

**The Zelensky files: Leadership strategies and practices
for university leaders**

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Abstract

Leadership, in all its guises, is complex, messy, elusive and often times enigmatic. Talented leaders fail and average leaders thrive in all sectors of society, including universities. Dynamic leadership situations with the right timing and a little luck create great leaders; complex situations also result in failure for some of the most talented leaders. And, occasionally a leader's talent transcends even the most complex situational context resulting in sustainable transformational change. This paper is a descriptive analysis of one leader who has captured the hearts, minds and imaginations of people across the world – *President Volodymyr Zelensky of Ukraine*. The article asks: Does Zelensky's leadership contribute to the field of leadership? Do the Zelensky's files [lessons] provide leadership options for university leaders? The author concludes yes to both research questions. Indeed, this article is not a political statement nor advocacy for any particular position. It is a discussion and analysis of leadership – and not simply for presidents and senior CEO leaders but all leaders within universities and schools, particularly those in educational technology and online digital learning. Education is at a crossroads and it is increasingly clear that institutions of the future must be resilient, adaptive and agile organisations capable of responding rapidly and effectively to societal trends and change. Future-proofing education against uncertainty, change, and complexity is simply not a viable option. Organisations will need a dynamic, humanistic and inspirational approach to leadership centred around empathy, empowerment, engagement and execution. Leaders of digital online learning units and managers of educational technology will need The Zelensky Files as much as chief executives.

Keywords: Leadership; Volodymyr Zelensky; educational technology; digital online learning; adaptive and agile organisations; university futures.

INTRODUCTION

Leadership, in all its guises, is complex, messy, elusive and often times enigmatic. Talented leaders fail and average leaders thrive in all sectors of society, including universities. Dynamic leadership situations with the right timing and a little luck create great leaders; complex situations also result in failure for some of the most talented leaders. And, occasionally a leader's talent transcends even the most complex situational context resulting in sustainable transformational change - - and, when we least expect to find inspirational leadership then *viola* – a leader takes centre stage whom transcends and inspires whilst confirming and discarding some of our long-held beliefs about leadership. In this real life play, the protagonist is none other than the President of Ukraine, Volodymyr Zelensky.

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Perhaps we all should have paid heed to this man's response when the NATO and the U.S. offered to evacuate him and his family from war-torn Ukraine in the early stages of the war – 'I need ammunition, not a ride!' Courage in action, calm under fire, and a burning clarity that leading from the front was right where he needed to be – in Kyiv. A reminder that leading from behind or from the side are often simplistic, sound bites rather than genuine and empowering leadership actions.

One of the unexpected benefits for university leaders from Zelensky is that it is truly real time. Even in 2023, most university leaders and leaders from other sectors) tend to rely on past approaches to their university governance and leadership formula – and often with limited results. These leaders may frame their leadership as 'new' and 'visionary' but in the end it all starts to revert back to the status quo and little changes.

Zelensky is certainly not a panacea for resolving the ubiquitous leadership crises in modern higher education and yet there is something uniquely attractive, inspiring and symbolic about this young man that has captured the imagination of the entire world. This uncommon leader in uncommon times just may offer current and future university leaders some new insights into the complex and elusive pursuit we call leadership.

PURPOSE AND FOCUS

This paper is essentially a descriptive analysis and synthesis about leadership from previous research, leadership theory and recent global observations about the leadership of Ukrainian President *Volodymyr Zelensky*. The central focus of this paper is to address two basic research questions. First, As noted, the leadership and management literature are exhaustive and nearly all contemporary topics have been covered in depth. However, in discarding a deeper analysis of a leadership scenario may inadvertently miss something relevant for the field.

The second research question is more practical and aligned with the UJESIT focus and university leadership in general. What lessons can university leaders adapt and/or replicate from Zelensky's leadership style that may potentially be applicable at their institutions; including digital transformation and leading the diffusion of educational technologies in the academy?

The first part of this paper will give the reader an overview of Zelensky – particularly recent observations by global leaders and journalists about his leadership. This will be followed by a summary of traditional leadership literature to provide the reader key strategies we have learned from leadership over the past century.

The method section will describe the single-subject design, re-state the research questions, and postulate hypotheses to these questions. It is important to recognise from a research design perspective that single-subject designs are inherently limiting in data analysis and comparison due to the single sample size. This study is a descriptive analysis and the delimitations of the design will be included in a section entitled Delimitations.

The results section will discuss the two basic research questions and whether the hypotheses are supported, refuted, or null. In effect, the author will examine whether Zelensky's leadership offers anything new in the field of leadership and whether any of these apply to university and educational technology management and leadership.

This paper is written for all levels of leadership and in particular focused on how the concepts and observations presented apply to leaders of online, distance and open learning units [educational technology] within dual mode universities as well as those leading open universities.

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LIVE FROM KYIV: VOLODYMYR ZELENSKY FRONT AND CENTRE

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Is Zelensky a great leader? A humanistic leader? Indeed, perhaps he is simply an actor turned politician for the role of a lifetime. Many think he is the real deal. Zelensky has been described as courageous, authentic and a great communicator (Gotian, 2022). Michael Useem (2022), an emeritus management professor from Wharton Business School, applauded Zelensky's consistent on-point messaging and his dedication to the cause – Ukrainian freedom and autonomy. Useem (2022) further highlights the Ukrainian President's unique capacity to focus on Ukraine, not himself, and to adapt readily to the moment articulating not only what Ukraine can and should do, but also what actions are necessary from his allies and at times even his enemies.

