Developing a Global Mindset: Learning of Global Leaders

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ABSTRACT: This paper explores the requirements of leading in a global environment as perceived by the leaders participating in this study as well as the way these leaders learn these perceived requirements. In-depth interviews with 24 global leaders were recorded, transcribed and analyzed using constant comparative and content analysis. The findings presented in this paper are part of a larger study on the meaning of global leadership and mindset. The framework for this research was guided by the Global Leadership Mindset (GLM) model developed by the authors and their colleagues. The GLM model has three dimensions (knowledge, orientation and behaviour) integrated by the learning process. The leaders indicated that knowledge related to cross-cultural issues, the global environment and self-knowledge with greater self-awareness related to willingness and enthusiasm for learning were essential components of the requirements for global leadership. Five different types of orientations, including transcendence, plasticity of the mind (flexible, thinking differently; rebalancing; open; multiple frames), mindfulness, curiosity, and change-orientation were also considered essential by the leaders. Knowledge and orientation were in turn tied to a set of behaviors exhibited by these global leaders. These included being interpretive/appreciative, communicative, self-regulative, ethical, and active learners; negotiators effectively building support and networks, managers of change and innovation, and having the right people strategies. These behaviors were an enactment of global leaders’ existing repertoire of orientation and knowledge. The findings also indicate that global leaders are continuous learners. In fact, they view global leadership through the lens of learning. To them it is about learning more, seeking more knowledge and then sharing that knowledge with others on a broad scale. The personal learning journeys of these leaders to develop their global mindset showed evidence of mainly informal learning (only in very few cases workshops and courses were mentioned), during everyday work and life experiences. Learning and being learners are fundamentally central to these global leaders. They exhibit humility and surround themselves with people they can learn from on a continuous basis. In this context differences encountered by global leaders from all sectors were subjects for “celebration” and viewed as opportunities for learning. They argued that global leadership is driven by a desire to learn and share learning. The stories of these leaders could inform HRD practitioners in their quest to create learning cultures and spaces for discovery in similar contexts.

KEY WORDS: Globalization, Global leadership, Global mindset, Global leadership mindset, Global leaders, Leadership learning, Leadership development

Globalization is rewriting social expectations internationally (Batstone, 2003 as cited in Dean, 2005, p. 181). It is increasing the capacity and scope of transnational interactions among states and corporations, exposing them to new kinds of challenges and responsibilities (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2008; Buller, Khols & Anderson, 1991; Lozano & Boni, 2002). An important implication and consequence of the globalization processes is that leaders in all spheres of society are experiencing major changes in their roles (Dean, 2005). Scholars have argued that the leadership paradigm that dominated in the 20th century needs to be transformed to include a new way of thinking/feeling/acting to better fit today’s intensely globalized, competitive and dynamic environment (Adler, 2007, 2009; Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2008; Jeanett, 2000; Werhane, 2007).

Despite an increased interest in the field of leadership, it is not yet clear what this ‘new form’ of global leadership ought to include. This issue becomes critical in view of the worldwide shortage of talent, which has made successful leaders sought-after and created an urgency to develop effective global leaders (Economist, 2006; Mendenhall & Osland, 2002). Lassere (2003) appropriately explains that organizations must address the shortage of effective global leaders in order to take full advantage of all the opportunities that globalization has to offer.

As scholars have tried to clarify what will address organizational capacity development, it has become clear that there is a need for creating and developing a learning culture, one in which continuous learning is a fundamental strategy of the business (Watkins & Marsick, 1993, 1997). Organizations structured to promote continuous learning have a culture that: values and provides resources and tools for continuous learning opportunities for individuals; ensures opportunities for dialogue and inquiry including capturing suggestions for change and improvement; emphasizes team learning and collaboration to promote cross-
unit learning; empowers people to enact a collective vision; creates systems to capture and share this learning; makes systemic connections between the organization and its environment, scanning the environment to learn and anticipate future needs; and provides leadership for learning through managers and leaders who know how to facilitate talent development of their employees and who model continuously learning themselves (Watkins & Marsick, 2003). Since the learning culture is impacted by the continuously changing landscape in which organizations function, there is a need to understand how leaders of global organizations make meaning of their environment, their requirements to lead in their global environment and the way they learn what they perceive that it is required for their and their organization’s well-being.

This paper explores the requirements of leading in a global environment as perceived by the leaders participating in this study as well as the way these leaders learn these perceived requirements. The findings presented here are part of a larger study on the meaning of global leadership, global mindset and global leadership mindset.

