



Cross-Cultural Leadership

Technological advances in communications and transportation have dramatically increased cross-cultural interactions in all types of organizations. Scholarly and popular press attention to crosscultural leadership in organizations has also risen dramatically in recent decades. For example, the discussion of cross-cultural leadership in the three editions of widely acclaimed *Bass and Stogdill's Handbook of Leadership* rose from one page (1974) to fourteen pages (1981) to a full forty-page chapter (1990). Popular publications such as the *Wall Street Journal*, *Business Week*, *Forbes*, *Fortune*, and the *New York Times*, and their international counterparts regularly recount the increasing need for cross-cultural leadership. Many consulting firms now offer to deliver or develop leader-competency models to help organizations identify, prepare, and develop leaders for crosscultural interactions and responsibilities.

SIDEBARS:

Cross-Cultural Confusion and Leadership Failure

Collectively, this rush of attention has increased our knowledge of cross-cultural leadership. Yet this same frenetic attention, characterized by different perspectives and approaches, has also introduced considerable confusion in terminology and consequently in understanding. For example, is crosscultural leadership different from global leadership, international leadership, or transnational leadership? Is an expatriate leader (a leader working in a country other than their home country) a cross-cultural leader? Does a person have to be managing across multiple countries simultaneously to be a crosscultural leader? How do we know what we know about cross-cultural leadership? Are there leadership behaviors that are effective in all cultures or is effective leadership manifested differently in each culture? By answering these questions we begin to define the parameters of cross-cultural leadership and the current state of theory and practice.

WHAT IS LEADERSHIP? WHAT IS CULTURE?

It has been said that there are as many definitions of leadership as there are individuals studying leadership. Though there is no agreed-on definition of leadership, two themes consistently emerge. First, leaders influence the behavior of others. Second, this influence is intentional and directed toward some desired objective such as developing a new product, achieving a sales goal, building a home for orphans, or raising student exam scores. Dean Keith Simonton of the University of California at Berkeley, in his seminal work *Greatness: Who Makes History and Why*, defined *leadership in general* as "that group member whose influence on group attitudes, performance, or decision making greatly exceeds that of the average member of the group"(Simonton 1994, 17). The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) international research project defined effective *organizational leadership* as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members"(House et al. 1997, 184). Another definition of [global] organizational leadership states that "leadership involves people in business settings whose job or role is to influence the thoughts and actions of others to achieve some finite set of business goals...usually displayed in large, multicultural contexts; that is, not just from one nation's perspective" (Gessner & Arnold 1999, xv).

As in the case of leadership, there is no agreedupon definition of culture. At a broad pragmatic level, culture is defined by social scientists as a set of characteristics or descriptors that differentiate groups in a consistently identifiable and meaningful way (e.g., Hispanic, French, Hindu, Republican, Southern, Generation X). Prominent

social psychologists Florence Kluckhohn and Fred Strodtbeck described culture as a patterned way of thinking, feeling, and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, and constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiments in artifacts. The prominent organizational scholar Geert Hofstede defined culture as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes one human group from another. Yet another scholarly definition is offered by anthropologist Clifford Geertz, who defined culture as a historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life. Common to these definitions is the notion that culture involves shared knowledge and meaning systems among its members.

WHAT IS CROSS-CULTURAL LEADERSHIP?

Since there is no consensual agreement on the terms leadership or culture, it would seem impossible to define the term *cross-cultural leadership*. Yet, as discussed earlier, definitions of culture and leadership each share common themes. To the terms *leadership* and *culture*, we now add *cross*. The “cross” in “crosscultural leadership” refers to the leader's (the influencer) culture being different from the follower's (influence target) culture. By combining the thematic definitions of “leadership” and “culture” with the qualifier “cross,” we define cross-cultural leadership as “the ability of an individual (the leader) to intentionally and unequally influence and motivate members of a culturally different group toward the achievement of a valued outcome by appealing to the shared knowledge and meaning systems of that culturally different group.” In reviewing this definition, it becomes clear that what separates cross-cultural leadership from simple leadership are the words “culturally different.” What separates simple leadership from crosscultural leadership is the need for leaders to consider the implications of the differences in the knowledge and meaning systems of their followers and to incorporate these differences into the influence process.

