

Organizational Leadership as a Soft Skill to Facilitate the Digital Transformation of the Workplace: Mohammed I University as a Case Study

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ABSTRACT

This study examines the crucial role of leadership in the context of higher education's digital transformation. It centres on a transition that involves behavioural changes and cultural transformations in the learning environment. Leadership is a driving force that initiates and sustains the digitalization of management. In this research, faculty management staff members are recognized as the leaders who promote an environment of change. They are advocates for adaptability and the integration of technology tools. The study includes qualitative data from semi-structured interviews. The participants are the staff of Mohammed I University Oujda (UMPO). They provide relevant data about their interactions with digital tools to enhance the administrative process. This work contributes to the existing body of research on leadership and the digital transformation of the workplace in educational settings by providing empirical evidence that facilitates the transition to digital education.

Keywords: Leadership, Digital Transformation, Influence, Administration Environment, Adaptability, Behaviours.

INTRODUCTION

This research investigates how leadership may facilitate the shaping of the administrative staff's behaviours. Leadership is often interpreted as a soft skill, enabling the integration of digital tools into administrative processes. Stogdill (1989) notes that effective leaders are visionaries who inspire others to achieve common objectives, thus indicating that leadership characteristics can be learned and embraced. The concept of transformational leadership, as put forth by Bass (1981), describes how people can choose to lead. Although there are many definitions, leadership, in this context, is best defined as the act of influencing people toward a common purpose (Rokach, 2016). Henry Kissinger, whom many recognize as a great statesman, notes that it is a leader's purview to lead a populace toward new heights (Peleg, 2012). Or, as Stogdill suggests, leaders tend to be at the heart of group change (Bass, 1981).

This study aims to investigate the influence of leadership on the administration staff as a stimulating factor for the improvement of their digital representations in order to facilitate the digitalization of the workplace (Edelmann et al., 2023). It also shows the subtle, yet powerful, ways that leaders can shape their colleagues via an indirect inspirational reach. This research attempts to answer the following questions: To what extent does the digital transformation of the workplace reduce administrative processes? How can Leaders enable the integration of technology in the administrative process?

LITERATURE REVIEW

This part involves concepts such as leadership, the digital transformation, and their intersection in the work environment. Regarding the behavioural components of interaction, there are important notions such as attitudes, knowledge, awareness, communication and collaboration (Fantini, 2019). For example, Delaney and Emmanuel (2014) experiment with the ways academic institutions promote values, beliefs, and attitudes inspired by a colleague's behaviour. The imbalance of power within the administration staff is an opportunity

for peers to reflect on their attitudes (Delaney et al., 2014). These observations align with Fantini's (2019) notion of communicative competence, which emphasizes the ability to communicate and interact effectively as a central element of professional and academic success.

Among academic institutions, leadership is consistently described as a vital contributor to the learning process, second only to the teaching process itself (Day, 2006). By explaining its role in teaching and learning within school settings, Peleg (2012) highlights the significance of leadership as a source for organisational change and development. Amidst the current wave of educational change, digital transformation is a new variable of change (Milton et. al, 2023). This change is more than merely using new technologies. It is a broader behavioural, cultural, and systemic transition that needs to be treated. Leadership is an agent of resilience and change, nurturing a climate conducive to lifelong education. It guarantees that the provision of digital tools is congruent with the institution (López-Belmonte & López-Núñez, 2020).

Equally important are the social and interpersonal aspects of leadership in academic and administrative contexts. Interactions among peers contribute directly to adaptation and success within higher education (Christenson et al., 2007). These interactions contribute to adapting to university life by providing emotional support (Rokach, 2016). These relationships can be affective, entailing feelings of empathy and respect, offering trust and safety. Regarding the digitalization within public administrations, there is a need for thorough training in digital competences (Edelmann et. al., 2023). This indicates a need for targeted training and education on such concerns. By integrating these perspectives, it becomes evident that successful digital transformation requires both strong leadership and a commitment to fostering communication, collaboration, and continuous professional learning.

METHODOLOGY

This chapter presents an overview of the methods used to study leadership in a digital age. The primary aim is to understand how digital technologies have profoundly impacted leadership in university administration, particularly through qualitative interview data. The interviews are designed to assess the leadership behaviours encouraging the integration of digital tools within administrations by the concerned staff. It consists of five variables: problem-solving, adaptability, teamwork, motivating and inspiring, and Delegation. To investigate the presence of the variables noted, a case study is employed.

