for education and its future.

Javidan et al. (2009) examined different leadership attributes and approaches across China, Brazil, Egypt, and France. Unsurprisingly, these researchers found many interesting differences between the four nations. For example, in Brazil individualism is not a trait admired in leaders yet in China and Egypt leaders are expected to be strong and autonomous. Class status is powerful in France and Brazil; less so in China and Egypt. These are not absolutes but do give the reader a sense of differences that exist across cultures.

Perhaps more importantly for delving in to Greek leadership is what Javidan et al. (2009) found regarding general global traits that are commonly accepted about leadership. Generally accepted positive traits include trust, honesty, creating a vision, empowering others, valuing family and open communications. Conversely, traits in

leaders found to be negative included being autocratic, anti-collaboration, and leaders who are anti-social – loners. The positive traits are a natural fit with the context and culture of Greece.

Open education and digital distance learning are inherently about expanding access to underserved student populations that historically may not have had equal access to higher education. However, leaders must also remember that openness, scale, and access must be managed – they cannot just be increased absent of strategic thinking and management. Most open universities around the globe, including well known institutions such as the Open University (UK), Unisa (South Africa), IGNOU (India) and Athabasca University (Canada) have all faced major financial and enrolment challenges the past decade.

Unlimited, poorly planned and managed unrestricted growth leads to mediocrity because institutions cannot keep pace with openness – open enrolment – qualified faculty cannot be maintained, support services cannot keep pace and academic quality goes down. ‘Quality is not an act, it is a habit’ (Aristotle, n.d.). The rate and speed of growth can lead to disaster unless these are managed astutely and continuously. Moral and hope can be extinguished because faculties and staff become burnt-out and exhausted.

Greek leaders of higher education, particularly the Hellenic Open University, must think differently about risk and rewards and look at viable options to diversity funding sources for sustainability. If your institutions insist on keeping fees low or at zero and your primary funding is the central government, you have abandoned your institutional autonomy to make market decisions. Competition will increase exponentially and you must be the architect of your future now, not three years from now.

This paper is focused on two primary themes. The first is the 1) search for Zorba to put passion and humanistic values back in your leadership and organisation and 2) to help you assess your own leadership skills and abilities on (10) variables for *effectively* leading an online distance education organisation. Moreover, the author attempts and invites you in collaboration to consider the uniquely Greek aspects of management and leadership in both open and traditional universities using digital technologies. The focus applies to open universities and traditional dual-mode universities.

### **A Selected Review of Literature**

The literature review in this paper will take a synthesis approach of integrating key studies relevant to leadership in general and specific to digital distance education. The scholarly literature on management and leadership is exponential and is beyond a comprehensive review for this paper. The author will draw upon classical research considered by scholars and practitioners to have moved the field forward and proven leadership attributes that have permeated the literature since the 1970s (and before).

J. M. Burn’s work on *Leadership* (1978); Harvey’s (1974) article *The Abilene Paradox* on organisational communications; Mintzberg’s (1975) classical article on what managers really do; Schein’s ground-breaking organisational culture model presented in *Organisational Culture and Leadership* (1985); and Senge’s (1992) *The Fifth Discipline* identified as systems thinking are all examples of major contributions to the fields of management and leadership (Olcott, 2020b).

Conversely, the scholarly literature to date that examines leadership issues, frameworks, and approaches in open and distance learning is relatively scarce. There is no formal theory of leadership for ODL. We draw upon the main body of

leadership/management literature for addressing ODL leadership issues and challenges. There are some notable resources that have focused on leadership and management related issues (see *Leading the e-Learning Transformation of Higher Education* by Gary Miller et al. (2019) and *Online Distance Education: Towards a Research Agenda* (2014), edited by Olaf Zawachi-Richter & Terry Anderson) however, most scholarly articles examine a specific ODL leadership issue (e.g., leading change, creating a vision, leading learning design teams, etc.).

