

Leadership in the Age of Innovation

At one time, people with their “heads in the clouds” were derided for being hopelessly disconnected from the real world. However, with the emergence of cloud computing, living in the clouds may swiftly become the best-connected way of life. Tech experts herald cloud computing as a game-changing technological innovation with the potential to profoundly alter the way people access their digital information and relate to their electronic gadgetry.

Cloud computing eliminates the need for individuals to have a central hub to house their information. For example, many people presently store the contents of their electronic life—music, videos, documents, and photos—on a PC. To access their information on another device, they must transfer the files or synchronize the devices. Cloud computing services, like Apple’s iCloud, allow people to store their information remotely, that is, in the “clouds.” That way, they can instantly access their digital content from anywhere, anytime, on any device so long as they have a wireless Internet connection.

The Shifting Style of Leadership

As technological trends shift, leadership styles must evolve as well. At one time leaders were the storehouses of knowledge, innovation, and decision-making power in an organization. They controlled the flow of information, trained employees how to do their jobs, and authorized others to act.

The top-down leadership approach no longer applies in an age when workers have just as much information as their managers and possess specialized skills beyond the knowhow of their bosses. What’s more, young employees entering the workforce are practically allergic to environments in which they must seek permission from a leader before making a contribution. They’re accustomed to expressing themselves by uploading content to YouTube, Twitter, or Facebook. Put them in a position where they must passively download instructions from above, and they will quickly search for employment elsewhere.

How then, do leaders exert influence in a workplace where they’re no longer the hubs around which an organization revolves? First and foremost, they must have a compelling purpose. Leaders might not be able to bark out orders and expect compliance, but they can invite others to experience the fulfillment of meaningful work.

Second, leaders can transmit values to their teams in order to orient the decision-making of their employees. In today’s complex world, rules and procedures certainly do not suffice to guide an employee in exercising judgment. Nor can a lone leader insist on handling all of the decisions that need to be made. Trying to do so would create a bottleneck while simultaneously disempowering a team. The solution for leaders is to model a set of core values and to highlight their significance. In time, as those values prove their merit, team members will adopt them and filter their decisions through the values.

Third, in a world that’s superficially networked and connected, leaders can offer relational depth. Today, many people have thousands of virtual “friends” on social networking sites, yet they experience intense isolation due to the absence of genuine, real-world relationships. They’re LinkedIn yet feel left out. As a result, they’re attracted to leaders who authentically care about their well-being.

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