Leadership Traits
in the **Digital Age**

Leadership in the Digital Age

- a careful balancing act

What are the traits required to lead in the digital age?

Technology has had such an impact on our working worlds. Whether it's addressing the expectations of a more techy-savvy worker, leveraging digital opportunity to create competitive advantage, or forecasting potential disruption on an entire industry, our expectations of work today have been fundamentally re-shaped by digital advancements. It follows that our expectations of leadership must keep pace, and that a new set of competencies are required to lead in the digital age.

What's a new generation expecting from their leaders, and how might these skills be different from traditional competencies? How do we fully capitalize on new digital tools in managing teams? How do we equip leaders to operate in an increasingly fast-paced environment characterized by digital advancement?

Consider the following traits required to lead in the age of digital disruption – thinking not only of the individual competencies, but perhaps more importantly, the natural tension between each pairing. At what point does creativity turn to chaos, inclusion to 'group think', too much choice to indecision? Being proficient in each, and balanced in their application, will ensure that leaders are well-equipped to manage an ever-changing workforce.

Curiosity & Critical Thinking

Being curious enough to question everything, but analytical and clear-headed enough to establish a firm direction.

Curiosity is an imperative for leaders in the digital age. Leaders must scratch below the surface, questioning everything to get to the "why" of the matter. A new generation of employees, hallmarked by their natural inquisitiveness and unwillingness to accept the status quo, will undoubtedly expect this from leaders.

Yet, excessive curiosity, without balance, could easily lead to organizational paralysis, as teams become mired in too many options, delays in decision-making, or worse yet, constantly changing priorities. Digital advancements have led to a dramatic increase in the amount of information available to leaders, and those they manage. Accordingly, leaders must hone their critical thinking skills to sort through the endless options. Their ability to rapidly analyze alternatives, gauge risks, and determine the best course of action may very well be the differentiator in terms of business success versus a missed opportunity. And our leaders must be able to do this at an ever-increasing speed.

The curious mind-set of "could we be doing this differently", while positive, must be complemented by a analytical mind-set that asks "should we be doing this differently", avoiding curiosity for curiosity's sake.

In short, leaders must think analytically in order to chart a clear path forward. Employees will look for this firm direction, particularly when there are multiple paths from which to choose.
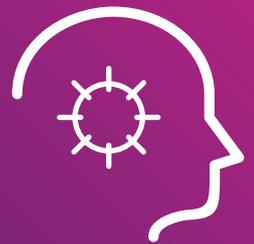
Vulnerability & Confidence

Being open to uncertainty and emotional exposure, but self-aware and confident enough to inspire and empower others.

Confidence is perhaps one of the more obvious traits people look for in a leader, and while that in itself is nothing new, some leaders may find their confidence lacking in a more digitally-driven workplace.

Leaders must resist the pressure that comes with "being in control" and be comfortable admitting when they don't know something – even acknowledging that the best advice may come from someone younger or more junior in the workplace. Saying "I don't know" followed with "let's work this out together, what do you think?" can encourage greater collaboration. This role reversal is healthy, creating a more inclusive workforce and instilling confidence across the team. But it does require a necessary measure of vulnerability on the leader's part.

But the leader must still embody confidence in the vision and the stated direction for achieving it. Confidence creates a level of trust and comfort within the team, and without it the leader will find it difficult to lead. A good leader also must have the confidence to take a firm stance when it is in the best interest of the organization.

The balance between confidence and vulnerability is important. Excessive displays of vulnerability can shake confidence in the leader, and by association, in the leader's stated direction. Such insecurity will only serve to distract the organization. Conversely, individuals might follow an overly-confident leader without question, which is equally as dangerous.

Empathy & Decisiveness

Being authentically empathetic as a leader, but able to make difficult decisions and bring others with you when it's time for action.

Empathy is an essential part of building an inclusive team that celebrates diverse views. When each member of the team feels appreciated and able to contribute it helps to create a sense of belonging. The leader's actions must be authentic, however. Pretending to care about an employee's situation or viewpoint can have more of a negative impact than not hearing the concerns in the first place.

Demonstrating empathy can be a greater challenge as the pace of business increases, as it can be easy to rush to a conclusion while forgetting to take others' perspectives into account. Likewise, as digital communications (email, Slack, instant messaging) overtake face-to-face interaction, special care must be taken to ensure that feelings and intention are adequately conveyed through non-face-to-face interactions.

While they can do so in an empathetic manner, it's inevitable that leaders will have to take tough decisions. The workforce will be depending on their leaders to step up when decisive action is needed. A leader who is overly guided by emotion may subconsciously avoid decisions that are controversial or confrontational, letting feelings get in the way of hard business decisions. Conversely, a leader that takes snap decisions may be missing the broader perspective that diverse team input would have brought. Good leaders will consider and weigh as many perspectives as possible before taking action. Great leaders will show empathy in their decision making style, explaining their rationale and generating greater understanding among those that will be involved in and impacted by the decision.

