

# Leadership Traits Among Effective Virtual School Leaders

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*There is a growing need for outstanding virtual school administrators who can effectively navigate the unique demands of this alternative educational institution. This study explores key leadership traits deemed important in virtual school programs and organizations. The researchers conducted a mixed-methods, explanatory design study using quantitative data from rank-order surveys and qualitative data from interviews with virtual school teachers and administrators. The results indicated similarities of traits identified and desired by virtual school teachers and administrators while reflecting meaningful correlation with Kouzes and Posner's admired leadership traits. Findings and discussion provide guidance for current and future leadership in virtual settings.*

*Keywords: Virtual School, Leadership, Traits, Admired Leadership Traits, School Administration, Educational Leadership, Organizational Leadership*

## INTRODUCTION

Virtual learning is one of the fastest evolving and growing educational models and provides an attractive alternative to traditional brick and mortar classroom-based education. Virtual learning models range from schools that offer a single or limited number of classes via computer to schools using online augmentation and support of traditional classroom instruction to schools providing completely remote and totally online instruction. According to a report from the National Education Policy Center (Shank, Davidson, Barbour, Huerta, Shafter, Rice & Nitkin, 2017), approximately 34 states offer education through virtual schools with close to 1 million students enrolled, and the numbers are expected to rise. In a time of virtual school growth across the country, unique school administrators with significant leadership expertise are no doubt necessary. These leaders are responsible for facilitating a novel and rapidly evolving style of education while also fulfilling the unique administrative needs of these organizations.

According to Coryn, Schroter, and McCown, (2014), one of the most critical lessons that emerged from research on effective schooling was the importance of the school leader. The conceptual framework demonstrates the connection between school programs and the leadership practices displayed by the administrator. The merging of two phenomena, virtual school programs and effective administrative practices, invites exploration to determine the leadership traits deemed important with school leaders in a

new format of education. Virtual schools are still considered a novel and alternative approach when compared to the traditional educational models. Virtual school leaders must inspire innovation, engagement, motivation, and initiative among their faculty (Webber, 2002). Leadership in such a setting requires a highly adaptive and flexible leadership approach (Yukl and Mahsud, 2010). These leaders must serve as strong communicators internally but also must represent the institution among the numerous stakeholders and observers of this still novel and heavily scrutinized approach to education (Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011). Virtual school leaders are required to build trust among faculty and give them confidence to try new approaches that might differ from the “tried and true” (Ferrell and Kline, 2018). In short, virtual school leaders are charting new territory and must be innovative educational leaders but also must demonstrate skillful administrative and organizational leadership. For example, in the study the authors deemed several of Kouzes and Posner’s (1993, 2011) admired leadership characteristics (ambitious, broad-minded, caring, competent, cooperative, courageous, dependable, determined, fair-minded, forward-looking, honest, imaginative, independent, inspiring, intelligent, loyal, mature, self-controlled, straightforward, and supportive) as critical when leading a virtual school program and organization. The table below lists Kouzes and Posner’s traits along with the relative importance scores from different studies.

**TABLE 1**  
**KOUZES AND POSNER’S ADMIRED TRAITS OF A LEADER**

<i>Characteristic</i>	<i>2010</i>	<i>2002</i>	<i>1987</i>
Honest	85	88	83
Forward-Looking	70	71	62
Inspiring	69	65	58
Competent	64	66	67
Intelligent	42	47	43
Broad-Minded	40	40	37
Dependable	37	33	32
Supportive	36	35	32
Fair-Minded	35	42	40
Straightforward	31	34	34
Determined	28	23	20
Cooperative	26	28	25
Ambitious	26	17	21
Courageous	21	20	27
Caring	20	20	26
Imaginative	18	23	34
Loyal	18	14	11
Mature	16	21	23
Self-Controlled	11	8	13
Independent	6	6	10