This definition provides a foundation for answering several of the questions posed in the introduction. Is an expatriate leader always a cross-cultural leader? The answer is yes only if there are significant differences in the knowledge and meaning systems of the leader and the followers. Does a person have to be managing across multiple countries to be a cross-cultural leader? The definition suggests that working across multiple countries is not required. In fact, some countries may be characterized by extensive within-country regional cultural differences. An example of this would be the substantial ethnic and cultural differences between the states of the former Soviet Union or the significant religious differences across groups in some Middle Eastern countries.

It must be acknowledged that some scholars will object to including within-border leadership as crosscultural leadership. For example, Hollenbeck (2001) has argued that the key distinction between traditional international managers and the current transnationally competent managers is the cross-border nature of the tasks and skills. Adler and Bartholomew (1992) have defined the “global leader” as an executive who executes global strategies across, rather than within, borders of time and geography, nation, function, and product. Yet another author defines world-class executives as “cosmopolitans” not based on where they go but on their mindsets being attuned to world-class concepts, competencies, and connections. These differences in terminology (cosmopolitan, global leader, international leader, and transnational leader) are characteristic of a relatively new academic area of study such as cross-cultural leadership.

These differences in scholarly opinion may also be traced to differences in the interests of researchers and commentators. Strategists tend to be interested in the tasks to be done, the accountabilities accepted, and the results anticipated. Human resources scholars tend to be interested in determining the knowledge, skills, abilities, and attitudes required to accomplish the tasks, meet the accountabilities, and produce the expected results. The definition of crosscultural leadership provided here encompasses both perspectives by recognizing that cross-cultural leadership can occur within a single set of borders and that management across multiple borders (i.e., global leadership and transnational leadership) may not be sufficient to classify as cross-cultural leadership. For example, a Korean leader based in New York managing a group of Korean employees in Seoul

and a group of Korean employees in Bangkok may not be engaging in cross-cultural leadership because the leader and the led are separated by physical space and not by cognitive space.

The definition of cross-cultural leadership provided here offers an approach to, rather than a definitive rule for, identifying cross-cultural leadership. For example, someone might argue that a United States Southerner leading a group of from the northern United States would be exercising cross-cultural leadership because of regional differences in attitudes, values, or intra-state regulatory systems. What is missing from such an argument is that the shared meanings and knowledge systems are more common across U.S. regions than different. The situation where meaningful differences exist but are smaller than the shared meaning and knowledge systems is more appropriately referred to as leadership of cultural diversity.

The inability to develop an easily applied and inviolate rule to identify cross-cultural differences may be why so many scholars, especially organizational scholars, have relied on national boundaries as proxies for cultural differences. National boundaries are easily identifiable, have identifiable differences in legislative laws and processes, and are often formed along cultural differences in the citizenry. But as the Soviet example introduced earlier illustrates, these boundaries are often inexact. Imagine someone who was "just a leader" in the former Soviet states awakening to find that he or she is now regarded as a cross-cultural leader simply because the political boundaries have been redrawn such that Bosnia, Serbia, and Croatia are politically separate nations. With no change in the followers (targets of influence), it would be difficult to argue convincingly that the mere redrawing of political boundaries is the dominant factor impacting attempts to exert influence. The more appropriate conclusion is that the person was a cross-cultural leader (managing multiple mindsets) both before and following the redrawing of political boundaries. While the redrawing of national boundaries is consequential to the work group, the change is more appropriately characterized as a change to the task environment (problems and opportunities faced by the group) than it is a new cross-cultural leadership (influencing targets with a different worldview) challenge.

HOW WE KNOW WHAT WE KNOW

Studies of cross-cultural leadership have followed two basic approaches. One approach, called the emic approach, seeks to investigate one culture at a time to determine those leadership behaviors that appear to be linked to the effective attainment of group goals. For example, a study investigating leadership behavior in Austria might associate follower evaluations of leadership effectiveness with objective group outcomes such as higher profits, higher student examination scores, or the attainment of fund-raising objectives. Conclusions would then be reached about how a leader should behave to be effective in Austria.

