



Leadership & Diversity: Synergistic Cross-culturalism

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As the harbinger of change, globalization has led to increased demand for leaders who exhibit a broad range of competencies. The required nature of cross-cultural interaction has emerged as an area of major importance for leaders within the private and public sectors. Leaders in distinct roles and sectors are likely to find themselves in situations where they must navigate a range of contrasting cultures while learning to cooperate with others from diverse backgrounds. To adequately equip leaders from divergent fields, it is quintessential to have a firm understanding of six key areas of cross-cultural synergism and leadership: approaches to conflict and conflict resolution, communication styles, decision-making, task completion, levels of disclosure, and epistemological approaches. This article describes each of these areas and explains the ways in which it is imperative for future leaders to succeed.

Leadership and Diversity: The Quintessential Nature of Synergistic Cross-Culturalism Pierce Bassett

In contemporary society, leaders face numerous challenges and opportunities in relation to globalization. As technology advances and trade across international borders becomes standardized, people from multiple countries are learning to operate uniformly. In fields like business, industry, government, and other groups, leaders are often required to work with others from unique cultures and language backgrounds (Triandis, et al., 1994). Whether working in the private or public sector of business, present-day leaders need to have the necessary skills to engage in cross-cultural synergistic methodologies. It is structurally necessary to focus on cross-cultural strategies for success in order to maintain the viability of an organization; the “traditional strategies used by management to manage culturally diverse workforce are proving inadequate and may not be able to solve the problem in cross-cultural diversity in the era of globalization” (Singh, 2012, p. 43). Common barriers to successes across cultures include misunderstandings, stereotyping, ethnocentrism, and varied belief systems (Jenifer & Raman, 2015). Current research suggests that the primary challenges and opportunities that exist presently in cross-cultural synergism are present in six crucial areas: approaches to conflict and conflict resolution, communication styles, decision-making, task completion, levels of disclosure, and epistemological approaches (Yu & Chen, 2008). If leaders develop a deeper understanding of these six areas of cross-cultural partnership, then they will be in a better position to meet the various challenges and opportunities of a global environment.

The first major challenge for leaders in a cross-cultural context relates to positive conflict management. Separate cultures approach conflict in diverse ways. It is necessary to discuss the methodologies of cultures in dealing with conflict due to many of their fundamental characteristics. Some cultures perceive conflict as something that must be avoided whenever possible. Others view conflict as essentially positive, because it leads to transparent, honest interactions and robust competition (DuPraw & Axner, 1997). In Mediterranean countries, including Spain and Greece, conflict is expected and seen as a normal aspect of workplace interactions, where colleagues who find themselves in conflict seldom take personal offense. Elsewhere, as in North American or Scandinavian countries, conflict is not socially seen as desirable, despite many employers urging co-workers to deal with these situations openly and directly. In contrast, many cultures in Asia and the Middle East see conflict as humiliating and demeaning. Any expression of conflict is highly



discouraged (DuPraw & Axner, 1997). If conflict becomes unavoidable, written statements are preferred, rather than meeting someone face-to-face (Jennifer & Raman, 2015). As individuals are able to adapt to these novel circumstances, they are able to rise to meet the challenges of modern leadership with an added sanctuary of cultural empathy. While this level of leadership capability is semi occasional in many current organizations, the incorporation of culturally appreciative leaders has many positive aspects. Some of these aspects include an added value to businesses through effective negotiations and decreasing misunderstandings while “exploring and discovering integrative, or value-creating, solutions” (Shonk, 2020).

Along with conflict resolution, another major area for leaders in business, healthcare, government, and even in secondary groups like clubs is communication styles; which vary widely around the world. In addition to utilizing rhetoric, body language is also a required aspect for leaders to visually demonstrate their competencies as well as earn the respect of colleagues. For example, in Japan and South Korea, it is normal for business associates to bow formally to each other when meeting (Scagliotti & Mujtaba, 2010). People from English-speaking countries, on the other hand, typically shake hands as a greeting. If someone is not familiar with the custom of bowing in some Asian countries, misunderstandings and awkwardness can arise. An awareness of cultural differences places leaders in an advantageous position and allows them to navigate interactions smoothly and successfully (Aneas & Sandín, 2009; Chen, 2017). The ability to effectively navigate these small, yet extremely significant interactions are characteristics of the type of leaders necessary to galvanize a successful future in their respective organizations.

