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A Conceptual Study on Virtual Leadership in Higher Education beyond COVID-19 Pandemic: Overcoming Challenges and Seizing Opportunities

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Abstract

This research is a conceptual study that identifies virtual leadership attributes effective in overcoming challenges and seizing opportunities in higher education beyond pandemic.

The outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic affected higher education system globally. Pandemic measures to curb the outbreak such as lockdowns, social distancing, hand washing, wearing masks avoiding mass gathering and assemblies, restrictive movement and staying at home disturbed the traditional educational practice of face-to-face learning worldwide.

Current review highlights that COVID-19 brought with it opportunity of introducing virtual learning in order to accommodate students globally. Within a short span of the COVID-19 pandemic, many researchers shared their works on teaching and learning in different ways (Pokhrel & Chhetri, 2021). Researchers identified challenges associated with virtual learning such as, weaknesses of online teaching infrastructure, the limited exposure of teachers to online teaching, the information gap, non-conducive environment for learning at home, equity and academic excellence in terms of higher education (Pokhrel et.al, 2021). Widely identified challenges with e-learning being accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning and educational policy (Murgatrot, 2020).

Literature review indicates that Transformational leadership models are perceived to be effective tools of virtual leadership capable of minimizing obstacles in virtual learning environments, increase performance, innovation, creativity, group cohesiveness and learner satisfaction. Obstacles in virtual environment can be overcome through a virtual leader who is capable to communicate effectively with the team using available technology.

Keywords: Virtual Leadership, Transformational Leadership, Virtual Learning, Conceptual Study

Introduction

COVID-19 pandemic brought about closures of schools, training institutes and higher education globally. There was an emergency paradigm shift in higher education system from face-to-face learning to virtual learning. COVID-19 ushered in new normal methods of learning. "The need of the hour is to innovate and implement alternative educational system and assessment strategies (Pokhrel & Chhtri, 2021). The Pandemic ushered in the

opportunities of Virtual Classes shifting from the traditional face-to-face learning. This in turn brought about opportunities for universities to incorporate part time lectures as well as full time lecturers working regularly from remote locations.

Education systems continued in trying to imparting quality education through unified communication and collaboration online platforms. Virtual platforms such as, Microsoft Teams, Google Classroom, Canvas and Blackboard, were introduced which allowed teachers to create educational courses training and skill development programmes (Petrie, 2020). The platforms include options of workplace chat, video meeting, file storage that keep classes organized support sharing of variety of content like Word, PDF, Excel file, audio, videos and many more. These allowed the tracking of student learning and assessment by using quizzes and the rubric-based assessment of submitted assignments.

Researchers highlighted obstacles that were encountered by the shift from face-to-face learning to virtual learning as; weaknesses of online teaching infrastructure, the limited exposure of teachers to online teaching, information gap, non-conducive environment for learning at home, equity and academic excellence in terms of higher education. Broadly identified challenges with e-learning were highlighted as: accessibility, affordability, flexibility, learning pedagogy, life-long learning and educational policy (Murgatroid, 2020).

Conducting online examinations and online student assessments relied upon the expertise of Lecturers and the compatibility of the learners and access to reliable internet connection. Despite the challenge of the posed risk of learners increased screen time exposure, most countries had substantial issues with access to digital devices such as laptops and mobile phones. In many developing countries, the economically backward children were unable to afford online learning devices (Sistema, 2020). While adapting to the new changes, staff and student readiness needed to be gauged and supported accordingly (Pokhrel et al., 2021). There is a lot to be learnt by both educators and students due to reduced contact hour for learners and lack of consultation with teachers when facing difficulties in learning/understanding (Sistema, 2020). However, packaged with these challenges, virtual learning came as a remedy to the pandemic environment forcing educators and learners to adopt with little options available.

