

Global Leadership

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A global leader plays a critical role in today's marketplace because she is responsible for leading a team of diverse employees and ensuring the organization has a competitive advantage. This is not a job a leader should take lightly because there are inherent challenges that go along with meeting the expectations of her diverse team, the global organization and her customers. A global leader who successfully fills this role must have critical competencies - cultural curiosity, cross-cultural competency, cultural agility, cultural humility, divergent thinking and creativity, and knowledge and integration of cross-national/cultural issues.

INTRODUCTION

Today's marketplace is faced with many factors, one of them is the alarming rate at which change is occurring. Globalization has been a key driver of those changes because not only has it played a role in the internationalization of investment and trade, and the rate at which technological advances are occurring but it is also responsible for the continued increase in diversity in the labor market. Diversity as it appears in this article is not just referring to race and gender. It is referring to diversity in its broadest sense which includes characteristics and traits that are both visible and invisible to the naked eye like diversity of culture, thought, generation, skill set, background, education, religion, sexual preference, region, ethnicity, and yes, race and gender. The differences that set us apart from each other are sometimes referred to as the dimensions of diversity and while they make us unique, these dimensions have specific cultural nuances that separate one group from another. Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov (2010) define this as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others". It is important to note that individuals within a particular culture are not automatically born exhibiting the behavior specific to that group. That is because behavior is learned from the environment individuals are immersed in as opposed to the genes they are born with.

What is a Leader?

As a leader in an organization, it is no secret that your role is focused on influencing others to achieve a common goal (Northouse, 2013). Additionally, "a business leader must increase shareholder value, and the public-sector leader must increase public value" (Gandz, 2005). Not only are leaders considered to be experts in the functions associated with their business lines, but they must also lead their teams of diverse employees. They wear many hats and fill various roles like mentor, coach, subject matter expert, peer, and manager. Leaders not only lead people and projects but they also influence processes through both formal and informal roles.

Leaders are expected to have greater emotional intelligence (EQ) than their employees which means they should be aware of and know how to manage their own emotions as well as the emotions of others. A leader who is self-aware must understand who she is both personally and professionally because she is expected to communicate and interact effectively with audiences at all levels in the organization while creating opportunities where there may have been none to begin with. The leader must also be trustworthy and able to drive results.

These are just a few of the things that are expected of leaders and calling them out makes it easy to see why both the organization and the employees have high expectations of their leaders. It is because of this enormous responsibility that leaders must arm themselves with the tools and resources that equip them to increase their ability to be both effective and successful as a global leader. This is critical because leadership is “about getting results for your followers. If you get results, people will support you” (Gandz, 2005).

What is a Global Leader?

As organizations expand and gain their global footing, it brings a completely different set of responsibilities for leaders. Some of these responsibilities come with challenges that multiply as the organization expands and goes global. The challenges increase when leaders manage employees and interact with customers and other leaders from cultures that are different from their own. The reason for this is because being a global leader takes leadership to a completely different level – it is a step up from what is considered the norm. A leader must be equipped with basic leadership competencies that include but are not limited to the ability to innovate, communicate effectively, be empathetic, take risks, manage change and lead inclusively. A global leader must have these basic leadership competencies plus all the skills necessary to effectively lead, interact and work with diverse audiences.

“Global leaders act as bridge builders, connectors of resources and talent across cultural and political boundaries — relentlessly dedicated to finding new ways of creating value” (Cabrera, 2012). “Being global is not an option. It’s an imperative” (Cabrera & Unruh, 2012) and the countless advances in our technology make this fact a reality. Furthermore, with the increased connectivity of our marketplace, each of us literally has the world at our fingertips. What does this mean for leaders? It means their customers, employees and peers may not only be different from them culturally but they will more than likely span five generations. Thus, to be successful, global leaders are expected to be skilled in leading, connecting to and doing business with this incredibly diverse group. The only way to accomplish this is to be equipped with six critical global leadership competencies that are discussed in detail below. These competencies are cultural curiosity, cross-cultural competency, cultural agility, cultural humility, divergent thinking and creativity, and knowledge and integration of cross-national/cultural issues.

GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

Cultural Curiosity

The first competency that is critical to global leadership is cultural curiosity. Cultural curiosity makes you agile with a “relentless desire to learn about cultures and makes sense of [your] new cross-cultural context” (Caligiuri, 2012). A global leader who is equipped with this competency is an individual who has a natural ability to ask questions when she comes into contact with or otherwise interacts with someone who is culturally different from her. This leader will seek to learn more about that culture’s “norms, customs, values, behaviors and other aspects of that culture that are unfamiliar” (Caligiuri, 2012) because she knows it is the only way she will become familiar with that culture and build her own knowledge about it.

A global leader who is curious about other cultures is one who genuinely believes that everyone has value and should be treated with dignity and respect regardless of what cultural differences might exist between them. This is particularly important in the global marketplace because, as mentioned earlier, each dimension of diversity has its own cultural nuances. For example, each of the five generations has its

own culture while the African-American culture is uniquely different from the Asian culture. Thus, a global leader who is not well-informed about any of these different cultures will leverage their cultural curiosity competency to build their knowledge base so that they can lead, connect to or interact with individuals from these diverse communities.

Many individuals are born with a natural sense of curiosity which causes them to always ask questions about the people and things around them. Cultural curiosity, however, is a little different. The reason for this is that we view our individual perspective as always being “right” which makes those who are different from us “wrong”. We position ourselves to be around people who are closely aligned with us – they think, speak, behave, listen to the same music, eat the same foods, and often even dress like us. Anyone who falls outside of these norms may make us uncomfortable because our brains are hard-wired to be comfortable or attracted to sameness. It takes a special individual - a leader, a global leader – to step outside of their comfort zone and question diversity in order to become familiar with it. The more the practice of asking questions is utilized, the more innate it becomes. Simply put, not everyone is born with the ability to be culturally curious but it is a skill that can be learned.

Cross-Cultural Competency

The second competency a global leader must be equipped with is cross-cultural competency which is the “ability to understand people from different cultures and engage with them effectively” (Rasmussen, 2016). Cross-cultural competency is not just about people and cultures you may have interacted with or studied for years. “Having cross-cultural competence means you can be effective in your interactions with people from most any culture” (Rasmussen, 2016). In fact, there are some important things that a global leader must be able to do before they can be considered cross-culturally competent.

First, a global leader must understand herself and her own culture. This is important because even though we all see the world through our own filters which include but are not limited to our background, personal history and culture, a leader is still expected to effectively make business decisions without allowing bias to impact those decisions. Second, a global leader must be able to think strategically while staying focused on her goals, particularly when she travels overseas and builds intercultural relationships. These experiences provide the opportunity for her to learn about a culture(s) that is different from her own while understanding how her perspective aligns with that culture. Third, a global leader who is cross-culturally competent must take responsibility for creating opportunities that allow her to learn about diverse audiences. While doing so, she should understand that she won’t learn everything by limited experiences or sources e.g. a book or a movie. Instead, her learning should be comprehensive to ensure she is gathering and analyzing information from several data points. Fourth, a global leader must remain in a constant state of learning because no amount of preparation is enough. That is because as the marketplace changes and cultures evolve, the people who identify with those cultures will also evolve and a global leader must be equipped to effectively lead these diverse audiences despite any cultural adjustments. Finally, as a global leader builds her knowledge base about cultures and/or individuals who are different from her, she should always ask for feedback to ensure she is meeting the needs of those diverse audiences as well as leading in an inclusive manner.

Cross-cultural competence is not a skill that individuals are born with; it is developed over time through a deliberate ongoing process of learning and awareness. When we speak about cross-cultural competence we are referring to an individual’s ability to not only understand people from different cultures but also to engage with them effectively. This skill set or competence is critical today because our marketplace is global and interconnected. People are traveling, reaching out and mixing with diverse cultures more now than they did before for both personal and professional reasons. Why they are doing it is not important. Instead, what is important is that they learn from these experiences because in order for any of us to be successful in business we must be able to develop and maintain relationships. In today’s marketplace the only way any of us will build these relationships is across a cultural divide and a global leader must position herself to spearhead this effort.

