

The Elements of Leadership in a Global Environment

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By facilitating connections among nations, organizations, and individuals, technology has accelerated the pace of globalization. To be effective in such an environment, leaders must do more than pay lip service to the general concept of diversity. They must first realize that diversity manifests itself in multiple ways. Then they must harness the power of the differences they uncover by addressing those nuances when developing strategies to enhance their competitive advantage. To do so, leaders must carefully develop sociotechnical systems that effectively merge the strengths of ever-evolving technology with those of an increasingly diverse workforce—all while fulfilling their local responsibilities without losing their global perspective. ©2013 Wiley Periodicals, Inc.

Many speak of globalization as the final frontier of business and leadership. But what exactly does it entail?

To some, it is simply “the increasing transnational exchange of goods, persons, and ideas” (Janssen, Kuipers, & Verboord, 2008, p. 720). Therefore, leaders must stand poised to bridge cultural differences and to cross national borders in the name of prosperity. But globalization is more than just conducting business in a foreign country or having an international presence. Globalization is immune to national borders and, like a chameleon, can adapt to any culture. At its core, globalization comprises a homogenous amalgam of behaviors within a major segment of a given population (Aurifeille, Quester, Lockshin, & Spawton, 2002). For example, it has been noted that in India consumers are “being influenced by the consumerism brought by foreign influence through media and products” associated with “globalization and westernization” (Gupta, 2011, p. 254). Hence, they are purchasing more foreign

products. This is what sets the concept of globalization apart from that of merely being *international*, which just involves crossing geographic borders and maintaining a presence in another country besides the home base.

Following advances in technology and communication, the use of the term *globalization* became popular in academic literature in the 1980s (Sliwa, 2007). As described in a 2001 *Foreign Policy* article, “The expansion of information technologies adds to globalization in ways other than facilitating communication” (“Measuring Globalization,” 2001, p. 58). It is ubiquitous in business and leadership circles today and is frequently viewed as a remedy for fledgling corporations around the world. For instance, when Infosys, an Indian company that was founded in 1981, nearly went under in 1989, it was saved because of an exchange crisis that opened the company to the global market (Khanna & Palepu, 2004). Oxley and Schnietz (2001) pronounced globalization as “the great economic event of our era” (p. 479), a catalyst for global prosperity. It is viewed as offering the potential to create a business oasis with an “absence of barriers and borders of trade” (Cristian & Ivan, 2010, p. 589).

Yet for all of the economic advantages it can bring, globalization presents leadership challenges. Crossing borders is one thing; crossing cultures is entirely something else. Greig (2002) writes, “Culture provides such a fundamental basis for human existence, it serves to shape all levels of human interaction” (p. 225). Who we are, what we believe, and how we perceive the world is, to a great extent, shaped by our culture. To be effective on a global stage, leaders must transcend international and cultural boundaries. They must become *global leaders*. And to do

so, they must adopt a global mind-set as they employ sociotechnical systems to expand their influence and presence in the global marketplace.

Diversity: The Heart of The Matter

One could argue that leaders have been operating in a global environment since the days of Christopher Columbus, when explorers established new trade routes with distant lands. It was not until the advent of commercial air travel, however, that the world became a much smaller place from a business perspective. Today, only a few decades later, the Internet, e-mail, and cell phones make the distances that appeared insurmountable in the days of sailing ships now seem inconsequential. Though the planet is the same size it always has been, it seems to have shrunk, for its inhabitants are now connected—plugged in—in a way never seen before. As Greig (2002) observed, this has led to a new form of cultural migration: “For a culture to be susceptible to outside influence, the capability for cross-cultural communication must exist. Historically, this ability has been sharply limited. Today, however, advances in communications technology, coupled with an expanding global economic system, have dramatically increased the opportunities for interaction between geographically separated groups” (p. 228).

The world has always been composed of diverse peoples, but globalization has brought the issue of diversity to the forefront, where leaders must address it to achieve success. When people talk about diversity, often what they are referring to is difference—that is, different values, beliefs, ethnicity, and culture. The broad term *diversity*, however, comprises several types. Jehn, Northcraft, and Neale (1999) identify three types of diversity at play in globalization: informational, social category, and value diversity. “These three types of diversity are not always distinct in practice,” they explain. “For example, two individuals from different races (social category diversity) may (though not necessarily) have experienced different educational cultures

(informational diversity) and may consequently espouse different values (value diversity)” (p. 742).