The authors felt it important to investigate the judgment and opinions of virtual practitioners vis-à-vis the required and desired leadership traits of practicing administrative leaders. Through a mixed methods research design, eight virtual school administrators along with their faculty and staff completed a self-assessment to evaluate the ideal leadership characteristics for a virtual school administrator. In total, there were 41 respondents to the survey (33 teachers and 8 administrators) and 16 participants for the interviews (8 teachers and 8 administrators with one from each school). The results of the survey measured, by rank order, the twenty leadership traits perceived necessary for the ideal virtual school leader. Following the completion of the surveys, individual interviews with the administrator and one teacher from each virtual school were conducted and transcribed for further analysis. By coding the transcripts, themes related to Kouzes' and Posner's twenty characteristics (Table 1) were identified and consolidated. Although significant growth continues in K-12 virtual learning options, there is limited research regarding the leadership skills necessary for success in blended or online learning environments. Furthermore, limited research exists with the correlation of educational leadership traits with those necessary for effective organization leadership. Further research with school leaders helps develop administrative programs for education while supporting administrators as they expand virtual school programs and build stakeholder support for these novel approaches. By conducting a research study to assess ideal leadership characteristics, in both the educational and administrative perspectives, the results added to the body of knowledge about virtual school education and effective school leadership.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

The field of education quickly adopted online learning as a form of distance education. Instruction using the internet fell under many titles: distance learning, online learning, web-based instruction, distance education, online education, interactive education, virtual K-12, virtual program, virtual school, e-learning, hybrid classrooms, web-facilitated, cyber school, and cyber charter (Rice, 2006). Internet programs in schools were implemented across the nation for numerous reasons, all of which were to meet students' specific needs. Regardless of the title given to the program, the terms referred to a school offering courses through a distance-education format delivered primarily through devices connected to the internet (Barbour & Reeves, 2009). Each state and district's decision to implement online learning was an attempt to reform education and to provide solutions for shortcomings in the system. Online programs provided a way for districts to remediate students using credit recovery, to challenge gifted learners who desired to move at a faster rate, to expand academic options when there was limited scheduling, to provide flexible scheduling due to student travel schedules or personal needs, and to offer an alternative to brick-and-mortar schools that may have been over-crowded or otherwise ineffective (Reid, Aqai, & Putney, 2009).

The Center for Public Education (2012) examined how many states implemented virtual school programs as an educational option. Since its existence in 1997, Florida Virtual Schools (FLVS) was the first online education program in the United States and provided its courseware, as well as expertise, to online learning programs across the nation. Michigan Virtual University (MVU) was established in 1998 by the State of Michigan and even provided online courses for students as well as continuing education opportunities for school personnel. Founded in 2000, the Pennsylvania Cyber Charter School grew to one of the largest and most successful online public schools. In 2001, a three-year federally funded grant was issued by the Department of Education to Georgia, South Carolina and Tennessee to make courses available by means of a contract with an online software company (Barge, n.d.). Georgia also passed state legislation to create a statewide online course marketplace for students to have access for both state and district run online programs (CPE, 2012). During this same period of significant growth, the states of Michigan, Alabama, and Florida mandated the creation of hybrid and online learning programs within all the school districts of their states (Cowan, 2011).

Growing instructional delivery used in both blended and fully online formats was synchronous (students and teachers communicating in real time) and asynchronous (students working at different times from teacher recorded lessons). These options allowed students to find the best program for their needs

and learning styles. To ensure success with either online delivery program, the educator would clearly outline the student's responsibilities and technology requirements prior to beginning the course (Rice, 2006). The National Education Policy Center (2017) reported 59% percent of school districts having students enrolled in courses that incorporated virtual learning as asynchronous (not simultaneous) instruction instead of synchronous (at the same time as instructor). There were an additional 27% percent of districts with students enrolled in courses that used both forms of teacher delivery to a small or moderate extent. A research study conducted by Kinash, Knight, and McLean (2015) analyzed the use of recorded or reproduced lectures for students and found a positive effect on student learning and achievement through the online instructional delivery. Some applications for instructional delivery combined the flexibility of synchronous and asynchronous online instruction for occasional face-to-face interactions that supported different models of online learning (Beldarrain, 2006).

Full-time online schools were organized as charter schools, operated by private education management organizations, and developed as a part of district or state public school system. As virtual schools became a more attractive option for students, state and district education agencies competed with conventional schools for funding, teachers, students, and school leaders (Cavanaugh, 2004). Unlike traditional public schools, virtual schools had the flexibility to cross state lines as national companies and some even functioned internationally (Bausell, 2016). As the popularity of virtual schools increased, the National Education Policy Center, NEPC, (2017) recommended accountability baselines to more clearly define license requirements for existence of the virtual school and to collect data as performance measures of the online program. In a report of online education standards, the International Association for K-12 Online Learning, known as INACOL, defined six elements when developing a virtual school. The elements were defined as leadership, professional development, teaching practices, management systems policy, curriculum, and technology (Connections Learning, 2016; Pape & Wicks, 2009; Patrick, 2011).