Michael Moore's & William Diehl's (2018, Eds.) *Handbook of Distance Education* focuses a section on policy and management and Michael Beaudoin's chapter on *Leadership in Distance Education Revisited* provides a solid review of DE leadership literature. However, again it accentuates the need for more scholarly research in this arena. In general, the research literature on ODL leadership can be categorised under administrative, instructional and support service leadership.

This author would also suggest that single versus dual-mode institutions present some similar leadership challenges and yet some very different leadership challenges. Comparing leadership at the Hellenic Open University (HOU) with leadership at a dual-mode university like the University of Edinburgh or New York University would show these contextual leadership differences. Unfortunately, most of the literature provides snapshots in time rather than formal frameworks or models of leadership specific to ODL. The leadership rhetoric amongst ODL leaders and practitioners is common and vocal; a commensurate level of empirical research on ODL leadership is limited.

### **Setting the Stage: Leadership and the Covid-19 Pandemic Response:**

The Covid-19 Pandemic provided a unique vantage point for the need for a leader shift by today's ODL leaders. Mrak (2019) suggested that the benefits of this shift are the capacity to seize opportunity, to be ready for success in shorter time frames and to lead teams in uncertain conditions. During the pandemic, educational institutions across the world responded by going online but were not agile enough to do it fast with efficiency, quality and consistency (Ice, 2020; Monash, 2020; Olcott, 2020; UNESCO, 2020).

The response was fast but there was only one option to a lockdown – go online or do nothing. It is likely that the post pandemic assessment will provide data that shows uneven successes in this response. Leaders didn't really have to make any decision other than go or no go. It was an international health crisis and failure to respond was not an option. There was only one option – lockdown = online. We can engage in another definitional and futile debate about the differences between online and remote learning, but this gets us no-where and is counter-productive. The issue was a leadership issue, not a technology issue during the pandemic (Bozkurt, et al., 2020).

Olcott (2020, 2020a) suggested that most organisations will go through three phases. Phase 1 was a digital call to arms and this one is in effect and was the emergency response of educational providers. Phase 1 is still in effect as of the writing of this paper in November 2020.

Phase 2, the core leadership phase, will occur over the next few months where organisations new to online will have to decide whether to go forward and transform their organisations for integrating online capacity for the long-term. This will require a complete rethinking of their organisational mission vision, staffing, infrastructure, technologies, competition, etc. This is a major decision crossroads for leaders. Dual mode institutions already offering some online learning will have to decide do they scale-up more online programmes? (Ice, 2020; Monash, 2020; Olcott, 2020).

It is imperative that this leadership decision is not undertaken by reluctant leaders and/or with half-hearted implementation or the online plan will fail. Leaders fail at organisational change usually during the implementation stages. Why? Because leaders lack the conviction and vision to go the distance and stay the course (Kotter, 2012; Olcott, 2020, 2020a, 2020b; Orlikowski & Hoffman, 1997; Yukl, 213). As Maxwell (2019) suggests, leader shift requires new thinking and insights to changing landscape and trends, but it also requires consistency.

Finally, organisations must go through Phase 3 of institutionalising their shifting vision, mission, culture and values. This often takes 3-5 years and solidifies a new culture and new normalcy across the organisation.

At this point in time, the term 'new normal' is ubiquitous amongst the rhetoric of writers and leaders yet no-one truly knows what the new normal will be. As such, this brief overview of the Covid-19 response is presented more to accentuate the fact that leaders face crises and challenges consistently and if the pandemic has provided any guidance it is that leadership matters, preparing your staff to teach online is good judgment, and the digital divide in homes is as serious in developed countries as developing countries. Transformational leadership is the capacity to respond and adapt to any normal, anytime, and anywhere. Are you up to the challenge?

### **Are You Fit to Lead an Online Distance Learning Organisation?**

The following section presents ten (10) key questions for you to self-assess your own capacity to lead an online and distance learning organisation. **Appendix A provides a summary *Fit to Lead Self-Assessment* for you to gauge your leadership style and abilities.** 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. Let's look at the basis of the ten areas and questions.