The target population consists of 14 administrative staff members affiliated with UMPO. Data were gathered using semi-structured interviews. They were recruited through snowball referrals ensuring a range of perspectives relevant to the research questions. Interviews lasted between 20 and 30 minutes, and were conducted face-to-face in participants' offices. Furthermore, open-ended questions were employed to allow participants to express their experiences in their own words. An interview protocol guided the conversations, covering themes such as leadership roles, experiences with digital transformation, communication practices, collaboration, and adaptability. This qualitative research design is particularly suited for exploring complex phenomena, such as leadership dynamics in a digital era. The selection of participants was based on their leading roles in acquiring knowledge and experience about using new technology tools. Ethical approval was obtained from the administrative staff members of Mohammed I University, and participants were assured of confidentiality and anonymity throughout the study.

RESULTS AND FINDINGS

The interviewees are staff members of the UMPO administration. A thematic analysis is used to analyse data. It is crucial to emphasise that the study presents the most relevant data.

The following are excerpts from interviews, along with our thematic analysis. The themes revolved around the five variables of teamwork, motivation and inspiration, problem-solving, adaptability, and delegation.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS

Teamwork

P3 excerpt:

“...our small team is the best. Honestly, I used to work in a bank, so things were a bit different there. No one would help without asking for something in return ...”

P10 excerpt:

“...within our team, this person would make us work better. When there is some new digital material or tool, he would help us with the necessary steps, but suddenly gives us the task to do with what we learned... I'll be honest, at first it seemed a bit stressful, but I couldn't say no to him because it was really beneficial”

It highlights a good team mentality and how participants perceive the environment as positive compared to their past work experience. Mutual assistance and collective growth, integral parts of teamwork, are given the utmost importance. We coded instances such as “Our little team is the best,” “would help us”, and “make us work better” as indicative of teamwork qualities.

Problem-Solving

P5 excerpt:

“When there was some new digital material or tool installed in the bureau, two friends would provide their guidance to us (in the bureau), but they would suddenly give us tasks to do that were new to us...”

P6 excerpt:

“...at first it seemed a bit stressful but I just couldn't say no to them because I knew they were totally right and I'm thankful, now I feel I'm a bit better at managing work stress and I can deal better with new situation...”

P14 excerpt:

Some of the phrases that interviewees expressed in the above categories were: “guidance to us,” “suddenly give us tasks to do that were new to us,” and “better at managing work stress, and I can deal better with new situations.”

It is evident that introducing new tools in the bureau serves as a trigger for activities that solve various work-related problems. Furthermore, the advice from peers demonstrates that they worked together to address new threats. This way, issues could be assessed collectively in a team environment, where knowledge transfer is integrated into task execution.

Delegation

P1 excerpt:

“...there was a girl with us who got transferred to another administration. She became my friend instantly. I was always ready to help her, but it's safe to say that I'm the one who needed help. It was really helpful that she started giving me some of her tasks”

P4 excerpt

“...he advised me to do it myself while assisting me. Even when I refused, he would gently offer his help, but pushed to do it, ‘even you fail,’ he would say...”

P13 excerpt

“...I didn’t think I would succeed in this administration because some said he was using me, but the fact that he got transferred and I’m still here means that he taught me how to survive in this administration...”

The key phrases suggesting instances of delegation include "giving me some of her tasks," "while assisting me," and "taught me how to survive in this administration." These participants describe interpersonal dynamics with colleagues that were subsequently transferred to another administration. This relationship quickly evolved into one where the participant took on tasks from this colleague, serving as a valuable learning opportunity.

Motivation and Inspiration

P2 excerpt:

“...he says that we can do many things that we think we can’t, while offering his help...I want to help the team too, but I get stuck with so many obstacles, and frankly, I don’t have the mood”

P7 excerpt:

“...you think you can catch up to them but find yourself trailing behind...he’s so positive... he is just so positive and motivating...I tried so many times to spend a day in the same way he does, but that was really tiring...satisfying but tiring, so I don’t have that kind of energy”

P8 excerpt:

“...he constantly offers his help... we try to imitate him sometimes, but we can’t...one of our teammates actually gets fired up when they team together, it’s like something contagious...”

P12 excerpt:

“...one young boy joined us in the bureau, he is just so full of energy...as I said, he is just full of energy, and when he is in the administration, it’s a whole different atmosphere with him...but when he’s not here, the bureau is so quiet that we can’t stand it...”

