

# Beyond the Rhetoric: Myths and Realities of Digital Leadership and Transformation

**Au-delà de la rhétorique : mythes et réalités du leadership  
et de la transformation numérique**

**Más allá de la retórica: mitos y realidades del liderazgo y la  
transformación digital**

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## ABSTRACT

This paper argues that digital transformation and digital leadership are myths. Digital leadership is an illusion and does not exist. There is only good leadership and bad leadership... or no leadership. It is a fallacy to think adding more technology will alter leadership quality and lead to organizational transformation. Digital transformation is not about technology, it is about visionary leaders who can lead systemic change and bring a new continuum of benefits to all stakeholders. These leaders embed shifts in the values, culture and purpose of the organization. Digital tools are but one resource that assists leaders in this quest. Today, the quality continuum for open and distance learning is stronger than n ever in the profession. Indeed, there will be future shifts in pedagogies but powerful pedagogies already exist for the most part. We simply need to unbundle them and integrate them across disciplines with digital tools. Visionary leadership that brings empathy and trust to empower and engage students, faculty, and the community is the most powerful tool available to us in the future. People, not technology, are our organizations' most valuable resources.

**Keywords:** leadership, digital transformation, technology, open and distance learning, organization



## RÉSUMÉ

Cet article soutient que la transformation numérique et le leadership numérique sont des mythes. Le leadership numérique est une illusion et n'existe pas. Il n'y a qu'un bon leadership et un mauvais leadership... ou aucun leadership. Il est faux de penser qu'ajouter plus de technologie modifiera la qualité du leadership et conduira à une transformation organisationnelle. La transformation numérique n'est pas une question de technologie. Il s'agit de leaders visionnaires qui ont la capacité de conduire un changement systémique et d'apporter un nouveau continuum d'avantages à tous les acteurs. Ces leaders intègrent les changements dans les valeurs, la culture et l'objectif de l'organisation. Les outils numériques ne sont qu'une des ressources qui aident les dirigeants dans cette quête. Aujourd'hui, le continuum de qualité de l'enseignement ouvert et à distance est plus fort que jamais dans l'histoire de la profession. Certes, il y a et il y aura des changements dans les pédagogies, mais des pédagogies puissantes existent déjà. Nous devons simplement les dégrouper et les intégrer dans toutes les disciplines à l'aide d'outils numériques. Un leadership visionnaire qui apporte empathie et confiance pour responsabiliser et engager les étudiants, le corps enseignant et la communauté est l'outil le plus puissant dont nous disposerons à l'avenir. Les personnes, et non la technologie, sont la ressource la plus précieuse de nos organisations.

**Mots-clés :** leadership, transformation numérique, technologie, formation ouverte et à distance, organisation

## RESUMEN

Este documento sostiene que la transformación y el liderazgo digitales son mitos. El liderazgo digital es una ilusión y no existe. Solamente existe un buen liderazgo y un mal liderazgo... o ningún liderazgo. Es una falacia pensar que añadir más tecnología modificará la calidad del liderazgo y conducirá a la transformación de la organización. La transformación digital no tiene que ver con la tecnología. Se trata de líderes visionarios que tienen la capacidad de liderar el cambio sistémico y aportar una nueva serie de beneficios a todas las partes interesadas. Estos líderes incorporan los cambios en los valores, la cultura y el propósito de la organización. Las herramientas digitales no son más que un recurso que ayuda a los líderes en esta búsqueda. La continuidad en la calidad del aprendizaje abierto y a distancia no había sido nunca tan fuerte en la historia de la profesión como en la actualidad. De hecho, hay y habrá futuros cambios en las pedagogías, pero ya existen poderosas pedagogías actualmente. Simplemente tenemos que desagregarlas e integrarlas en todas las disciplinas con herramientas digitales. Un liderazgo visionario que aporte empatía y confianza para empoderar y comprometer a los estudiantes, al profesorado y a la comunidad es la herramienta más poderosa de la que disponemos en el futuro. Las personas, no la tecnología, son el recurso más valioso de nuestras organizaciones.

