Pillars of Digital Leadership
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As schools change, leadership must as well.

With society becoming more and more reliant on technology, it is incumbent upon leaders to harness the power of digital technologies in order to create school cultures that are transparent, relevant, meaningful, engaging, and inspiring. In order to set the stage for increasing achievement and to establish a greater sense of community pride for the work being done in our schools, we must begin to change the way we lead. To do this, leaders must understand the origins of fear and misconceptions that often surround the use of technology, such as social media and mobile devices.

Effective leadership is extremely important in any system, but it is even more imperative in schools if we are to provide all learners with a world-class education. This education has to be relevant, meaningful, and applicable. During my tenure as Principal at New Milford High School, we worked tirelessly over the course of four years to transform the culture to one that was primed for student engagement, learning, and achievement. Through the lens of social media, I was exposed to a whole new world that I didn't know existed. My subsequent journey as a connected leader and learner, resulted in small, then large shifts in professional practice that eventually served as catalysts for transformative change. Thus I began to construct an area of practice around digital leadership.

So how would one define digital leadership? I think it is important to first look at the concept of leadership in general. Wikipedia defines leadership as a process of social influence in which one person can enlist the aid and support of others in the accomplishment of a common task. Kevin Kruse defines it as "a process of social influence, which maximizes the efforts of others, towards the achievement of a goal." Both of these definitions highlight the importance of social influence. This leads me to ascertain that social media can be an invaluable tool that educators can harness to move schools, learning, and the teaching profession forward. In the end, leadership is about action, not position. Social media in all of its many forms and functions, is simply a tool to engage in conversations. In a sense, it levels the playing field by providing all leaders the same sandbox to play in. The resulting conversations that take place in these social spaces has the ability to radically transform professional practice. This is the essence of my story and countless others that effectively lead in a digital world.

Leadership is no different today than it was years ago. The only difference is that style and focus need to change with the times if we are to accomplish the lofty task of preparing students for a dynamic world, that is more socially connected as a result of technology. Leading in a way that supports the status quo, standardization, outdated practices, and misconceptions related to technology not only does a disservice to our students, but also renders our schools and profession as irrelevant. We can no longer accept a head in the sand mentality as technology is changing all facets of society. The only constant non-changing entity are school buildings and many of the leaders that reside within their walls.

Digital leadership takes into account recent changes such as ubiquitous connectivity, open-source technology, mobile devices, and personalization. It represents a dramatic shift from how schools have been run and structured for over a century. What started out as a personal use of technology has become systemic to every facet of leadership. Digital leadership can thus be defined as establishing direction, influencing others, and initiating sustainable change through the access of information, and establishing relationships in order to anticipate changes pivotal to school success in the future. It requires a dynamic combination of mindset, behaviors, and skills that are employed to change and/or enhance school culture through the assistance of technology.

The basic tenets of leadership are still valuable and needed for our schools to succeed. These foundational elements will never change. However, the changing times, as well as society's reliance on technology, demand an evolution of leadership practices to create schools that our learners deserve and need to succeed in today's world. It all begins with trust. Digital leaders must give up control and trust students and teachers to use real-world tools to unleash creativity and a passion for learning. The time is now, whether you are a district, building level or teacher leader, to boldly move schools forward into the digital age. Only then will we be able to create and sustain a digital learning culture that is relevant, meaningful, applicable, and provides all students with the skills to succeed.

Once the fears and misconceptions are placed on the table, leaders can begin to establish a vision for the effective use of technology to improve numerous facets of leadership. The challenge for school leaders is why, how, and where to begin. Digital leadership is not about flashy tools, but a strategic mindset that leverages available resources to improve what we do, while anticipating the changes needed to cultivate a school culture focused on engagement and achievement. It is a transformed construct of leadership that grows out of the leader's symbiotic relationship with technology.

The end result will be sustainable change in programs, instruction, behaviors, and leadership practices, with technology as a pivotal element. Digital leadership requires a shift in leadership style from one of mandates, directives, and buy-in, to one grounded in empowerment, support, and embracement as keys to sustainable change. From my work, I have identified what I call the Pillars of Digital Leadership. These are the specific areas embedded in the culture of all schools that can be improved or enhanced through the use of available technology, especially social media. They present a framework from which any educator or leader can begin to harness the power of technology to change professional practice, and initiate sustainable change.

7 Pillars of Digital Leadership in Education

1. Communication
Leaders can now provide stakeholders with relevant information in real time through a variety of devices. No longer do static, one-way methods such as newsletters and websites suffice. Important information can be communicated through various free social media tools and simple implementation strategies in order to meet stakeholders in the digital age. Digital leadership is about engaging all stakeholders in two-way communication.

