

Chapter 1

Long Tail Leadership: Understanding Soft Power Affecting Organizations

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ABSTRACT

The emergence of a growing long tail has added complexity to organisational leadership. Trends affecting the individual come from social, economic and technological sources and affect leadership behaviours and this in turn affects society. In order to understand this interconnection, lower level influences and how they affect the higher-level visible signs are discussed. These lead to influences on behaviour. Influences which are felt as intensity and embeddedness of engagement, decision-management, feedback ability and motivators. This chapter begins with a discussion of causes for this phenomenon and concludes with ways to work with the long tail, either from within as a member, or externally as a leader. The chapter ends with a brief comment on future research based on findings discussed in this chapter.

INTRODUCTION

The discussion in this chapter is based on original empirical research into ‘engagement with digital networked technologies’ and involved both qualitative and quantitative research into personality factor correlations related to engagement. The research leads to insights into how leadership is being challenged by technology. This chapter explores a tangential aspect of the core research and so the quantitative research is not discussed in detail in this chapter. Literature related to this new social phenomenon is sparse and in order to present this argument the literature review is

not specifically confined to the background section of this chapter but dispersed throughout the discussion.

Qualitative research in the form of interviews did however reveal significant insights pertinent to this chapter and have therefore been used to substantiate some aspects of the discussion. During this research it was observed that the participants who were deeply engaged with technology also appeared to participate in ‘social activism’ to a greater degree. This raised the question: what mechanism could translate minor acts of activism on a mass scale into social change and challenges for leaders of organizations?

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We can see a number of changes rippling through society. One of the most startling is the behaviour of the long tail. The previously least influential members of society are becoming more important both as a proportion of the total and in their willingness to exert influence. *It appears that the long tail is getting fatter!* There are significant behavioural changes at the individual level that can be traced to social trends: the individual believes they have self-worth, they expect their individualism to be acknowledged and they expect to be instantly gratified. *The long tail is more assertive!* Of great significance are the changed behaviours resulting from engagement with technology: the expectation that in the digital environment things are cheap, fast, connected and that there will be a like-minded peer group to support and assist them. *The long tail has expectations!* In the long tail *it is harder to differentiate* leaders from those being led: individuals may simultaneously be both. Most people in society are participating in the long tail even if not aware of it!

The discussion looks at digital technology as an environment and how the individual operates within the duality of real-world and digital environments. It then continues to a discussion on digital technology as a tool and how through engagement with the technology the individual becomes enmeshed and synthesized with the technologies. This leads onto how engagement with technology amplifies individual's behaviours, which affects society and challenges leaders. Each challenge has a suggestion for coping with this social phenomenon. Finally the chapter concludes with a look at future research directions. It should be noted that the nature of this topic requires a discussion in order to lead the reader to an understanding of the multiple elements and how they interact. To achieve this a narrative style of writing has been used.

BACKGROUND

The origin of the term 'long tail' is from statistical distributions such as the Pareto distribution. The Pareto distribution was named after Vilfredo Pareto a civil engineer and economist who observed a power law probability distribution that is now used in descriptions of social, scientific and many other types of observable phenomena. Generally speaking the graph of such a distribution will start high and quickly drops off as a concave curved line, approaching zero along the X-axis. Events at the far ends of the axis have an increasingly low probability of occurrence. The Pareto principle applies in many cases, which gave rise to the 80/20 rule: 80% are accounted for by the first 20% of items in the distribution. It should be noted that the distribution is not strictly 80/20, it may vary.

Initially Pareto used his distribution to describe wealth-allocation and income distribution. The distribution illustrated how a large portion of wealth of a society is owned by a small percentage of the people within that society. Application of the distribution soon moved to other situations in which a similar distribution of the "small" to the "large." For example: The sizes of human settlements (few cities, many villages), file size distribution of Internet traffic which uses the TCP protocol (few larger files, many small ones), the values of oil reserves in oil fields (few large fields, many small fields), sizes of sand particles, the standardized price returns on individual stocks (Reed & Jorgensen, 2004) and hard disk drive error rates (Schroeder, Damouras, & Gill, 2010). Recently there has been awareness that the influence of technology is making the tail longer and fatter. The formerly least influential 80% of a population are becoming more significant as a proportion of the total. Interest and research into the long tail phenomenon has been growing with

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