

Three traits of technology leaders who are navigating the digital revolution

Learn how the new breed of technology leaders can benefit your organization



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“ It is not the strongest of the species that survives, nor the most intelligent that survives. It is the one that is the most adaptable to change.”

Charles Darwin

Today’s digital transformation is changing how companies collect and use information. Digitalization is essential, and companies around the globe must digitalize or face real business challenges. That said, as Giacomelli, executive and business leader for digital solutions at Genpact, put it, “It’s not easy to find a lot of examples of true success in digital transformation”.¹ Another Forrester analyst pointed out “...there is no successful completion of a transformation—it’s a continuous evolution”.² Since digital progress is constantly evolving, so must be the technology leader who is overseeing and implementing digital strategy. This leader must be on the forefront of change and also bring the requisite knowledge and experience each company needs.

One obstacle many companies face is the difficulty in finding and recruiting top technology leaders. These leaders are increasingly younger and come with different experiences and expectations; furthermore, as a result of their youth, there is a scarcity of experienced, qualified technology leaders. As Steve Watson, Managing Director in the Stanton Chase Dallas office, explains in his article, [“The evolving leader today, ‘the times they are a changin’”](#) technology is at the core of leadership changes. Finding the right technology leader means finding the right path forward.

In this article, we examine how a few key leadership traits are supporting the digital transformation in today’s world.

Leadership Trait 1:

Entrepreneurship

(Courageous Leaders)

Entrepreneurial leaders differ from other types of leaders with their very high tolerance for risk. They accept an extraordinary amount of risk in pursuit of their vision, and they don't stop until they have achieved their goal. The strategy they follow is commonly aligned at a very high level and based on their ambitious growth strategy – generally highly flexible, agile and adaptable. They are used to dealing with setbacks and challenges, and they are known for being persistent.

“ Our mission is to build tools of mass innovation.”³

Solomon Hykes, Founder and Former CTO, Docker

CEOs who recognize the value of a strong, entrepreneurial technology leader can bring great value to their organization. These individuals often have a laser focus on one particular project. For example, Arash Ferdowsi, CTO and cofounder of Dropbox, has been described by a friend in the following way:

“ ...to Ferdowsi, Dropbox is his social life and ‘his baby.’
‘At home in his free time...he is sitting with the TV on and scouting Dropbox. Sometimes I’ll get texts from him at 1 in the morning: ‘The icon on this page looks funny. Can you fix it ‘ “Much of it is a love for the company the way a parent would love a child.”⁴

Ferdowsi's unwavering passion is typical for an entrepreneurial tech leader. In any company, entrepreneurial tech leaders drive digital transformation with their ambitious approaches. They focus on customer needs, and they strive to develop the necessary technology by creating efficient solutions – both in relation to the speed of execution and cost.

Entrepreneurial technology leaders are very selective about what type of people they hire for their team. They don't hire based on traditional measurements; instead, they are driven by emotional intelligence.

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“...success is much more likely... ‘when we have a healthy, engaged, and talented work force led by leaders with unquestionable integrity and full transparency.’”⁵

Thuan Pham, CTO, Uber

These types of leaders know how to learn from failure and are capable of asking the right questions to innovate their business model to achieve success. Confidence, self-belief, involved and goal-driven are some of the characteristics seen in entrepreneurial technology leaders. Technology leaders with an entrepreneurial spirit pursue a vision with their passion, leading them to success in the current era of digitization.

Can your organization benefit from an entrepreneurial technology leader? Consider this style of tech leadership if your company is ready for potentially drastic change in pursuit of a clear, solid vision.

Leadership Trait 2:

Strategist (Thought Leaders)

“For a CIO to be asked to join a board, they need to be known for work that is broader than the CIO title.”⁶

Doreen Wright, former CIO, Campbell Soup Company

“People believe that IT is about technology, but it’s really a behavioral science—understanding the behaviors of your company’s staff, leaders, and customers—and facilitating the adoption of a new vision.”⁷

Werner Boeing, CIO of Roche Diagnostics

In comparison to entrepreneurs who focus primarily on building a business from scratch, a technology strategist focuses on evolving technology business models and reinventing them to meet future technology requirements. Adjusting a business to the economic environment is key to execute the company vision.

Technology leaders often work with executive and board members who have backgrounds outside the technology sector and have a different understanding of the impact of digital transformation. Consequently, technology leaders must clearly explain and advocate for investments in technology and the related human capital to advance and sustain the use of such technology. Strategic technology executives focus their efforts on working within existing business structures to foster change.

Your organization may benefit from a strategic technology leader if you are looking for consistent, measured growth in digitization. Look for a leader with a broad range of experiences both within and outside the technology sector; these executives have unique insights and experiences to help unify your C-suite, and they also bring diverse perspectives from outside the field of technology.

Leadership Trait 3:

Activism & Environmentalism *(Inspirational Leaders)*

“There are four ingredients in true leadership:
brains, soul, heart and good nerves”

Klaus Schwab, Founder and Executive Chairman World Economic Forum

“I’ve never found anything I loved more than
writing code, but at the same time I knew
we had a responsibility as an organization
to support the amazing people we’d hired.”⁸

Greg Brockman, CTO, Stripe

“To be successful, you have to have your heart in
your business, and your business in your heart.”

Thomas Watson, Sr., former CEO, IBM

Technology activists in the C-suite are game changers and visionaries. They succeed in the era of digital transformation by focusing on the continued alignment of human capital and the ethics of digital development. Technology today is enabling many startups and organizations to create a more transparent business model for customers to understand the social and environmental impact of their consumption.

“ **SELCO Solar Light Private**, India...has developed small scale solar power systems. This enables people to produce electricity as well as start home businesses. It does not require the infrastructure investment that bringing electricity to slum areas usually would.”⁹

SELCO's innovation illustrates one technology initiative in environmental activism that can be seen to benefit society on a large scale.

Technology leaders focused on activism believe transformation enables and inspires others to join their movement. Change is a key aspect of their mindset and execution. It is important for them to question their business case and ask themselves what they can change in order to have a more sustainable impact on society, the environment, customers and partners.

What's next?

None of the above leadership traits is a silo unto itself. Leaders share characteristics and move between traits as their businesses evolve, and they adapt to the business situation they are confronted with and their goals/vision. The activist may, in fact, be a strategist or an entrepreneur by nature. The type of technology leader right for your organization should be analyzed against what traits will work for your organization.

About the author

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