Experts in the field of administration and organizations define leadership in many ways. Kotter (1990) explains leadership as setting direction, aligning people, motivating, and inspiring. Leadership, according to Bennis & Nanus (1997), exercises the ability to communicate direction, vision, goals, objectives, effectiveness, and purpose. Collins (2001) suggests leadership focus on what is essential, what needs to be done, and how to get it done while developing a team that continued learning. Kouzes & Posner (2011) outline competencies to develop the ability to lead since one leads from what was already in one's soul. There has been limited research regarding leadership traits in the educational setting, and even less addressing Kouzes and Posner's leadership traits. However, Geoway (2012) examined leadership effectiveness of school administrators using Kouzes and Posner's leadership framework by surveying 50 elementary principals and organizing a focus group for the responders. The findings supported what Kouzes and Posner encouraged in the business sector and school leaders also lead based on their beliefs. The participants in the study agreed that elementary principals needed to share and inspire a shared vision as forward-thinking and understood the importance of building trust with their teachers, staff, and students (Geoway, 2012).

The Evergreen Education Group (2014), with the help of Watson (2015), published a detailed analysis to outline the key qualities to be addressed before instituting a virtual program: 1) Define the nature of program that complies with the state laws of governing a virtual learning program. 2) Identify the source of funding for the virtual program to be established, including start-up costs and operational budget. 3) Establish goals that are essential to the program to include the professional development, content areas, teaching methods, technology implementation, and school operations. The key qualities defined by the Evergreen Education Group encompassed the six essential elements determined in the INACOL report.

The Wallace Foundation (2013) studied the practices determined necessary for school administrators. Five key practices were defined as: (1) shaping a vision of academic success for all students; (2) creating a climate hospitable to education; (3) cultivating leadership in others; (4) improving instruction; and (5) managing people, data and processes to foster school improvement. Additional research was conducted at Vanderbilt University while developing the Val-Ed model (Porter, Polikoff, Goldring, Murphy, Elliott, &

May, 2010), and six steps were defined that principals used to carry out important leadership responsibilities: planning, implementing, supporting, advocating, communicating and monitoring. According to iNACOL (2008), the key aspects of virtual leadership included: effective communication, mission driven, establishing relationships, being a risk-taker, and advocating for program needs.

While specific educational leadership is certainly critical in the virtual school setting, the pressing need for critical administrative leadership acumen must also be addressed. The virtual school setting is unique and effective leaders must inspire innovation, sharing, trust, adaptive behavior, cooperation, and teamwork (Joshi and Lazarova, 2009; Jones and George, 1998). Leaders must be boundary-spanners in that communication, information-gathering, and serving in a liaison role with various stakeholders inside and outside the organization is critical. As the new setting remains novel, the leader often finds themselves communicating, explaining, and interpreting, while maintaining cooperation and communication among internal staff members. Leaders often engage in a similar, core set of practices that center around vision, meaningful values, and determination to change (Lee, 2016). The titles given to the experts' competencies or practices ultimately emphasize leadership as a requirement to "extend the boundaries of a set role to make a difference to an organization" (Drysdale, Gurr, & Goode, 2016, p. 50).

It should be re-emphasized that the virtual school setting is administratively unique in a number of ways that could have significant implications to the effectiveness of leadership approaches. It has been noted that leaders must be very open-minded, forward-thinking, and willing to "think outside the box" in that they must inspire creativity and innovation among faculty and must sell all stakeholders on the effectiveness and legitimacy of approaches that break from traditional education (Heifetz, Grashow, and Linsky, 2009; Hoch and Kozlowski, 2014). The team is at least somewhat virtually assembled meaning all faculty are not constantly present in the same facility. It is critical to emphasize communication among faculty and responsiveness and engagement by the faculty toward participating students (Joshi and Lazarova, 2009; Hoch and Kozlowski, 2014; Ferrell and Kline, 2018). Above all, leaders must exhibit strong competence and confidence and motivate, inspire, and build honesty/trust among internal staff while at the same time representing and communicating the perhaps "non-traditional" approaches and organizational progress and results to key stakeholders and interested parties (Webber, 2002; Ernst and Chrobot-Mason, 2011; Hoch and Kozlowski, 2014).