Sejpal (2022) suggests Zelensky personifies that empathy is as much action as an emotion and that he is authentic, relatable in his words, and links purpose and belongingness to his central message of fighting and protecting Ukrainian autonomy, culture, language, freedom, and heritage. Panjwani (2022) suggests Zelensky has a clear vision, is a skilled and authentic communicator and makes people feel valued. And finally, according to Adam Grant, star Wharton Professor, interviewed by Jessica Stillman (2022), what makes Zelensky effective is his ability to understand and reflect the values and identify with those he leads. Perhaps another way to think of Zelensky is he is the common man acting presidential to lead his country through a dire crisis.

From the outset, perhaps we can agree there is no perfect mantra or model of leadership. The continuum of leadership and leaders we observe across all social institutions tends to confuse more than enlighten us about what constitutes the very best of leadership. Incredibly talented leaders falter and crash and burn every day; average leaders rise to the top through a combination of serendipitous factors that come together in perfect harmony – timing, situation, strategy, fit, and even that most elusive of leadership attributes – luck.

Many 'experts' wrote Ukraine off and predicted Russian victory within weeks in 2022. A year later on the anniversary of Russian's attack, Ukraine has stood strong against an antagonist and enemy that invaded sovereign Ukrainian territory. It is unfathomable to think Ukraine would still be here against Russia without Volodymyr Zelensky.

LITERATURE REVIEW OF MANAGEMENT AND LEADERSHIP (BZ – BEFORE ZELENSKY)

The concept of management in the sense of organization and planning work goes back centuries. Socrates was reported to have suggested that management was something completely different than technical expertise (Higgins, 1991). Today, we might see this same sentiment in distinguishing the differences between leadership and management. From the legions of the ancient Roman armies who implemented common principles of hierarchical authority and span of control to the guilds of the middle-ages where masters controlled authority down to the journeymen and apprentices.

Even the organisational matrix of the Catholic church was built upon strict authority, departments, and specialisation we would later see in business, government and universities. The Industrial Revolution would usher in the disruptive innovations of the 19th century ranging from the steam engine, railroads and assembly lines that became catalysts for the mass migration from rural to urban areas where mass factories demanded workers who in turn needed to be managed and which led to new organisational approaches. This was also the period of mass immigration to the U.S. by Europeans to settle in the emerging urban cities where employment opportunities were better.

Classical management theory

From the early part of the 20th century, classical management theory progressed from the early works of Frederick Taylor, Max Weber, Henri Fayol and Mary Parker Follett (Phelps, Parayitam, & Olson, 2007; Fayol, 1916; Weber, 1947). These theorists covered the basics of managerial theory that whilst focused on bureaucracy, improving production and outputs (scientific management), were perhaps unfairly criticised for not caring more about people. The fact suggests otherwise and that the human element was important to all these theorists.

Follett helped move management theory beyond the basics articulated of Fayol's planning, organizing, command, coordination, and control (Fayol, 1949; Lamond, 2004; Phelps, Parayitam, & Olson, 2007). Follett, well ahead of her time, introduced the concepts of law of situation, participatory decision making, cross-functional teams and human resource development. Unsurprisingly, the classical period of management tended to focus on tasks and bureaucratic principles (e.g., Ford assembly line approaches, strict task assignments and controls, etc.) (Weber, 1947). These assembly line approaches to mass production would dominate the 1920s – 1940s from World War I to beyond World War II.

What managerial characteristics defined a manager in 1945? First, the manager would be male. The language of using the term 'leader' tended to be reserved primarily for government and military positions of power and authority. People referred to global politicians such as Roosevelt, Churchill, Stalin and General Marshall as leaders. The head of Ford was a CEO or manager of the company. Even top athletes and coaches were seldom really identified as leaders. Coaches were more likely called good 'Managers' which continues right up to the present. Star players then would have been described as inspirational, superb, outstanding, invaluable, and other superlatives. Today, of course a week doesn't pass that we don't refer to top-tier athletes, male and female, as leaders – Elina Svitolina, Ronaldo, Roger Federer, Tom Brady, Steffi Graff, Annika Sorenstam, Michael Jordan, Usain Bolt, Simona Halep and more.

In universities, the titles president/vice chancellor and vice president/pro-vice chancellor existed but in most instances these individuals would have been considered senior managers and in some elite or private institutions, senior faculty managers. Administrative directors in schools were managers, not leaders. A language and dialogue of leadership simply did not exist and would not exist to well in to the 1970s. Management was management and if you were in management, you were a manager.

During this period, it is equally fair to say that the dominant mode of viewing the president or CEO was that of the all-knowing, all powerful, authoritative male who had primary decision and planning responsibility. We know now of course these super

human managers did not exist in reality. Women were second class citizens and primarily support personnel if at all except in professions that were primarily female – nursing, teaching, and some service industries. In sum, from the 1930s to the 1960s, if someone was labelled a bad leader, they were usually politicians or ex-military turned politicians. Leadership books were simply not to be found in your neighbourhood bookstore nor your university library.

The 1950s and 1960s did signal a change viewed by most as progressive in the management field. The welfare, training and motivation of workers started to be taken more seriously. This is not to suggest there were not some progresses in this area previous to the 1950s. We can go back to the 1920s and Elton Mayo's Hawthorne Effect studies where employees changed their behaviours if they were being observed. Moreover, Mary Parker Follett had been ahead of her time and motivation, professional development and participatory management were on her radar screen even in the 1930s. Despite these developments, personnel welfare and motivation did not really attract the attention of top managers and academics until the late 1950s and early 1960s.