Bravery & Engagement

Being brave enough to disrupt and challenge the business, but knowing how to do so in an engaging and non-threatening way.

Leaders must not fall into the trap of being a 'yes person'. Instead they should be prepared to challenge ideas and existing organizational structures. Leaders must be a positive disruptive force. And leaders must navigate the business through the discomfort that this disruption causes. This all requires considerable bravery.

Consider the plight of industries that have seen wide-spread digital disruption through competitor re-shaping – taxis, hotels, music, television. The most "stable" of sectors have been impacted and challenged in ways that threaten their very existence. Leading through this change – either as the disruptor or the one being impacted – is not for the faint-hearted. And new challengesare always just around the corner.

Leaders must understand that any disruption, even if positive, can make people uneasy. And, that effective change requires buy-in from employees. Thankfully, there have never been more tools to assist the leaders in this task, including digital options to facilitate enhanced team communication and engagement. From digitally-facilitated focus groups, to pulse surveys, to on-demand learning, to better communications tools, technology can be harnessed to create ever-stronger levels of employee engagement. This engagement in turn creates a broader sense of awareness – awareness as to why changes are being implemented, awareness of how employees can support the business aims, and ultimately awareness as to the consequences of not being brave.

As with the other traits, the key remains in the balance. A brave leader who does not include others in their thought processes, risks setting off boldly in the wrong direction. While a leader that seeks to achieve complete buy-in before stepping out, risks creating a 'group think' culture, and an organization that is too slow to react.

Creativity & Drive

Being an encourager of creative thinking and risk-taking, but driven to see things through and achieve the business result.

Leaders in the digital age can no longer rely on 'old ways' of doing business, but rather, must encourage creativity. Whether that's promoting the fast-prototyping of a new product, the creative solution to a business risk, or the cultivation of a new idea to boost sales, it's the leader's job to unleash the creativity,

Unlocking this creativity requires effort, and in today's work place the leader plays a pivotal role as a master facilitator of the team. It's the responsibility of the leader to create a space were all ideas are welcome and a team where it is acknowledged that great thinking can come from anyone. Such synergistically-led organizations are much more likely to consider and weigh all options, and thus to benefit from more creative and impactful solutions. Further, teams that help create the solution are far more likely to be enthusiastic about owning and driving the solution forward.

Again, digital tools can greatly assist. Applications like Instagram, TikTok,

and Brainsparker have shown just how much people crave creativity. Today's leaders should capitalize on this energy, promoting opportunity for individuals to demonstrate the same level of creativity in their jobs. This may mean getting more creative (and brave!) around work processes, or getting more creative in replacing traditional organizational communications approaches.

But, balance once again is paramount. Creativity alone is not enough. Leaders must have the drive to see a project through to completion and not give up. Innovation without achieving a clear goal burns time, resources and impacts other opportunities for progress. A creative team will generate good ideas, but good ideas will stay only that - an idea - unless there is a resolve to execute. A good leader also knows how to "stay' the course" and drive to the desired outcome.

Agility & Attention

Being quick to flex and adapt to changing circumstances, but able to control distractions, manage attention and keep focus.
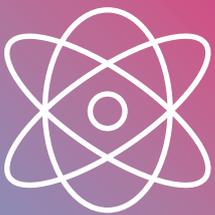
Agility is imperative for leaders in the digital age. The pressures of work and the rate of change in business mean that the need to quickly review, sense check and adjust strategies, many times over, has become the norm. Leaders must adapt swiftly and move forward at pace - with resilience, as if second nature.

With the many distractions and competing priorities in the modern world, the danger is that leaders end up spinning many plates, but achieving very little. Controlling distractions and being fully present in the moment are critical traits for a leader in today's workplace. Leaders must have the focus to resist distractions and remain set on completing a goal, while also having the agility to change course swiftly when circumstances warrant a strategy shift.

Leadership in the balance

Taken together, these six trait pairings represent a new set of competencies for a business world that is rapidly changing due to technology. Thankfully, it is also a workplace that lends itself to being lead in different ways, facilitated through enhanced digital engagement tools.

As with all things in life, balance is healthy. Inherent in these traits are natural tension – a tension that can be seen in either the under- or over-achievement of any individual competency. These tension points can otherwise create adverse situations for the business if left unchecked. Leaders must cultivate a sixth sense to determine when there is imbalance, adjusting strategies real-time to restore harmony. The payoff is huge – a team that is curious, creative and brave in charting the organization's path. And one that is engaged, agile and driven to ensure its success.

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