## **METHODS**

The mixed-methods study explored the leadership characteristics perceived as ideal to effectively lead in a virtual school program from the perspective of the virtual school administrators and virtual school teachers. The explanatory sequential mixed methods design (Crewell, 2008; Fetter & Freshwater, 2015) was used with quantitative data collection through electronic surveys completed first, followed by qualitative analysis of interview transcripts. At the conclusion of the data analysis, interpretation of the two phases was conducted to correlate and to better understand or describe the findings of leadership traits deemed important for virtual school leaders.

The researchers identified eight virtual schools, all publicly funded and state operated, with instruction conducted either fully online or in a blended learning format. Convenience sampling, a form of purposeful sampling, allowed access to participants and was strategic in gaining access to virtual schools (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Patton, 2015). In the eight virtual schools, 41 total participants were surveyed, 33 teachers and 9 administrators (n=41). For the interviews, there was a total of 16 participants with one teacher and one administrator representing each of the eight schools identified. The specific aim for the study was to determine the leadership traits reported in rank-order surveys deemed important for the ideal virtual school leader. Virtual school leadership traits were further defined through one-on-one interviews.

The comparative study consisted of two data collection instruments, one quantitative and one qualitative, to explore the experience and opinion of the participants and to better understand their perception of leadership characteristics needed for administrators of a virtual school. With the sequential data collection approach (Feters & Freshwater, 2015), patterns of identified leadership traits were better

defined and understood after interpreting the responses given by the participants. Analysis of the qualitative data using provisional coding was applied as the codes correlated to Kouzes and Posner's leadership traits. Results could be revisited or expanded to include new codes if deemed necessary (Saldana, 2009).

## FINDINGS

The leadership traits ranked by the virtual school teachers and virtual school administrators reflected remarkable similarities. The identified traits from the perspective of virtual school administrators and virtual school teachers were consistent. The comparison of the ranked-order traits using the Mann-Whitney U test did not yield any significant difference between the ranking of traits from the teacher and administrator perspective. When the top traits from the study were compared to Kouzes-Posner's list of admired traits, the traits further alligned. The outcome from the study of admired traits for virtual school leaders was consistent with previous research findings and the review of literature.

The data from rank order surveys provided information for the researchers to identify similarities of admired traits between both the teacher and administrator groups. **The traits identified included 1) broad-minded, 2) competent, 3) forward-looking, and 4) honest. In addition, the teacher group identified dependable and cooperative as important; whereas, the administrator group held ambitious and inspiring as a priority.** There were no significant differences in the rank-order of the admired traits from the teacher group when compared to the administrator group.

While studying virtual schools, Cavanaugh and DiPietro (2011) explained the "80/20" principle where 80% of what was happening in a virtual school was common across all schools with teaching and management. The remaining 20% was unique to the specific school based on the talents of the personnel and the innovations implemented. The application of the ideal traits identified in the study (broad-minded, competent, forward-looking, and honest) would seemingly be beneficial for the common features of virtual schools, but would be especially impactful to that 20% that is so diverse and different from the norm. A school leader with the skill set for the position, the ability to be flexible, the desire to share a vision, and the trait of trustworthiness could foster great success for the virtual school program.

When associating the result of the study to the top traits identified by Kouzes and Posner (2011), the researcher found parallel characteristics. **Four of the top six traits overlapped to include broad-minded, competent, forward-looking, and honest. The traits of ambitious and dependable were deemed important by the participants of the study compared to intelligent and inspiring from Kouzes and Posner's list of admired traits.** The themes emerging from the quantitative data (surveys) and the qualitative data (interview transcripts) were consistent in comparison of the participants and to Kouzes and Posner's research. One administrator explained how leadership traits were intertwined for overall effectiveness:

*I see these traits a lot like the ingredients of a cake. They can't just sit on the shelf, and they are not that beneficial all alone. They have to be mixed together to produce a good product.*

As management and leadership were put into practice, one teacher explained the trait of broad-minded as:

