

## **Creating an Optimal Environment for Distance Learning: Discovering Leadership Issues**

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# **Creating an Optimal Environment for Distance Learning: Discovering Leadership**

## **Issues**

### **Abstract**

Current literature does not provide exhaustive information about leadership as part of teaching and learning. The distance learning format creates a platform for developing leadership skills in all educational process participants. However, this form of education is often confused with the denial of the importance of education and the ideas of “unschooling”, which leads to a negative attitude in society towards extramural forms of study. This study demonstrates the value of distance learning in the education system and describes specific leadership skills that can be improved through distance learning. The study disproves unconfirmed judgments and clichés about detachment, loneliness and the degradation of communicative competencies among distance learning students. The study as well outlines the impact of extramural forms of study on the development of inclusiveness and tolerance for self-expression in educational classes. Thus, it was proven that distance learning has a positive influence on the development of these skills.

**Keywords:** distance learning; educational leadership; leadership theory; optimal environment, literature.

### **Introduction**

Across the world, distance education is developing through the establishment of open or distance education universities that use the latest computer technologies (Chakraborty and Chakraborty, 2004; Rego et al., 2007; Crawford, 2012). In modern Europe, there is a great deal of educational institutions offering distance-learning programmes. The interest in technology-based education programmes involving satellite services and networking has increased

significantly (Plas and Lewis, 2000; Becker et al., 2002; Bennet et al., 2003; Benjamin and Flynn, 2006; Hank, 2010).

Distance learning is a new promising technology designed to engage students in independent learning. Such a system uses electronic technologies for communication between students and teachers separated in space (location), time, or both (Silverthorne, 2001; Razik and Swanson, 2010).

In the early 30s, Kurt Lewin studied the influence of group forces on the behavior of an individual, and drew his attention to leadership. It turned out that a group can have a significant controlling effect on a leader, overcoming his/her impact with time (Bush and Glover, 2004). In education management, a leader serves as a mentor who influences students at the administrative level. Sometimes, there can be a team of multiple leaders, whose role is to find better ways of teaching (including distance teaching).

Leadership refers to managerial decision-making process (Bryk et al., 2010). Management is a process of making right decisions, even though they may not satisfy the majority of participants engaged in teaching and learning (Judge et al., 2002).

A good leader encourages his/her colleagues to solve a common task, contributes to their progress on unlocking the inner power, and makes them feel as comfortable with their work as if they are co-owning the company. The interest of employees in dedication, a sense of responsibility and pride in their organization are crucial to effective performance of this organization (Day, 2000).

Management and leadership operate at different levels. While the first finds the best possible ways of solving problems, the second determines what exactly needs to be done. Most leadership theories view leadership through the lens of individual's experience, abilities and potential (Garrison, 2011).

Researchers usually define leadership according to the goals of their studies. Thus, there are as many definitions of leadership as there are people, engaged in leadership matters. Leadership is a process in which a person interacts with others in order to reach a specific goal (Giessner and Schubert, 2007).

This study explores the potential for creating an optimal environment for distance learning using the theory of leadership. In this regard, the survey was conducted with the aim to identify specific skills of a leader. Thus, it was proven that distance learning has a positive influence on the development of these skills.

### **Theoretical framework**

Psychological studies distinguish various styles of leadership that come from different concepts. The most famous concepts of leadership are:

#### *Trait Theory of (Charismatic) Leadership*

A leader possesses unique personality traits. There are many different lists of these traits and none of them is unified and complete. The theory of charismatic leadership states that a leader is born with innate qualities of a leader like charisma, which in Greek means “a divine gift”. A charismatic leader enjoys absolute confidence in the group, encourages submission (Morrison, 2010)

#### *Situational Theory of Leadership*

This theory accepts the trait theory and assumes a change in leadership styles from situation to situation. At this point, challenges and communication in different situations bring to the foreground the individuals who dominate others in at least one quality. With a discarded statement about the inheritance of traits, this theory expresses a belief that a particular situation

stimulates and ensures full manifestation of specific leadership features. A situational leader leads in one situation and does not demonstrate leadership qualities in another. Yet, he/she is labelled a leader anyway. If a person proved him/herself as a situational leader in one situation, then he/she might be recognized as a leader in a similar situation.