Two prominent theorists to emerge in the late 1960s were Henry Herzberg and Douglas McGregor. Herzberg (1968) wrote his classic paper on motivation identifying specific elements that facilitated employee motivation and others that diminished motivation. Herzberg was instrumental in showing that job satisfaction should be taken seriously by managers because it does make a difference in employee performance. McGregor (1960) conceptualised his Theory X type of management which was more authoritarian and focused on objectives and tasks whereas Theory Y was more people oriented and this led the way to more focus on the people aspects of motivation and performance by managers. A blend of these would later be adopted by the Japanese as Theory Z which was also influenced by the work of Edwards Deming (Phelps, Parayitam, & Olson, 2007) and his focus on quality.

Modern era of management and leadership: 1970s to present

Management by Objectives was the first contribution that would be made by the man many view as the 'Father of Modern Management' – Peter F. Drucker (1973). MBOs was the process of identifying and measuring specific objectives that feed into organisational goals. Drucker would also argue most of his life that the first goal of business was to create a customer. He would often comment that the first responsibility of business was to make a profit. An interesting view of Drucker was that the two most important functions of any business were marketing and innovation (Drucker, 1973).

Drucker (1973) should also be remembered because although he did not invent the leadership rhetoric that would emerge in the late 70s and 80s, he was alluding to many approaches that would, in fact, differentiate leadership from management. Theorists that would usher in today's approach to management and leadership emerged in the 1970s and 1980s: W. Bennis and B. Nanus (1985); E. Schein (1985); J. M. Burns (1978); B. Bass and R. Riggio (2010); J. Kotter (2012); J. Harvey (1974); H. Mintzberg (1975); P. Senge (2006); P. Hersey and K. Blanchard (1984); G. Yukl (2013); T. Peters and R. Waterman (1982) and many more. These thought leaders ushered in new approaches such as organisational culture (Schein), the Abilene paradox (Harvey), systems thinking in management (Senge), situational leadership

(Hersey & Blanchard), key steps to organisational change (Kotter), core values (Peters & Waterman) a rethink of managerial roles (Mintzberg) and transformational leadership (Burns and Bass).

A very important caveat is warranted here. Although much of the modern management literature was written by U.S. theorists, the scope and range of cross-cultural and global scholarship and publications in management and leadership are extensive (Javidan, Dorfman, Sully de Luque, & House, 2006). Moreover, this body of research is essential for all 21st century managers or leaders leading a unit/organisation with diverse employees that represent a unique blend of ethnicity, nationality, race, age, gender and religious backgrounds. The global repository of management and leadership scholarship today is indeed global and diverse. From Tallin to Madrid, Cape Town to Shanghai, New York to Buenos Aires, and Moscow to Kyiv, we will find diverse and unique approaches to leadership. And finally, when we discuss leadership for development, we must be cognizant of these differences where culture, context and geo-political history impacts the educational landscape. It is with this spirit the author has drawn upon Ukraine's president.

In summary, what has this repository of literature and research informed us about effective leadership? First and foremost, there is no magical formula for success for the leader or for an organisation. Practice and experience have consistently suggested to us that leaders are visionaries, they build trust across their organisations, they show empathy and value their employees; they employ sound judgment and common sense, and they can implement and lead change – not just talk or write about change.

Great leaders are dedicated and committed to core values of the organisation and spend considerable time articulating and reinforcing these values amongst staff, partners, and other key stakeholders (Olcott, 2020; 2020a). The reader is encouraged to review House & Aditya (1997) which provides a comprehensive review of research on management-leadership based upon empirical studies, particularly pertinent to key values, attributes and personal characteristics.

Leaders empower those around them, mentor and coach colleagues, and lead by example and out front rather than from behind or on the side. Leaders display calm under fire – as situations become less certain great leaders display a razor like judgment in their decision making. Good Leaders see opportunities and yet avoid high risk situations that threaten the organisation and/or its staff. A good leader view collaboration and competition through a similar lens and yet is seldom oblivious to market forces and changes in the business environment. Leaders are human, they admit their mistakes and seldom make the same one twice.

Do all of these unique attributes provide a silver bullet formula for visionary, inspirational and effective leadership? No, in fact, great leaders fail and average leaders succeed every day across all sectors of business, government, education, healthcare, the military, social services and volunteer organisations. The author concludes from this vast arsenal of written and practical experience the following about leadership.

Indeed, perhaps the most poignant lesson we have learned about leadership, is that despite how good the leader appears, despite the range of extraordinary abilities one may possess, and despite having remarkable vision and resilience, sometimes the situational playing field is so complex given the context and culture of a particular problem or environment, it can spell disaster and failure for even the best leaders.

Conversely, average leaders might emerge due to good timing and a bit of luck and appear to be our leaders extraordinaire. Indeed, this is the enigma of leadership and the reason we search for that unique leader who brings together that synergy and mix of magic, pragmatism, and humanism to transform lives, organisations and societies. Finally, what hovers over all of this is the fact that the emerging leadership for university leaders is collaborative – the all-powerful, all-knowing, and dominant male approach to dynamic and effective leadership is gone with the wind.

LEADERSHIP RESEARCH FOR ONLINE, OPEN AND DISTANCE EDUCATION LEADERS

There are two distinct realities that emerge when we examine the leadership research from online, distance, and open education. First, there is a tendency to draw heavily upon traditional leadership literature for both theoretical and practical approaches to ODL. To some degree, this is practical and makes good sense. Moreover, the focus tends to be issue specific rather than an examination on the dynamics of leadership as a university leader responsible for online, open and distance learning.

