

10 Characteristics of a Digital Leader

The background of the top section features a blue-toned image of two hands reaching towards each other, with a bright light and digital network lines connecting them, symbolizing digital collaboration and leadership.

Our newly released Guide to Digital Leadership explores the modes of thinking and organizational dimensions that digital leaders need to master in order realize the full value from digital. As part of this we explored the characteristics of a successful leader in the digital age. Based on based our experiences in working with many different organizations, we share our views on what the ten critical characteristics for authentic digital leadership are.

1 Vision

The magnitude of the challenges that the future of work poses can be overwhelming, and the sheer volume of potential solutions, technological developments and market changes can make the mind boggle. Digital leaders need to set a clear strategic vision for their teams to align around and inform their decision-making as they traverse the digital terrain. Setting the vision, getting people behind it, and being able to create followership is critical. Digital leaders need to understand the big picture and translate this into practical decisions about how they run their business today, by embodying and embracing change.

2 Focus

Customer, employee and shareholder expectations are rapidly changing. In this dynamic environment there is an expectation to move fast and deliver at speed. For example, with user needs at the heart of product development, responding to changing preferences requires continuous adaptation. In this fast-paced environment it can be difficult to plan, prioritize and see projects through to completion. Digital leaders need extreme focus to cut through the noise, channel their energy towards high-value activities and execute on the strategic vision.

3 Agility

The all-encompassing reach of digital transformation means that now more than ever, the ability to be agile, to test and learn, to make rapid strategic pivots and adapt based on customer feedback and market dynamics has never been so important. Digital leaders need to adopt agile principles, embrace continuous improvement and embed an agile, product mindset across different areas of the business. At the same time, they must be the navigator who ensures that the agile approach does not descend into chaos, by ensuring that the right guardrails and conditions are in place for success.

4 Growth mindset

Carol Dweck's research captivated the public imagination and sparked a new field of research that continues to be at the forefront of management science – how to develop a growth mindset. In a digital world, leaders are increasingly expected to build new skills and move fluidly between roles, which requires the ability to work outside of their comfort zone. Adopting a growth mindset of continuous learning, believing that skills are not innate (fixed mindset) but can be learnt and developed (growth mindset) is crucial for the leaders of today. Embedding a growth mindset across the business will help digital leaders build successful, adaptive teams. The ability to analytically link mindsets to business outcomes is a burgeoning area of work science that can help organizations understand what really drives value in the digital age, to inform leadership approaches.

5 Humility

Sometimes one of the most courageous things to do is to be humble. Digital leaders need to be open to new ideas, to challenge their mental models and to admit when they are wrong. It takes humility to develop a growth mindset of continuous learning. The best digital leaders understand their limitations, endeavor to develop themselves and their teams, and learn something new every day. This humility needs to be balanced with the confidence to take decisive action.

6 Psychological safety

In order to lead – you need to both feel psychologically safe and enable others to feel psychologically safe. Without psychological safety people cannot bring their full selves to work, speak truth to power, or unlock their full potential. Digital leaders need ensure that those around them are empowered to challenge the status quo and speak their mind at work.

7 Cultural intelligence

Digital leaders operate in a global environment, and with the advent of virtual working the importance of cultural intelligence has grown. Being able to form connections with people from different walk of life is incredibly valuable, and those leaders that can build an inclusive culture will get the best out of their teams, and their ecosystem of collaborators.

8 Courage

Taking an experimental, agile approach when you are being held accountable to targets and goals takes courage. It takes belief in the method. Accepting that some projects fail fast and need to be cut short can be a seriously tough call. Similarly, persisting with a project where the benefits are taking longer than planned to realize. Digital leaders need to have the courage of their convictions, the confidence to follow the data, and the experience to leverage their intuition.

9 Accountability

With many organizations adopting an increasingly flat workforce structure and project-based ways of working, accountability is very important. Digital leaders need to be transparent in how they operate, be accountable for delivering on clear program goals and ensure that their teams are held accountable too.

10 Emotional intelligence

As workplaces become more automated, softer skills will become more important and critical for human workers. As a result of many technical skills becoming obsolete, we will see the rise of emotional intelligence, relationship-building and stakeholder-management as increasingly important for digital leaders. Leaders need to model these behaviors and coach others around them to act with emotional intelligence.

I hope you have found this list of 10 characteristics for digital leaders engaging, and we'd love to hear your thoughts. What have we missed? What are the most important characteristics you've observed or developed? Join the debate!



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