Simply stated, diversity is diverse. All cultures are unique and contain individual and yet collectively similar nuances. Cox (1994) writes, “Cultural diversity means the representation, in one social system, of people with distinctly different group affiliations of cultural significance” (p. 15).

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If they are to become effective global players, leaders must not only understand this concept, but also embrace it. It must be at the very core of their leadership philosophy. Rosen, Digh, Singer, and Phillips (2000) write, “They must develop a multicultural perspective, an international knowledge base, and a global imagination” (p. 172). And they must apply it to their organizations. That is, they must harness the power of diversity through strategic initiatives.

One suggestion calls for increasing the “cultural diversity of the senior management ranks” (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002, p. 177). Increasing the level of diversity increases an organization’s competitive advantage. The increase in “demographic diversity in the workforce requires that organizations embrace and value diversity and recognize that human resources are sources of sustained competitive advantage” (Oyler & Mildred, 2009, p. 436).

Taking such steps, some researchers maintain, is critical to success in the global economy. As Pellet (2005) writes, “Over the past 15 years, the corporate perspective on diversity has evolved from mere lip service to a strategic directive with clear business benefits. Both demographic shifts in the

American marketplace and globalization have led to recognition of diversity initiatives as not only the right thing to do ethically and culturally, but also a competitive imperative. Companies with successful diversity programs cite benefits ranging from access to a wider variety of perspectives and more effective multicultural marketing efforts to better employee morale and reduced turnover” (pp. 50–51).

In Canada, Ernst & Young successfully integrated diversity initiatives by “aligning talent management strategies with [their] overall business growth strategy” (“Apply Within,” 2012). According to People Managing Partner Steve Shea, “By integrating the principles of diversity and inclusiveness into our core processes . . . we attract, retain and develop top talent. . . . Together, this depth of perspective becomes our unique competitive advantage” (“Apply Within,” 2012). To be effective on the global stage, leaders must immerse themselves in all aspects of the diversity issue and be fluent in their understanding of the various types. In other words, “They must know their culture and the culture of others” (Rosen et al., 2000, p. 59).

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Some companies that are catching on to this idea have taken steps to adapt to their cultural surroundings. For example, “In Shanghai, KFC serves porridge for breakfast and Peking Duck burgers for lunch. In Beijing, Starbucks serves green and aromatic teas. In Shenzhen, Coca-Cola produces carbonated fruit drinks and bottled water” (Vorhauser-Smith, 2012). The brands are indisputably Western, but the companies behind them are carving out a healthy market share for themselves as global businesses in emerging markets. They have managed to

do that by recognizing, learning about, and adapting to local tastes, attitudes, and values.

Achieving the Balance of Global Thinking on a Local Level

Going from local to global requires strategy, planning, and a great deal of thinking, both on a global and local level. Specifically, local people need to “see the big picture beyond the local picture” (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002, p. 137)—seeing the proverbial forest through the trees. Developing a global-local mind-set is essential when devising innovative strategies. Ger (1999) writes, “Innovative local firms need to be sensitive to the new global reality that consists of forces of both globalization and localization as well as rapid change” (p. 72).

Going from local to global occurs on many scales. With the click of a mouse, a local company can be doing business around the world via the Internet—and face a host of challenges. The Internet’s “direct effects vary from one industry to another and, also, it speeds up globalization at different rates in different industries” (Tixier, 2005, p. 45). Although the Internet has enabled worldwide connections like never before and created opportunities for global expansion by local businesses, globalization is not an equal opportunity employer. Lituchy and Rail (2000) write, “The Internet also makes it difficult for small, local firms to make their mark, because they must compete with businesses all over the world” (p. 95). Therefore, the Internet is not a free ticket to admission to the global scene. It enables organizations to establish a global presence, but presence alone will not get them far in the global marketplace.