1. ***Action speaks louder than words. Does your leadership create trust, confidence and loyalty across the university beyond your rhetoric?*** You have to want the role – reluctant leadership does not work! (Burns, 2010; Harvey, 1974; Lewicki et al., 1998; 2006; Raven, 2008; Schein, 1985). Building trust may be the single most important personal attribute of any good leader. Leaders must inspire trust amongst their followers and stakeholders. Is empathy part of your relationship with your staff? Do your staff have complete trust in your rhetoric, commitments, and leadership? Your followers must see you as human; this is the first prerequisite of the Zorba Factor.
2. ***Are you in the vision making business or the revision making business?*** A vision is an ideal state of affairs for your organization at some point in the future – usually 3-5 years (Bass & Riggio, 2010; Hogan & Coote, 2014; Phelps et al., 2006; Wesley & Mintzberg, 1989; Yukl, 2013). This takes consistency and resolve to stay the course. Many leaders confuse strategic plans, mission and values statements with vision; these are important but tend to be short-term focused. The result is that vision ends up looking much like the status quo. What is your organisation's vision?

Stated more succinctly, where will the Hellen Open University (HOU) be in 2525? The University of Athens: The University of Crete: The University of the Aegean? Will it serve students outside of Greece? Will it have created alternative sources of revenue? What role will/should research play amongst



open university faculty? Will HOU offer programmes in English? Why or why not? Remember open universities are not the only kids on the block – dual mode traditional universities are gearing up to offer more online programmes and they represent a competitive threat to single-mode distance or open institutions. And, the market is going to get even more competitive in the next decade.

Many leaders talk a good game about re-envisioning their vision for the future but in the end the organisation reverts to the status quo and ends up looking pretty much like it did before. How will you as a leader ensure the vision becomes priority and embedded in your institution's culture? As a leader, you must bring the Zorba factor and passion to your vision. You must be willing to get the distance and stay the course.

**3. *Are you willing to accept the Leadership Deal - give all credit for organisational successes to your followers and take responsibility for all organisational failures?***

Ask yourself if you accept the deal – success to followers, muck-ups are on you! Leaders are role models who empower others – their reward, especially confident and dedicated leaders, is to shower praise and support on their staffs.' Organisational success and impacts are the leader's reward (Burns, 2010; Yukl, 2013). Leadership is also about making difficult decisions often driven by the vision, institutional priorities and changing economic and social forces inside and outside the organisation. This characteristic is often very telling about how a leader is perceived by his/her followers. If you are an aspiring leader that needs to be popular and get the credit for your organisation, perhaps a career change as a greeter at a shopping mall would be a better fit for you. Either lead and accept the deal or get out of the way and let those who embrace this challenge lead.

**4. *Can you lead and implement effective change? Having strong leadership attributes is not synonymous with the capacity for leading effective change?***

Olcott (2020b) has suggested that the capacity to formulate, plan, lead and successfully implement change may be the single most important leadership attribute for 21<sup>st</sup> century university leaders. Charismatic, smart, and innovative leaders often fail because despite a great vision and sound personal values, they have not developed the art of leading change (Kotter, 2012; Todnem, 2007). Leading change is much more than writing a vision statement and appointing a team – it's about empowering every member of the organisation with a 'benefits continuum' of why the change will lead to that higher state of affairs referenced above (Baker, 2007; Kotter, 2012); Hogan & Coote, 2014; Javidan et al., 2006; Olcott, 2020b)). In short, your vision should lead to a better future than the present.

**5. *Do you have the right team round you?***

First and foremost, and despite good intentions, hiring and depending upon friends in one's organisation sooner or later creates problems. This author would suggest you refrain from hiring close friends in your organisation. More importantly, the really leadership issue here is fit – do you have the right people in the right jobs for the right reasons to achieve the right outcomes and successes. Often leaders are perplexed because they have great talent mixes

but results are poor. The issue is often not the talent, it is how the talent within an organisation is being used. The leader must look closely at current staffing as well as hire with deliberate intent. What becomes obvious is sometimes people are simply in the wrong jobs – reframe the organisation with people in the right jobs creates a new synergy that leads to new opportunities and successes.