Virtually Learning

Virtual learning is a paradigm shift from traditional face to face learning. Students interact from any location by use of video, text or audio and is normally hosted on platforms such as Google hangouts, Skype and Zoom. Virtual learning is a technology-based environment that allows interactions among teachers and learners and provides access to learning experiences and a wide range of resources (Alotebi et al., 2018). According to Hess (2021), Online classrooms and virtual learning environments are more than just watching theoretical lectures via video conferencing software like Zoom. Instead, they can now create impactful remote experiences to add engagement and interactivity on a granular level

Hess. J defines virtual learning in following points:

- Instructions is delivered through the internet, software, or both
- Can be used inside or outside the physical building of the educational organization
- Uses the computer and an online program or software to enhance the learning experience
- Can be used in a self-pacing format(individualized) or live web conferencing between student and instructors
- Students have remote access to content and instructors

- Students can connect and interact with other students and their instructors online. Therefore, virtual learning environments allows professors to have virtual hours and hold live lectures with students from different parts of the globe. It allows more interactive way of learning between the professor and students as they are able to meet and discuss face to face through video conferencing, use of online whiteboards and screen sharing. Virtual learning brought with it benefits to students and educators such as:

- More affordable and cost less than traditional on campus courses.
- Gives students access to classmates all around the world, providing networking opportunities which might not get on campus
- Likely to increase user involvement by maintain one to one interaction between instructor and students
- Virtual learning platforms are cheaper to build and maintain than on premises ones.
- Travel plans are not necessary can schedule training at convenient time.
- Can accommodate large number of users and trainers than in a physical classroom.
- Can be accessible from any gadget with an internet connection regardless of geographic location.

Options to Virtual Learning in Higher Education

The pandemic has set a pace for the future higher education learning system not to thrive on physical location. Students no longer need to be confined to interact with professor, discuss with other peers or write exams in a physical location. With the rise in digital transformation, a new alternative is now available where you do not need to think about getting everyone in the same place at the same time (Hess, 2021). According to O'Rourke, hybrid and blended learning are gaining traction among higher education. Hybrid and Blended learning are described to be the effective platforms for the new normal virtual learning environment. Blended and hybrid learning methods both use technology to support and supplement learning. According to Steele. C., both blended and hybrid types of learning involve a mix of in-person and online learning, but the 'who' differs in the two scenarios. With hybrid learning, the in-person learners and the online learners are different individuals whilst with blended learning the same individuals learn both in person and online. Advances in cloud technology has made both blended and hybrid learning to be more accessible and viable and brought new opportunities to higher education virtual learning experiences.

Blended Learning

Prior to COVID – 19 many institutions of higher learning had already adopted blended learning method where by the Lecturer would teach in class then post supplementary material on virtual platforms. O'Rourke defines blended learning as a blend of in-class learning and online materials and activities. Hess (2021) defines blended learning as a combination of offline and online instruction where students interact with instructor, the material and other students through both a physical classroom and an online platform. In blended learning, students are expected to attend classes in person for learning and there is no option to attend virtually. The Professor make use of virtual platform for posting supplementary materials for ease access by the students for the purpose of outside class studies and research. The Professor does not necessarily record lectures and post on virtual platform for the purpose of students who misses classes. O'Rourke emphasizes that blending does not replace in-class learning with online activities and materials but it is about supplementing and building upon what students learn in class. According to Mahyoub (2020), universities that had previous

experience with blended learning before COVID-19 facilitated rapid transition to e-learning during the pandemic by use of Blackboard tool in teaching online.

Hybrid Learning

O'Rourke, defines hybrid learning as a situation in which students attend class in-person or virtually at the same time. This is a situation whereby some students can learn from campus physically whilst at the same time studying with virtual students. Hess defines hybrid learning as online interactions that replace much of the physical communication between students and instructors. Live classrooms incorporate interactive virtual components allowing remote students not to merely passively watch an online lecture. Hess goes on to say that, hybrid learning seeks to find a flexible balance of online and offline that promotes the best experience, even down to individual students. According to Alotebi et.al. (2018), hybrid learning incorporates synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. Alotebi et.al (2018) goes on to define synchronous virtual learning as an environment where learners meet with others in the real time and teachers lead live classes physically or virtually. Asynchronous refers to activities that take place whilst the students are not in classroom. Professors post learning materials to a virtual learning platform for ease access from students outside class. In case a student misses class there is an option to access previous lectures uploaded to the virtual learning platform as well as other learning resources.