2. Public Relations

If we don't tell our story, someone else will, and more often than not, another's version will not be the one we want told. Leaders need to become storytellers-in-chief. We can now form the foundation of a positive public relations platform using free social media tools where we control the content. By doing so, we create the means by which we share all of the positives associated with our schools, and create a much needed level of transparency in an age of negative rhetoric toward education.

3. Branding

Businesses have long understood the value of branding and its impact on current and potential consumers. Leaders can leverage social media tools to create a positive brand presence that emphasizes the positive aspects of school culture, increases community pride, and helps to attract/retain families when looking for a place to send their children to school.

4. Student Engagement/Learning

We cannot expect to see increases in achievement if students are not learning. Students that are not engaged are not likely to be learning. Leaders need to understand that schools should reflect real life and allow students to apply what they have learned through the use of the tools they are using outside of school.

Digital leaders understand that we must put real-world tools in the hands of students and allow them to create artifacts of learning that demonstrate conceptual mastery. This is an important pedagogical shift as it focuses on enhancing essential skill sets— communication, collaboration, creativity, media literacy, global connectedness, critical thinking, and problem solving – that society demands. With a solid pedagogical foundation, digital tools and social media afford students the opportunity to take more ownership of their learning. The Rigor/Relevance Framework is a tool leaders and teachers can use for planning rigorous and relevant learning experiences, leveraging digital tools effectively. Letting students choose the right tools to create an artifact of learning to demonstrate conceptual mastery builds a greater appreciation for learning, while better preparing them for the real world. The chart below describes the types of tools and how they align to the four quadrants of the Rigor/Relevance Framework.

Technology Use by Quadrant

Quadrant C	Quadrant D
- Programming - Editing - Monitoring - Testing - Hyperlinking - Validating resources - Media clipping/cropping - Photos/Video - Reverse engineering - Cracking	- Mashing-mixing/remixing - Broadcasting - Podcasting - Composing - Audio casting - Digital storytelling - Blog comments - Reviewing - Collaborating - Networking - Directing - Photo/video blogging - Animating
Quadrant A	Quadrant B
- Word doc - Bullets and lists - Internet searching - Highlight-selecting - Creating and naming folders - Using a mouse - Typing - Editing - Loading	- Google docs - Blogs - Posting – social media - Web authoring - Advanced searching - Tagging - Subscribing to RSS feed - Annotating - Replying – commenting - Social bookmarking - Texting - Sharing

5. Professional Growth/Development

With the rise of social media, schools no longer have to be silos of information and leaders do not have to feel like they are on isolated islands that lack support and feedback. Leaders can form their own Personal Learning Network (PLN) to meet our diverse learning needs, acquire resources, access knowledge, receive feedback, connect with both experts in the field of education as well as practitioners, and discuss proven strategies to improve teaching, learning, and leadership. There are also new and exciting ways to acknowledge both formal and informal learning through the use of digital badges, as opposed to more antiquated systems that focus on contact hours instead of learning. To remain relevant and on the cutting edge, leaders need to be cognizant of how to harness and leverage a slew of free tools to follow their learning passions.

6. Re-envisioning Learning Spaces and Environments

Once leaders understand the pillars and how to use them to initiate sustainable change, the next step is to begin to transform learning spaces and environments that support essential skill sets and are aligned with the real world. Leaders must begin to establish a vision and strategic plan to create an entire school building dedicated to learning in a more digital world. In order to do so, leaders must be knowledgeable of the characteristics and dynamics that embody innovative learning spaces and environments such as Bring Your Own Device (BYOD), blended learning, the flipped classroom, gamification, makerspaces, and virtual learning.

7. Opportunity

It is important for leaders to consistently seek out ways to improve existing programs, resources, and professional development. Digital leaders leverage connections made through technology and increase opportunities to make improvements across multiple areas of school culture.

Conclusion

Leaders need to be the catalysts for change and the pillars identified above provide a framework. Each is critical in its own right to transforming and sustaining a positive school culture. By addressing each of these pillars, leaders can begin changing and transforming their respective schools into ones that prepare learners with essential digital age skills, while engaging a variety of stakeholders. Digital leadership begins with identifying obstacles to change, and specific solutions to overcome them in order to transform schools in the digital age.

You can learn more about digital leadership at Eric's website at: ericsheninger.com or from his best-selling book Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times available from Corwin Press.

Note –a version of this was originally published at http://www.teachthought.com/technology/7-pillars-digital-leadership-education/