*Students are getting experiences in education through virtual learning that provides them life skills. College and job applications are online now. They (students) will communicate with their co-workers or employer using technology so this experience in education is helping them. Their next level in life will be though digital format, and we need to have them ready.*

Another participant, an administrator assisting in the development of a new virtual school, described the ability to be forward-looking as seeing beyond the now:

*The whole idea of virtual schools was forward-looking many years ago. The idea came by making education accessible through new forms of technology. Without being visionary and establishing a plan to get there, we are not embracing what education set out to do in the first place. We should be encouragers of pioneering something new.*

School leaders in a virtual setting could be equipped by developing necessary traits to ensure success of their programs and to adequately lead the staff, students, and parents. Identifying the best leadership traits appears to be a key step to providing a quality virtual education experiences.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

Virtual school leaders, like all strong administrative leaders, are to be active, engaged participants and modelers who recognize that digital collaboration is possible (McLeod, 2015). As technologies are incorporated, school leaders must accept that working together is possible no matter the space, time, or location (DeRosa, 2010). The ability to help others adjust to change and to understand adaptability are critical in leading education and a new workforce into the digital age (Wagner, 2012).

Virtual school programs can only be as strong as the leadership that is in place, even when the leader has knowledge and experience. Administrative practices are outlined for school leaders to implement while executing the day-to-day responsibilities of a school. Meanwhile, school leaders are encouraged to act as change agents, have a mission and purpose, use effective communication, build relationships, and be technology proficient. Kouzes and Posner (1993) defined leadership as a relationship between those who aspire to lead and those who choose to follow, but overall leadership features admired traits in order to be effective. Educational leaders in virtual schools should take time to evaluate the leadership traits that make themselves most productive.

The implications for leadership development for virtual school leaders should incorporate adequate training to develop top admired traits. The difference in exceptional leadership for virtual schools comes from the application and practice of leading with the top traits of broad-mindedness, competence, forward-looking, and honesty. University and professional development programs developing leadership education for virtual school administrators need potential leader candidates to imbue the desired traits of admired leadership and foster these characteristics for participants. Identifying and measuring leadership traits encompasses the emotional, social, physical, and intellectual capacity to lead others (Collins, 2001).

## **SUMMARY/CONCLUSION**

Virtual school teachers and virtual administrators recognize the importance of quality leadership in the new world of virtual learning (Easton, 2003). The faculty has extensive influence in the virtual learning process (Davis, Eickelmann, & Zaka, 2013); however, the program is only as strong as the virtual school leader. The study brought to light the fact that administrators see the need for ambitious supervision and a desire to inspire others; however, virtual school teachers want a reliable and cooperative leader. These traits, both educational and organizational, are supported by previous research. The ability to help others adjust to change and understand adaptability are critical in leading a new workforce in the digital age (Wagner, 2012, Fullan, 2002).

The operations of a virtual school require the administrator to be proficient or competent in a unique skillset as a school leader while using diverse technology. Teachers want a leader who is dependable and willing to communicate through email, instant messaging or discussion boards (Johnson-Lee, 2015). Leading a virtual program successfully is directly linked to how well the administrator of the program shares knowledge, completes tasks, and promotes cooperation within the virtual team (Hambley, O'Neil, & Kline, 2007). The study reflects the alignment of the leadership traits determined by key players in virtual school programs and validates how similar traits in leadership resonated from an educational and business perspective.

The study of ideal leadership traits for a virtual school leader is applicable and relevant to the field of education. The traits of broad-minded, competent, forward-looking, and honest are consistently identified as necessary to be an effective leader. Recognizing these four traits in relation to virtual school leadership, the participants reiterated that these characteristics remained important even in the digital age. A relationship emerged between the results of the study and the 30-year reputable list of admired traits by Kouzes and Posner (2017) used in many arenas of leadership, including education and business.

Virtual school programs are a unique educational frontier and leading these programs warrants further investigation. With the expansion of virtual school programs throughout the country, the demand for quality leaders for online education is growing. Understanding what leadership traits are deemed important offered insight to those individuals preparing to be administrators in virtual schools. A school leader with the ability to be flexible, the skill set for the position, the desire to share a vision, and the act of trustworthiness could foster success for the virtual school program. Identifying the best leadership traits was a key step to providing quality virtual education experiences while correlating the findings to a business approach for schools.

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