**Palabras clave:** liderazgo, transformación digital, tecnología, aprendizaje abierto y a distancia, organización



*'Digital Transformation is Not About Technology'*  
(Tabrizi, Lam, Girard & Irwin, 2019, p. 1)

## Introduction

In our quest for a brave new world, we sometimes forget that language matters (Olcott, 2020). The creation and use of new terms and acronyms have become a normative part of the open and distance learning landscape. In fact, we have become so good at this we often confuse ourselves. A simple example of the multiple terms used for distance education: distance learning, online learning, flexible learning, community learning, open learning, external learning, self-directed learning, self-paced learning, asynchronous learning, virtual learning and more illustrate this preoccupation with terminology. It's no wonder that we and our stakeholders are sometimes dazed and confused by our language. Perhaps it is natural to try to push one's profession forward with new terms and approaches in the digital knowledge age.

Indeed, the issue of language and semantics only becomes a problem when definition and substance appear to diverge. What does this mean? It means that terms that are adopted and assumed to convey a similar meaning to everyone diverge in practice. A primary example of this is the term distance learning. During the past five years the majority of the author's graduate students defined and used the term distance learning as synonymous with online learning. Although this is not as serious as the COVID-19 (Olcott, 2020a, 2020b) pandemic or global warming, it does illustrate how important language is to clearly understanding the processes, concepts, and constructs of one's discipline.

This paper will examine two terms that have been elevated to star status amongst the latest and greatest open and distance learning (ODL) and university change terminology – **Digital Transformation and Digital Leadership**. At one end of the continuum, these terms have become euphemisms for adopting digital technologies as synonymous with digital leadership and organizational transformation as embedded in digital technology to thrive, not just survive, in a highly competitive higher education sector.

Conversely, the other end of the continuum suggests that genuine leadership (Bass & Riggio, 2010; Burns, 2010; Yukl, 2013a) is much more than digital technologies; and that digital transformation is not about technology, it's about creating the optimum business strategy to adapt, respond and compete effectively with one's competitors (Boulton, 2019; Tabrizi, Lam, Girard & Irwin, 2019). We could revert to common language for these processes – technology planning and implementation or business strategy; however, the truth is these terms are simply not conducive and sexy enough terminology. The result is the divergence of definition and practice.

There is certainly some overlap with leadership and the conceptual basis of digital leadership. Similarly, there is some overlap with organizational transformation and the idea of digital transformation. This author suggests, however, that these overlaps do not constitute sufficient substance to replace the fundamental processes of visionary leadership and change and the transformation of organisations with these terms. Digital leadership and digital transformation are attractive, they are inviting, and they are misleading and confusing. What do we do?



The roadmap for this paper will start with a selected view of key elements of visionary leadership and organisational transformation. How do we define leadership and transformation minus the word digital? What are key arguments for the use of these terms with the term digital – are they valid and useful? The final section of the paper will try to bring together the basic elements of traditional leadership and transformation in concert with the ‘digital’ uses of these terms and offer suggested strategies for university leaders and innovators.

## Leadership and Transformation Revisited

**Myth 1: Digital leadership is the key to educational transformation and for elevating the teaching and learning profession to the apex of quality.**

Digital leadership is a myth. It suggests that by having more technology at our fingertips this will magically improve the quality of leadership and by extension the quality of open and distance learning and organisational effectiveness. This is similar to rhetoric in the early years of the online revolution when we sent technologists to convince faculty members why they should engage in distance teaching. The arguments these technocrats were making did not resonate with the faculties and most faculty members simply wondered does this technical person have any idea what I really do for a living. Lastly, after 35 years I don’t recall ever reading an article using the term ‘Analog Leadership’.

**REALITY: DIGITAL LEADERSHIP IS AN ILLUSION AND DOES NOT EXIST. THERE IS ONLY GOOD LEADERSHIP, BAD LEADERSHIP OR NO LEADERSHIP (AND VARIATIONS OF THESE).**

A leadership crisis seldom exists in isolation. It usually begins due to poor judgment and poor decisions. Do you see the irony in this statement? We have more information and more knowledge than at any time in the history of human existence and yet leadership is failing – poor judgment and poor decisions across most sectors in our societies – ODL is no exception to this crisis. Most of the ODL institutions, single or dual mode, that have failed or fallen into financial disarray are the result of ineffective leadership (Olcott, 2020).

