Values and Leadership In The Digital Age

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Political and social revolutions are not new. But what is new is that they are being brought about through Facebook, U-Tube, and text messages. We are currently watching whole nations, societies, economic and political systems reorganize. Some times violently, in other cases with less trauma, but all facilitated, accelerated, and even precipitated by the ability of people to share digital information. And they do it in synchronous, real time. Various platforms are getting a lot of attention, but these revolutions are not about the specific technologies. They are about people being able to connect, and those connections are being facilitated by our ability to use digital information with all its characteristics of increased speed, volume, and quality.

Our current world has only begun to enter the digital age. The implications of this age are becoming more obvious with each innovation, not simply in terms of new models of phones and tablets, simple internet marketplace business, or even in terms of the emergence of large social networks. Now we begin to appreciate how people's ability to access and share vast amounts of real time information has proved to be far more powerful than any rigid philosophical or ideological structure could envision or withstand.

It would appear that the digital age favors dynamism, but this is not the case. It just makes the dynamism more obvious. On the other hand, when a need for change is accentuated, there is always an equal need for stability. Digital technologies should serve both, but there is a general assumption that *if we are using modern technologies we are engaged in change; we are progressive*. This is simply not accurate. The immediacy of digital communication forces our attention onto the novelty of 'look what we can do' and we miss the point of what we are doing.

The Digital Age and Emerging Values

The Digital Age is like a huge forcing function for the emergence of new values. In the past, especially in organizations, we might have placed our priorities on values like Achievement and Responsibility. But in the digital age, "Real time defines what we

do," says Abraham Hyatt, Production Editor at ReadRiteWeb, a prominent weblog that covers the Internet industry, technologies and trends. Hyatt explains that 80 to 90 percent of RRW's internal communication is done virtually, in the moment. "We get work done." The company has no brick and mortar office, and the staff are separated by large geographic and time zone differences. Multiple sets of ongoing individual and team responsibilities must be attended to, while real time team work is being done.[1] The operating value is Simultaneity, which might be defined as "…having to work on multiple tasks in synchronous and asynchronous environments, often using multiple internet and phone media."[2]

Unlike previous norms which prioritized the value of Courtesy in work situations, it is now commonplace to think that the pressure put on people by the demands of the sheer flow of digital information simply leaves no time to value Courtesy as much as Flexibility and Risk, which have moved to much higher priority value positions. Paying attention to something other than the person one is communicating with used to be considered impolite. Now it is considered necessary, and valuable if done well. Courtesy has not simply disappeared, but the instantaneity of digital communication is changing the way we interact.

The recently-touted value of Transparency, in commerce and governance, is both an advantage and disadvantage. Mountains of information can be instantaneously disseminated to make one's case and influence massive numbers of people to draw conclusions and to actions. Internet-enhanced interactive customer service leads to business growth. At the same time, misdeeds or gross untruths cannot be hidden for long, and both buyers and constituents can and do 'vote with their feet' and do so metaphorically, on the Internet.

Social Media Impacts

Whole generations are now moving into positions of power and responsibility with working assumptions about the dynamic nature of things. As they do, we see that many values are being redefined operationally. This change is perhaps most visible in the

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[1] Personal correspondence with Abraham Hyatt, April, 2011.
[2] The Values Perspective survey, found at http://www.thevaluesmeasure.com. © 2011, Cheryl De Ciantis, Ph.D, and Kenton Hyatt, Ph.D.

political arena. In Egypt, Tunisia, Libya, Syria, and in Iran's Green movement, as well as other countries, social media and networking platforms have been used to both organize and to create a sense of identity among protesters. Perhaps the most notable recent exemplar of the phenomenon is 30-year old Wael Ghonim, marketing manager for Google in Egypt, who was instrumental in galvanizing the Egyptian revolution through his use of Facebook, and subsequently became recognized as an icon of the massive influence that can be wielded by individuals and groups through social media by creating awareness and quickly mobilizing collective action.[3] Authoritarian regimes have reacted to this mobilization by shutting down the Internet and mobile phone networks. In each case where this has occurred however, other forms of communication and networking re-emerged to quickly provide the connection necessary for protesters to continue. In the case of Mr. Ghonim, global networks reacted with great speed to his arrest by the weakening Mubarak government, which led to his release.

Whereas in the past, regimes have been able to control unrest by dominating print and television media and keeping dissenters relatively isolated, social media have been instrumental in energizing protesters around a sense of shared grievance and hope for a better future. This grassroots networking is built on the value of Belonging, and this foundational value has in turn energized the value of Community on the part of participants who have responded to the call for action. In turn, the systems-level value of Mutual Responsibility, coveted but relatively rarely seen in business and government settings, has been exemplified in the readiness of protesters to spread the word, show up and persevere. The value of Risk, very often seen as an abstraction managed by analysts, has manifested in widespread personal commitment which has not diminished in the face of casualties and deaths. The results have been startling, dramatic, and rapid.