The second approach, called the etic approach, seeks to investigate multiple cultures simultaneously to determine those leadership behaviors that appear to be linked to the effective attainment of group goals across most of them. For example, a study might attempt to determine if a leader lavishing praise on followers is positively linked to group outcomes in most cultures or if the public scolding of employees is negatively linked with leader effectiveness in most cultures. Conclusions would then be reached about how leaders should behave to be effective in most cultures. Etic studies often demonstrate differences. For example, it has shown that talking critically about an employee to that employee's peers when the employee is not present is considered to be undesirable in the United States (because of a value for open communication) and is considered to be desirable in Japan (because the employee "saves face" by not receiving the criticism directly). A series of emic studies can be used to make etic-like comparisons across cultures, but these comparisons are often less reliable than simple etic studies.

The obvious benefits of an emic (single culture often operationalized as single country) perspective are that it is more likely to reveal what leadership behaviors should be exhibited locally. Emic studies often provide very fine details about a culture that could be overlooked when designing a study to measure attributes across a number of cultures. The advantage of the etic approach (multiple cultures) is that it provides leaders who must migrate

through multiple cultures, often in rapid succession, with information about which behaviors are likely to be well received in most cultures and which ones will typically have a negative impact. Though scholars disagree on whether the best approach is to deduce similarities and differences from etic studies or to induct similarities and differences from emic studies, the literature on cross-cultural leadership has been enhanced by both approaches. Greater confidence in what to do may be warranted when the conclusions of emic studies and etic studies agree.

The touchstone for most attempts to conduct cross-cultural leadership research has been the pioneering work of organizational scholar Geert Hofstede. Hofstede proposed the following four dimensions (actually continuums) of culture that can be used to explain similarities and differences in leader behaviors and follower reactions: (1) High Power Distance–Low Power Distance: The degree to which members of a society expect power to be shared equally; (2) High Uncertainty Avoidance–Low Uncertainty Avoidance: The degree to which members of a society feel uncomfortable in unstructured, ambiguous, and uncertain situations, and create beliefs and institutions intended to minimize the occurrence of such situations; (3) Individualism–Collectivism: The degree to which individuals function independently of one another or are integrated into groups; and (4) Masculinity–Femininity: The degree to which cultures look favorably on assertiveness, aggressiveness, and the striving for personal success, or to which they stress supportive behavior, nurturance, and service.

FINDINGS FROM RESEARCH ON CROSS-CULTURAL LEADERSHIP

The final question posed in the introduction was whether some leadership behaviors are effective in all cultures or whether leadership is manifested differently in each culture. The answers to this twopart question are yes and yes. Research has identified several leadership behaviors that are associated positively or negatively with effectiveness across most cultures (universals). Research has also identified some leader behaviors and attributes which are culturally dependent (contingencies). Representative findings of both categories are discussed in brief below, and details and additional findings can be found in comprehensive reviews of the leadership literature.

Bernard M. Bass, author of the *Handbook of Leadership*, provides a number of assertions based on cross-cultural research of the transformational/transactional leadership paradigm. First, transformational leaders are those who provide inspiration in the form of an enticing vision, give individualized consideration to followers, and intellectually stimulate followers to perceive problems in new ways and are more likely to induce followers to transcend their own interests to achieve a higher cause. Second, transactional leaders are those who clarify work expectations, provide rewards contingent on specific outcomes, and closely monitor employee behavior and are more likely to produce followers motivated primarily by self-interest. Bass explains that there is a consistent relationship between leadership style and various outcome measures (effectiveness, subordinate satisfaction, and subordinate effort).

According to Bass, transformational leaders appear to be more effective than leaders who rely on contingent reward, leaders practicing active management by exception, and leaders practicing laissezfaire management. The latter, laissez-faire management, includes frequently avoiding responsibilities and shirking duties. The findings for laissez-faire management are etic in nature, with negative associations to leadership effectiveness across all cultures. Bass also states another etic conclusion, that across cultures transformational leadership augments transactional leadership in predicting important outcomes. He believes that this relationship pattern is consistent across cultures because prototypes (conceptions of model leaders) for leadership across cultures are generally transformational rather than transactional. Such findings are characteristic of the universal view of cross-cultural leadership.