The above excerpts convey the admiration for the energising and motivating qualities of teammates. That level of relentless positivity and proactiveness is viewed as an individual characteristic and a team requirement. While their efforts to copy them have failed, they are indicative of the powerful impact these behaviours and attitudes have on team members.

Adaptability

P9 excerpt:

“...things were very complex and difficult for me; I didn’t want to change the way I used to work at first...It seemed really difficult and complex... it took me a while to learn what I used to do, but suddenly found myself obliged to change it again...”

P11 excerpt:

“...it’s not like there was anything of benefit for me, but....at some point I decided to go forward and not make enemies in my line of work...I suggested to others in my bureau to try to do the same. It was a difficult time, but we managed somehow...”

These participants stated phrases such as "obliged to change," "go forward without making enemies," and "it was a difficult time, but we managed somehow." They reflect on a moment of transformation and the

challenges that accompany it. They discuss a shift that compelled them to unlearn and relearn aspects of their job, a difficult process that takes time to unfold their benefits.

DISCUSSION

The findings of this study suggest that leadership plays a significant role in the development of digital competencies and soft skills within university settings. Participants described how peers influenced one another by modelling professional conduct, reinforcing earlier arguments that leadership extends beyond formal positions to include informal acts of guidance and influence (Day, 2006; Peleg, 2012). The role of leadership in a university as a medium for overcoming challenges is impactful. We believe that some people can be leaders even if they are not aware of it. The data has indicated that a level of employees respect at least one of their peers' conduct. Positive experiences reinforce respect, which encourages admiration. Additionally, it has an interrelationship with leadership and soft skills. By definition, leadership is a broader soft skill that encompasses other soft skills, which are exhibited in interactions. It is possible to transmit these skills, such as in the case of influence. In the teamwork case, interviewees describe collaborative and mutual support of their small teams, and how it felt different from less collaborative times in their past. They highlight the benefits of their current environment, which is characterised by communal advancement.

A consistent theme was the impact of collaborative problem-solving during the implementation of new digital tools. The narratives illustrate that their environments encouraged a team-centred problem-solving approach. This is not only knowledge transfer but also the assignment of new tasks, which facilitates the application of newly acquired skills. Rather than merely teaching new tool use, peers invited a cycle of proximal development, where learning was a meaningful discovery to peers, anchored in exploratory engagement. By doing so, it promoted the ability to apply the new skills they learned, while also giving them the courage to take on new challenges. This results in greater stress resilience and the ability to embrace new challenges. Problem-solving is not an individualistic aspect; it is a collaborative activity where knowledge is shared among team members.

Motivation also emerged as a critical mechanism of leadership influence. Such an impact was strong; their positivity lifted the whole group's spirits. While often challenging, attempts to emulate the energy displayed in these motivational instances can be powerful for the team. The atmosphere where motivation becomes a mutual experience adds a propagative energy to the work environment. The theme here is that workplace motivation and inspiration can spread within and transform workplace behaviour.

Adaptability was another key theme highlighted by participants. Individuals trying to imitate, as explicitly expressed in the quote, define the concept of leading by example. Regarding the issue of adaptability, it tackles a difficult concept of the resistance to modifying procedures when new people are hired. They characterise adaptability as a skill and an essential mindset for success within the administration. We believe that it's not easy to change. Change requires time, which many participants reaffirmed. It means being prepared to engage in a new process of learning, which implies long-term benefits. Adaptability in the workplace is about solving workplace problems.

All these themes highlight a dynamic workplace where both formal and informal leaders are needed to nurture the qualities essential in a competitive environment, mainly collaboration, problem-solving, delegation, motivation, and flexibility. In such environments, leaders who clearly possess these traits within themselves also strive to inculcate them in their team. Leaders serve as the pivot in enabling the team as well as individuals to be a more effective working force.

CONCLUSION

As the data excerpts demonstrated, leadership makes the workplace a better field for change, toward growth and prosperity. Leaders who demonstrate skills such as adaptability and teamwork positively influence their team dynamics with long-term effectiveness. These leadership attributes are invaluable in the dynamic world of public administration, where digital transformation is a growing reality. Consequently, it considers public

administration's future as one in which leadership enhances the previously described traits. By emphasising these skills, public organisations of higher education can accomplish their digital transformation while also creating a workplace where employees feel intrinsically engaged, valuable and equipped to tackle future obstacles.

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