### *Behavioral Approach to Leadership*

A leader behaves in one of several ways. The effectiveness of a chosen style of behaviour depends on a specific situation: when the situation changes, so does the style. This approach analyses and classifies various leadership styles. However, this approach is less developed in comparison to situational theory.

### *Relational Leadership Theory*

A leader focuses on togetherness and builds ties between group members. This theory embraces personal traits structure of a leader, the lasting period of group's existence, etc. It defines leadership as a result of joint activities, when each member of the group adds to the solution. Thus, common tasks and goals, as well as common setting and other factors, are predictors of leadership. Most of domestic studies on leadership gather around this theory.

A person tends to organize his/her knowledge about the world via schemas (stereotypes) (Kaplan and Kaiser, 2003). When processing social information, three types of schemes are used: personal, situational, and role-based. The latter may be related to occupations, positions in a group. The scheme allows recognition of a stimulus and behavior prediction. This is how leadership stereotypes are born. In order to overcome inconsistencies that arise between stereotype-based expectations and actual behavior of another person, the individual makes causal attribution, or ignores those inconsistencies, or aligns roles, or labels a person as deviant.

## Methods

Methods used in this study are a survey, testing, quantitative and qualitative analysis, statistical data processing. The survey comprises a Leadership Stereotypes Questionnaire. The respondents were 800 students of both sexes, aged 18–20, from 2 universities in Kazan. Tests that were in use include a Twenty Statements Test (TST) in Bogomolova's modification and the J. L. Moreno's sociometric test to determine informal structures of leadership and to track energy vectors of interpersonal relationships in a group. Additionally, a Bem Sex-Role Inventory (BSRI) was applied in Rean's modification (Farkas and Wetlaufer, 1996; Rosete and Ciarrochi, 2005; Eacott, 2015).

Data for processing is t-distributed. Correlation and cluster analyses are additionally involved.

A Leadership Stereotypes Questionnaire included three blocks of questions:

**Block 1.** Questions about leadership stereotypes, leader's role in a group, (fe)male and (in)formal leadership.

**Block 2.** Questions about one's dependence upon the opinion of others, about factors influencing interpersonal perception as seen by students;

Induction methods are also used in order to identify the specifics of the direct implementation of the learning format outside the institution. The synthesis method is used in order to determine how distance learning approaches impact the educational institution in society. System-based institutional analysis is used in assessing the place of distance learning in the education system and identifying the influence connections within this system.

## Results

The process of informatization of society directly affects the education system as an institution. There are such valuable aspects as freedom of a person, protection of his/her rights to self-expression and choice of professional activity. These aspects stimulate the emergence of

tendencies to receive educational services distantly by people of different age. Distance learning eliminates the necessity for students to be physically present in the same classroom with the teacher. Information technology makes educational process more accessible to the listener, regardless of his/her geographical location. The asynchrony principle of classes creates convenience and, as a result, satisfaction with the educational process from both the student and the teacher. Since the creation of the lesson, a period of learning, the completion of tasks and assessment are separated in time. Thus, the student is more focused and motivated, since he/she conducts the lesson in a convenient place and time slot.

Freedom of choice and the simultaneous commitment to learn a lesson, provoke the student to lead a more disciplined lifestyle, keep a schedule of classes, use time management tools in everyday life.

It is important to understand that the principles of extramural studies (home education for children or distance learning for adults) are not about the lack of control over the process of learning (which is typical for “unschooling”). Extramural studies imply permanent tracking of student success through the electronic system, access to which is possible from any computer. The student does not skip classes while at home, but uses his/her time more rationally in order to study the basic program and concentrate on the scientific areas of his/her interest. In such conditions, the extramural student receives more in-depth knowledge than his/her intramural peers. Since intramural education always averages the level of educational information offered to students. Intramural education as well cannot be adapted to the quality of training of each individual student.