And, for the record, there is ample evidence that women are fully capable of being as good as or better leaders than men (Olcott & Hardy, 2006).

We should have learned something from the multitude of failures of the old model of the all-powerful, all knowing, male leader who could surely be the only person capable of leading complex organisations. Now that was poor common sense in practice. The Covid-19 pandemic has also shown quite clearly that many nations that respond effectively were led by women (Henley & Roy, 2020). Ladies, the leadership we need your passion and humanity. We need your leadership – apply now.

Embrace diversity of staff and do this genuinely. Make it a priority to build your diversity around gender, ethnicity, experience, age, race. When this is done with sincerity you will have a stronger, more resilient, and flexible organisation that can respond and adapt to any new situation and open doors for future success.

**6. Do you trust your own judgment and delegatory powers? (Schein, 1985, Raven, 2008; Harvey, 1974)).**

Great leaders embrace the 3Ds of empowering leadership – 1) delegate; 2) delegate; and 3) delegate more. ☺ Many organisational theorists in leadership, management and organisational development will tell you if you want to maximize the talents and results of your staff – delegate, delegate and delegate more. Can you give your staff wide latitude to make decisions in your absence, to move forward autonomously and exert their creative and innovative approaches to solving problems and creating opportunities? (Burns, 1978, 2010; Yukl, 2013, 2013a).

Do you know how you make decisions? Anyone can make decisions but everyone does not make consistently good decisions that demonstrates sound judgment and wisdom (Olcott, 2020b). Every problem or issue one faces in an organisation has at least (5) sound options for responding. The days of decisions being either-or; black or white; this or that are long gone. Today's complex world requires insightful leaders with proven judgment. Each decision matrix option has pros and cons and the leader and his/her team must decipher which one brings the most benefits to resolving the problem now but avoids similar issues in the future. Mark Twain said it best: ***'Good judgment comes from experience and a lot of that comes from poor judgment.'***

The Partnership Landmine - Leaders in single and dual mode open and distance learning organisations are wizards at creating things. What they don't do well is exit projects and initiatives that are not working. The best intentions and best ideas often derail. *Do you have an exit strategy to cut your losses, learn from the process, and move on?* (Harvey, 1974). It is better to address this upfront rather than when the boat starts to founder. Most leaders and their leadership teams let ego get in the way and persist much too long on initiatives



that need to be put to bed. Can you stand up and argue against the grain and trust your own leaderships abilities when everyone around is telling you the opposite? Agreeing with all your staff just to be participatory is not always the right choice if it is the wrong decision. This is called **judgment**. How do you rate your own decision and judgment abilities?

**7. *Digital technologies are, in and of themselves, are simply tools of the leader and organisation.***

Let me be clear. Digital technologies will not make a poor leader a great leader. Digital technologies will not make a poor teacher and great teacher; a poor researcher and great researcher and most importantly digital technologies will not transform your organisation in and of themselves. The required ingredient is leadership. Technologies are simply tools. Using technologies wisely can be tactically effective but over-reliance of digital toys can make a leader digitally blinded to his or her leadership role. This role is a human role in all its guises and once again it personifies the Zorba factor. Digital transformation, despite of the all the rhetoric, requires leader and personal transformations first.

**8. *Are you ready to leave the stage if best for the organisation and its members??*** Are you willing to defend your values, convictions, and vision even it brings negative consequences for your career? Do you really take integrity seriously? Are you willing to do what is right for your university and not what is convenient or easy? A tough question and the response 'it depends' is a very human reaction. Do you know when it's time to leave your leadership role? It takes a very mature and confident leader to know when it's time to go (Asghar, 2013). And, sometimes stepping down really means stepping aside and/or giving other members of your leadership team across the organisation more opportunities and responsibilities for leadership.

