

# BOOK REVIEW

**Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times.** *Sheninger, E.*; Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage; Publication Date: 2014; Price: \$24.16; ISBN: 978-1452276618.

In Eric Sheninger's (2014) *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times*, the first thing the author does is indict the current command and control system. This system of education was fit for late-1800s factory workers and a largely agrarian-based society. It is completely antiquated for today's learners.

Sheninger is a pioneer in the digital age. While many districts seek to maintain the status quo or make minimal change, Sheninger blazes a trail into technological methods to change the way his school operates. The book not only endorses educational change but also acts as a beacon for schools that seek to engage every learner, every teacher, and every stakeholder. It uses methodologies such as professional growth periods and student engagement through Bring Your Own Device (BYOD), and it leads change through a multifaceted technological approach.

In the book Sheninger offers that bold leadership is necessary to make revolutionary changes. These changes include utilizing social media to enrich the learning process of current students while positioning the school in strategic partnerships to build buy-in from corporations and universities. Specifically, Sheninger has seen success in partnering with universities to enhance science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) learning (p. 180).

The beauty of the book is that it does not contain deep pedagogical theory. It is an examination of a practical approach in reinventing the school as a place where students are engaged, lives are enriched, and learning abounds. The beauty is that each chapter in the book contains ideas that have been implemented, and the practitioners' stories, struggles, and successes are documented. Finally, the book shows that there are educational leaders who realize that the twenty-first-century style of engaging students through social media and other digitally enhanced learning platforms is not going away, and those leaders are adapting and providing a world of difference for their students and communities.

## Fixing a Broken System

From Savannah, Georgia, to San Francisco, California, there are data that indicate that our students are not achieving the academic success that Americans demand. This is due in part, according to Sheninger, to the fact that "the individuals trusted with leading educational change in the twenty-first century are the least knowledgeable about the twenty-first century" (p. 23).

It is our charge to step up to the plate and come to terms with what the twenty-first century has to offer. Specifically, tools that are mentioned in the book are Web 2.0 applications that drive student engagement, Facebook and Twitter for stakeholder interaction, and enriched technologies that enable students to be more proficient thinkers who can creatively and critically solve real-world problems in real time.

It is Sheninger's implication that getting away from the TTWWADI (that's the way we've always done it) paradigm is paramount for the success of our learners going forward. Further, Sheninger affords that his teachers are given professional independence to evaluate the technologies of their choosing to drive their own professional development and ultimately, student achievement, forward (p. 130).

Sheninger writes about the Godfrey-Lee District (Grand Rapids, MI) where retired Lieutenant Colonel David Britten has taken up the cause as the district's superintendent. Bringing 22 years of hard-charging military service with him, it is no wonder that Britten's motto of "Lead Out Loud" is personified throughout the district. Mr. Britten knew that technological focus was vital to student success on the lower-income side of Grand Rapids. Therefore, he employed a strategy known as BYOD, where students could utilize their smart phones to connect with teachers in the classroom. Students were able to work with teachers and take ownership of their educational journey. Further, Britten provided smartboards and iPads for the district's students. Finally, Britten maintained a blog (Rebel 6 Ramblings) to communicate key points to stakeholders. Sheninger points out that "the future of educational leadership promises to become even more exciting as real-time communications through social networking and blogging combine

with the expanding realm of analytics to provide administrators like Britten with more powerful, mission-focused tools" (p. 63).

The system is broken. It is antiquated. It is producing a type of learner that could have been productive in society 150 years ago. According to *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times*, if we are going to reform our efforts and create learners who can deal with real-world situations in the twenty-first century, we must utilize technology (p. 36). Technology is here, and we need to unload all the excuses and find ways to mesh with the applications that our students are already utilizing outside of school. Almost all things either evolve or go extinct. The world around educators has evolved. Now is the time for us to do the same.

### Road Map for Success

The beauty of *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* is the approachable advice laid out by those practitioners (Sheninger included) who have seen a real need for change, have developed a methodology, and have seen the successful impacts of embracing technology.

For example, Dr. Spike Cook shares his journey of becoming a leader who embraces technology. Through a New Year's resolution, he was led to Twitter, Google+, Facebook, and a variety of other free social-media outlets. Through the utilization of these facets, he was able to connect with other principals and create a free flow of information that helped his school in New Jersey while building collaboration with a social professional network. He took it a step further and challenged his teachers to utilize technological applications to hone their craft. Through these efforts, he was able to learn more about his staff (specifically through Facebook) and involve stakeholders to a degree never before imagined (p. 183).