A third area of cross-cultural synergism that is inherent in successful leaders is the confidence to make concise, yet often difficult decisions. The roles that supervisors and managers take in decision-making contrast significantly across business cultures in their approach, as well as how the consequences of decisions impact the organization. In the U.S. and Canada, supervisors often delegate decisions to subordinates. In contrast, in Southern Europe and Latin America, it is generally assumed that the supervisor will make decisions alone and will very rarely delegate to others (Chen, 2017). The differences in culture are also applicable in group decisions. In Japan, reaching a uniform group consensus is ideal, while in North America, a “majority rule” approach is considered adequate (Dupraw & Axner, 1997). When professionals work across multiple cultures, an understanding of cultural expectations in relation to delegation and decision-making is vital in terms of successfully managing a multi-cultural team of employees. These styles reflect disparities in each culture’s values and styles, and the leader of any organizations’ role is molding these two pieces together effectively. Without a primary guiding force that knows how to make decisions that allow these distinct features to work together, many organizations especially in business, will experience a negative cultural saturation throughout their structure. This small example displays the positive impacts of a leader who can confidently make good decisions.

Distinct cultures also exhibit unique approaches and attitude towards their contributions to organizations. The cultural attitudes and variations towards task completion may be influenced by several diverse factors. These include deviating concepts of time, alternating levels of access to workplace resources, and a spectrum of ideas relating to the ways that task completion may intersect with workplace relationships and hierarchies (Singh, 2012). Specifically, cultures shift in terms of the priority emphasized on particular aspects of a collaborative project. These can range widely in separate cultures, when for example, an added value is placed on balancing family, work, and spiritual aspects. In a study conducted with over 570 individuals in a corporate setting, researchers found that there existed a negative relationship between working hours and a satisfaction in a work-family balance relationship (Valcour, 2007). This study indicates that employees who work longer hours actually experience a decrease in productivity and efficiency because of a lack of balance. In contrast, in many countries throughout Asia like Japan, many workers are required to work longer hours in order to protect their job security (Kuroda & Yamamoto, 2013). In addition to implementation of working hours, many cultures also fluctuate in how supervisors and managers choose to regulate collaborative projects. Asian and Latin American cultures typically put a high value on establishing relationships in the early stages of a mutual



collaboration and emphasize task completion later, towards the end of the project. In contrast, North Americans and Europeans are more likely to prioritize the completion of a task at an earlier stage of a shared project, while allowing workplace relationships to develop as the progress moves forward (DuPraw & Axner, 1997). As with other areas of cross-cultural collaboration, it is important for leaders to be aware of diversity and cultural expectations. Leaders must recognize that diverse approaches to task completion do not mean that members of contrasting culture are less committed to finishing a task in addition to how these attributes contribute to the personal values of employees and members of an organization.

Along with the areas that have been described, another area that can present challenges for leaders is the attitudes that are taken regarding personal disclosures in the workplace. As mentioned already, various cultures take different views regarding interactions between colleagues. This type of diversity includes the sharing of personal information, including one's thoughts and emotions, which has the potential to contribute positively or negatively to a workplace environment. Around the world, fundamental notions of self and individualism deviate widely and often affect workplace interactions (Pekerti & Thomas, 2015). In Asian cultures, including China, it is considered unprofessional and inappropriate to be open about one's inner landscape and feelings, including one's thoughts regarding the root causes of an interpersonal conflict or workplace misunderstanding (Aneas & Sandín, 2009). In Canada and the United States, however, it might be expected that everyone involved in a project or situation will be open and willing to disclose information. These discrepancies are especially crucial in situations where conflict emerges. Leaders should recognize that individuals in some cultures will not feel safe or comfortable answering certain questions or revealing certain levels of information. Questions that might seem completely non-threatening to a North American, such as "What was the disagreement?" or "What was the sequence of events?" may be experienced in other cultures as intrusive, insensitive, or even rude (DuPraw & Axner, 1997). Changing approaches to this type of disclosure around the world mean that leaders need to be careful in making assumptions about a situation when working in a diverse global environment. In this way leaders like supervisors can more fully relate employee cultural expectations to a workplace environment.