At the end of the day, however, you still have to ask yourself this question and how flexible are your values and boundaries such that others don't see you as changing with the wind to suit your own personal agenda (Lewicki et al., 2006). You can be flexible and still be grounded in your core personal and professional values (Burns, 2010). Burns (1978; 2010) suggests that *transformational leadership is moral leadership – leadership that provides positive benefits to large numbers of people. Character and integrity are prerequisites for leadership.*

**9. *Planning is, without exception, continuous and contingency planning is an essential component of continuous planning.*** Is your institutional planning process continuous and do you engage in creating alternative 'game plans' – contingencies? Are your planning processes embedded in your strategy for leading change? (Phelps et al., 2007; Westley & Mintzberg, 1989).

If you don't know where you are going then it doesn't really matter which road you take. Your vision and plan go hand in hand. If you do know then you likely have a plan – and plans usually don't come off perfectly. Engaging in contingency planning, particularly for big picture change initiatives, is worth the time and effort (Yukl, 2013).

10 ***The Zorba Factor is Your Leverage for Success***

The search for Zorba is the human side of enterprise. The human factor puts leaders back in the mortal frame as human beings who have incredible and demanding responsibilities for leadership. Moreover, a good leader simply can't lead without followers. In the past, leaders have perceived weakness or personal flaws as personal failures – this is simply not true. Followers want real people leading them – people who embrace empathy, empowerment, personal flaws, and who can extend the bonds of trust, integrity to everyone in the organisation. The final summary of this paper will expand on the Zorba Factor for you, as a Greek, or for the non-Greek to take with you on your leadership journey. The search for Zorba is not an abstract metaphor. It is real and powerful and puts humanity and passion back in leadership.

**Beyond the Search for Zorba: Practical Leadership Challenges for Online Learning**

As Nikos Kazantzakis so eloquently shared in his story (*Βίος και Πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά* (Life and Times of Alexis Zorbas, 1946; adapted 1964 *Zorba the Greek*), Zorba's passion for life and adventure did not always compensate for his human flaws. Like Zorba, visionary leadership and organisational transformation take more than just putting humanity and passion back in the mix to create success. This article has argued that the core foundations of leadership require us to put the Zorba factor back in to leadership – passion and humanity as the core values.

Leaders often get side tracked because their preferred style of leadership gives way to their enacted style of leadership (Lamond, 2004). This means the world has become increasingly complex and organisations must often respond, shift, and adapt to changing markets, customer needs, competitor actions, and the broader economic, political, and social winds of change. Case in point – Covid-19 pandemic.

What are the practical challenges that online learning leaders will face in the next five years?

1. **Securing alternative sources of revenue beyond government.** New revenue streams could include online training programmes to business and industry; targeting market-drive programmes in English to serve students outside Greece, for example. Common sense suggests with the UK out of the EU, competition may increase with more providers offering programs in English. English is the bridge language for business in Europe. Are you going to compete in this market? You can take pride in offering only programmes in Greek – but you severely limit your markets and your potential revenue streams. Dependency on one or two sources of funding is usually the road to financial disaster. A case in point – university budgets due to the pandemic are at crisis levels after only eight months due to lost revenues.
2. **Market differentiation** – What makes your universities unique compared to your competitors? Remember your students have more choices than at any other time in history. They could be enrolling in a course right this moment with an online university from the U.S., Australia, Turkey, Africa?
3. **Competition** – Whilst this is related to market differentiation, it is also a reminder that the market will simply have more providers. Many of these may be dual mode universities that astutely offer only their very best programmes

online based on market demand. What prevents the U of Athens or the University of Crete from competing with the HOU? The HOU leadership cannot control what other institutions do but it can position HOU for the future to compete effectively.