Implementing Hybrid Learning Platform

According to O'Rourke, in order to accommodate students' needs and pandemic health restrictions, hybrid learning platforms should be capable of:

- i. Video conferencing to record lectures and this allows Professors to hold live lectures and record them for later use; screen sharing for lecturers to share pertinent material and also live chat that allows students to make comments and answer questions.
- ii. Integration with learning management tools that allows Lecturers to post their lectures and supplementary material for students learning purposes.
- iii. Should be easy to use on devices of student's choice such as smartphone, laptop, tablet or desktop

Hess, states that, "hybrid model works well because students work through realistic exercises rather than just passively consuming a theoretical lecture, pre-recorded content, and other disengaging material builds a stronger understanding of core content, improves knowledge retention and exercises critical thinking and problem-solving skills (2021). Hess goes on to say that, as travel becomes less essential and remote working norms spread through the globe, modern business training is going the way of the hybrid mode as organizations realize that traditional on-site classrooms alone are not as effective.

The key differentiator between blended learning and hybrid learning is the relationship between in person and online learning. In a blended learning environment online learning is meant to complement in person class. Additional resources like videos articles podcast and more are meant to enhance in-person classes and create an enriched learning experience. On the other hand in a hybrid learning environment online learning is meant to replace an element of in-person class. Material shared asynchronously is considered part of the main lesson plan. The online material is alternative to in-person material and is meant to create a flexible learning experience.

Transformational Leadership as a tool of Virtual leadership

Most institutions of higher learning are moving towards adopting virtual learning options that save their situation beyond pandemic. “Effective leadership in virtual learning environments is considered to enhance students’ learning experiences by overcoming barriers associated with web-based learning (Alotebi et. al., 2018). Institutions of higher learning view the shift to virtual learning as a new norm during and beyond pandemic. Hybrid and blended learning have increased popularity due to COVID-19 experience and institutions are studying more about virtual learning strategies that works best for their classes beyond pandemic. As the popularity of virtual classes continues to grow, it is important for institutions to support faculty, staff and students in ways that are conducive to their needs (Mohr & Shelton, 2017). Puranova & Bono (2009) defines virtual teams as team members working together from geographical locations using electronic media.

Virtual leadership has an individual’s capacity to influence others’ behavior in a technology-mediated or virtual environment. The leadership provides a change in attitude, feelings, thinking, behavior, and performance. In the context of education, some educators use virtual leaders to refer to school principals, but others expand the domain of the e-leadership to contain the action of teachers and students. Leadership can help overcome obstacles that learners often encounter in virtual learning environments, such as low presence and lack of instant feedback, by promoting participation in learning groups and developing positive attitudes and behaviors as well as providing effective methods of using technology” (Alotebi et.al., 2018).

Transformational leadership models are regarded as effective tools of virtual leadership capable of minimizing obstacles in virtual learning environments, increase performance, innovation, creativity, and group cohesiveness and learner satisfaction (Alotebi et.al., 2018). Transformational leadership is defined as management style in which the leader encourages, motivates, and inspires subordinates to grow, innovate and create change (Traqq, 2020). Research shows that use of effective transformational leadership models may minimize barriers that are associated with virtual learning environment such as; lack of social interaction and collaboration that may increase the risk of learner isolation and detachment, challenges in communication, trust, building, development of interpersonal and technical skills, and group cohesion (Alotebi et. al., 2018). Transformational leadership approach is more beneficial when the face-to-face learning is not present. Nnabeze (2020) states that, transformational leadership aims to nurture a collaborative environment. The goal of this approach is to make sure that every member feels valued while avoiding over control and micromanagement. It is associated with building emphatic and mutually trustful relationship between teams and team leaders.

