

Global Business Leadership

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Elsevier/Butterworth-Heinemann
2008

GLOBAL BUSINESS LEADERSHIP
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FOREWORD

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One might question whether, following more than a dozen volumes in this *Managing Cultural Differences Series* edited by Drs. Philip R. Harris and Robert T. Moran., there remains fertile ground to be ploughed regarding cultural differences and their impact on the effectiveness of “global leaders.” The answer, as this book illustrates, is “Yes.” Dr. Wibbeke clearly has advanced the discussion in both theoretical and practical areas.

It is not difficult to discern patterns of change in the content of “leadership” and “management” studies over the past forty years. It would be helpful if there were conveniently universal definitions for these two terms. In my mind, “management” focuses more on task definition, resource allocation, and organizational design. “Leadership” is involved more with vision, motivation, and trust. Both call for competence in core skills, commitment to desired organizational outcomes, high levels of personal energy, and considerable emotional resilience. Both require some degree of empathy for colleagues and strangers. For sustained success, both demand adherence to an ethical code whose implementation precludes the erosion of trust and confidence within a team or across cultures. In reality, managing and leading are inseparable components of practice.

The existence of this series of books confirms a basic trend in approaching leader development. That is the notion that productive, healthy adults who have earned positions of responsibility require continuing education to facilitate career success. Today, in response to this notion, there are not dozens but hundreds of seminars and workshops dedicated to “cross-cultural leadership,” available from Fontainebleau to Minneapolis to Shanghai.

If one change in focus and content of leader development efforts over the years is the notably increased attention to continuous learning in the executive and middle manager ranks, a second and closely related issue—also mentioned in a variety of discussions by Dr. Wibbeke—is the recognition of the power of awareness, both self and contextual, as foundations for leader competence and growth. Recognition of the role of self-knowledge is surely not new. From Socrates to Shakespeare and beyond, it was there. However, serious attention to the issue remains erratic. The idea of spending time and money developing “awareness” in the already “successful,” busy people who are candidates for cross-cultural adventures is not always well received. “Self-awareness,” a cousin to “self-reflection, is the unique ingredient leading to personal growth and change—the lubricant for learning. Unaware of our proclivities, biases, strengths, or shortcomings, it is difficult to improve as leaders. The most highly regarded leader development programs—understanding that measuring “effectiveness” in any educational program is problematic—are those with a strong component of individually tailored behavioral feedback.

Excursions into the need for cross-cultural sensitivity, with deference to the particular role of empathy, are rightly predicated on the reality that the internal needs and drives of “global leaders” are critical to the discussion. The degree of challenge involved in enhancing cross-cultural effectiveness is related to the prevailing gap between the environmental complexity and the operable level of individual competencies. Whether or not the hard-wired narcissists can escape from their impediments through any kind of educational intervention is debatable. Modifying the adult personality to increase the probability for success in diverse settings generally requires an emotionally healthy person to begin with. The odds of renovating a self-centered adult bully seem low.

The second part of “awareness,” also specifically addressed in this tour through which Dr. Wibbeke’s new book, *Global Business Leadership*, leads us is the capability of individuals to sense the nuances of context. Such recognition of social and interpersonal circumstance depends on a deeper understanding of the local climate than that which might be gained by a course on social protocol. While a training course in local customs might suffice to permit a talented American lobbyist to function for a few weeks in Beijing, the necessary capacity of a true “global leader” to build sturdy relationships, create teams, and establish trust demands a more sophisticated intellectual and emotional intervention. Such topics include comparative ethics; the impact of local and regional governments; the constraints of family, religion and clan; and the translated pressures of international politics on regional business practices. It is, however, the crucial self-awareness attribute that permits these topics to penetrate our personal armor and craft deeper understanding of the external environment. Such understanding of course is the catalyst for cross-cultural success. As we discuss requirements for cross-cultural effectiveness, it becomes clear that the basic elements of awareness are also cornerstones for solid leadership and management at home. The reality is that not all of our leaders and managers working exclusively in the domestic environment have acquired the skills for routine success on their home field. Perhaps their working on the fresher, more tangible and fashionable challenges of cross-cultural business will stimulate interest in good leadership in general.

We might note also that much of today’s global setting is significantly “Anglicized.” It is sometimes difficult to conduct business in a local non-English mode. Native competence in English seems commonly superior to American efforts to master another dialect. Many cross-cultural workshops in Europe and Asia are conducted in English. There are more Chinese studying English than there are Americans and British learning English. In venues from the air traffic control system to the World Bank, English is prevalent. American business people have succeeded in many areas of international commerce, including membership on the boards of major corporations headquartered outside the United States. The stereotype of American executives as typically fumbling among foreign compatriots seems increasingly inaccurate, even as any level of gouache behavior appears to be less tolerable. In other words, we are not starting from a zero base in enhancing cross-cultural effectiveness. However, the issue demands continuing attention as cultural and international diversity touch increasingly more lives, and international expectations for empathetic competence rise.

As we deal with issues of individual effectiveness in the global marketplace, Dr. Wibbeke and others have explored the notion of a common set of principles and behaviors (“behaviors” are more important!) that could facilitate leader success regardless of context. Both Dr. Bernard Bass

and Dr. David Campbell, for example, have found in their research certain behaviors, such as those resulting in inspirational leadership and intellectual stimulation, to be, with modest local adaptation, quite universal in their positive impact in a wide variety of settings. From a weak anecdotal base, my own conclusion would be also that some basic assumptions of western approaches to leading find traction in foreign settings. I noted, for example, the reaction of Vietnamese soldiers to various styles of leadership. They seemed to respond positively to four classic leader attributes that we have taught in American military schools for decades: 1. Be competent in core skills. (In that environment it was my providing and directing rotary-wing and fixed-wing aviation support at the right place and time.) 2. Be willing to share risk and hardship. (We all slung our hammocks between trees, ate the same cold rice balls, and went out on the exposed landing zone to welcome helicopters.) 3. Keep people informed; and avoid surprises whenever possible. (We told them in as much detail as possible—noting certain linguistic obstacles--what the plans were for tomorrow, including what we thought the weather and the enemy might have in mind.) 4. Listen to what others have to say. (Indigenous soldiers on the march don't pretend to be strategists. But they may know a lot about the local enemy, and which bugs will crawl inside the eyelets of your boots. Further, most seem to appreciate an opportunity to be heard—which may at times differ from the local hierarchical culture!) I don't find it difficult to believe that the essence of those four behaviors is relevant for the “global leader.”

It is possible to overdose on local culture, to imbibe too deeply of customs and practices that can compromise personal or corporate values. Here again we can confront the issue of short versus long-term orientation. When a customary “gift” to inspecting officials could provide immediate business reward, the savvy manager weighs very seriously the potential for strategic embarrassment later on. There are times to respond promptly to ambient expectations of form and protocol. Indiscriminate deference to local norms, however, can be a recipe for future disaster. Most responsible business people worldwide understand this. Codes of ethics are, ultimately, pragmatic pathways to accomplishment.

This book is replete with vital information supporting success in both personal growth and business productivity. Naturally, the definition and measurement of “success” itself remains a germinal issue. A reading of Dr. Wibbeke's thoughtful work should stimulate among things, reflection on the meaning of “success” at home and in the global marketplace.

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