Today, even though we prefer to whisper about it at conferences open and distance learning institutions are facing challenges from all sides. This includes single and dual mode institutions. At least three world class open universities have faced severe financial issues with one nearly insolvent between 2016-2020; three others have grown so fast that adding commensurate student and faculty support services will never happen without severe reductions in enrolment which in turn reduces revenue which in turn reduces the capacity for provision of essential student and faculty support services. The lesson here is that even access and student growth must be managed effectively to avoid institutional disaster.

We do the same things and expect different outcomes and this approach is a failure of leadership not a failure of digitalisation. All of these and many more are not due to the lack of digital tools; they are due to the lack of visionary and inspirational leadership defined by good judgment and good decisions. Finally, for many dual mode institutions actual revenues from distance education have fallen far short as an alternative funding source for declining government allocations.



Indeed, scaling student growth without adding comparable services is detrimental to academic quality and may be the most disrespectful and unethical decision leaders make. We need transformational leadership, not digital leadership. Technology may be a partial solution but more buzz words like digital leadership miss the point. Technology will not save you if you are not a visionary and creative leader. It is not a compensatory strategy. Are you the reader willing to look in the mirror and ask: Am I fit to lead a distance learning organization? If your answer is yes, take the **Fit to Lead** (Olcott, 2020c) self-assessment in the appendix of this document.

We need to ask the presidents and vice chancellors of our institutions a very direct question: Are you in the vision making business or the revision-making business? Institutions spend millions of dollars-pounds-Euros on transformation only to end up looking pretty much the same – the status quo. I refer to this as institutional regression – a vision concerted back to the status quo. A vision for the future aspires to a new state of affairs that is better than the status quo and provides a 'continuum of benefits' to all followers and stakeholders of the organization. This vision is built around a sound set of core values that drive institutional behaviour every day for everyone (Kotter, 2012; Olcott, 2020a; Schein, 1985; Yukl, 2013b).

As we reflect about digital transformation, we may wish to consider this being led *by dynamic and visionary leaders who recognize from the outset that for their specific institution, digital transformation may look very different than other institutions conceptual framework for digital transformation. In sum, diversity matters even among ODL institutions on the other side of transformation.*

We need to focus our efforts on tapping into the diverse range of institutional digital transformation models that can be shared as case studies or best practices with other institutions. Personally, searching for that blue sky optimum digital transformation state of affairs, much like digital leadership, does not really exist. It is a fallacy to think by adding more technology we will achieve organizational transformation. This is wishful thinking at best. A diverse range of digital transformation models exist. The single silver bullet exploration for an optimum model that fits every institution weakens rather than strengthens our universities.

Has your institution achieved digital transformation? What do you think this means? It simply can not be adopting and integrating technology without major positive transformative effects and outcomes that are clearly benefits of a new vision for the organization and its members. Digital tools are highways to some of these benefits but transformation suggests something bigger, better, far-reaching and positions the institutions to thrive, not just survive in the future. Is that your institution? Do we really want to suggest that the only venue to get there is digital leadership – what does this mean? It reminds me of my colleague's definition of an expert – someone who knows how to use PowerPoint better than the next person.

## Myth 2: Open and distance learning institutions, single and dual mode, are facing a crisis of quality.

Indeed, this is an important area of ODL that we must always monitor and continue to improve. Quality begets quality. At the same time, perhaps stepping back for a moment and celebrating the outstanding progress we have made on the quality front is in order. Ironically, whenever politicians and others criticise ODL, it is almost exclusively on the quality issue.

Perhaps the truth is that the face-to-face (f2f) classroom standard was a flawed quality baseline from the beginning. Can you imagine saying this to your academic senate in 1995 that f2f quality is a poor standard to compare distance teaching. It would surely have been the game changer for you to have a short but adventurous career.



A lesson we learned when you challenge the status quo even if the quality of the status quo was suspect. Does anyone really believe that poor instruction does not go on in f2f classrooms all across the globe every day? I would even argue that cumulative effects of distance learning have been to make many university level faculty better classroom teachers. To be sure another story but worth mentioning here.

Perhaps the only misjudgement we have made regarding the quality continuum is that we have not, as a profession, voiced our achievements on the quality front more vigorously, widely and clearly to all our stakeholders, critics and supporters alike. Quality does, indeed, matter. C'est la vie!

