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How to Make Sense of Digital Chaos

What it Takes to be a Leader in the Digital Age



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In a world of fierce competition, digital projects have become an omnipresent challenge. While 75% of all businesses will be digital businesses or preparing to become one by 2020, software will disrupt virtually all traditional industries. In the face of a global economy that is in a state of flux, instability has become the new norm. The change that comes along with this is not only non-linear, it has become exponential (Pemberton Levy 2016; Lopez 2014; Brynjolfsson and McAfee 2014).

The need to cope with these challenges has made managing organisations more complex than ever before. Companies can no longer rely on traditional ways of doing business. In order to stay competitive, they must use digital technology to improve not only the reach, but also the performance of organisations.

Digitisation in Healthcare

Digital disruption does not stop at the doors of the healthcare sector. The abundance of medical and health-related information on the internet has already led to a rise in patient engagement. Mobile digital applications allow to look for biomarkers indicating patients' state of health and the monitoring of vital statistics. Other apps will be in place to remind patients to take their medication regularly. These developments pave the way for healthcare companies to shift away from just curing illnesses to keeping people healthy.

In parallel, artificial intelligence applications are on the rise. These new software programmes will make it easier for healthcare providers to effectively analyse patient data. They will be able to predict the necessity of surgery, monitor and guide surgery and ultimately apply insights from big data to individual patients.

Another trend that can be spotted is that the contact between doctor and patient will be increasingly filtered by digital communication and relevant software solutions. Parallel to that it will be necessary to keep up with the growing amount of data that is produced by storing ever more information on individual patients' developments. An ageing population and the growth of chronic diseases will further spur the development of this field of telemedicine.

Digital: No Longer an IT Buzzword

All these developments not only reflect a changing relationship with patients, they also result in substantial

changes within healthcare organisations. Against this background, healthcare executives at all levels must come to terms with one fact: the disruption caused by an ever-shifting technology landscape will not stop at their industries' doorsteps. The term "digital" is therefore no longer only an IT buzzword for healthcare professionals.

Today, more processes than ever are defined by technology. To drive and develop digital initiatives in patient care, diagnostics and communication, appropriate IT systems are put into place. Based on the vast amount of resulting records, big data and data analytics help to enhance patient service and patient experience.

“MANY PROFESSIONALS ARE HAUNTED BY THE SENSATION OF BEING A PUPPY DOG ON LEASHES BELONGING TO MANY DIFFERENT OWNERS”

The overall advantages of the internet and its technical opportunities are undisputed: through search engines we have all gained easy and rapid access to healthcare information. Email, text messaging and voice-over IP has made communication faster and more affordable than ever before. And most healthcare professionals will find clear advantages in being able to communicate with patients and take part in consultations without the need to travel and be present in person.

But while healthcare organisations quantitatively profit from new processes and efficiency, they often turn a blind eye to the human aspect of moving faster and with ever more automation. New digital practices trigger new priorities and sentiments in the world of work. More generally, they inflict profound changes in the human experience.

The Human Experience

Healthcare professionals spend much of their days administering and filling in electronic forms for the sake of measuring, evaluating and comparing the efficiency of their work hours. The rest of the time they feel bombarded with emails and text messages by bosses, colleagues and reports, even on weekends. In having to adapt to ever new and rigid IT-driven processes,

countless employees as well as executives are left feeling estranged. Many professionals are haunted by the sensation of being a puppy dog on leashes belonging to many different owners. They feel torn between the responsibilities they have towards patients and the excessive demands of digital administration. Automation takes a toll on them, leaving them with a feeling of being overstretched and overwhelmed.

Functioning in a good way in digitally defined surroundings has become a challenge. In order to stay on top of these developments, both healthcare leaders and professionals not only have to become technology savvy, but also need to be creative and resilient enough to cope with the new complexities at hand.

For healthcare organisations to thrive in the new digital landscape, it is therefore important to further optimise technological processes. To fortify their ships for stormy seas, they need to bring out the best in their people; in other words, they need to bring back the human dimension into their organisations.

Structural Adjustments

To be able to lead, innovate effectively and improve organisational performance, leaders must remain confident and resilient amid chaos. In order to do so, they should take into account the following aspects:

Recognise the risk of disruption and the opportunity of digital

Leaders must recognise the necessity of entering uncharted territories. Reinventing structures and processes may be key to survival. Planned disruption may mean disrupting the organisation from within before the market will do so. Rethinking and possibly reinventing long-established processes, may be done by exploring new revenue streams and processes. The goal of this will always be to create value for all stakeholders involved and to boost competitiveness. This awareness must be shared by boards and executives alike. At the same time, they need to acknowledge that taking advantage of the opportunities that digital creates, takes not only vision, but also the stamina to do so.