Conversely, there is a false assumption that all leadership strategies and roles fall under this broad research umbrella in the university regardless of the level, unit mission and focus of the leader. Leadership that works for the president should work for the Dean of Business and this should work for the Director of ODL. Yes and no. Leadership strategy is often a function of leadership context and situation and one would expect similarities and differences in approaches. Thus, we tend to draw upon the general management and leadership research

The second reality is a function of the first. There is a very limited research base on leadership for ODL. There is no theoretical approach exclusive for ODL and when we talk about leadership, we frame it within the broader repository of research across all sectors.

Olcott (2020a) summed up the state of leadership research for ODL:

... the scholarly literature to date that examines leadership issues, frameworks, and approaches in open and distance learning is relatively scarce. There is no formal theory of leadership for ODL. We draw upon the main body of leadership & management literature for addressing ODL leadership issues and challenges. (p. 49)

Conversely, there is ample research and scholarly inquiry in educational technology, digital transformation, comparisons of specific technologies, pedagogical strategies and theories, assessment, learning design, and more. And yet these studies seldom, if ever, delve in to the intricacies of leading organisations embedded with a technology mission and/or distance learning function.

A THEORETICAL BASELINE: HENRY MINTZBERG'S MANAGEMENT ROLES

Indeed, within the context of drawing upon observations from Zelensky, it is helpful to be able to frame his actions and roles within a recognised theoretical framework for leadership. Henry Mintzberg's ten (10) management roles fits this purpose for us.

As we reviewed the evolution of the management field earlier in this paper, it was clear that managers were viewed as all-knowing, powerful, fearless, invincible, indispensable, and predominately white male. This perception of the manager was

an illusion and, in fact, was never true. The concept of leadership that emerged in the late 1970s suggested something much more complex than the old model. Leadership was distinguishable from the classical management principles and ushered in a new era for how we think about organisations and their leaders and managers.

Interestingly, in the mid-1970s Henry Mintzberg's (1975) classic article on management – '*The Manager's Job: Folklore or Fact*' redefined how we thought about what managers really do. The problem with Mintzberg's study was that he appeared more interested in discrediting Henry Fayol's original work on management written in 1916 and first published in English in 1949 (Fayol, 1949).

Fayol, to be fair, was a French mining executive who proposed the first practical and theoretical focused approach to management emphasising the manager's role in planning, organising, staffing, monitoring and controlling. Fayol was a practitioner – Mintzberg was an academic more focused on writing and theorising than doing. Mintzberg called Fayol's work 'folklore' and yet whilst Mintzberg's study highlighted actual things managers do with their time, he really failed to delve in to leadership.

Mintzberg (1975) reconceptualised his framework of management into three primary dimensions – Interpersonal, Informational and Decisional. Within each of these dimensions Mintzberg then assigned specific roles.

Interpersonal	Informational	Decisional
Figurehead	Monitor	Resource Allocator
Leader	Disseminator	Disturbance handler
Liaison	Spokesperson	Entrepreneur
		Negotiator

It is beyond the scope of this article to analyse Mintzberg's original management framework in detail or to align it specific to Zelensky. A few observations, however, are warranted. First, leadership is not really given any unique status. Mintzberg saw leadership just as one managerial role. This is completely in contradiction to forty years of subsequent leadership literature and practice which has shown that manager and leadership are not the same. There is indeed overlap in some roles but leadership constitutes something other than the basics of management (Olcott, 2020; 2020a). Secondly, Mintzberg's sample size was corporate only; and a small sample size of five (5) CEOs. Moreover, Mintzberg's sample illustrates the difficulty in designing leadership studies – you have to identify the organisation and/or the leader which in practice derails many leadership studies.

Mintzberg's key finding was managers spent a lot of time informally gathering information for their own decision making from employees at all levels of the organisation. Mintzberg was still caught in that illusionary view that leadership is the all-powerful, all-knowing, male who knows, controls and decides everything. This was more than just insulting to women leaders; it was insulting to all aspiring leaders. Three years later James McGregor Burns seminal book '*Leadership*' (1978) was published and highlighted limitations of Mintzberg's framework.

In sum, Mintzberg's work was valuable for the field of management; less valuable for the emerging focus on leadership. To varying degrees, Zelensky has assumed each of Mintzberg's roles and we are left with the question: What does Zelensky bring to leadership that is new and dynamic? We will explore this question in the remainder of this article.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS (R1 & R2) AND HYPOTHESES (H1 & H2)

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The descriptive design of this study tends to drive very pragmatic research questions. As previously noted, the depth and breadth of management and leadership research during the past century is extensive. Common sense suggests that we are in search – formally and systematically and through new lens – what is new in leadership? This study focuses on the following research questions and respective hypotheses for each question.

R1 – Do Volodymyr Zelensky’s leadership approaches contribute to the field of leadership?

H1 – Volodymyr Zelensky’s leadership offers new approaches to the practice of the leadership.

R2 – What lessons can university leaders adapt and/or replicate from Zelensky’s leadership style that may potentially be applicable at their institutions; including digital transformation and leading the diffusion of educational technologies in the academy?

H2 – Zelensky’s leadership style will present new interpretations of leadership pertaining to collaborative partnerships, educational and digital technologies, the symbolism of leadership attributes, communication and 21st century universities.

RESULTS

Research Question 1

Do Volodymyr Zelensky’s leadership approaches contribute to the field of leadership?

Yes and no. Zelensky builds trust, he motivates, and above all he listens (Gotian, 2022). He listens to his NATO partners, to his military, to his citizens, to his enemies. At the same time, he knows he can’t lead by himself. He delegates but always returns to the core values of a free, independent, proud, and peace seeking nation of *Slava Ukraina* (Stillman, 2022). He is direct, assertive in his needs with his partners and yet collegial in every reasonable way to build an unlikely alliance. These attributes are not new and have been covered in leadership literature.

