Chapter 1
Leadership in the Digital Age:
Rhythms and the Beat of Change

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces the scope and focus of the new book. The reader is briefly introduced to the definitions and debates about leadership and management boundaries, differences, and overlapping responsibilities in the digital age. Drawing on both theory and practice, current issues and topics are covered in depth, providing an introduction and overview of perceptible trends and scenarios relevant to the current post-Global Financial Crisis (GFC) leadership outlook for global business. The authors then provide an outline and overview of the topics and themes of each chapter and a coherent rationale for developing discussions and research from our first book "Dynamic Models of Leadership for Global Business: Enhancing digitally connected environments".

INTRODUCTION

It's a new era of business and consumerism—and we all play a role in defining it. Today's biggest trends - the mobile web; social media; and a younger digital-savvy demographic; have produced a new interactive landscape. Such emerging digital resources have brought demands for changes in many societies, which go beyond simply increasing access to the technology per se for consumers. For example recent research by Pew Global Researchers (2014) has noted that 20% of the world has mobile and online access and this has reinforced other social demands in particular from the younger generation who are usually the first to take up the newer technologies and access the web. As the report states:

Majorities in 22 of 24 countries surveyed say it is important that people have access to the internet without government censorship. In 12 nations, at least seven-in-ten hold this view. Support for internet freedom is especially strong in countries where a large percentage of the population is online. And, in most of the countries polled, young people are particularly likely to consider internet freedom a priority. (Pew Global Research Center, March 19, 2014)

This democratization of information is not limited to the customer sphere, but also has a significant impact on internal organizational processes. There is a well-researched and growing recognition that in consequence 'Business as usual' is no longer a viable option, and it is not logical to continue applying models of leadership founded in traditional 'best practice' experience. These and other changes beg many questions about what leaders must do to succeed and what new 'psychological contracts' need to be negotiated between citizens, followers, employees and the formal and informal leaders in all organizations in order to sensibly and practically define what is allowable, acceptable, desirable, possible and mandatory in the workplace today. As a consequence, we live today in a world rich in digital resources, but as yet we share a poverty of leadership competence in exploration and exploitation of these resources. Solis (2011) and Smith and Cockburn (2013; 2014) explore this complex information revolution, explaining how it has changed the future of business; media; culture; and leadership; and detail what leaders can do to address these changes.

At the time of writing the leaders of many nations and businesses are under threat and are failing. As many as 40% of all new leaders fail within the first 18 months according to recent surveys, thus the leadership crisis continues to grow more threatening and as leaders' world of work grows more complex each year, the leaders' own self-doubt about their skills is magnified (Newhall, 2011, Smith & Cockburn, 2013, xii). As noted above, both organizations and leaders at all levels today have to work hard and strive to continuously maintain a sharp, cutting-edge profile within their organizations (Pretorius & Roux, 2011), as well as reinvent themselves to address the constantly shifting unpredictable opportunities and constraints of operating in a global business environment. There is as pressing need to search for more effective, dynamic leadership models in order to keep pace intellectually and

practically with the heady pace and complex swirl of new socio digital media, devices and applications bubbling to the surface of our lives each day. The practical drawback here is that many current definitions of leadership continue to be much contested in an often confused area of academic research; practitioner debate; and often lagging public perceptions fuelled by the popular media (Kets de Vries, 1993; Higgs, 2003; Ruettimann, 2011; Krohe, 2011).

In this chapter the authors provide a very brief overview of traditionally accepted definitions of leadership in organizations as discussed in detail in Smith and Cockburn (2013; 2014). We also acquaint the reader with the new up-to-date flexible, gender-neutral leadership model presented in Smith and Cockburn (2013; 2014) that we believe will successfully address current and future leadership demands in digitally defined contexts.

In general, as we have noted before, many leadership definitions are either so broad that they become bland; so narrow that little of any practical significance can be elicited; or in the case of public perceptions, tend to refer to historic or military metaphors of heroic leaders (Smith & Cockburn, 2013). In addition, many of these definitions often seem to be based on versions of leadership activities and competences that are out of touch with a globalized world of cloud computing, viral marketing, ecological disasters, and the Volatile, Uncertain Complex and Ambiguous ('VUCA') world of today (Smith & Cockburn, 2013, pp.6-7, Lawrence, 2013). The older certainties of the more stable and less disrupted 'best practice' world are gone.

That there is some appreciation of the nature of today's VUCA world, is indicated by the current academic consensus that best leadership practice does revolve more closely around the transformational leadership styles than the older transactional or traits-based models. So, although there is debate about the character of it, or how it impacts on the leader or followers, there is at least some implicit or explicit recognition that

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