

# Understanding the Effects of Followership on University Faculty Adoption of Innovation in Teaching and Instruction

**Dawn T. Gresham**

*Doctoral Candidate, Marymount University, Arlington, USA, d0g71557@marymount.edu*

**Abstract:** Despite the rapid digital transformation of Higher Education Institutions (HEIs), the organizational dynamics underlying faculty reactions to online instructional resources remain under-researched. While traditional innovation models frequently focus on individual variables, innovation is a purposeful change process requiring fundamental behavioral shifts rather than routine procedural improvements. Faculty acceptance is a critical determinant of successful implementation; however, existing literature often overemphasizes leadership at the expense of followership, a perspective that suggests a significant institutional risk. Drawing upon a socio-constructivist framework, this paper examines innovation adoption through the lens of followership. Since an organization's reality is built upon collective standards of thought and practice, faculty engagement is a defining element of leadership efficacy. This study utilizes the concept of "followership schemas"—generalized knowledge structures developed through socialization—to explore how these cognitive frameworks influence the integration of new technologies. By repositioning followers as potential "entrepreneurial leaders" who drive innovation from within, this paper demonstrates how a robust understanding of followership can positively impact the practical adoption of innovation in university settings. This shift in perspective offers a more comprehensive understanding of the human factors that determine the success of digital transformation in higher education.

**Keywords:** Technology Adoption, Innovation, Faculty Adoption, Online Technology, Faculty Development, Higher Education, Followership, Followers, Leadership

## Introduction

### *The Resurgence of Immersive Technology in Higher Education*

Immersive technologies, once restricted to specialized military training, have gained significant traction within higher education (HE) and professional development (Ahn, 2022; Reede & Bailiff, 2016). Most scholars and industry analysts concur that Extended Reality (XR) has the potential to transform the instructional paradigm (Pelletier et al., 2022; Marks & Thomas, 2022). Despite this momentum, adoption remains nascent; as of 2021, 53% of colleges characterized their XR utilization as "small but growing," with faculty adoption rates in some disciplines as low as 1.4% (Chronicle of Higher Education, 2022). This slow diffusion of innovation risks creating a pedagogical disconnect between traditional methods and the dynamic needs of modern learners, potentially compromising institutional competitiveness (Sviridova et al., 2023; Fell, 2024).

### *The Empirical Gap in Faculty Perspectives*

Although faculty members are primary drivers of technological adoption—with 48% of institutions identifying them as the lead catalysts for XR implementation—the literature remains disproportionately student-centric (Wheeler, 2022; Cohn, 2021). A comprehensive review by DeLima, Walton, and Owen (2022) revealed that the vast majority of XR research prioritizes student outcomes, which are often secondary to successful institutional scaling. While the COVID-19 pandemic accelerated pedagogical innovation, empirical research regarding faculty-specific motivations and determinants of acceptance remains sparse (Pomerantz, 2019). This paper aims to rectify this deficiency by examining the factors that affect XR adoption from the viewpoint of faculty members, who are the crucial gatekeepers of instructional technology.

### ***Leadership, Followership, and Institutional Adaptability***

Operationalizing XR (extended reality) requires a robust integration of progressive leadership theories and proactive followership. University leaders influence digital transformation by fostering environments of trust and empowerment (Laufer et al., 2025). Based on Complexity Leadership Theory (CLT), research indicates that while empowering staff to experiment with educational technology (EdTech) enhances intrinsic motivation, it necessitates substantial institutional support—such as funding and infrastructure—to avert demotivation (Laufer et al., 2025). Furthermore, effective followership, characterized by independent critical thinking and active engagement, positively correlates with innovation adoption (Chiang et al., 2022). Creative self-efficacy (CSE) mediates this relationship, transforming faculty from passive recipients of directives to proactive change agents (Chiang et al., 2022). Finally, institutional success in adopting XR depends on understanding adaptability. Scholarly perspectives vary between situational models, where self-efficacy and experience shape adaptable behaviors (Pulakos et al., 2002), and dispositional models, which view adaptability as a stable individual trait (Ployhart & Bliese, 2006). This study examines how these internal and external factors coalesce to drive systemic institutional change.

## **Literature Review: The Intersection of Competency and Ethical Integrity**

### ***Ethical Leadership and Moral Authenticity***

Effective leadership is fundamentally predicated on selflessness and a commitment to collective interests. In the servant leadership model, authority is based on a mission to help others rather than on traditional power structures (Greenleaf, 1977; Russell & Stone, 2002). Unlike conventional leaders whose motivations face frequent scrutiny, servant leaders are often credited with inherent moral authenticity (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Brown et al., 2005). Bass and Steidlmeier (2004) conducted a study on ethics, character, and authentic transformational leadership behavior, which purports that ethical standing is vital, and a perceived lack of integrity frequently disqualifies a leader from being viewed as trustworthy, regardless of their capacity to deliver transformational results.

### ***The Interdependence of Competence and Trust***

While followers maintain high competency as a baseline expectation across both transactional and transformational paradigms (Kenney et al., 1996; Burns, 1978), technical proficiency alone is insufficient for sustained success. Organizational outcomes are optimized only when proven competence is paired with situational appropriateness and "justness" (Kort, 2008). Research indicates a significant correlation between a leader's perceived morality and their projected effectiveness (Dent et al., 2005; Fry, 2003). As Ciulla (2004) observes, technical "effectiveness" devoid of integrity can facilitate catastrophic ethical failures, illustrating that moral character is an essential component of functional leadership.