Contingencies

Research has shown that sensitivity to norms was a more critical component of leader behavior in Mexico and Iran than in the United States. Managers who maintained a distance from their employees used rules and

procedures more than managers who valued a closer relationship, and managers who placed a high value on interpersonal trust preferred participative and democratic leadership while leaders in countries low in trust preferred a more authoritarian style. There is substantial evidence for a correlation between a leader's consideration of followers and subordinate satisfaction, although the results of these studies are inconsistent.

Transformational leadership behavior had more dramatic effects in the People's Republic of China and Taiwan than did transactional leadership. Providing an appropriate model and demonstrating high performance expectations significantly influenced the attitudes of Chinese employees, while leaderindividualized support and fostering collaboration significantly influenced the job attitudes of Taiwanese employees. Similar differences were found for leader-contingent rewards. While several aspects of leadership were universally endorsed (i.e., charismatic and values-based leadership), researchers have found that collective value orientations are positively related to team-oriented leadership endorsement, and that the distance of a leader from a follower is negatively related to participative leadership endorsement. Such findings are characteristic of the contingent view of cross-cultural leadership.

IMPLICATIONS

Terms such as "global leader," "transnational leader," "international leader," and "expatriate leader" have served as a point of departure for discussing issues related to cross-cultural leadership. This lack of precision in terminology can be traced to the lack of consensus regarding the terms "leadership" and "culture." By laying semantics aside and focusing on cross-cultural leadership thematically, it can be seen that the challenge of cross-cultural leadership for leaders is to motivate members of a culturally different group toward the achievement of a valued outcome by appealing to the shared knowledge and meaning systems used by a culturally different group.

A great deal of progress has been made in recent decades toward understanding cross-cultural leadership. The increasing rate of globalization will undoubtedly continue to accelerate calls for more research on cross-cultural leadership (see Lowe and Gardner 2000). While a comprehensive understanding of the relationship between leadership and culture is a distant vision, an understanding of the etic or universal findings can be expected to become more multifaceted and pragmatic over time.

— Akiga

—Kevin B. Lowe

Cross-Cultural Confusion and Leadership Failure

One of the major hurdles in any cross-cultural leadership situation is for the members of each cultural group to develop a full understanding of what leadership means to the other group. The following description of British attempts to appoint effective local leaders from the Tiv ethnic group during the period of British colonial rule in Nigeria indicates just how difficult a hurdle this can be.

The white man demanded the election of clan chiefs, or "district heads," as they were called after the pattern of the northern emirates, and chiefs were elected. It was quite in accordance with precedent that the elders should appoint a younger man of no especial standing to carry out the administrative duties required by the white man, and not one of the men who wielded the real authority, that is to say, a senior elder, who was master of the Poor and other great *akombo*, and had all the power of supernatural sanction behind him. This fundamental difference in conception of the nature of chieftainship caused much misunderstanding between the Tiv and the British Administration. The men who were put forward by the elders to be the 'white man's chief' (*tor u Butel*) often were not backed by the consent even of their own group, far less of the clan over which they were supposed to rule. In consequence, they either completely failed to fulfil the function for which they were

appointed by the Administration, being mere puppets in the hands of their seniors, as indeed the latter intended them to be, or else they used the power given them by us for their own ends, and defied the authority of their natural leaders, bringing down much odium upon themselves and the new régime. As Downes says, "We cannot escape our share of the responsibility for the position as it exists now, and it is, to a large extent, our fault that the Tiv authorities have remained in the background. We have seen that many of the real authorities are not capable of carrying out the duties of village head, supervising the census, collecting the taxes in the way we would like to see it done. We have not liked their arrogant claims to supernatural powers and we have ignored them, and they, not understanding, have preferred to be ignored and have elected a man of no importance to be the ' *or koghor kbandegh*' (tax collector) and to take the kicks of a District Head who, in many cases, they consider to be inferior to them in position.

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