

Rethinking leadership for the digital era

By [Amir Sohrabi](#)

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Digitisation, most of all, means acceleration. This has numerous implications for leadership in the digital age. Simply making decisions faster to keep up with the rapid pace of business life and innovation will not be enough - today's business leaders need to focus on a clear vision, engagement, humility, and fostering growth in their teams.



Amir Sohrabi

Never has there been a time in human history when new kinds of business players, competitors, and market leaders appeared as rapidly as they do today. The driving force behind this is the dramatic progress of digitisation. It has made so many things much faster than they were in the business world of say 20 or even only 10 years ago.

Earlier, the steam engine, the combustion engine, electricity, and robotic automation all contributed to speeding up business processes, but digitisation is now bringing business to the speed of light.

At its heart, the accelerating force of digitisation affects communication, access to information, and data analysis, but this triggers a whole cascade of consequences. With everybody (and soon, everything) in the business world connected to each other and to the vast compute power of the cloud, countless workflows, like team meetings and collaboration, have been fast-tracked – as have numerous business processes, from product design to quality control.

This, in turn, has sped up the go-to-market of new products and services, ultimately creating a dynamic competitive landscape where situations can change in a flash.

This situation puts pressure on businesses and business leaders to act and react much quicker than in previous decades. At first glance, this might seem trivial – after all, digitisation can also be applied to expedite decision-making.



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However, today's acceleration has intensified one fundamental strategic conflict: on the one hand, businesses need to establish a stable, recognisable brand with a sharp and clearly communicated vision. On the other hand, they are constantly challenged to adapt to rapidly-changing circumstances, technologies, and market conditions.

Therefore, the current situation has intensified demand for competent leadership prepared to meet the new challenges of the digital world.

To meet this demand, leaders need to re-think their leadership style by focusing on the following:

- **Vision**

A clear vision has always been a must-have in business, but it has never been exposed to more stress from outside forces than today. So, digital-age leaders must constantly look for new challenges, prepared to adjust their course flexibly, sometimes at a moment's notice, without ever losing sight of their direction and ultimate goal.

This also includes leveraging all tools and channels of communication that are available today to drive vision and communicate it to employees, partners, and customers. Most of all, it means always having an open eye for the enormous impact digital transformation has – and will continue to have – on businesses and society in general.

- **Growth mindset**

In today's complex world, being successful is very much a team effort. Managing teams, especially in a region as large and multi-faceted as the emerging markets region in which I work, requires acknowledging that success is not about control – it's all about growing as a team.

Leaders need to switch from a control mindset to a growth mindset and have a passion for developing and empowering people around them to achieve their goals, both as a team and individually.

My team, for example, is distributed across a huge area that spreads from Poland to Dubai and across the African continent. It would be physically impossible to regularly be present in all the offices we have. So I focus on the enablement and empowerment of my team to work and grow in a self-reliant way, reducing all the geographic, cultural, and language boundaries.

New technologies are a great help here, enabling us to work and collaborate effectively and without interruptions, no matter the location or the time zone we are in.

- **Engagement**

A growth mindset entails that leaders need to be prepared to continuously engage with their team members. They need to identify the high potentials, be open to new ideas and make sure that these ideas are quickly implemented. At

the same time, leaders always need to have an open eye for the concerns and shifting dynamics of their teams. So, while it always helps to be a good speaker, most of all, team leaders need to be good listeners – especially in diverse teams.

A high level of diversity means that at times there will be hugely differing points of view and a need for discussion, but listening to a wide spectrum of viewpoints and bringing them all together is a highly productive way for finding better and more innovative solutions.

- **Humility**

Today's leaders must be more humble than previous generations. Old-fashioned leadership was once based on authority and confidence, which in turn were rooted (at least ideally) in the leader's character, knowledge, and experience.

However, knowledge and experience tend to age rapidly today. So, more than ever before, leaders now must be open to feedback, suggestions, and initiative from the people they interact with; be the team members, customers, or partners. In an increasingly complex environment, no one could possibly know everything that is relevant in each situation. So, accepting that others may know better is an important step in taking decisions that ensure long-term success.

Finally, to succeed in the digital era, a balance between technological progress and people-centric leadership is essential. Clearly, technology is a key business driver in today's world, helping us to work and communicate efficiently, but it needs to be combined with an open-minded company culture, clear and transparent communication, and joint values. Then, only then, teams can unlock their full potential, being productive and supporting their businesses in keeping up with the rapid pace of development and innovation of the digital era.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Amir Sohrabi is Area Vice President and Head of Digital Transformation for Central, Eastern Europe, Middle East and Africa at Citrix

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