

CHAPTER 17

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT IN THE FUTURE: THE IMPACT OF NEW TECHNOLOGY

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The danger of writing on the impact of new technology is that the information will be obsolete before it is published. Having had the opportunity to work with many leaders in the field of applying technology in training and development, I can provide educated speculation based on current projections of technological advancement. The real breakthroughs will probably occur in ways that no one has yet imagined. Please accept this chapter as an “educated guess” based on input from the experts of today. As with most writing about the future, it will be amusing to review this piece in 10 to 20 years to see how closely it parallels the new reality.

Before the year 2000, massively available, “instant download” audiovisual programs of television quality (in terms of both picture and sound) will be available over the Internet (or Intranet). This technological advancement will change the world. Most leading hardware, software, telecommunications, and cable companies clearly understand the importance of this advancement and will invest billions of dollars in the attempt to “get there first.”

The advent of massively available, “instant download,” television quality, audiovisual will result in a *technological plateau*. For most people in the world, television quality audio and video are “good enough.” For example, my television is eight years old. Since I am connected to the cable, the reception seems fine. The additional quality produced by a new television (if there is any) is not worth the investment to me. The huge majority of television owners feel the same way. A *technological plateau* lasts until a major breakthrough occurs that produces a superior product at a reasonable price.

When instant download Internet television is massively available, there will be a major shift in focus. Instead of investing billions in technology to improve download time or reception quality, companies will invest billions to acquire and develop *content*. Investors with foresight (such as Ted Turner and Bill Gates) have already begun to make huge acquisitions of content to meet the projected demand. The level of interest in all kinds of training and development content will soar.

This new technology and content boom will radically change leadership development. As much as we all like to pretend to be “literate,” most leaders do not spend much time reading. Both Peter Drucker and Peter Senge have speculated that only a small percentage of the people who buy books actually *read* their books, however, we almost all understand television. The average person in the “developed” world has spent literally thousands of hours in front of a television. (This is especially true in the United States.) We have acquired a near addiction to high-impact video and sound. The Internet (or Intranet) will provide the medium to make interesting, high-impact audiovisual leadership development available on demand.

How might the new leadership development technology work? Let's assume that Kelly Jones is an executive in the XYZ Corporation in the year 2017. What are some options that Kelly might have available?

To begin with, Kelly will have on-line access to a Leadership Inventory that lists the desired attitudes, behaviors, and competencies for an executive in her position in the XYZ Corporation. She will be able to complete a self-assessment on-line and then record the names of all key stakeholders who will be in a position to provide her with 360° feedback. A confidentiality-coded Leadership Inventory will appear on each stakeholder's computer. After stakeholders complete their feedback for Kelly, she will instantly receive a complete 360°, on-line summary report. An analysis will be made of her perceived strengths and areas for improvement. Let's say Kelly learns that she needs to be a better listener and do a more effective job in providing performance feedback. A menu of video suggestions will appear. Kelly will punch a button, and the world's expert on listening will provide a brief audiovisual tutorial. Text-based suggestions on listening and a reading list will be available. Books on the topic can be ordered instantly on-line. She will push a second button and receive guidance on providing feedback. Since the feedback process may involve company-specific performance appraisals, she will push a third button and see an internally developed video clip review on how to make the XYZ system work most effectively.

Kelly has greatly appreciated her Leadership Inventory feedback and the efficiently designed audiovisual suggestions, but she still wants some more help. She has some specific questions to ask and wants to interact with a real human being. She pushes another button. A menu appears with the names and biographies of coaches who specialize in various aspects of leadership development. She studies the backgrounds of potential coaches and makes a decision. The coach's schedule appears on-line. After reviewing her calendar, she automatically schedules an on-line appointment. The coach (through two-way video) appears on-line at the appointed time. Kelly and the coach have an hour-long discussion. She develops a very specific action plan for improvement and agrees to respond to her feedback with key stakeholders.

Kelly's key stakeholders live in a variety of locations around the world. Some are members of the XYZ Corporation but many are external customers, suppliers, and business partners. All are connected on-line. Kelly has the clearance to access calendars and schedule on-line appointments. She schedules brief on-line, two-way video appointments with each stakeholder to discuss the results of her leadership inventory feedback and her plans for personal improvement. She has a series of very positive dialogues with each key stakeholder and picks up some more specific ideas for change. Within four months, she will automatically receive a progress report from each key stakeholder describing her increase in effectiveness in her two areas for improvement.

One of the four global project teams that Kelly is leading is almost finished with its assignment. Kelly reviews an on-line menu describing potential projects that could be available in the near future. She reviews her previous assignments and concludes that more experience on a marketing project is critical to her future development as an XYZ executive. She makes on-line contact with her mentor (who lives in another country). Kelly's mentor provides input, and Kelly's next project is selected. Kelly would like some guidance on managing a global marketing project in her industry. She calls up a menu and selects a custom tape made by the world's authority on the topic. She also schedules video appointments with two associates who have a great track record in this area.

One of Kelly's greatest challenges is continuous education. The world in 2017 is changing so rapidly that Kelly must devote at least 25 percent of her time to learning. Since the Internet is now providing more educational opportunities than she can ever use, Kelly has an intelligent personalized editor to help her find out which educational opportunities are most

likely to fit her unique needs. Each morning her editor makes an on-line report of the most interesting potential learning opportunities that are available on the Internet. She has the opportunity to review an edited analysis of the latest information impacting her company, suppliers, customers, and business partners.

Action learning (which began to be widely used in the late 1990s) is now a major tool for both individual and organizational learning. Kelly has a weekly on-line video meeting with her action-learning team. The team has eight members and includes representatives from various functions and geographies. The team is sponsored by an executive vice president who helps ensure that the action-learning projects are beneficial for both: (1) addressing major corporate issues and (2) providing developmental opportunities for all team members. Action-learning team recommendations are written and edited on-line. The team gets on-going on-line feedback from key executives on the viability of their suggestions.

As part of her ongoing leadership development, Kelly likes to combine business with pleasure. She connects with friends on-line and participates in business simulation competitions. The simulations are fun and exciting and also help prepare her for real-life situations that she may have to face in the future.

One day, while studying corporate history on the Internet, Kelly reviewed the history of leadership development. She was amused to learn about the incredibly inefficient way that things were done near the end of the twentieth century. Companies actually went to the expense of flying leaders from around the world to sit in classrooms (sometimes for days on end)! The poor leaders had to stay awake while speaker after speaker gave them more information than anyone could possibly remember. Participants were given large, “clunky” binders filled with paper to drag home. No one ever even measured whether anyone even changed as a result of the process!

Kelly was amazed. No wonder the leaders of the past seemed so backward! She probably learned more relevant information at her desk in a week than they picked up in a year.

Will the example of Kelly in 2017 prove to be accurate? I hope not! I believe, however, that it is eminently possible that the “Kelly story” will become more fact than fiction in the next ten years. Organizations that lead the way in the implementation of new technology for leadership development may well have a huge competitive advantage in the twenty-first century.

This chapter appears in the book:

“Tomorrow’s HR Management: 48 Thought Leaders Call for Change”, edited by Dave Ulrich, Michael Losey, Gerry Lake, 1997, John Wiley & Sons, New York, pp. 171-174, ISBN 0471197149