Moreover, a visit to an educational institution takes a lot of time (6-10 hours a day, 5-6 days a week, from 6-7 to 17-18 years), practically depriving children of their childhood. This is especially true for younger students, for whom the main method of knowing the world is figurative, and not logically rational. (Bruns et al., 2011)

Daily physical presence in an educational institution limits the child's independence, gives him/her an extremely limited right to choose his/her free time from school (for example, the obligation to do homework). A child is also limited while choosing a social environment, and a way of interacting with the outside world. A child lacks independency in his/her judgments and actions.

Thus, a new institution appears in society, which can be called a "virtual school", where a school means a system of receiving both general education and higher education. All processes and relationships in such a system are completely remote and virtualized. The physical distance between teachers and students creates the effect of reducing internal stress, which has a positive effect on improving communication skills on both sides. In such communication, there are less stereotype, social clichés and tangible subordination. As subordination often interferes with the learning process and deprives the pedagogical process of trust. (Giessner and Schubert, 2007). The lack of physical contact of the student with the team does not imply his/her loneliness and lack of experience of group dynamics. A methodologically well-organized process of distance learning injects a student into various teams on a permanent basis. For example, up to 20 students can attend an online lesson, the teacher sees each of them, and the students see each other, socialization is not lost and is maintained by student chats. During such lesson, students work directly with each other on some tasks. This practice allows student to test different communication strategies and to be at the same level of understanding with peers. The student develops leadership skills through communication with new partners.

A survey among students confirmed that the leader has identification indicators. To the majority of students, the way other students see them is important. Factors influencing the way one or another member of the group sees someone as a leader were reported to be behavior (80%), open mind and intelligence (50%), and appearance (i.e. physical attractiveness, style, etc.) (15%).



The majority of respondents see a leader as a person possessing traits, such as responsibility (85%), intelligence (81%), willpower and strong character (75%), kindness (75%), honesty (62.5%), persistence (50%), sense of humor (50%), emotional strength (50%), energy (50%), benevolence (50%), and even temper (45%).

On sociometric test, leadership positions are distributed among three leadership dimensions:

1. Absolute leaders – students who have the status of both a formal and informal leader;
2. Instrumental leaders – students selected as leaders only for their task-oriented attitude;
3. Expressive leaders – students selected as leaders for their ability to promote emotional strength.

TST was used to answer the question “Who is a Student Leader?” The TST descriptors include statements about personal attributes of a leader and associated role models:

1. Leadership role characteristics or socio-demographic characteristics of a leader;
2. Personal attributes:
  - appearance (physical appearance and fashion style);
  - behavioral and communication characteristics;
  - personal traits (smart, kind, etc.)

Thus, the distance learning format creates the conditions for inclusion. Among students there can be an adult, a person with a disability or a serious illness or a lack of appearance. All the above-listed cannot prevent students from gaining leadership skills in the process of learning.

The leadership skills, which can be exercised among similar students in different teams.

This statement is based on the fact that during the survey ...answers were processed via content analysis and with regard to factors below:

1. *Attitude towards leadership* – judgments that characterize the attitude of respondents to the role of a leader. Thus, answers given by each respondent may be interpreted within the range of four categorizations: positive, negative, mixed, volatile.

2. *Femininity/masculinity* – gender-typed characteristics of a leadership role, gender stereotypes. Answers may be interpreted within the range of four categorizations: masculinity, femininity, androgynous, undifferentiated.

TST findings show that the majority of respondents (80.5%) primarily pay respect to personal traits. In order of significance, they are followed by communication behavior, appearance, and leadership role characteristics. Regardless of gender, personal traits are distinguished as responsibility, kindness, intelligence, honesty, strong character, distinction, willpower, etc. Thus, these characteristics correspond to those forming an image of a leader in a survey.