Cultural Agility

The third critical competency a global leader should have is cultural agility. The word agility, by definition, refers to the power to move quickly or easily (Dictionary.com, 2010). Cultural agility goes a step further as it is viewed as the “mega-competency that enables professionals to perform successfully in cross-cultural situations” (Caligiuri, 2012). While each of us has some level of basic cultural agility before we even work with someone from a different culture, for an individual to be comfortable in navigating their agility it’s important they understand “it is a practice and building it is a process” (Caligiuri, 2012). This means that we must commit to being lifelong learners because it enables us to keep working at our cultural agility if our intent is to improve the skill. This is also true for global leaders - those who are more culturally agile “succeed in contexts where the successful outcome of their jobs, roles, positions, or tasks depends on dealing with an unfamiliar set of cultural norms – or multiple sets of them” (Caligiuri, 2012).

What does cultural agility look like when it is in practice? It is simple. A global leader who is skilled in cultural agility can effectively manage diverse perspectives, regardless what dimension of diversity is the source of the perspective. In other words, if a global leader has direct reports who reside in different continents or time zones, are from different cultural backgrounds or represent different generations, she must be agile enough to lead conversations with these individuals either as a group or singularly. In addition to leading these conversations, the global leader must be equipped to manage the perspectives of those who occupy a seat at the table and be insightful enough to include the perspectives of those who do may not be present.

Much like cultural curiosity and cross-cultural competence, cultural agility is not a skill that many people are born with. But it is a skill that can be developed when an individual is intentional in their efforts to do so. Cultural agility can be developed by: (1) maximizing your curiosity and minimizing your certainty, (2) ensuring your frame of reference is flexible, (3) focusing on ways your culture may be similar to others instead of how they are different - it will increase your comfortability to build relationships with individuals who are different from you, (4) supporting the ideas and perspectives of others even if those ideas are different from yours, and (5) being open to learning while reflecting on the information you are learning as well as those you are learning from.

Cultural Humility

The fourth critical competency that a global leader must be equipped with is cultural humility which is the competency that enables professionals to be open to learning the proper ways of conducting themselves in order to achieve success in a foreign culture. When we speak of humility in this sense it means that the leader should recognize her own knowledge is limited when it comes to full and complete understanding of another culture (Hohman, 2013). She must be humble if she intends to open herself up to learning about other cultures by personally acknowledging that her perspective is not representative of all cultures. Like cultural agility, humility is something that some of us are born with or already have but it is also something that can be developed through becoming more self-aware of one’s self and by fostering curiosity.

The American Psychological Association opines that there are three ways an individual can either develop or improve cultural humility. The first way is that a leader must commit to consistent and ongoing self-evaluation and self-critique (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). By utilizing this approach in her leadership style, the leader embraces the idea that as an individual she never gets to the point where she has finished learning. When she doesn’t know the answer to a question, she is strong enough and feels empowered to admit that she didn’t know the answer. She recognizes that this admittance does not make her weak or incapable of leading – it simply makes her human and open to learning.

The second way a global leader can build cultural humility is by correcting any imbalances of power where there should be none to begin with (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998). A leader who sees beyond difference and embraces only equality is one who sees the value in everyone. This innate desire for equality is what serves as the foundation for developing this skill. The third way a leader can develop cultural humility is by building or strengthening relationships with people or groups of people who

advocate for others (Tervalon & Murray-Garcia, 1998) to address systemic issues. Cultural humility is the key driver that enables leaders to build relationships grounded in trust.