And yet, underlying the very essence of Zelensky’s leadership was empathy (Sejpal, 2022) whether he was visiting local villages, hospitals or the front lines he consistently showed genuine feelings and compassion for his fellow Ukrainians – perhaps surpassed only by his passion and courage for Ukraine (Stillman, 2022; Useem, 2022). This empathy combined with other attributes associated with leadership produces a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts. Zelensky is not the only leader in the past five years to be more empathetic as a leader except that he has done it during wartime conditions – this is unique.

Zelensky is an effective communicator. No other leader in the last 100 years has been given open access to address the United Nations General Assembly, parliaments, congresses, national assemblies and the global media. He is not simply a team builder for Ukraine, he is the ultimate team builder for freedom, justice, and moral necessity. He does not tell the world Ukraine is the only country suffering or in need, but he tells his story in ways that inspire the entire world (Useem, 2022).

Despite all these demands on one man, he has remained culturally sensitive, even offering to have Russian soldiers who were killed in action returned to their mothers

in Russia. Zelensky is the personification of calm under fire – the more uncertain and stressful things become, he becomes razor sharp in his judgment and makes sound decisions against all odds (Olcott, 2020; 2020a). Everything about him exudes common sense and he is adaptable and willing to negotiate and compromise. He is the essence of leadership and yet vulnerable, with human imperfections, and knows the future is tenuous.

The traditional paradoxical, enigmatic axiom of leadership is not new. When organisations are failing everyone knows what the leadership issues are from the receptionist to the chairman of the board. This is particularly true in organisations focused on using and deploying technologies. Conversely, when we experience great and impactful leadership, we often at a loss to just what makes a leader effective. Our tendency is to pull out the attribute lists, cite specific organisational successes, and yet we are often no closer to understanding why leadership is working so well.

Research Question 1 asked: Does Zelensky's leadership contribute to the field of leadership? Recognising this will subject to scrutiny and interpretation, the answer is an unequivocal yes. How? Empathy drives his actions. Moreover, this empathy manifests itself in unique partnerships, iconic symbolism, and yet strong leaders-receptive collaborator.

What are the unique elements of the Zelensky's leadership for the field?

File 1: Synergistic leadership approach

Zelensky approaches leadership from a synergistic synthesis of humanism, pragmatism and sound and calculated judgment. Assessing leaders in the past argued that most leaders must always be strong, tough, unwavering stalwarts in every context and situation. Moreover, they were most often men – Thatcher, Arden and Merkel have dispelled that myth in the 21st century. Leaders can share real human emotions and yet not diminish their leadership or power in their own eyes or in the eyes of their followers. We have missed this lesson for years. Followers want real human people leading them – illusionary demagogues usually personified as all-powerful males in the past was always an illusion. People want to follow, be inspired and be led by real human beings. Zelensky is the real deal.

File 2: Collaborative individualism

Zelensky's leadership is visually and publicly very often front and centre but its essence is entirely collaborative, inclusive and team oriented. In his view, and the view of this author, this dual approach is essential for effective leadership. The leader must assume this centre piece role model publicly yet must lead together and collaboratively across all the organisation's stakeholder groups. *The view that great leaders lead from the side or the back is simply nonsense.* These leadership sound bites we see on FB or LinkedIn have no basis in the real world.

File 3: Universities and schools are gatekeepers for freedom, social justice and humanity

A pragmatic reflection of Zelensky's leadership is that he knows that no war is ever won by rhetoric or sound bites by NATO leaders who talk about 'an unprecedented solidarity of Europe' and yet do not truly understand the pain and suffering of the Ukrainian people. A victory by Russia would be the equivalent of a victory by Germany in 1945.

Zelensky knows that no matter how much western aid, weapons, and financial support Ukraine receives, if NATO lets Ukraine lose this war, then freedom and justice lose equally across the world. If Russia wins this war, then NATO becomes the new watchword for failure and Appeasement – Solidarity without Action. Zelensky knows that rhetoric never stops the bully on the playground. The bully is only stopped when he is hit so hard that he doesn't get up even if he could (Raven, 2008).

In the opening of this paper, I noted that Zelensky had captured the imagination, inspiration and symbolism of the entire world. The essence of this is Zelensky and Ukraine are fighting for freedom for the entire world – he knows it and so does every other leader of every other country. Of course, this does not mean other nations are not struggling as well for essential freedoms, justice, and human approaches in their countries.

Indeed, some leaders simply do not understand or choose not to acknowledge that the fighting on the battlefield by Zelensky and Ukraine is also a battle for freedom at the gates and inside the halls of the modern university and all educational institutions. Many leaders will sound the call for social justice, equality and humanity towards the human condition and yet will equally dance around taking a side that is centred around geopolitics and the fight for freedom. Holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel has so eloquently reminded all of us who benefits when we choose not to take a side.

We must always take sides. Neutrality helps the oppressor, never the victim. Silence encourages the tormentor, never the tormented. Sometimes we must interfere. When human lives are endangered, when human dignity is in jeopardy, national borders and sensitivities become irrelevant. Wherever men or women are persecuted because of their race, religion, or political views, that place must—at that moment—become the centre of the universe. (Wiesel, 1986 – Noble Prize Acceptance Speech)

When freedom and justice are challenged on the battlefield, in the streets, in the media and in the classrooms university leaders not only have the right, they have the responsibility to choose a side. It is an illusion for any university leader to think things will be fine by doing nothing if we just mind our own academic business. How freedom, justice, equality and humanity evolve from the battlefield and/or from authoritarian populist regimes ultimately find their ways in to the very essence of the academy. Today, in 2023, academic freedom is under siege across the globe by right wing populist governments.