Thus, students of distance learning programs gain leadership skills, use them in life and thereby enhance their life position and motivation to learn (since learning is always an individual's desire to improve him/herself). Students of distance learning programs become more resistant to learning difficulties. Which traditionally causes a lower level of "dropout" of distance learners in comparison with intramural students at the stages of intermediate and final control.

## **Discussions**

Distance learning systems stimulate the leadership and effective behavior not only of students, but also of teachers, methodologists, and management bodies of educational aspects. This is manifested by the following:

- reducing the cost of training for both students and teachers (as there is no need to rent premises, the money is not spent on trips to the place of study, etc.);
- reduction of time (time needed to get ready, travel time);
- the participant can independently plan the time, place and duration of classes;
- conducting education for a large number of people at the same time;
- improving the quality of education through the use of modern tools, voluminous electronic libraries, etc.

- creation of a unified educational environment (which is especially important for corporate training) (Waters and Marzano, 2006).

In addition, in contrast to the standardized, averaged approaches of the school, the distance learning format creates a competitive advantage. As distance learning actively uses fully interactive and hybrid or mixed courses that offer flexible learning formats for students of all ages through individual learning. The latter adapts to their needs and expectations. Such an approach is a reliable foundation for the development of the leader, in the understanding of society - whether a woman or a man. (Becker et al., 2002).

In various fields of activity, men and women demonstrate leadership qualities differently, depending on the way they acquired these qualities (whether they are nurtured, gained throughout life, or learned by books) (Bush and Glover, 2004; Rego et al., 2007; Bush, 2010; Hank, 2010). Some scientists label female leadership democratic and flexible in style. They believe that empathy, sociability, adaptability, and lower aggression are traits that are more found in women (Waters and Marzano, 2006). Female leaders have a number of common characteristics – competence, pomposity, high-performance capability, and creativity (Heck and Hallinger, 2005; Boling et al., 2012; Mitgang, 2012). They have high self-esteem, a clear idea of goals, self-awareness, a “cool head”, vigour, independence and no credit for restrictions. They are often expressive leaders, oriented towards interpersonal relations. Female leaders dominate in small groups, are more open-minded, expansive, and interact better with staff. Theories explaining reasons for gender disproportion in leadership can be divided into three categories: theories about gender, about leadership, and those considering both factors equivalent. Most studies devoted to gender in leadership encompass six issues surrounding the relationship between leadership and gender: 1) the number of men and women in leadership roles; 2) leadership style and behavior; 3) leadership effectiveness; 4) leadership and gender

composition of a group; 5) strive for leadership; 6) gender identity of leaders (Elfenbein and Ambady, 2002; Mendels and Mitgang, 2013; Eacott, 2015).

Wherein, the main thing is that ... the effectiveness of an educational organization depends on leader's ability to manage formal and informal communications, and to create a unified communicative system, the access to reliable and complete information. Competences for solving this aspect are highly efficiently formed through distance education, which explains its high relevance in the system of educational institutions in society.

## **Conclusion**

Within a group, student becomes a leader if he/she possesses strong personal traits and fit with a leader prototype, which has formed in the mind of group members. However, the foundation of leadership behavior is formed before the introduction of a person into the team. An education in a distance format can be an effective tool in this regard.

According to the study, the majority of students, regardless of gender, believe that being a leader is something both sexes can do.

Factors influencing the way one or another member of the group sees someone as a leader are the organizational structure (formal or informal) of a group and the dimension (emotional or instrumental) of intragroup relations.

The findings show that boundaries of leadership stereotyping become blurred. These results may be used to design online courses for distance learning in universities with regard to differences in training requests and predisposition to leadership.

Leadership has become an important feature of the modern personality, which seeks social success and can achieve it. The educational world today is tightly connected with information technology, which allows many students to access information and create new skills, regardless

of location. Distance education becomes an effective way of gaining leadership without the influence of social stereotypes, clichés and other barriers.

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