



THE SHIFTING POSITION OF LEADERSHIP IN A TIME OF DIGITAL DISRUPTION

HOW TO “LEAD FROM BEHIND”

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In times of intense digital disruption, leaders need to position themselves in the group differently to how it was done in the pre-digital era. Why? If, like many of the executives I work with, you have to lead a digital transformation of some sort, you probably lack the technical skills to carry out the task yourself and must rely on others in either your current or a future team to do the “digital groundwork” – that is, to do the technical stuff. Many leaders worry about this structure because they are not necessarily the ones carrying out the transformation on a procedural level, yet they must still understand enough about what’s going on to make competent leadership decisions about it. They are also concerned that it poses a threat to their “case for leadership” – that is, they may ask themselves, “Why should my subordinates listen to me and look up to me if I don’t have the skills to lead the initiative myself?” and “In such a context, what gives me leadership legitimacy in their eyes?”

This new environment in no way renders the leader obsolete. In fact, it makes the leader’s role more important than ever: providing an overall strategic framework, freeing up resources where necessary, contextualizing people’s contributions and motivating the team. That said, such a structure also requires a unique leadership style where the leader is comfortable with “leading from behind.” This often means “biting your tongue” when it comes to taking credit for successes and instead allowing others in your team to be front and center – to get the day-to-day credit and take the spotlight. But it also means that you still need to “take the hits” for your team at a higher level when there are failures or setbacks. Leading from behind is important because (1) it empowers those who work with you, (2) it allows others in your team to gain visibility in the organization, (3) it demonstrates to your team that you are about empowering others rather than holding the power yourself, and (4) it provides your team with much-needed motivation to get through the tough times.

I have never seen a leader who “leads from behind” not get the overall credit for a successful transformation. Ultimately, the leader is the one accountable for the work done, and most companies implicitly and explicitly recognize this. Thus, a job well done will ultimately reflect positively on the leader, even if he or she lets others shine in the process. Plus, doing so will be a win-win – as not only will the leader get the ultimate credit for the success, he or she will have fostered team loyalty as a result.

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