Meeting the challenge of being globally local and locally global requires strategic initiative. Tixier (2005) observes, “Globalization is defined on an institutional level as a strategy of constraints that have to be adjusted in all local sites. Localization is the implementation of globalization constraints in agreement with the constraints required by the local

environment of the firm and the final user” (p. 15). Organizational leaders, therefore, must strike a complex balance between global and local strategies—what Tixier (2005) termed “glocalization” (p. 22)—that allows them to coexist independently.

Going from local to global and global to local demands that leaders examine the frontier beyond their thinking and develop flexible strategies.

Achieving this balance is complicated by the ever-changing global and local landscapes. This is where a strategic choice like glocalization comes into play. Glocalization is “a subtle intermediary that makes it possible to combine worldwide unity of the brand image and a perfect adaptability to the specificities of national expectations” (Tixier, 2005, p. 15). Furthermore, it is the “implementation of the constraints of globalization in accordance with the constraints of the local environment and requested by the final user” (Tixier, 2005, p. 16). In other words, as a strategy, it provides the best of both worlds.

Reebok and New Balance are two companies that have successfully implemented glocalization. One of the ways they managed this was to present local and regional website content that reinforced their brand while maintaining “a certain amount of freedom applicable to the different culture groups” (Tixier, 2005, p. 34). Thus, they found the sweet spot between a global and local presence.

Going from local to global and global to local demands that leaders examine the frontier beyond their thinking and develop flexible strategies. Rosen et al. (2000) write, “People must know not only where they’re going but how to get there” (p. 246). To do this, global leaders must create flexible structures, ensure cultural transparency, develop a global vision, promote global values while respecting local traditions, craft a global strategy built on local rela-

tionships, and build a global workforce while managing local employees (Rosen et al., 2000). In short, global leaders must walk the precarious tightrope of being both global and local amid uncertainty and change.

Coca-Cola is one of the most recognized brands in the world. Mere recognition, however, does not necessarily guarantee universal or cultural acceptance. Such a balance requires glocalization, which requires “a combination of different levels, from local to global, of strategic approaches, with the awareness of the significance of adaptation to local markets, and . . . attempts to maintain a balance between global homogenization and local customization” (Tian, 2006, p. 14).

In 1999, Coca-Cola experienced a global setback because of a crisis in which schoolchildren in Belgium reported feeling ill after drinking Coke (Tian, 2006). In response, Donald N. Daft, the company’s chairman of the board and CEO at the time, remarked that the company needed to “think local, act local” (Tian, 2006, p. 16) and noted that although Coca-Cola was a global brand, it was not consumed globally (Tian, 2006). From this emerged a glocal strategy in which the company integrated various elements of local cultures into its branding and associated media. For example, the company developed a Chinese website that is not a literal translation of its English website. Instead, the company “localizes the content and the style of its Chinese web site for the Chinese market. This glocal strategy approach practiced by Coca-Cola integrates the ethnocentric and polycentric model in public relations” (Tian, 2006, p. 20). Such strategic initiatives have helped make Coca-Cola a global giant with a 13 percent increase in earnings for the first quarter of 2013 (Ziobro, 2013).

Merging People With Technology

Sociotechnical systems are the result of human interaction with technology. They are, as Lawson

(2011) noted, “Large, complex systems in which the lines between the social and the technological, the human and the machine are increasingly blurry.”

From e-mail to social media, technology envelops us. Advances in technology have forced businesses to adopt ever more sophisticated means of getting the job done. This is consistent with sociotechnical theory, which “stresses that technical and organizational development goes hand in hand” (Herrmann, Loser, & Jahnke, 2007, p. 459). Sociotechnical systems develop because of the need for production systems, which are a combination of technical and social systems (Howard, Foster, & Shannon, 2005). Howard et al. (2005) write, “The technical subsystem includes the tools, equipment, work processes or production structure, and the information and information technology necessary to complete tasks. The social subsystem . . . refers primarily to the relationships among the people who work in the organization” (p. 772).

When handled effectively, the task of merging people with technology creates a harmonious relationship whereby the members of the organization embrace technology because they understand and appreciate the advantages that it offers. Technology is more than a driver in the workforce; it is a force that can be used to drive global strategy. In essence, it is not just a part of the strategy. It *is* the strategy.