Does this suggest universities and their leaders must take combative approaches to their relationships with government in the future. No, of course not. To the contrary, however, universities and their leaders must be willing to support and defend the values, freedoms, and societal norms that the majority of the people in any nation hold essential to life and liberty. In sum, however, universities and their leaders are not immune to the geopolitical landscape and winds and must be willing to stand and defend what the peoples believe are right and just. If a university cannot do this it has already failed its mission to society, its members, and its students.

File 4: Situational imaging

Even after nearly fifteen months of war in Ukraine, we have yet to see the Ukrainian President appear in public, on TV, or in photos wearing a suit and tie. It is a remarkable

use of situational imaging to remind the world his country is at war every day. He wears a green/brown tee shirt with military fatigues and usually combat boots. I picture truly is worth a 1000 words.

He is a president at war even on days when his speeches and his smile reflect the most optimistic and empathetic words that a leader can convey. He understands the power of this message – it's not just what the war brings day in and day out but a reflection of why Ukraine is fighting. Zelensky truly believes Ukraine is fighting for the world, not just his own country and Europe. He is steadfast that his nation has been placed in this unique historical context for defending the very essence of freedom and that the outcome has immense implications for the future of freedom and justice across the globe.

File 5: Managing Shifting Narratives

A brief note that this shift towards greater empathy, empowerment and simple humanistic approaches to leadership are not uniquely Zelensky's. We have seen the former New Zealand Prime Minister Jacinda Jarden (Henley & Roy, 2020) videoconferencing with colleagues whilst her children were in the background at home. She was a mum, a parent, a wife, not just a PM.

We have seen photos and news film of Angela Merkel walking to a local Berlin supermarket (wearing a mask) having bought food at her local market with her husband like any other German citizens. Of course, the former Chancellor of Germany could have called Uber or even her own private Mercedes but instead we saw an inspirational human being, not just a powerful leader up front and personal, walking the talk with her fellow citizens. Perhaps this was even more remarkable given she was raised and trained in the East German GDR under Communism.

These types of human focused examples were ubiquitous during the pandemic almost like these leaders were trying to tell all of us something about leadership. The genuine message was we are all human and we are all in this together which are powerful truths for families just as they are for organisations, communities, and nations.

Again, as articulated earlier in this paper, followers want real human beings leading them. They want leaders who know their strengths and their weaknesses; leaders who don't delude themselves into thinking they know the answer to everything. Followers want leaders out front and yet in the mix – but not from the back nor on the side.

Perhaps this is another reason why Zelensky may have captured the world's imagination: he is one of us. A common man in an uncommon role in uncommon times. We get to see the leader assuming these diverse roles across shifting narratives. Does a day pass where the university president doesn't assume varying leadership approaches for managing different priorities and narratives.

Research Question 2

What lessons can university leaders adapt and/or replicate from Zelensky's leadership style that may potentially be applicable at their institutions; including digital transformation and leading the diffusion of educational technologies in the academy?

First and foremost, be an authentic and humanistic leader and ask how empathy, engagement, empowerment and execution can benefit your institution and its constituents. University leaders working with digital and educational technologies are

in unique and advantageous positions in the university to build multi-directional leadership relationships with senior leaders, deans, department chairpersons, support units for ODL, and many other stakeholder groups.

Educational technology and online digital technology leaders have a dual role. First, to promote the academic enterprise of the educational organisation which is the essence of the institution – the delivery of academic programmes. Secondly, leaders are the ambassadors for the institution to educate the institutional staff, teachers, and leadership at all levels about the advantages and limitations of ODL delivery systems for the institution. These leaders, like Zelensky, interact and work in partnership with diverse stakeholders and supporters (and detractors) each day. The central message remains the same but the leader – including educational technology leaders in the university – must refine the message a little differently for each group. Moreover, this builds understanding, consensus, and promotes consistency in the message.

All stakeholders look at a leader and ask only one question: *Does this leader personify trust and authenticity in his/her collaboration with us?* Trust and authenticity are essential to the leader's arsenal for promoting educational technology and online programmes and being an authentic leader. And the leader's trust and authenticity are the foundations for his/her own staff – they too want to know their leader is the real deal – trustworthy and authentic. Again, this is personified by Zelensky in his diversity of interactions and stakeholder groups.

Collaborative individualism starts with throwing out all those sound bites about leaders leading from the back or from the side – we have heard them all before – guides on the side or sage on the stage. You want your campus to adopt and innovate with educational technology then you as the leader has to be front and centre for advocacy. And, those you want to collaborate and support you has to embrace you as the leader whilst also feeling you are receptive to genuine collaboration.

The cold hard truth is 95% of all followers want leaders in the university who are real people but they also want leaders who know when to stand front and centre and lead. The majority of followers in any organisation or society do not want to lead – they want to be led. The moral of the story is technology and senior leaders who choose to keep a low profile will also produce organisational results that are low profile.

What does this mean for university technology, digital and senior executive leader? First and foremost, you must decide what your key message is to all stakeholder groups mentioned under observation 1 above. This is different than the mission of the educational technology and/or distance learning unit which might be articulated simply as ... to become the leading provider in the country by 2025. The message I'm referring to parallels Zelensky's message by wearing his tee shirt and combat fatigues. The ODL leader should refrain from similar attire but the point here is that the ODL leader must have a message that is understood and respected by all stakeholder groups across the institution.