4. **Micro-Credentials** – Degrees and certificates may not become obsolete but we will see diverse new credentials in the market. Employers need workers with focused skills and abilities. The credential landscape is already being transformed. In Greece, this will also require greater collaboration with K-12 high schools and universities to ensure continuity and flexibility that align with government regulations but also government workforce and economic priorities. This re-packaging of knowledge will also include OERs and MOOCs provided they can be integrated into the institution’s culture and core values. OERs fail because advocates fail to understand the academic culture in which open content must function. The recent UNESCO OER Recommendation again highlights that despite all the hype and rhetoric, OERs are still lagging far behind earlier predictions (UNESCO, 2020a).
5. **Balancing Quality with Growth** – most distance learning universities, including open universities, experience major financial problems because they grow too fast. The Open University mantra is access and scale. The idea of more students is good, costs are kept low and everyone lives happily ever after. This model is flawed for reasons beyond the scope of this paper. Leaders can respond to this by ensuring expansion for serving students is sustained with commensurate levels of support services, qualified faculty, technological infrastructure, and reasonable and equitable workloads for faculties and support staff.
6. **Quality, Flexibility and Agility** – successful online universities in the next decade will be characterised by academic quality, flexibility in how and when they offer programs, duration of academic sessions, etc. and the agility to adapt to new market needs efficiently and rapidly. This competitive landscape will not be kind to traditional delivery models of taking a year to decide whether you will respond to emerging needs. If you can’t or won’t respond, students and employers will go to an institution that will. The only thing that will be obsolete in this emerging competitive market is business as usual. Students have diverse options for pursuing higher education and they are and will increasingly exercise their customer preferences.

### **Summary**

The search for Zorba is about putting humanity back in leadership and refocusing and reframing leadership with humanistic values that empower and sustain an organisation and its members. The Zorba factor is the soul of the organisation embodied in its leadership. The heart of the organisation is its followers. Together, this synergy sustains, nurtures and builds the organisation around humanistic values, not simply organisational charts and formal positions.

In a practical context, The search for Zorba is leadership that values, emulates, and embraces empathy, teamwork, innovation, empowerment, knowledge, creativity, adaptability, compassion, passion and commitment that holds the organisation together through the highs and lows, the ebbs and flows and the uncharted waters

that face all modern universities. The Zorba Factor is the glue that binds the organisation, its members, partners and stakeholders and society together. It gives the organisation and its members meaning and purpose to thrive.

Are you fit to lead an online distance learning organisation? Within the context of the search for Zorba this is the focus of this paper. Ten key questions are presented for you to self-assess your leadership capacity in online learning. The questions address your capacity to build trust, create a vision, accept the leadership deal, lead effective change, create the right team, delegate with autonomy, deploy technology as tools, step aside and allow others to assume leadership roles, make planning continuous rather than option and build and nurture all of these under the core foundation of the Zorba Factor – the human side of enterprise. In short, can you put humanity back in your leadership and organisation?

As a leader the search for Zorba will only get you part of the way. You will still have to face the practical challenges that the environment and high education brings to your doorstep. Indeed, you may escape this with a few lovely days on Kriti, Andros or Rodos but as sure as the Aegean's magical colours transcend the soul, these organisational issues and challenges will be waiting at your office back at the university.

How will you diversify your funding sources? Resources matter and like it or not, you will need to pursue this with the zest and passion of Alexi Zorba. How will you define your university that differentiates and provides a better deal for students than your competitors? Who are your competitors and what do they do better than your university online? Are you going to navigate the micro-credentials markets – it's here so you might as well start getting ready – your competitors already are gearing up. Access is good but it has to be managed astutely or you put your online organisation at risk. Finally, quality is job one and you must be a flexible and agile organisation that is responsive, adaptive and whose core human values embrace people as the organisation's most valuable resource.

In the final analysis, the search for Zorba is about finding the passion and humanity in each of us.

