DIGITAL LEADERSHIP:
Nonsense or a completely new dimension?

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Much has been written already about digital leadership. Digitalization is not new but has made giant steps forward over the past two years. Giant steps mean fast transformation - not easy in the best of times, but highly challenging in a crisis. However, is it not exactly the crisis that makes things happen fast? Few of us change voluntarily. Just to make it clear: there is strictly speaking no digital leadership – unless you refer to machines controlling humans – but there is leadership applying (also) digital tools. Some leaders simply deny the sense of digital leadership, some have embraced a new style for a new world of working and all have struggled and still are struggling, not only with the definition, but with the implementation.

The factors determining good leadership have been amazingly stable over the past 4000 years. They are not changing now either. What differs are the means, technology, needs and expectations of the new environment with its enhanced possibilities and challenges. What have also evolved are the demands and self-confidence of a rather scarce workforce with sought-after skills and competences that are in high demand and last, but not least, the generally observable resistance of millennials, but spreading to the other groups like wildfire, against hierarchies, control and authoritarian behaviour of so-called superiors. Agile leadership, effectuation, self-empowerment and self-enablement, as well as the chaos caused by the VUCA world demand different methods and styles.

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To cut it short: bad leadership is still bad leadership and has become more detrimental in the digitalized, and often remote world of work, but good leadership with its focus on the key values (which one should absolutely continue to adhere to) might prove ineffective, unless one adapts to the new world. Therefore, let us focus on the key success factors of digital leadership. First and foremost:

1.Sense and purpose

During this fast transformation with people working more often at home and only their results, but not their input being visible, control has become disturbing and ineffective. Bad news for all micro managers! In their place has come a new dimension: purpose and sensemaking. People – leaders and individual contributors alike – will only excel if they want to make a difference and they only want to make a difference if they feel passion for the cause and are convinced that their contribution makes sense and is valuable. We expect to see large shifts from frustrating, meaningless jobs that will either not get done, done by machines or done only for exorbitant prices. Focusing on the "why?" and "what for?" will be key in digital leadership to raise self-motivation and self-initiative within the contributors. This leads us to the next key success factor:

2.Self-Responsibility

"Character is when nobody is looking!" If there is no control, we are left to decide ourselves what we do, how we do it and what we don't do.

A successful leader will have to take this into account. Like never before, the leader depends on the people he leads to perform, even if they do not have to, but simply because they want to. Employees on the other hand more than ever have the responsibility to give their very best to make things happen, even if they do not have to, but simply because they realize their part in the game. Otherwise, they should get out of the way. Thus, digital leaders focus on the third success factor:

3.Trust

If you cannot command and control, you need to trust. Trust needs to be given proactively and freely, but not naively. Trust also needs to be earned. The three pillars that earn you trust are authenticity, logic and empathy. You can only be trusted if you allow the other one to know you for who you really are, for what you think and what you feel. Hidden agendas and smoke screens raise mistrust, confusion and insecurity. With intuitive people, they do not work at all.

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Unless you can explain your cause logically – if there is an underlying logic – you will not be understood and therefore not be trusted. Equally, if you cannot convincingly show that the wellbeing of the other one is as important to you as your own, you cannot be trusted. However, if you give trust freely, over time you will want to see some concrete signs telling you that your trust is well placed. This leads us to the fourth success factor:

4.Visible, measurable results

Unless you can see the value, there might not be one…..This has become paramount in digital leadership. Therefore, focus on measurable, observable results. Clearly state your expectations in the form of very concrete outcomes that can be achieved (KPI's). Do not focus on states, but on action-based facts. "Be present in the zoom!" is less concrete and effective than "keep your camera on, smile, communicate frequently, give feedback and ask questions!" would be a much better form of expressing expectations and helps the other one to comply and deliver. What gets measured gets treasured! Therefore, make sure that you focus only on the topics that make a real difference. However, especially working remotely, you cannot see and hear everything. Therefore, another key success factor is

5.Intuition – the new frontier of management

Some are born with it, some need to develop it, all can master it. In a complex, volatile, ambiguous and uncertain world, we never have enough information and even if we had we could not process it.

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THEREFORE ONE WILL NEED TO BE ABLE TO LET GO QUICKLY, TO FORGIVE AND FORGET AND TO FIND NEW PATHS AND METHODS TO MAKE THINGS WORK OUT.

We still need to make decisions though and these can only be based on assumptions and intuition. You can train your intuition by guessing and checking back on the correctness of your guess. You can reflect and you can tune into your body. There are many techniques, and one can easily learn them. Like every competence, it takes time and practice to build, but you will get better at it. Your subconscious is a willing provider of hints and signals that tell you the things you cannot possibly know. The next key success factor in digital leadership is

6.Agility and flexibility

The world is not as it should be, the world is as it is! This statement of Virginia Satir sums it up. And worse: if it is the way it should be, then only for a very short moment. Your expectations will remain unmet, your plans will not work out and your assumptions may prove wrong. Holding on to principles and plans, illusions and requirements will only frustrate you. Therefore, one will need to be able to let go quickly, to forgive and forget and to find new paths and methods to make things work out. Some do, some don't.

Flexibly adjusting, to think and act in a solution-oriented, adaptive manner is essential if one wants to be successful. At the same time being tolerant, polite, empathic and friendly with people, in order to avoid alienating them, is equally important. Make sure you find your inner equilibrium very quickly after irritations and mishaps. This also means, that what we think we know is constantly challenged. Therefore, we need

7.Life-long learning and re-learning

We learn as we go….. less likely from theories, but by experimenting, reflecting and adapting. Theory creates structures and structures are prone to break-up in the VUCA world. Excellence is nice, but it demands practice and continuity. Thus, only the highest priorities should be pursued to excellence. Most things just need to be "good enough" and work for the moment. Little can be repeated and copied, but new challenges are constantly thrown at us to be dealt with swiftly and effectively.

There is no doubt that digital leadership is not just a fad, but the expression of a profound culture change. The world of working is changing fast and to remain an attractive employer and to win and retain the best talent, we shall need to provide for the requirements, preferences and needs of leaders and employees alike if enterprises should continue to thrive. The above key success factors may not be all that is needed. There are many more contributing influences to be considered and optimized for the transition to a more mature, more democratic and more sustainably performing world of working in the 21st century.

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