For the past forty years when institutions disproportionately focus only on the 'technological toys' without managing collegial relations and 'shifting narratives' educational technology and digital initiatives lose their continuity. Moral of the story – technology remains mostly about managing people's expectations and

less about the bells and whistles. We want technology to empower us, make our jobs easier and efficient at the same time, and we want leaders who do this.

Many ODL leaders spend so much time trying not to offend others that they abandon their authenticity and, in fact, have forgotten themselves what their key mission is for their institutional colleagues. For example, an educational technology or online learning leader message may be simple, subtle and yet powerful in the eyes of others. As a leader, would you be comfortable with this message about you:

Our tech leader respects our faculty, is committed to academic quality, seeks new ways digital tools can empower faculty and students, offers alternative pedagogical practice and works collaboratively with campus support units. She/he is a true leader with integrity and we embrace his/her trust, leadership and support.

If you are a tech or online program leader, does this reflect your view of yourself? Leadership often goes awry when a leader's view of herself/himself is misaligned with how others see you, particular your immediate colleagues. In 2023, educational technology and digitalisation does not have to live in the shadows, walk on eggs, and try to placate the traditional academic establishment. Educational technology leaders are critical to university, faculty, and student success. Develop your own message that is your equivalent of the Zelensky tee shirt-fatigues-combat boots message.

Because of the unique position within the university or school, the technology leader also will have to make choices and, in some instances like presidents and nations, may have to take sides on divisive issues. For example, can a technology leader stay neutral on the applicability of faculty work with digital tools (design, delivery, assessment, etc.) to promotion and tenure? The technology leader is the ambassador for online, open and distance learning and teacher incentives must be a priority. The technology leader cannot excuse herself/himself from this arena. The emerging area of Artificial Intelligence (A.I.) is taking the world by storm and already the division amongst educators, business and government leaders is polarised at the extremes. It is the brave new world we have been waiting for many; it is the end of civilisation for others. What message do you as the technology director

This is only one example and certainly there will be issues and campus-wide discussions where the educational technology and/or online learning director's views or support may be unnecessary. The key point here is for university leaders to reflect upon critical policy, delivery, and academic support issues and where he/she needs to be in the eyes of other campus leadership. This is a tricky path in navigating the informal culture of the institution and its norms. Conversely, trying to fly under the radar and keep everyone happy by not taking a position or side will often lead to technology being isolated and on the periphery of many key discussions. Are you willing to stand up and fight for what is right and if necessary, take a side? Many technology leaders would rather go along to get along. This can be disastrous for the unit and the institution. There is something amoral about a leader who abandons one's own judgment. Leadership requires tough choices, taking sides, and razor sharp judgment. This is equally true for educational technology and online learning directors in the university.

Leaders at all educational levels and including the educational technology leader often get in their own way when it comes to *managing shifting narratives* primarily because they believe they must pull a new leadership role-style out of their hat

for each narrative. Moreover, there is a valid concern that leaders that take on too many 'different' roles that followers and institutional stakeholders become confused. This is a fine line to walk because followers want to know who their leader is and even to be reasonably confident that they know how their leader may or may not respond in specific scenarios.

In the final analysis, this does not mean the ODL leader must always be predictable and in fact all leaders will make choices that followers would not have predicted. Even in these instances, stakeholders and followers will support the leader if they trust him/her as an authentic leader. Each new narrative (e.g., fiscal crisis, enrolment declines, increased violence on campus, intrusive concerns about A.I., challenges to academic freedom, external political trends etc.) brings with it new challenges and what is truly a unique leadership attribute is for a leader to be able to maintain a level of consistency with their values, decision processes, and empowerment strategies. This consistency is the hidden secret for ODL leaders to build the trust and authenticity inside and outside the university.

FUTURE LINES OF RESEARCH

Drawing upon the lessons of leadership discussed in this article, what lines of empirical research need to be investigated further.

1) Do the Zelensky Files or lessons have applicability in different units in the university?

2) How do we prepare leaders for the future to employ and empower with empathy, manage shifting narratives and develop their defining message to peers and partners?

3) What are the risks and rewards for universities and Schools taking on a more geopolitical role in the future? Does not the university and its leaders have a joint responsibility to defend and uphold the core values of a humane society, to fight for education as a human right, and to defend these rights inside and outside the university? Do universities need a new social contract with governments? Does ODL leadership have a role to play in this geopolitical arena?

DELIMITATIONS OF STUDY

The study of leadership is problematic in practice and in research design. A study's delimitations are not necessarily severe limitations of a study but rather choices made by the author that have some level of impact on design, results and by extension the discussion.

The first design flaw in this study is it is a single-subject design. The author provides an extensive review of leadership and management literature as well as lessons from practice. However, despite being a descriptive analysis, the sampling is one subject – Volodymyr Zelensky which inherently limits the data gathering and analysis. It also means that the results and discussion are subject to the interpretation of the researcher.

A further issue is unlike studies in educational technology where we compare technologies, provide anonymity of subjects, and can be openly critical, leadership studies are front and centre. Critical assessment usually does not reflect the name

of the leader and the organisation unless the researcher is highlighting positives about the leader/organisation (this study). In one sense, we do not want to disparage any of our colleagues as leaders nor their institutions, but this is a real issue when trying to get at leadership analyses that are candid and direct.

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SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Leadership and education are at the crossroads. The complexity of the world has increased exponentially in the past decade and we face immense challenges on a global scale ranging from the post-Covid era, conflicts in Ukraine, Myanmar, and Sudan, growing climate change and disasters, the A. I. invasion, a credential revolution in HE, shifting political winds towards populist governments which in turn are challenging the basic freedoms and traditions of universities.