A final area of opportunity and challenge for leaders when it comes to cross-cultural synergism relates to fluid epistemologies, or ways of knowing. Cultures generally exhibit diversity widely in terms of the processes that people use for learning in addition to distinct emphasis placed on educational methodologies and experiences. In North American and European cultures, there is a strong emphasis on using empirical, cognitive methods to collect information. These methods include the scientific method, collection of data, counting and measuring. Not only are these processes extremely common, but most North Americans and Europeans consider these processes to be superior to other ways of knowing, which can often verge on ethnocentrism (Jenifer & Raman, 2015). In contrast, many African cultures prioritize affective methods of accumulating knowledge, such as symbolic imagery and rhythm. In some Asian cultures, knowledge is often acquired through a process of searching for spiritual transcendence (DuPraw & Axner, 1997). If a leader is unaware of different epistemologies and has never considered how her or his own epistemology may be modified from others, then problems may arise (Chen, 2017). It is important for leaders to recognize that various ways of knowing (e.g. symbolic, transcendent, empirical) have unique strengths, as well as weaknesses. In recent years, there has been increasing research to suggest that the use of a wide spectrum of epistemologies can be valuable when there is a need to find innovative solutions to problems. In situations where one way of finding knowledge is inadequate, another epistemology may present a new perspective (Aneas & Sandín, 2009; Pekerti & Thomas, 2015). Combined epistemologies provide important assets for multi-cultural organizations.

While this research addresses leadership on a contemporary and international level, it is limited in scope. Future research into the histories of cultural backgrounds has the potential to allow for a deeper understanding into niche societal interactions. Studies that allow for a broader understanding of sociology within business, healthcare, education, and government has the potential to alter how a leader chooses to overcome the six aforementioned categories. One aspect



of potential studies involves utilizing pertinent background information to avoid further hinderances is known as cultural appropriation (Young, 2005), a term added to the Oxford dictionary as recently as 2017. Cultural appropriation studies have the potential to adequately prepare academic advisors at many predominantly Caucasian universities in preparation for the predicted twenty-percent increase in multiracial students in the United States by the year 2050 (MacDonald, 2014). This process of establishing cross-cultural interactions for educators is currently being pursued virtually and in person through organizations like American Councils for International Organization and Globalschoolnet.org. However, extensive research into the effectiveness and the impact on students of these types of organizations remains largely unknown (Tichnor, et al., 2016). Many students currently attending university have also been confronted with similar circumstances. Studies seeking to measure a student's cultural competencies have the potential to present insight into how diverse educational organizations are preparing their students to be participate and lead in a global community. Additional studies into contemporary international corporate leaders and how they have been successful in navigating these fields also has the potential to contribute to this topic.

An understanding and recognition of the six key areas of cross-cultural synergism are absolute necessities in order for leaders to have the necessary tools to work successfully with a wide range of people and cultures. With advances in modern technology that allow information to be distributed more rapidly around the world than ever before, the global workplace is becoming a standard for many organizations. Within this context, an effective application of cooperation across cultures is of fundamental importance for leaders who wish for success. A thorough understanding of the six key areas can help prepare leaders for successful interactions with the diversities of the world. The ability to engage respectfully with people around the world is urgently imperative for a successful and thriving organization. For companies and organizations who seek to remain current in an era of globalization (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016). Through attentiveness to these cultural emphases, leaders can be prepared to meet emerging challenges and opportunities.

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