**Global Competencies, Global Mindset and the Global Leadership Mindset (GLM)**

From a focus on minute behaviors to patterns of behavior, to global mindsets, the history of competence development is one of an expanding scope. During the past twenty years, scholars and practitioners alike were preoccupied with deciphering, understanding and developing competencies needed in the continuously evolving global environment (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2008, Bird & Osland, 2004; Caligiuri & Di Santo, 2001; Chin, Gu, & Tubbs, 2001; Conner, 200; Cseh, 2002; Gregersen, Morrison & Black, 1998; Jokinen, 2005; Kefalas, 1998; Kets De Vries & Mead, 1992; Lobel, 1990; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Mendenhall, 2006; Osland & Bird, 2008; Rhinesmith, 1996; Rosen, Digh, Singer & Phillips, 2000; Watkins & Cseh, 2009). Cultural competence and cultural intelligence are often mentioned in the management literature as prerequisites for successful functioning in the ever-changing global business landscape (Peterson, 2004; Thomas & Inkson, 2003; Walker, Walker & Schmitz, 2003).

Global mindset is a concept that encompasses holistic competencies and is frequently associated with the mindset needed in a global business context to make strategic business decisions. Rhinesmith (1996) identified 24 competencies that a global leader has to possess and grouped them by responsibility as they relate to the organization’s strategy and structure, its corporate culture and its people. Global mindset is associated with both individuals and organizations (Kottolli, 2007). At the individual level, Levy et al. (2007), concluded that the global mindset is a multi-dimensional concept and described it as “a highly complex cognitive structure characterized by an openness to and articulation of multiple cultural and strategic realities on both the global and local levels, and the cognitive ability to mediate and integrate across this multiplicity” (p. 244).

In a review of the literature on global leadership competencies, Beechler and Javidan (2007) concluded, “the list of effective global leadership competencies are practically endless, to the point in which they become useless” (p. 138). In order to address this issue, the authors identify the following three critical components of a global mindset essential for global leadership: 1) intellectual capital; 2) psychological capital; and 3) social capital. Intellectual capital refers to the knowledge and understanding of global business, cognitive complexity and cultural acumen. Psychological capital is composed of a positive psychological profile (i.e., self-efficacy, self-confidence, optimism and hope and resilience), cosmopolitanism (e.g., respect for other cultures, openness and sensitivity, flexibility) and a passion for cross-cultural encounters. The three types of social capital (structural, relational and cognitive) reflect participation in social networks, the nature of relationships in those networks, and the shared meanings derived from them. Global mindset mirrors self-confidence balanced by humility and generosity, and like cultural competence and intelligence encompasses skills such as flexibility and adaptability, collaboration and listening (Werhane et al., 2006; Thorn, 2007).
This research was guided by the Global Leadership Mindset (GLM) model developed by the authors and their colleagues (Davis et al., 2008, Figure 1).

Figure 1. Global Leadership Mindset (GLM) Model

The GLM model has the following three dimensions integrated by the learning process: 1) Orientation which is a way of being that includes elements of openness, collaboration, awareness, mindfulness, appreciation, flexibility and cosmopolitanism; 2) Knowledge defined as a cognitive structure consisting of sense-making, systems thinking, integration, selection, analysis, imagination, reasoning, intuition, perception and judgment; and 3) Behavior, an enactment of orientation and knowledge, which includes a propensity to engage, be curious, have the ability to build emotional connections, demonstrate global business savvy, exhibit cultural awareness and appreciation, balance tensions, evidence visioning, and cope with the speed of changing events and technologies. Learning is understood as the process that fully integrates the three components of GLM, as they are embedded in one’s environment.

Methodology

In this exploratory study, 60 to 90 minutes in-depth interviews with 24 global leaders (representing line function) from private/public sector organizations and international agencies were conducted to understand their perceived requirements of leading in today’s global environment and the ways they learned how to lead. Out of the 24 interviewees, two
could not be used due to technical/recording problems and handnotes that did not allow for the capturing of the depthness of the interviews. The 22 taped interviews were transcribed verbatim and both constant comparative and content analysis were performed by the researchers to develop categories and themes and to ensure inter-coder reliability.

The sample consisted of 59% males and 41% females, representing mostly the business and NGO sectors. A large majority of the sample was divided between 31-45 and 46-60 age range (i.e., 96%). With respect to the tenure in the organization or industry, 73% had 1-10 years in their current organizations and 91% had more than 11 years of experience in their respective industries. This was a highly educated sample (as is expected) and 68% of the participants had Master’s degrees. Cross-culturally, 68% of the leaders were from the USA, 14% were European and 9% were Australian or New Zealander.