Take the case of Amazon.com, which emerged on the scene in the mid-1990s as the first company to take the bookstore concept from traditional brick-and-mortar outlets to the web. Without the Internet, Amazon would not exist. Since its inception, it has amassed an impressive array of acquisitions of other online businesses (Carlson, 2009). For Amazon, the technology is the very core of the organization’s strategy. The company fully harnesses the power of its local markets by integrating external shopping opportunities through its web-

site, which keeps customers satisfied and coming back. Amazon has harnessed technology in conjunction with global product availability and delivered a home shopping experience to consumers’ computer screens. Combining one-click shopping with collaborative-filtering technology, the company serves its public and meets its own objectives by facilitating “comparison-shopping that gives customers a way of finding products that Amazon does not sell directly” (Mellahi & Johnson, 2000, p. 450).

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As Tassey (2008) notes, “Globalization of corporate strategies is an attempt to manage the technology life cycle” (p. 566). This is precisely what Amazon is doing and what global leaders need to do to be successful. Additionally, in 1999 Amazon took control of distributing its merchandise via a series of regional facilities, which enabled the firm to coordinate merchandise with greater proximity, thereby reducing cost and expediting delivery (Kargar, 2004). This includes maintaining local warehouses and distribution centers both inside and outside the United States.

Aggarwal (1999) writes, “Globalization helps technology leapfrog traditional national boundaries to become more profitable, while technology helps make business more global” (p. 83). Thus, technology and globalization feed off each other’s energy. As one expands, so does the other. The most effective global leaders foster the integration of people and technology because “technology facilitates globalization and globalization makes technology more profitable and accelerates technological advances” (Aggarwal, 1999, p. 101).

Tips for Meeting the Challenges of Globalization

To meet the challenges that globalization presents without losing their focus on local realities, organizational leaders must be willing to change. They must:

- Embrace different cultures, and harness their power to maximum advantage while addressing the various types of diversity throughout their enterprises. The new norm must not focus on *why* cultures, people, and markets are different; it must focus on *how* they are different. Understanding the composition of diversity is critical to realizing the full benefits of its power. It is the precursor to economic and leadership success.
- Understand the role that values place in determining culture. For example, in Japan, honor is a very important value that is deeply embedded into the nation's cultural identity (Elmer, 1993). Involving "the things we associate with being a member of our cultures" (Gudysunst & Kim, 2003, p. 102), cultural identity must not be ignored when devising corporate strategies.
- Strive to make a global mind-set a part of their daily thought process and the foundation of the organization's strategic plan. They can do this by developing "a global vision, structure, and process" (Herbert, 2000, p. 197). An excellent example of a truly global management team can be found at Adidas, the German-based sportswear company, where the executive board consists of two Americans, two Frenchmen, two Germans, one Swiss, one Swede, and one Australian (Herbert, 2000).
- Accept the fact that local organizations now exist in a global dimension. Therefore, local leaders must look beyond their borders and see the distant horizon; global leaders must shift their gaze from the distant horizon to their local borders. They can begin to balance their global and local responsibilities by using the brand to do the cultural infiltration to the local target groups, so that the product brands with the local culture organi-

cally (Wang, Chen, & Chu, 2010). For example, "Motorola's success is that it brings the advanced technologies to China, and then actively implements the localization of technological research and development and strengthens the cooperation in research and development with China" (Wang et al., 2010, p. 59).

- Develop sociotechnical systems to maximize the integration of people and technology locally and globally. Among the strategies that can be employed to achieve this objective is to "match fundamental knowledge domains to each other and to their context of application" (Iansiti, 1998, p. 21). These domains can be classified into three types: knowledge generation, knowledge retention, and knowledge application. In other words, people need to know how something works and will benefit them in their position in order to incorporate it effectively into the local and global business process. The mere existence of technology is irrelevant without a realized benefit.

Such initiatives require a willingness to expose oneself to other cultures and to be open to local influences. Those who rise to the task will be the most likely to succeed in a world that is becoming more homogenous yet is still influenced by myriad cultural nuances. They will be the true leaders of the present and future global economy.

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