Leadership is complex, messy, often elusive, and always multi-dimensional. The interconnected world we live in, where global events and decisions can send shock waves across regional and local landscapes, further intensifies the challenges facing today's leaders. The impacts of these global reverberations are diverse in different regions and sectors of the world, and universities [and schools] and its leaders are not immune to their effects. (Olcott, Arnold, & Blaschke, 2023, p. 74)

This paper has attempted to frame a mosaic of new vantage points on leadership issues and approaches drawn from decades of management research, leadership theory and practical observations and examples from the emergence of *President Volodymyr Zelensky* of Ukraine upon the world stage.

A key question that weaves itself throughout this paper is whether empathetic leadership approaches can be effective in complex geopolitical and power scenarios at the national-global levels; as well as right down to the educational technology leader of today's universities and schools? In fact, leaders at all levels across all types of organisations can benefit from infusing more humanistic aspects in to their leadership –followers want a human leader not an illusion.

Indeed, the Zelensky leadership files offer us some new insights into leadership and yet the complexity of today's educational landscape and political ecosystems will require us to seriously examine the continuum of challenges we face as university leaders and institutions. This is particularly true for technology leaders who increasingly are playing a major role in navigating future directions and waters for the university.

The global pandemic, Ukraine-Russian War, climate change disasters, political populism, and economic downturns have accentuated the fact that our powers to predict the future were quite limited in the main (Author & co-authors). *Does this suggest that university and school leaders need to focus more on building adaptive organisations to change and uncertainty in the future? The answer is yes.* Future forecasting doesn't need to go away – data matters - but there is no perfect 'future proofing' defence against the future other than being prepared to adapt and shift directions quickly, efficiently and effectively (Sager, 2019). The is equally true of university ODL units and their leaders must become more adaptable and agile to external forces.

In the final analysis, it is the opportune time for us to re-examine our approaches to university and school technology (open and distance learning) leadership given the emerging trends. Indeed, some of these were well under way prior to the pandemic and others have emerged post Covid. First, digitalisation continues although the mass adoption of online delivery is not a clear picture. Many organisations have returned to pre-pandemic approaches though with a better understanding of the potential of ODL with emergency delivery options at now part of their response posture.

Secondly, the credentials revolution seems to suggest that in the future that some institutions will be highly engaged in providing these shorter, skill-based credentials designed to put people to work (McGreal & Olcott, 2022). This raises a fundamental question that also challenges traditional ODL leadership approaches: Does every institution need to offer more online programmes? Micro-credentials? OERs? The answer is an unequivocal no. Educational technology leaders will need to do a better job at prioritising what their institutions do best and build solidly around those strengths. Why? Because all things digital will likely be under the technology umbrella and micro-credentials will be digitally based for easy access and validation by employers. Undoubtedly, short focused credentials may be critical for developing nations and nations rebuilding post conflict. Indeed, this only accentuates how important leadership will be to rebuilding and empowering universities, schools, and nations.

Thirdly, the shift towards conservative populist governments is finding its way back to the university with direct attacks on freedom of speech, academic freedom, freedom to assemble, and others. This also filters down to our public K-12 schools. Again, as argued in this paper, universities may need to come out of the shadows geopolitically and take sides in the future beyond just equality and social justice issues.

Finally, A.I. has entered the building and George Orwell and Aldous Huxley are likely having tea and reflecting not only whether we understood their messages – but whether we even read their books. A.I. could bring a reincarnation of 1984 and we may, in fact, finally have the brave new world we have so impatiently been waiting for – it just may not be the one for which we hoped or one we can control.

The final quintessential lesson for leaders is more practical. Every human problem or issue cannot – and in fact never could – be resolved or better managed with either-or, black and white, and this or that approaches. Rather, all critically important issues have 3-5 sound approaches and solutions. The chosen solution will likely be a synthesis of all of these depending upon context, resources, timeline, competition, economic trends, digital capacity, and others. This is a good first step towards building ‘future proof’ adaptive organisations and universities for the future.

In conclusion, the Zelensky files (lessons) are not a panacea for leadership in the 21st century or the silver bullet for educational technology organisations. They are, however, a reminder that the human condition craves inspiration and genuine leadership. We desperately need leaders whose whole is greater than the sum of their parts. President Volodymyr Zelensky has personified this new frame of leadership and its contributions to field of leadership and alternative approaches for university leaders.

Indeed, at the outset of war most external leaders, CNN, the BBC, global journalists and government and military experts predicted a short-war with Ukraine unlikely to withstand the perceived power of Russia. Fast forward to the present and it is April 2023, the war continues and by all accounts Ukraine is winning. The final outcome of this war, of course, is uncertain. As all of these experts backtracked their earlier predictions, what hasn't changed is the perception globally by other leaders that the Ukrainian president is a unique, humanistic, determined leader dedicated to his country's freedom, the welfare of all Ukrainians, compassionate towards his enemies as well as his NATO allies. Calm and courageous under fire leadership that is deliberate, resilient and perhaps most of all – humanistic. On 10 November 2022, in an interview with President Zelensky and First Lady Olena Zelensky by award winning global journalist and current CNN International Anchor, Christiane Amanpour, Zelensky was asked if it was true you said to President Biden in February 2022 when they offered to evacuate you and your family, you responded 'I need ammunition, not a ride.'

Zelensky responded: 'Yes, that's right. Nothing changed. You know my answer is still the same.' (CNN Transcripts, 2022)

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