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# CONCEPTUAL BASIS FOR THE DEFINITION OF DIGITAL LEADERSHIP

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## Abstract

Although digitization and digital transformation are radically changing the organization and behavior of companies (Collin, Hiekkänen, Korhonen, Halén, Itälä, & Helenius, 2015), scientific research has only marginally combined these issues with that of leadership.

In order to pursue a customer-centricity vision, digital leaders have integrated the most advanced technologies (intelligent automation, artificial intelligence and machine learning) into their organizations and processes in order to improve the usability of the data that allow a digitalization of products and services. Therefore, digital technologies are like “enabling factors” to satisfy customers’ demand for innovative products and services (Lancioni, 2005). In this regard, traditional companies need to identify adequate technological partnerships in order to govern the digital transition (Aguar, Boguea Gomes, Rupino da Cunha, & Mira da Silva, 2021). To this end, a continuous IT audit is necessary in order to intercept the deficiencies of a company’s digital transformation path and, at the same time, to have immediate feedback that may be the basis of the remediation plan.

In this process of internal introspection and in that external of partner engagement, what can be the role of leadership?

The premise behind this contribution is the awareness that well-known digital giants in the global economy (such as Apple and Microsoft) are led by charismatic leaders. Given this observation, it seems useful to question the ways of thinking about the exercise of leadership in the current digital age.

In fact, digital companies represent valuable empirical environments to shift the focus of the deepening of the genesis and dynamics of leadership from the classic traits of a leader's personality towards leadership as a system of interactions in an organizational and social environment (Thorpe, Cope, Ram, & Pedler, 2009; Day, 2000). In this sense, the study aims to search for synergies and interactions between citizens, policymakers, public decision makers and business managers who, jointly, are called to create and distribute public value (Moore, 1997) in the paradigmatic era of open and smart government. From this perspective, the concepts of leader and leadership are not coincident, since this approach neglects the contexts in which leaders operate (Silvia & McGuire, 2010). In fact, traditional leadership styles do not sufficiently address the opportunities and challenges arising from digitization. As the digital leadership literature is still fragmented and not extensive, it is believed that it is possible to draw on existing literature in related fields (e.g., general leadership, public leadership, and the literature on digitization), developing the theoretical track recently marked by Hensellek (2020), in order to frame the foundations for the development of an adequate framework for digital leadership.

In addition to the technical skills needed to better understand and use digital technologies, digitization requires that business leaders have a digital mindset so that they can correctly recognize and evaluate the opportunities and challenges posed by digitization in complex multilevel business contexts (Ospina, 2017). Therefore, a conceptualization of digital leadership must not fail to recognize its primary source, which some authors (Huxham & Vangen, 2000) have highlighted can reside in the collaborative practices between different social actors, public and private, even highlighting the traits of an informal, emerging and shared leadership (Ospina, Foldy, El Hadidy, Dodge, Hofmann-Pinilla, & Su, 2012; Ospina, 2017).

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