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Issues of Global Leadership: Old Problems in New Packages

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Recently the executive coaching business has been seeing a rash of interest-bordering-on-concern about surviving in the global marketplace. It's not that globalization is anything new, (remember Marco Polo?); it is just that with the increasing pace and pressure of doing business today, the dynamics are shifting. Globalization affects nearly every member of the business community, whether indirectly through their supply chain, or directly in their off-shore operations, call centers and after-market service centers. Learning to thrive in the global market becomes more challenging each day for leaders of these organizations, and it often falls to those of us in the coaching and consulting world to assist our clients in finding their way.

Leaders of globalized companies need to understand three important points to overcome the challenges of borderless business. First, local culture and economic conditions within the borders of other countries are distinctly different from the US, as anyone who manages sites in India, Latin America and the Far East can attest. Secondly, leadership is culturally defined and therefore a leader's work style must accommodate that culture. Lastly, the globe itself is a rather large place, making it impossible to be everywhere all the time, so leading and managing virtually presents a rather daunting challenge as well. Let's look at each of these in some detail.

The effect of culture. Before digging into the issues of culture itself, we first must be careful not to sidestep one problem that precedes that discussion: the fact that no two people understand the phrase "global business" to mean the same thing! Though we will all smile and nod to the concept of doing business on a world-wide playing field, going global, globalization, and global literacy are immensely complex issues involving a level of awareness that many leaders and employees are unwilling to face. While on the surface this question seems to lead to discussions of logistics and languages, the deeper truth is that globalization is forcing many leaders to entertain what it means to be human and borderless on deep and often philosophical levels. If, as westerners, we never believed in the oneness of all things, globalization in the post-modern world has made that concept a reality.

The aspiring global leader must begin by asking, "If we are all one people, then how am I to divest myself of those beliefs and attitudes that are solely mine – by virtue of my culture, education, memberships, and uniquely limited experiences – and listen and interact with 'others' of humankind with and through 'their' unique perspectives?" Face it, we don't just walk around with that as our most pressing thought! However, once opened to that line of reasoning, the leader is better able

to filter out the layers of meaning that get in the way of listening. These layers of meaning – How do I see me? How do they see me? How do they see themselves? How do I see them? – all stand in the way of any attempt to answer, “What do they need me/our product/service for?” and that is the business question we need to get to. Understanding from a level of global literacy (awareness of these differences) often radically shifts perception of the business equation from the product being created to the management processes that are utilized to create that product.

Leadership differences. There is a wide and varied range of routes to leadership that increases across cultures and geographies. Our Western notions that, to paraphrase Shakespeare, some are born into leadership, some achieve it and others have leadership thrust upon them, may not be how others see the picture. International consultant, Chin-Ning Chu presents an excellent overview of the subtle distinctions between Chinese, Korean and Japanese leadership styles in her book *The Asian Mind Game*. But Chu’s awareness is often very difficult for most of us to grasp. Most often, this level of awareness has to be learned experientially. Off-shore experiences, if sheltered under the umbrella of a strong Ameri-centric corporation, may not do the trick. Our inner most beliefs about leading and managing often don’t leave us without a good fight.

Two factors seem to help: having these experiences earlier in one’s career (before attitudes and behaviors become solidified within the dominant culture) and having an experience that is relatively devoid of home support. Taking on a role in Australia might not be as developmentally challenging as doing a comparable job in Cameroon. Learning cultural differences is much like learning language; immersion is faster and more thorough than learning in a classroom where you have opportunities to continually translate back to your native tongue. Understanding the value of *ubuntu* as a core of the South African leadership model or the patience inherent in many Asian leaders, come only with a significant whack in the head for most Westerners.

Virtual leadership. Over the past dozen years, technology has aided us greatly to bridge the gap of global distance. Through videoconferencing and shared functions like Webex and GoToMeeting we are able to be more present to those we manage half a world away. But the essence of leadership is neither here nor there – not necessarily in any physical location or physical presence. Leadership, roughly defined, is what happens in the space between leader and follower, and as such is defined more by the relationship and relatedness of the two parties of leader/follower than by the task at hand or the need to be in the same room. Zulu culture captures this relationship/relatedness factor so well in their traditional greeting, “I see you (sawubona),” and its response, “I am here (ngikhona).” The message that the Zulu communicate is that one does not really exist until and unless he or she is recognized and acknowledged by another. Yet the challenges of geographic distance might make that physical presence difficult.

The key in virtual leadership is awareness of these cultural nuances. Many years ago I was coaching an executive of a French company with whom I had grown quite friendly. We were in the middle of rolling out an elaborate management training program that had many moving parts when I called to check in with him. Due to our timeline and his urgency, I jumped right in to the business at hand and we started working. But after about fifteen minutes, he stopped me and said, “You know, Kris, I am very upset with you right now. We have been talking for a quarter of an hour and not once have you asked me how I am or anything about

my family.” Relationship is the first order of business for a global leader, and a relationship in most cultures is a marriage, not a one night stand!

In the realm of executive coaching, we tend to focus more on the behavior and skill set, and less on the culture *per se*, (after all culture is solely the sum total of the beliefs and attributes of the people in a certain organization or place). But research from MRG (Management Research Group) based on over 50,000 leaders in 20+ countries and 6,000 industries, suggests that culture makes a significant difference. Under the direction of Dr. Rob Kabacoff, MRG researchers looked at several factors of leadership as well, as the similarities between different cultures – like finding that Belgium, China and Spain are more similar to each other’s leadership style than any of them are with France and Switzerland. Kabacoff’s research (which can be found on the MRG website www.mrg.com) found that Swedes count heavily on consensus and continual feedback (don’t ever “pull rank” or play authoritarian there), whereas tactical controls and facts are far more persuasive to Chinese than innovation (the least effective leadership skill).

Like the classic CCL (Center for Creative Leadership) research found in *Lessons of Experience* (McCall et. al., 1988), the MRG research finds that there is no shortcut to developing global literacy. Their recommendations are that in order to begin to understand culture as a context to business strategy, operations and communication, the leader needs a set of “perspective changing experiences” which include culture shock, changes in scope and scale, personal challenges, or dealing with crises. Once again survival comes down to “survival of the fittest” and global fitness, and like athleticism, is found in pushing beyond the comfortable and often to the breaking point.

The new challenges of global leadership, such as widening economic gaps, concerns for global warming, and market volatility (to name but a few) may simply be the topics of the times. However, the task of understanding their meaning and impact on the globalized organization still requires a significant shift of style, beliefs, attitudes and priorities on the part of the leader. Unfortunately, there is no formulaic recipe for addressing the challenges. Rather, we will need to dig in one case at a time, one culture at a time. While the language metaphor still applies, and while eventually one can get better at learning new and different languages, it still requires that emersion experience to do the trick. Welcome to the new old world of leadership.

