

Chapter XII

Millennium Leadership Inc.:

A Case Study of Computer and Internet-Based Communication in a Simulated Organization

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ABSTRACT

Technology, communication, leadership, and work processes are inextricably linked in contemporary organizations. An understanding of these topics and an ability to apply these understandings in the workplace is becoming increasingly critical for workers in all sectors. In this chapter, we discuss some of the competencies that are vital for success in the contemporary workplace, and provide a description of one approach to developing these skills: a simulated organization designed to create a dynamic classroom learning environment. We explain how simulations help students develop “real-world” competencies in effective communication and writing practices in mediated and geographically dispersed contexts, and we present how educators, students, and professionals may benefit from this approach.

INTRODUCTION

For many years, scholars and educators have investigated leadership in proximate settings—that is, in settings where leaders and subordinates are co-located with one another (e.g., Bass & Avolio, 1994; Burns, 1978; Fiedler, 1967; Mintzberg, 1994,

1973; Yukl, 1989, 1981). Contemporary organizations, however, often utilize geographically dispersed work groups. As a result, distanced leadership has become a timely and relevant issue.¹ Various degrees of geographical dispersion exist. Some organizations employ “telecommuting,” a practice in which members may work at home, on

the road, and/or at the office. Others have teams and operations that are globally dispersed. In these emergent organizational forms, computer and Internet-based technologies are the primary means through which organizational members and leaders communicate (Benson-Armer & Hsieh, 1997; Hymowitz, 1999; Townsend, DeMarie, & Hendrickson, 1998; Van Aken, Hop, & Post, 1998). Technology, communication, leadership, and work processes are inextricably linked in geographically dispersed organizations.

In this chapter, we present an approach to teaching and learning distanced leadership and mediated communication competencies in the classroom. Specifically, we: (1) discuss the role of simulations for approximating “real-world” dynamics within the classroom, (2) present a course design that allows educators to do so, and (3) give examples of computer and Internet-based communication from this course, *Leadership in Groups and Organizations*, developed by the authors at Rutgers University. Our approach is grounded in theory and empirical research in organizational communication, leadership in virtual teams/organizations, and written communication. The objectives of this chapter are to explain our approach to using simulation as an instructional model, highlight the outcomes of this approach, and discuss how educators, students, and professionals may benefit from such a design.

BACKGROUND

Leadership and communication are central to successful distanced work relationships (Kayworth & Leidner, 2002; Wiesenfeld, Raghuram, & Garud, 1999). And, leadership and communication are closely related phenomena (Witherspoon, 1997). For instance, *leadership is interactive and dynamic*. It constitutes an ongoing process of interactions between leaders and followers (Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003). *Leadership is also enacted through communication*. Lead-

ers’ communication competencies are critical to leadership practice. Indeed, many of the behaviors that characterize exceptional leaders are communicative in nature (i.e., a leader may have an excellent vision for the future; but unless he/she can articulate it to stakeholders, that vision may not become a reality). To be an effective leader, then, one must be effective in their communication with multiple audiences.

For educators, a critical question arises: Can leadership and communication competencies be effectively taught in the classroom? We suggest here that they can be taught and learned if one follows certain criteria (see Connaughton, Lawrence, & Ruben, 2003; Prince, 2001). One criterion of leadership development programs is to provide learning opportunities for students to apply and practice their knowledge, allowing them to experience the consequences of their actions (Prince, 2001). In other words, in order to develop their leadership potential, students need opportunities to lead. And, given contemporary organizational realities, students not only must have opportunities to lead others who are co-located with them, they also must practice leading in *dispersed* organizational and team settings.

Distanced Leadership & Communication Technologies

Distanced leadership—leading others who are not co-located with you—can be more complicated than leadership in co-located settings (see Duarte & Snyder, 1999; Fisher & Fisher, 2001; Haywood, 1998; Lipnack & Stamps, 1997; O’Hara-Devereaux & Johansen, 1998). Proximate settings allow organizational members and leaders to communicate frequently and spontaneously, provide opportunities for leaders and members to interact immediately if necessary, and foster the chance for work relationships to develop and grow (Davenport & Pearlson, 1998). Leading over time and space, however, is more complex than leading co-located teams because: (1) trust

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