**REALITY: THE QUALITY CONTINUUM IS STRONGER AND BETTER THAN AT ANY TIME IN THE HISTORY OF EDUCATION AND ODL IS NO EXCEPTION.**

The concept of continuous quality improvement is not simply a process as so eloquently stated by the 'Father of Quality', Edwards Deming. It must be a part of the culture of the organisation and the profession – in short, it must be one of our core values. We strive to be better but we don't have to apologize for not doing more, particularly when we look at the evidence.

First, we have seen the benefits of major quality initiatives over the past twenty years. The Commonwealth of Learning (COL); Quality Matters initiative in Europe; the Sloan-Online Learning Consortium (OLC) in the U.S.; and many national agencies and professional associations have elevated the quality discussion globally. Europe is notable with organizations such as EDEN, UNESCO, and ICDE having played key roles. Similarly, we have seen wide dialogue at forums across Australia, Canada, Brazil, Africa, and Asia addressing quality issues in ODL and in higher education in general. Indeed, we have redeemed ourselves on the quality front.

Moreover, at the teaching and learning micro level we have infinitely better learning design; deeper analytics; improved student and faculty support services and training; stronger interaction and engagement among students, teachers, and content; expanded alternative assessment and personalised learning models; major inputs from employers to make our subjects/courses more practice and world relative; and even contributions to instructional and learning theories through the works of our colleagues around constructivism and connectivism infused with existing theories from the cognitive and behavioural sciences. And yes, we have better digital tools for all of these – emphasis here is on digital technology as tools not a replacement for leadership.

### **Myth 3: Digital leadership + enhanced quality will create the optimum pedagogy for ODL**

We are already on the road to improving a range of various pedagogies for ODL. Today, our approach to pedagogy includes old and new learning theories alike but also maximum input from students, teachers, learning designers, assessment specialists, employers, scholars, and even parents. Digital tools have empowered the continuum of available teaching and learning strategies exponentially as evidenced by the varying types of effective pedagogy that occurs in classrooms, online and f2f, everyday across the globe. Our institutions have become student-centred and repositioned students where they belong – right in the middle of the teaching and learning process.



**REALITY: THE OPTIMUM PEDAGOGIES ALREADY EXIST – WE SIMPLY NEED TO UNBUNDLE THEM AND APPLY THEM ACROSS DISCIPLINES WITH DIGITAL TOOLS.**

Why do we insist that by adding more digital technologies and more pedagogies will equal better quality? Perhaps it is time to consolidate the gains in both arenas for the past two decades. We tend to ascribe to a misleading axiom that more is better. Let's take what we have on the digital technology and pedagogical fronts and concentrate our efforts on making these better. The last thing we need is more silver bullet strategies that confuse more than enlighten. Back again to that preoccupation with creating more terms, definitions, and confusion. And my how this profession likes new 'sound bite' terms to confuse the dialogue.

**Myth 4: Digital technologies are the key to effective leadership and educational transformation in the future.**

The validity of this statement can be summarised succinctly as nonsense - Educational transformation will happen because of visionary, inspirational, and empowering leadership. Yes, technology may be a catalyst for that leadership as an enabler, not as the driver. Leaders who actually get it will empower the talents of an organisation's most valuable and important resource – people.

**REALITY: LEADERSHIP IS THE KEY DRIVER FOR EFFECTIVE ODL IN THE FUTURE AND WITHIN THE LEADERSHIP PARADIGM, THE GAME CHANGER IS THE CAPACITY TO EFFECTIVELY LEAD CHANGE.**

The management and leadership literature and research are extensive yet our individual views of what constitutes visionary leadership is usually reduced to common sense – we watch good leaders lead and bad leaders fail and we know both when we see them. Managers do things right – LEADERS DO THE RIGHT THINGS.

The research tells us that great leaders have certain traits that differentiate these individuals from managers and the rest of us. These traits include the capacity to create a viable vision for the future; to empower one's followers to embrace that vision and voluntarily engage in the implementation of that vision; great leaders communicate well with everyone inside and outside the organization and are absolutely passionate about having the best people around them in key roles.

Transformational leaders empower, they don't micro-manage because they know the eternal secret – micro-management is the death of leadership and organizations. These leaders may have a unique charisma that attracts people to their vision but their leadership talent and skills drives the organisation.