**Findings and Conclusions**

Respondents indicated that knowledge was an essential component of the requirements for global leadership. This could be further split into three different types of knowledge, namely knowledge related to cross-cultural issues, the global environment and self-knowledge. The importance of the former two types has already been highlighted adequately in international business literature. It is important to note that knowledge of the environment leads to an acute formulation and implementation of the change within organizations. The latter (i.e. self-knowledge) has received less attention in the literature. We found that it included a greater self-awareness, and related to willingness and enthusiasm for learning, which previously has been cited as a critical aspect of global leadership. As one of the leaders noted “I think it’s starting to know and understand your limitations - is very important.” Another leader observed that one of the requirements “which is incredibly important that people can miss is the value system. You really need to know who you are. You need to know who you are, you need to know the value systems that you have, you need to know the value systems of your company and of your industry. And you need to know where boundaries lie, and they need to be very, very clear boundaries....”

Orientation and its components, in the literature, are often equated with traits. Our research suggests that orientation is more fundamental. We found that Orientation dimension, based on the literature review and our own inquiries into its meaning, lead to our definition of this dimension as a way of being. Its characterization includes elements of openness, collaboration, awareness, mindfulness, appreciation, flexibility and cosmopolitanism (Adler et al., 2001, Javidan et al., 2006, Levy et al., 2007). Orientation in this context is a perspective that can be learned and developed. Without an appropriate orientation, leaders cannot be effective in a global context. Our analysis identified five different types of orientations, including transcendence, plasticity of the mind (flexible, thinking differently; rebalancing; open; multiple frames), mindfulness, curiosity, and change-orientation. We found these to be tied to a set of value systems, to include having the right instincts, integrity, passion, and fortitude.

Knowledge and orientation were in turn tied to a set of behaviors exhibited by these global leaders. These included being interpretive/appreciative, communicative, self-regulative, ethical, and active learners; negotiators effectively building support and a network, managers of change and innovation, and having the right people strategies. We found these behaviors to be enactment of global leaders’ existing repertoire of orientation and knowledge.

Our research indicates that global leaders are continuous learners. In fact, they view global leadership through the lens of learning. To them it is about learning more, seeking more knowledge and then sharing that knowledge with others on a broad scale. Learning and being learners are fundamentally central to these global leaders. As one of the leaders observed: „I never assume I'm the smartest person in the room… I'm a firm believer that you always learn...And while you may hire somebody who's smarter than you, you ought to be
learning and understanding.” The leaders exhibited humility and surrounded themselves with people they can learn from on a continuous basis. In this context differences encountered by global leaders from all sectors were subjects for “celebration” and viewed as opportunities for learning.

The study participants argued that global leadership is driven by a desire to learn and share learning. The differences and their challenges that they encountered were not discounted but viewed as opportunities for learning something new. The personal learning journeys of these leaders to develop their global mindset showed evidence of mainly informal learning (only in very few cases workshops and courses were mentioned), during everyday work and life experiences. As one of the leaders explained: “The experience, therefore, taught me so much. It was not just the difference in economics, the need to go back to fundamentals of distribution, to even understand how to sell the products. But also heart, it taught me heart. It taught me sort of form of sort of human love that I thought I had practiced in the past, but I hadn’t really, not to that extent.”

Learning from mistakes, from others (e.g., mentors, clients, employees, experts, friends, networks, media, reading, travelling) and about the self (e.g., self-reflection) were major themes that emerged from the data. As one of the leaders explained: „You know, I’d like to tell you how brilliant I was, but this was me talking a lot with my team, insuring that they understood the problems that we were dealing with, asking them about their ideas and coming up with and develop these ideas together, and we began to implement them.” Learning in this context is similar to Lane, Maznevski & Mendenhall’s (2006) definition of Discovering. “Discovering is about learning and creating. It encompasses a set of transformation processes that lead to new ways of seeing and acting, which lead in turn to the creation of new knowledge, actions, and things. When organizational processes support and incorporate discovering, people explore multiplicity, experiment with interdependence, and articulate ambiguity. Continual discovering helps adapt to the constant flux found in the global marketplace” (p. 20). HRD scholars should continue to investigate the ‘discovering’ process in different contexts with different populations. The stories of these leaders could inform HRD practitioners in their quest to create learning cultures and spaces for discovery.

There is an agreement in the literature as well as in practice that the learning and developmental process associated with global, holistic competencies/global mindset needed for the well-being of individuals and organizations is a lengthy one (Watkins & Cseh, 2009). Both individuals and organizations are at various levels of awareness, knowledge and skills along the global mindset continuum. Enabling the development of these levels in time will determine the viability of all protagonists amidst the heightened complexities brought about by rapid worldwide change. Thus, researchers and practitioners should continue their quest of understanding the rapidly shifting needs of global leaders and organizations and developing environments supporting the health and well being of all.

References