As explored by many researchers, hybrid learning incorporates synchronous and asynchronous learning activities. Professors are expected to provide virtual supplementary learning for effective virtual learning and be capable to teach virtually interacting with students. There is naturally anxiety among Professors who are late adopters of advancing technology. Academic employees react differently to new technology and change in general. Transformational leadership inspires attitude and motivation by implementing effective training and development sessions that ease anxiety among employees (Bennet et al., 2008). Virtual leaders can directly impact outcomes by applying self-management behaviors associate with

- a. Establishing specific, challenging, and mutually accepted goals
- b. Monitoring, evaluating, and providing feedback to members and teams

c. Coordinating and synchronizing activities, information and task, and establishing task assignments, roles and balancing workloads among members (Ziek & Smuloitz 2014). Transactional leadership, may be beneficial in achieving goals and increasing productivity in the short term (Alotebi et.al., 2018). Rewarding Professors for meeting synchronous and asynchronous set learning goals activities can be a motivational factor in the short term. In the long-term transformational leadership which focuses on intrinsic motivation and role modelling, is thought to be superior in terms of increasing performance, innovation creativity group cohesiveness, and learner satisfaction (Alotebi et.al., 2018). There is nothing wrong by using transactional leadership where it works well. However, transformational leadership is more desirable in virtual teams since managing virtual teams requires being flexible and adaptable to change (Traqq, 2020). Transformational leadership provides more support for employee motivation and increased commitment. Therefore academic leaders should be educated and trained in leadership theory and encouraged to cultivate thoughtful and sincere relationship with their virtual faculty employees. Leaders of virtual team need to be aware of factors that assist in creating cohesiveness, trust, and communication amongst virtual teams through different media tools and media communication, such as Skype, Zoom, email or phone. Research proves that communication between leader and team members has a great impact on team effectiveness within a virtual environment (Towler, 2010). An effective transformational leader is reported to normally exhibit following attributes that are perceived to enhance performance in virtual employees:

- i. The leader gives personalize attention to employees as a mentor or coach and inspires the employees to be their best selves and monitors progress
- ii. The leader inspires and transforms individual employees or organization to be all rounded, to be creative in problem solving and innovative.
- iii. The leader changes values, beliefs and attitude of followers and he exhibits consistent behavior as role model
- iv. The leader exhibit risk taking behavior and high integrity and inspires behavior of followers.
- v. The leader involves employees develop preferred vision for future, communicate clear expectations, demonstrate commitment to shared goals and vision.
- vi. Motivate and train employees and the leader is responsible for performance beyond ordinary expectations (Nnabeze, 2020)

In order to overcome challenges faced by virtual employees, transformational leadership practices the following:

- i. Establish and maintain trust by using available technology to engage team
- ii. Manage virtual work life cycle meetings and monitoring team progress through technology
- iii. Enhance visibility of virtual members (Rigler, 2018)

Therefore, it is of vital importance that virtual leaders keep abreast with changes in technology and their positive impact on interactions within a team, for example, use of virtual chat rooms with team members when there is need for consensus on vital decision making. Relationship between leader and members is strengthened more by frequency in communication and is more crucial when geographic location and time zones of team members differs (Gajendran & Joshi, 2012).

Some universities deploy virtual academic teams without essential training, leading to negative impact on students and eventually loss of revenue, negative morale to the team and productivity challenges. Faculty leaders to be engaged in improving pedagogical strategies

by implementing techniques and best practices that are effective in producing improved student outcomes in the online environment (Orcutt & Dringus, 2017). There is an increased pressure in higher education entities to be accountable for the achievement of learning outcomes and retention. Educators and administrators are increasingly interested in improving pedagogical strategies by deploying practices that are effective in producing improved student outcomes in the online environment (Ekmekci, 2013)

Conclusion

Researchers perceive transformational leadership to be effective in leading virtual teams. It has proven to get results as leaders who exercised transformational leadership style in remote teams achieved high performance levels. However, it might not benefit higher educational institutions where strict hierarchy is needed. It requires a lot of effort to know individual team members and feed back in form of meetings, discussions, brainstorming which might be a drawback.

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