## References

- Asghar, R. (2013). What rock God Robert Plant can teach CEOs and celebrities. *Forbes* <https://www.forbes.com/sites/robashghar/2013/06/28/what-rock-god-robert-plant-can-teach-ceos-and-celebrities/#61a8af9d432b>
- Baker, S.D. (2007). [Followership: The theoretical foundation of contemporary construct](#). *Journal of Leadership & Organizational Studies*, 14(1), 50-60.
- Bass, B. M. & Riggio, R. E. (2010). The transformational model of leadership. In Gill Robinson Hickman (Ed.) *Leading organizations: Perspectives for a new era* (pp. 76-86). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Beaudoin, M. (2018). *Leadership in distance education revisited*. In Michael G. Moore & William C. Diehl, *Handbook of distance education*. Routledge.
- Bozkurt, A., Jung, I., Xiao, J., Vladimirschi, V., Schuwer, R., Egorov, G., Lambert, S. R., Al Freih, M., Pete, J., Olcott, Jr., D. Rodes, V., Aranciaga, I., Bali, M., Alvarez, Jr., A. V., Roberts, J., Pazurek, A., Raffaghelli, J. E., Panagiotou, N., de Coëtlogon, P., Shahadu, S., Brown, M., Asino, T. I. Tumwesige, J., Ramirez Reyes, T., Barrios Ipenza, E., Ossiannilsson, E., Bond, M., Belhamel, K., Irvine, V., Sharma, R. C., Adam, T., Janssen, B., Sklyarova, T., Olcott, N. Ambrosino, A., Lazou, C., Mocquet, B., Mano, M., & Paskevicius, M. (2020). A global outlook to the interruption of education due to COVID-19 pandemic: Navigating in a time of uncertainty and crisis. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 1-126. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3878572>
- Burns, J. M. (1978). *Leadership*. New York: Harper and Row.