Of course there is a darker side to the new technologies of the digital age which allow us to create and maintain connections. Issues of identity fraud and associated financial insecurity, privacy, and safety continually arise in the news media, through stories and reports that most often involve the young and the elderly. Both of these

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[3] More information at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wael_Ghonim. As a statement of the power and influence of his work, the U.S. print and digital magazine Time recently identified Mr. Ghonim as the number one most influential person in the world in 2011: http://www.time.com/time/specials/packages/article/0,28804,2066367_2066369,00.html

groups have been shown to be vulnerable to the abuses of technology, for different reasons. Young people were already more statistically prone to drive recklessly. Now, texting while driving has been found to result in more accidents than drunk-driving.[4] And the elderly have always been the targets of scams and frauds. The digital age provides new and innovative ways to do damage as well as to be a force for good. The value of Safety in its public policy aspects is being redefined as a result. Finally, the dynamism of digital networking technologies will allow for conditions leading to the emergence of the "hivemind," which is an unstable, usually not sustainable, collective form of leadership. It is a function of chaotic environments which are increasingly characteristic of the Digital Age.

The Dilemma of Leadership in the Digital Age

In spite of the many different leadership styles articulated in over a century of literature, there are in general two basic styles, and leaders have a preference for one or the other. The Digital Age accelerates the need to face the tension between opposing forces which define the two basic leadership styles, one concerned with the need to ensure and exemplify stability, and the other concerned with the need to lead with, and in the midst of, dynamism.

Leaders in all domains struggle with the dilemmas of the Digital Age as they constantly witness and experience the pull between these two needs. It is necessary to provide structure and direction, and to operate within legal constraints and board directives while satisfying stockholders and other stakeholders with tangible results. Bills and people still need to get paid. It is also necessary to be agile and respond with flexibility, imagination and speed to the demands and opportunities of the moment, and to foster creativity. These two forces act as two mutually exclusive, opposing masters.

Simply stated, leaders whose preference is for stability tend toward centralized control, whether it takes the form of information, finances, or authority. Security is a high value for this type of leader, with regard to property and processes, and is a commonly articulated value with regard to their constituents. They are often more adaptive and incremental in their responses to innovation, and have tended to deploy digital

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[4] Study found at: http://www.bobbattlelaw.com/blog/study-says-text-messaging-while-driving-poses-greater-risk-than-dui.cfm

technologies as a secondary support to the primary role of either a single person, or an institution. Stability-preferring leaders make use of digital technologies, but they tend to think of information as a commodity. Innovative technologies are subordinate to traditional means of communicating and influencing. Belonging, in the sense of being a recognized and trusted insider, is a key value and may operate as a way of gate-keeping information. Stability-preferring leaders can over-emphasize control and centrality until it becomes authoritarianism, becoming inflexible and lacking vision.

Dynamic leadership is a style of connections, and lots of them. In fact, connections are so important that from this perspective, leadership cannot be separated from collaboration with others; it simply cannot be accomplished alone. This is a style of both depending on, and assuming responsibility for, one's own creativity, or the creativity of a group or network. Security tends to be a lower-priority value for this style. Generally, dynamic leadership has adopted each innovative technology of the digital age much more readily than leaders who emphasize stability. And the use of the same technologies is markedly different. Whereas stability leaders use digital technologies to disseminate information as well as directives for its interpretation, dynamic leaders tend to use digital technologies to create connections, and let the ensuing network generate share or even generate its own information, creating the conditions for operationalizing the value of Simultaneity. However they may become so caught up in the dynamics and exhilaration of change that they may lose track of practical objectives and the need for concrete results. They can be too visionary, too future-oriented, and undervalue the tactical and operational applications that justify why innovations were created in the first place.

Leaders for the Digital Age need to be able to take advantage of the strengths of their preferred style, as well as to appropriately value the characteristics of the other. This often means partnering with individuals and groups with complementary strengths, which in turn demands developing trust and transparency through continual communication. Digital technology provides unprecedented means for this kind of communication to be instituted and maintained. The failure of leadership is the failure to value the need for both perspectives. Being both stable and dynamic may seem like a contradiction of terms, but as is pointed out above, the Digital Age is continually

reprioritizing operational values, and Simultaneity, being able to do multiple things and monitor multiple relationships at the same time, is being demanded of anyone called to lead.

Conclusion

The Digital Age is changing the way we connect, the way we form and maintain relationships. What does not change is that people link together based on what they commonly hold as being important, what they prioritize, what they value. There is no single value or single set of values that will ensure leadership success in the Digital Age. Indeed, values theory shows that the connections that occur through new platforms and technologies occur across the spectrum of value perspectives, and that previously held values are being redefined and new values are arising.

The best aspects of dynamism continually push the envelope of creative possibility. The best aspects of stability are capable of creating conditions for public safety and security, and for organizing appropriate functional hierarchies for disseminating the benefits of innovation. In the long term, people still need leadership to help organize, to help accomplish things that would not, or could not be done without some structure and strategic direction, leadership of some sort or another.