### ***The Paradox of Altruism and the Burden of Command***

The psychological stress and personal risk inherent in leadership roles can create a tension between self-preservation and group needs (Van Vugt et al., 2008). The Meindl et al. (1985) study focused on the relationship between leadership and the assessment of organizational performance and discussed that philosophical traditions often "romanticize" the leader as a purely altruistic figure. However, extreme altruism presents a potential "dark side"; uncritical devotion to a specific cause or group can lead to unethical conduct if it supersedes universal moral constraints (Price, 2003). Thus, authentic leadership requires a balanced integration of high-level competency and a disciplined ethical framework that withstands the burdens of command.

## **Discussion: The Co-Construction of Leadership and Innovation**

### ***The Socio-Constructivist Nature of Followership***

This analysis examines higher education followership through a socio-constructivist lens, addressing the institutional risk of overemphasizing leadership at the expense of the foundational follower role (Kellerman, 2008). Rather than a passive state, followership is a proactive, accountable engagement that defines leadership efficacy (Townsend & Gebhardt, 1997; Billot et al., 2013). Within this paradigm, organizational reality is constructed through shared standards of cognition and action (Berger & Luckmann, 1966). Central to this dynamic are "followership schemas"—socialized knowledge structures that dictate how individuals interpret and respond to leadership stimuli (Carsten et al., 2010). Consequently, organizational success is a collaborative construction dependent upon active, constructive followership (Billot et al., 2013; Kelley, 1992).

### ***Leadership Influence and Collective Efficacy***

Effective followership requires individuals to prioritize institutional objectives over personal interests, a transition facilitated by high levels of engagement (Baker et al., 2014). In response, effective leaders promote collective efficacy by emphasizing the importance of each person's role in achieving the larger goal. This influence often transcends routine management; virtuous leaders demonstrate an extraordinary commitment to justice or sacrifice, inspiring followers to exceed typical behavioral boundaries (Johnson, 2021). Such authentic leadership mobilizes dedicated followers to commit to high-stakes goals with uncertain outcomes, ultimately transforming organizational culture.

### ***Leadership as a Catalyst for Institutional Innovation***

Leadership serves as a fundamental determinant of creativity, innovation, and entrepreneurship within higher education institutions (HEIs). The Sutanto (2017) study examined the impact of organizational learning capability and organizational creativity on organizational innovation in universities and proposed that by resolving systemic challenges associated with the implementation of novel ideas, effective leaders drive institutional evolution. Transformational leadership is particularly conducive to this process, as its emphasis on robust leader-follower connections promotes original concepts and high-level achievement (Li et al., 2018). Empirical evidence confirms that the world's most innovative universities predominantly employ transformational styles to trigger change, whereas the impact of reward-based transactional models on innovation remains statistically insignificant (Wenjing et al., 2018).

### ***Cultivating a Culture of Intellectual Proactivity***

To sustain innovation, HEIs must establish guidelines that nourish a culture of intellectual proactivity. Such an environment encourages "divergent thinking," continuous knowledge creation, and contributions that transcend formal contractual obligations. By fostering intrinsic motivation, leaders empower staff to exceed their mandated responsibilities, driving the sustainable innovation necessary for institutional competitiveness in a modern global landscape.

## **Conclusion: A Multi-Dimensional Framework for Institutional Innovation**

### ***The Nexus of Self-Efficacy and Technological Adoption***

Faculty self-efficacy, a situational and domain-specific construct, fundamentally underpins the successful integration of emerging technologies within higher education (Bandura, 1997). Empirical evidence substantiates that perceived self-efficacy (PSE) is a principal factor influencing technology adoption among faculty (Fathema et al., 2015). To reduce resistance and increase the desire to use new systems, administrators need to do more than just put them in place. They need to take strategic steps, like showing how useful the technology is. These interventions reshape underlying belief structures, fostering the cognitive readiness necessary for systemic change (Michels et al., 2021; Noble et al., 2022).

### ***Leadership Adaptability in Complex Systems***

Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) function as complex systems, necessitating a leadership approach that is both adaptive and contextually sensitive (Tsai et al., 2019). Institutional success is contingent upon the leader's ability to transition interchangeably between operational, enabling, and entrepreneurial modalities (Laufer et al., 2025). However, adopting a specific leadership style alone is insufficient; relational trust must underpin it. Nurturing such trust empowers staff in their creative engagement with Educational Technology (EdTech) and ensures that innovation is supported rather than stifled by rigid administrative structures.

### ***Contextual Drivers and the Entrepreneurial Mindset***

The evolving academic landscape demands a dynamic transformation of instructional environments, where leadership serves as the primary catalyst for scalable innovation (Serdyukov, 2017). Because the efficacy of these initiatives is highly context-dependent, leaders must align strategies with local institutional practices and socioeconomic realities. Research indicates that a positive correlation exists between organizational perceptions of innovation and the development of an individual entrepreneurial intent (Wei et al., 2019). To leverage this relationship, HEI leaders should revitalize institutional tools to foster a culture of autonomy, critical thinking, and heightened self-efficacy (Tait & Faulkner, 2016).

### ***Strategic Implications for Followership***

Ultimately, fostering an entrepreneurial mindset among followers is a contingent process facilitated by nuanced environmental evaluations. By aligning leadership behaviors with the unique cultural and institutional needs of the local environment, HEI administrators can cultivate the necessary conditions for effective followership. This alignment ensures that innovation is not merely a top-down mandate but a sustainable, systemic outcome of a robust leader-follower partnership.

### ***Study Limitations and Future Research***

The paper provides a valuable framework for understanding immersive technology adoption, though it is limited by its portrayal of faculty as a homogeneous group and its focus on internal motivations rather than external factors like funding and infrastructure. Subsequent research should utilize empirical field testing, encompassing surveys and interviews, to directly evaluate teacher followership schemas. Furthermore, longitudinal tracking is crucial for assessing the lasting sustainability of entrepreneurial leadership, while comparative case studies across other disciplines could determine if followership approaches require specific customization for different academic subjects.

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