- Burns, J. M (2010). Leadership (Excerpts). In Gill Robinson Hickman (Ed.) *Leading organizations: Perspectives for a new era* (pp. 66-75). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.
- Harvey, Jerry. (1974). The Abilene paradox: The management of agreement. *Organizational Dynamics*, Summer74, 3 (1), 63-80.
- Henley, J. & Roy, E. A. (2020). Are women more successful at managing the coronavirus crisis, 25 April 2020, The Morning Guardian. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/apr/25/why-do-female-leaders-seem-to-be-more-successful-at-managing-the-coronavirus-crisis>
- Hogan, S.J., & Coote, L.V. (2014). Organizational culture, innovation, and performance: A test of Schein's model. *Journal of Business Research*, 67(8), 1609-1621.
- Ice, P. (2020). *Transformation and the long game in higher education*. Available at <https://wallyboston.com/transformation-long-game-higher-education/>
- Javidan, M., Dorfman, P.W., Sully de Luque, M., & House, R.J. (2006). In the eye of the beholder: Cross cultural lessons in leadership from Project GLOBE. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 20(1), 67-90.
- Kazantzakis, N. Kazantzakis, Nikos. Βίος και Πολιτεία του Αλέξη Ζορμπά (Life and Times of Alexis Zorbas, 1946); adapted 1964 *Zorba the Greek*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953; 1969.
- Kotter, J. (2012). *Leading change*. Cambridge: Harvard Business Review Press.
- Lacerenza, C. N., Marlow, S. L., Tannenbaum, S. I., & Salas, E. (2018). Team development interventions: Evidence-based approaches for improving teamwork. *American Psychologist*, 73(4), 517-531.
- Lamond, D. (2004). A matter of style: Reconciling Henri and Henry. *Management Decision*, 42(2), 330-356.
- Lewicki, R., McAllister, D.J., & Bies, R.J. (1998). Trust and distrust: New relationships and realities. *Academy of Management Review*, 23(3), 438-460.
- Lewicki, R.J., Tomlinson, E.C., & Gillespie, N. (2006). Models of interpersonal trust development: Theoretical approaches, empirical evidence, and future directions. *Journal of Management*, 32(6), 991-1022.
- Maxwell, J. C. (2019). *Leadershift: The 11 essential changes every leader must embrace*. HarperCollins.
- Miller, G., Benke, M., Chaloux, B., Regan, L. C., Schroeder, R., Smutz, W., & Swan, K. (2019). *Leading the e-learning transformation of higher education: Meeting the challenges of technology and distance education*. Publisher: Online Learning Consortium.
- Mintzberg, H. (1975). The manager's job: Folklore and fact. *Harvard Business Review*, 53(4), 49-61.
- Monash University Education Future. (2020). *Rapid response report: After Covid-19: The long-term impacts of the Coronavirus crisis on education* Contributors Christine Grove, Kelly-Ann Allen, Ruth Jeanes, Beatriz Gallo Cordoba, Mike Phillips, Carol Perrotta, Neil Selwyn, Bronwyn Cumbo, Lucas, Walsh, Bertalan Magyar, Jane Wilkinson, Amanda Heffernan, Emily Berger, Stephanie Wescott, Deborah Corrigan, Jennifer Hall, Kathleen Aikens, Catherine Waite, and Mark Rickinson. <https://cog-live.s3-ap-southeast-2.amazonaws.com/n/1271/2020/Mar/31/rSYcIRg7jv0K1fmxUr1s.pdf>
- Moore, M. G. & Diehl, W. C. (Eds.). (2018). Handbook of distance education (4<sup>th</sup> ed.). Routledge.
- Mrak, T. (2019). What is leadershift and why you should embrace it. <https://medium.com/pldx-org/what-is-leadershift-and-why-you-should-embrace-it-55074be08d20>
- Olcott, D. J. & Hardy, D. (2006) (Eds.). *Dancing on the glass ceiling: Women, leadership and technology*. Madison WI: Atwood Publishing.
- Olcott, D. J. (2020). The leadership imperative: Back to the future after the Covid-19 pandemic. Published by the International Council for Open and Distance Education (ICDE) <https://www.icde.org/icde-blog>
- Olcott, D. J. (2020a). Going online: Life in the fast lane or so the story goes. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*, 15(1), 180-184. <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.3881634>
- Olcott, D.J. (2020). (In press). In search of leadership: Practical Perspectives on leading distance education organisations. *Asian Journal of Distance Education*.
- Orlikowski, W.J., and Hoffman. J.D. (1997). An improvisational model for change management. *Sloan Management Review*, 38(2), 11-21.
- Phelps, L.; Parayitam, S; Olson, B. (2007). Edwards Deming, Mary P. Follett and Frederick W. Taylor: Reconciliation of differences in organizational and strategic leadership. *Academy of Strategic Management Journal*, 6, 1-14, <https://www.abacademies.org/articles/asmjvol6no12007.pdf#page=9>
- Raven, B. H. (2008). The bases of power and the power/interaction model of interpersonal influence. *Analyses of Social Issues & Public Policy*, 8(1), 1-22.



- Schein, E. H. (1985). *Organizational culture and leadership*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Senge, P. (2006). *The fifth discipline: The art and practice of the learning organization* (2<sup>nd</sup> ed.). Doubleday.
- Todnem, R. (2007). Organisational change management: A critical review. *Journal of Change Management*, 5(4), 369-380.
- UNESCO. (2020). <https://en.unesco.org/covid19/educationresponse>
- UNESCO. (2020a). UNESCO OER Recommendation <https://en.unesco.org/themes/building-knowledge-societies/oer/recommendation>
- Westley, F., & Mintzberg, H. (1989). Visionary leadership and strategic management. *Strategic Management Journal*, 10(1), 17-32.
- Yukl, G. (2013). Charismatic and transformational leadership. In *Leadership in organizations*, (8th ed., pp. 309-339). New York, NY: Pearson.
- Yukl, G. (2013a). Contingency theories and adaptive leadership. In *Leadership in organizations*, (8th ed., pp. 162-184).
- Zawachi-Richter, O. & Anderson T. (2014). *Online distance education: Towards a research agenda*. AU Press. Athabasca University.



## Appendix A

### Fit to Lead Self-Assessment

The following Fit to Lead Self-Assessment 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?
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?
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?
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?
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 culture and environment?