Schools that utilize these connections and involve their stakeholders will tell their story with great enthusiasm and tremendous volume. Furthermore, schools that learn from one another and dig deep to richly engage their student population will produce great dividends regarding student learning.

At Knapp Elementary (Lansdale, PA) principal Joe Mazza has seized the opportunity to engage more of his home and school parent population through physical and virtual meetings. In one such meeting, Mazza had 14 parents sign in. However, using a two-way enabled multimedia platform, he was able to engage 44 more parents who would have not been able to attend otherwise (p. 78). This concept of community relations and meeting the parents where they are is paramount to the success of the students and the school.

Sheninger notes that he has utilized some of the same technologies (Ustream, Skype, Google Chat, and Face

Time) to engage parents and expand the walls of the school. No longer are students only responsible for a set curriculum that a localized board or team has deemed appropriate. But, rather, today's learners are interwoven into the fabric that is a global society. Concepts such as these technologies allow them to participate freely in that venture.

### Brand-ED

Branding is a marketing concept. The idea behind branding is that the business must develop a concept that people will embrace, recognize, and support. Sheninger points out, with the help of Madison Avenue executive Trish Rubin, that branding in the social world is vital to the success of the digital footprint (p. 105).

In chapter 6 Sheninger introduces us to John Carver. In 2009 Carver was the secondary principal for Van Meter Community School District. Sheninger explains how Carver utilized social media to stamp his "global footprint" and create a brand for his school. By utilizing YouTube videos and other forms of social media, Carver and his leaders were able to change the trajectory of this small, rural Iowa district. Students became engaged in the technology-rich aspects of 1:1 learning and participated in YouTube and social media videos to share the #vanmeter brand to parents, community members, and stakeholders (p. 103).

Sheninger asks readers to tell their own story, and his takeaway message is to be the author of your own brand. He points out that if you do not tell your story, someone else will, and you may not like their version. Therefore, it is important to take a branding approach to your educational journey. Point out where teachers are successful. Provide the positive things that are happening in your district. Always seek to enhance and effectively communicate with your community of stakeholders. Bring people into the brand and build relationships with the businesses in the community. When a school administrator seeks this path, according to Sheninger, relationships will grow, people will see your digital footprint, and resources will flourish.

### Leadership That Gets Results

Digital leadership includes a shift in the leader's way of thinking. It is difficult to change. That mantra is printed throughout the text. However, the concept pays dividends. Whether it is implementing the pillars of digital leadership (communication, public relations, branding, professional growth and development, student engagement and enrichment, opportunity, and learning environment) or dipping one's toes in the ocean that is technological change, the concept is the same. It is going to take hard work—from everyone—to change our schools to be the types of institutions that are effectively training tomorrow's leaders today.

Digital leadership provides the autonomy for teachers to implement new concepts in their classrooms. It provides the opportunities for teachers to seek out their own methodologies and technological applications. Sheninger states it best with a quote from Daniel Pink: “Carrots and sticks are so last century. For 21st century work, we need to upgrade to autonomy, mastery, and purpose” (Pink 2011, 203).

Digital leadership is a symbiotic relationship that brings all stakeholders to a better place because of a school’s need to change. Sheninger brings forth a new paradigm in the administrative world. This concept is spreading—thanks to Sheninger’s own professional learning network—to other districts quickly. As this movement gains momentum, there will be more practitioners coming forward with a desire to bring their schools and students into the twenty-first century.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, *Digital Leadership: Changing Paradigms for Changing Times* lives up to the billing. It lays out critical ways that schools can grow past command-and-control educational techniques to enrich and engage the students who now roam the hallways. It provides practical insight as to how administrators can move past the agrarian learning methods of yesterday and embrace the Web 2.0 technologies of today. It indicts the current system of high-stakes test teaching and provides a pragmatic look at a paradigm that fosters creativity, confidence, and application of real-time data.

It is a great read for any administrator and pointedly tells readers: “Digital leadership is about transforming schools into exciting and stimulating institutions of learning where students are actively involved in applying and mastering concepts both in traditional ways and through the use of educational technology. It is a call to action for leaders at all levels to become more knowledgeable about society and to look for opportunities to connect the real world to an educational system clinging to preparing students for an industrialized workforce that is no longer in need” (pp. 190–91).

Thank you, Eric Sheninger, for providing this sensible guide that tells us that change is an option and that we are able to take over our schools and engage our learners in an invigorating way using practical technologies that many are already using outside of schools. If you are a school leader, or seek change in the way twenty-first-century educators approach learning, this is a great read.

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### REFERENCES

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