Divergent Thinking and Creativity

The fifth competency that is critical to global leadership is divergent thinking and creativity. “Divergent thinking is the ability to generate multiple solutions or approaches to a given situation, problem or challenge” (Caligiuri, 2012, p. 64). In practice, this can be seen when leaders facilitate brainstorming sessions with groups of individuals. In doing so, leaders encourage divergent thinking and creativity because of the diverse ideas that are generated in the process. In addition to brainstorming, there are other ways to stimulate divergent thinking and creativity such as journaling, mind mapping, conversating with diverse individuals or freewriting.

Global leaders are sometimes challenged when it comes to developing divergent thinking and creativity because this unique skill cannot be developed alone. That is because the leader needs to work with a diverse group to learn the most effective ways of navigating and leading these audiences. It is critical to note that no two brainstorming sessions are the same simply because the diverse groups involved in these sessions are not the same nor do they think the same. Thus, if leaders seek to perfect this skill, they must do so through repetition. Once the skill is acquired, it must be consistently practiced to ensure it is not lost.

Knowledge and Integration of Cross-National/Cultural Issues

The final competency a global leader must have is knowledge and integration of cross-national/cultural issues. In other words, global leaders should be knowledgeable in areas of business that transcend industry. These areas include but are not limited to global finance or a country’s exchange rate in the global marketplace, global strategy, global macroeconomics and even global marketing (Caligiuri, 2012). While these are not the only functional areas that are important, they are some of the more critical areas that set global organizations apart from each other. Thus, by default, the leaders who lead global organizations must be skilled in them. Leaders must have a “worldly awareness and sound judgment, intuition, and decision-making skills” (Caligiuri, 2012) when it comes to navigating cross-national/cultural issues. Obviously, this skill is one that global leaders must develop and they can do so by remaining vigilant about issues that are trending in the areas within which they do business.

VALUE OF DEVELOPING THESE SKILLS

Global leaders must operate with a global mindset and Cabrera & Unruh (2012) opine that “developing one requires ongoing investment in personal development through both formal and informal education”. They go on to say that “cultural awareness is not synonymous with having a global mindset” and that’s because cultural awareness is merely an early stage on the path to developing a global mindset. Additionally, a global mindset is critical to global leadership because having one can lessen the chances of missing important cues – verbal or non-verbal - or displaying behavior that could be offensive to others. Global leaders share unique characteristics in the cognitive, social and emotional areas that make up a global mindset and together, they shape a leader’s ability to function in a global marketplace.

Global leaders recognize and can appreciate that each culture is different - they think, act, behave and feel things in different ways. To add to the complexity of leadership, global leaders understand that individuals of different cultures have different needs, wants and goals and they must be able to effectively lead conversations with diverse groups. A leader must not only listen to the ‘voices of the people’ but she must also understand what those voices are telling her. In other words, there may be occasions when people perceive the world and even communicate and view their leaders in different ways. When this occurs, it could cause the leader’s ears to be filled with misunderstood messages simply because she is of a different culture. Hence it is advantageous for a leader to build awareness and create exposure opportunities to increase her understanding of people beyond her own culture. Only a leader who is equipped with the competencies discussed above can successfully navigate these diverse audiences.

CONCLUSION

In today's global marketplace leading cross-cultural teams is almost impossible to avoid. That is because not only are many organizations creating a global footprint but there is also increased diversity in the U.S. marketplace. With this reality, leaders are faced with managing cross-cultural or global teams. A global team could refer to employees or team members who either reside on different continents or teams of cross-regional multi-generational individuals working out of the same location. Regardless of how the global team is defined, it is important that the leader operate with a global mindset and function as a global leader.

This article details six critical competencies that a global leader must be equipped with to be both effective and successful in her role. All these competencies can be developed if the leader is not born with them. But to perfect them, the competencies must be consistently practiced on an ongoing basis. Additionally, global leaders must be willing to listen and absorb the cues that are around them before speaking up. Being knowledgeable about cultural differences is important and a critical part of building trust, friendship and a better common understanding with others. A leader who is *not* equipped with the competencies discussed above would be challenged to effectively meet the needs of both her team and her organization in a manner that would allow them to be competitive and sustainable in today's global marketplace.

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