Embrace and cope with complexity

While the use of digital may be great for enhancing productivity, customer service and revenue, a holistic view of the possibilities of digital transformation will offer perspective from a wider lens. In order to effectively face complexity, it is important to challenge long held assumptions and ideas about risk and uncertainty. While leaders should respect and stay aware of their core principles, they must realise that processes that have worked in the past may not do so in the future. In other words, leaders need to stay agile. They need to think

flexibly, learn fast and take risks. They must share new ideas before they are perfectly formulated, then discuss, reflect and execute swiftly.

Prioritise: Define where change is needed most

In order to be a successful health leader in the digital landscape, being technology savvy is not enough. Often the problem of digital initiatives is that they are uncoordinated and ad hoc. A good initiative may fail because it does not get the necessary attention and funding. In order to add steam to such projects, it is necessary for the leader to decide where change is needed most. She/he must set priorities, link the different projects and give them direction. This needs to be communicated and put into practice throughout the entire organisation (Baculard 2017).

Empower

Against the background of rigid automation, leaders need to keep employees engaged. In order to do so, they have to be able to create meaning. At the same time, they have to inspire and empower their people to accept and make the most of new developments. It should be understood that technology does not function purely because of the work that people put in to make that happen, but rather as a solid tool to make lives easier. With this in mind, a proper understanding of digital must be distributed across the organisation.

In parallel, management has to accept that traditional hierarchical distribution of information will often prove unsustainable. Successful transformative projects breed better in connected organisations. They are the result of perfect orchestration of all members of the project. Successful change profits from contributions by everyone involved. In order to give each team member the opportunity to contribute, they need access to the right data. If this access is granted effectively, digitalisation will gain the support of more members from the organisation. It will facilitate a greater level of cooperation across the whole organisation and drive sustained teamwork as an integral part of organisational culture.

Retain Self-Efficacy

In order to function successfully, leaders as well as employees need to retain the belief that they are capable of organising and executing the processes needed to attain the required levels of performance (Bandura 1997). It is therefore essential that digital technologies are used and perceived as the right help to master a challenge rather than a threat to be avoided. If new technologies fail to guarantee this, their use will result in individuals' lowered self-efficacy. They will likely abandon goals if they prove too difficult to achieve. Correspondingly, they will be reluctant to take responsibility for difficult tasks

(Bandura 1994). In other words, badly implemented digital processes may produce leaders who are no longer able to reach the desired performance goals. By thus presenting new technologies as facilitators rather than threats, digital transformation will not be seen as a catastrophe, but rather a wealth of opportunity.

Improving Digital Leadership Skills on an Individual Level

Typically, digitally-driven projects mirror purely rational chains of thoughts. They are designed to enable processes that are the result of efficiency-driven ideas and rationalisations. However, people who are expected to make use of the digital solutions once they are implemented, hardly ever function in accordance with the idea of the rational man (Kahnemann 2011), nor are they carved from the digits 0 and 1. Still, business requirements have to be met and employees are expected to perform accordingly.

Leaders should be mindful of this gap and realise that in the digital age, a purely functional management style will often fail to produce the desired results. In order to get the best out of people, executives need leadership skills that enable them to rise above a merely functional perspective.

Leadership Coaching to Successfully Master Digital Disruption

Years of experience in leadership coaching show that leaders are typically well aware of their roles and the responsibilities that come with them. Nevertheless, many executives are plagued by insecurities and a sense of anxiety. They ruminate over whether they are good enough to face the challenges the digital world imposes on them. Under this stress, their behaviour becomes dysfunctional. Moreover, they are often not clear about the effects of their behaviour on peers and subordinates. In order to prevent this from happening, leaders can be accompanied by dedicated leadership coaching and management development programmes. Studies show that companies that make use of executive coaching, will perform better than their competition (Kets de Vries 2016).

Tailor-made leadership coaching sessions successfully support executives in going through the shift in how business is conducted and organisations are managed. The goal is to adopt leadership behaviour that fosters the ability to motivate and collaborate. Experienced leadership coaches provide guidance for managers to know themselves and their motives better. Based on this realisation they learn to cope with stressful experiences more successfully. As a result, they learn to give their best to others and create meaning among employees, even in demanding times. They will manage their organisations more dynamically and distribute a spirit of motivation throughout their organisations.

Conclusion

Organisations that take into account these aspects of digital leadership will not only succeed in leveraging and advancing new opportunities in healthcare, but their leaders will thrive on change and become experts in unlocking human potential. As a result, they will make the most of their digital projects and keep customers, employees and shareholders happy and engaged. Empowered leaders will proactively adapt to new challenges, even in the face of uncertainty. ■

KEY POINTS



- ✓ New digital practices in healthcare inflict profound changes in the human experience
- ✓ The human dimension of large technology driven organisations is neglected and needs to be addressed
- ✓ The important role leadership coaching can play when executives need to master the challenges that digital disruption imposes on them
- ✓ Healthcare leaders need to stay agile, and share new ideas before they are perfectly formulated, then discuss, reflect and execute swiftly
- ✓ Presenting new technologies as facilitators rather than threats, digital transformation will not be seen as a catastrophe, but rather a wealth of opportunity



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