Great leaders understand that position, authority and power to make decisions is not synonymous with great leadership. Great leaders make their followers better than they think they can be; and engage everyone in the organization in decision making. Anyone can make decisions, however, not everyone can make good decisions. Good decision-making takes judgment and experience. **The game changer for leaders, however, is the capacity to implement and lead effective change at our institution** (Olcott, 2020; Kotter, 2012).

We have seen charismatic, competent, great communicators, and even leaders with a unique vision fail. Why? Because for all their talents then couldn't lead effective change and this is essential in a rapidly fluid 21st century ODL sector. If your institution cannot respond to changing opportunities and challenges in the market you will be driven from the playing field by your competitors who can respond faster and better and who are led by transformational, empowering and empathetic leaders.



## Summary

In sum, we need transformational and genuine leadership rather than more digital technologies. Indeed, there is no crisis of quality only a crisis of leadership. Future organizations will tap the aggregate leadership talent at hand rather than relying only on top positions with titles and authority. Everyone has leadership skills to contribute to the organization and the single, all-knowing, all powerful (usually male) leader persona of the past is obsolete. Today's organisations and markets are simply too complex for one person and we equally need more resilient and committed leaders who are passionate about gender and cultural equality and diversity. These are competitive advantages.

We need to celebrate the gains we have made on the quality front and ensure these are communicated to all relevant stakeholders. Moreover, we need to step back and reflect on the vast array of pedagogical strategies and models we have employed in open and distance learning which are finding their way into our traditional f2f classrooms. And finally, we need leaders who can lead effective change in their organisations so their institution can thrive rather than just survive in a globally competitive ODL landscape. In the final analysis, digital technologies are critical game changers for successful and thriving 21st century organizations; but they are not a substitute to compensate for poor leadership in defining a thriving organisation's future vision, competitiveness, and success.

The future is uncertain and our adaptability and agility coming out of the pandemic at some future point suggest a new normal if not brave new world. Perhaps the words of Charles Dickens ring true as we navigate the winds of change.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, It was the age of wisdom, it was the age of madness, it was the time of belief, it was the time of unbelief, it was the season of light, it was the season of darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair, we had everything in front of us, we had nothing in front of us, we were all going straight to heaven, we were all going the other way - in short, the period was so far away as the present period, which some of its loudest authorities have insisted on being received, for good or for evil, to the superlative degree comparison only. (Dickens, 1859: 1)

The lesson for all of us is great leadership thrives during any 'Normal'.

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## APPENDIX A

### Fit to Lead Self-Assessment (Olcott, 2020c)

The following Fit to Lead Self-Assessment is an informal questionnaire for leaders and aspiring leaders to reflect upon their leadership profile. The survey is informal but you can adapt it and apply a simple Likert scale 1-5 (1 lowest and 5 highest) to get a snapshot of where you are in your own leadership journey. The real test, however, is for you to share the survey with 10 colleagues and ask them to assess you.

1. Do I foster open, honest and candid communications amongst my followers and stakeholders? Do I inspire trust, integrity and character amongst my staff?
2. Do I have a vision for my organisation? Why should followers and stakeholders support me?
3. Do I accept the leadership deal? Why or why not?
4. Can I lead and implement effective change? This is more than just developing a strategy or charismatic rhetoric – can one actually lead change?
5. Do I have the right team for the right goals for the right reasons with the right talents around me? If not, how will I change this? If yes, how do I empower and delegate effectively for the good of the organisation?
6. Do I genuinely delegate to my staff or do I disguise some tendencies towards micro-management as coaching or mentoring? (Hint: There is no effective disguise – staff know and feel micro-management like a lightning bolt is going right through them. It demoralises, it insults and destroys innovation and creativity by good people who ultimately will leave). Do I have good judgment, make consistently good decisions, and know when the answer is simply good common sense?
7. Do I understand the role of technology in driving my business strategy?
8. Do I know when to exit the stage? The view of the author is the effective life cycle of most leaders is 4-6 years and then it's time to move on and get out of the way for your successor. What's your leadership life cycle?
9. Are planning and contingency planning essential processes in my organisation?
10. The Leader Plus Factor – Can I bring all these leadership attributes and roles together in a humanistic culture and environment?