



European Journal of Training and Development

Developing a global mindset: learning of global leaders

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Article information:

To cite this document:

Cseh Maria, B. Davis Elizabeth, E. Khilji Shaista, (2013) "Developing a global mindset: learning of global leaders", European Journal of Training and Development, Vol. 37 Issue: 5, pp.489-499, <https://doi.org/10.1108/03090591311327303>

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Developing a global mindset: learning of global leaders

Developing a
global mindset

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Received 19 April 2012
Revised 1 October 2012
Accepted 25 March 2013

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore 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 and develop their global mindset.

Design/methodology/approach – The research methodology informed by social constructivism included in-depth interviews with 24 global leaders that were 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.

Findings – Transcendence, plasticity of the mind (flexibility, thinking differently, rebalancing, openness, having multiple frames of reference), mindfulness, curiosity, and humility emerged as requirements of leading in the global environment. The global leaders' learning journeys were characterized by informal learning during everyday work and life experiences including learning from mistakes, and from and with others. Self-reflection leading to the "self-awareness of otherness" as well as reflection with others were at the core of learning and developing the global mindset of these leaders.

Practical implications – The findings of this study highlight the role of human resource development (HRD) professionals in facilitating self-reflection and reflection with others – core processes for the learning and development of global mindset. HRD professionals are called to address both the "you don't know what you don't know" phenomenon by offering cross-cultural training programs and experiential learning opportunities and the "you know what you don't know" daily challenges of global leaders and their team members. Initiatives that will incorporate self-reflective and reflective processes will allow the participants to make meaning of their learning.

Originality/value – This is an initial attempt to explore the development of a global leadership mindset as informed by the GLM model with a focus on its learning component. The findings of this study could inform leaders preparing to work in global environments and HRD professionals called to develop learning environments and a learning culture in global workplaces.

Keywords Global leadership mindset, Global mindset, Global leadership, Learning and development, Globalization, Self-reflection and reflection, Human resource strategies, Learning, Self development

Paper type Research paper



Introduction

Globalization is rewriting social expectations internationally and it is increasing the capacity and scope of transnational interactions among states and corporations,

European Journal of Training and
Development
Vol. 37 No. 5, 2013
pp. 489-499
© Emerald Group Publishing Limited
2046-9012
DOI 10.1108/03090591311327303

exposing them to new kinds of challenges and responsibilities (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 2008; Buller *et al.*, 1991; Dean, 2005; Lozano and Boni, 2002). An important implication and consequence of globalization 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 the twentieth century needs to be transformed to include a new way of thinking/feeling/acting/being to better fit today's intensely globalized, competitive and dynamic environment (Adler, 2009, 1997; Bartlett and 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 (*The Economist*, 2006; Mendenhall and Osland, 2002). Lasserre (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 explored 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 and 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 continuous learning themselves (Watkins and 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 is required for their own 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 20 years, scholars and practitioners alike were preoccupied with deciphering, understanding and developing competencies needed in the continuously evolving global environment (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 2008; Bird and Osland, 2004; Caligiuri and Di Santo, 2001; Chin *et al.*, 2001; Conner, 2000; Cseh, 2002; Gregersen *et al.*, 1998; Jokinen, 2005; Kefalas, 1998; Kets De Vries and Mead, 1992; Lobel, 1990; McCall and

Hollenbeck, 2002; Mendenhall, 2006; Osland and Bird, 2008; Rhinesmith, 1996; Rosen *et al.*, 2000; Watkins and 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 and Inkson, 2003; Walker *et al.*, 2003).

Global mindset is a concept that encompasses holistic competencies and is frequently associated with the mindset needed for global leadership (Cohen, 2010) in a global business context (Begley and Boyd, 2003) 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:

- intellectual capital;
- psychological capital; and
- 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). 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

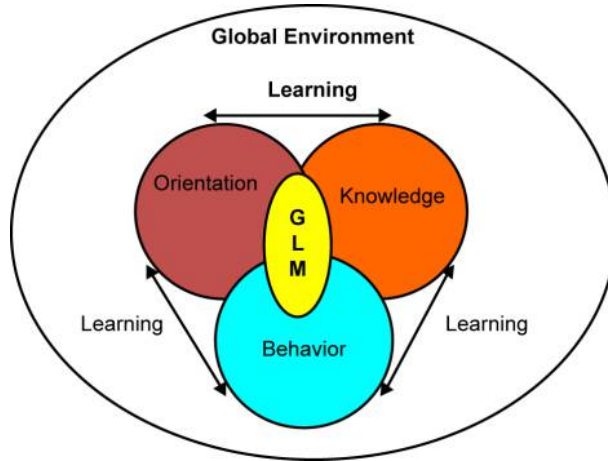


Figure 1.
Global Leadership
Mindset (GLM) model

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 qualitative exploratory study informed by social constructivism, 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, 22 were tape recorded and two were captured through handwritten notes due to technical/recording problems. 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 percent males and 41 percent females, representing mostly the business and NGO sectors. A large majority of the sample (i.e. 96 percent) was divided between 31-45 and 46-60 age range. With respect to the tenure in the organization or industry, 73 percent of the participants had 1-10 years in their current organizations and 91 percent had more than 11 years of experience in their respective industries. This was a highly educated sample and 68 percent of the participants had Master's degrees. Cross-culturally, 68 percent of the leaders were from the USA, 14 percent were European and 9 percent were Australian or New Zealander.

Findings

Since learning is the process that integrates the components of the GLM model, this section will address the knowledge, orientation and behavior components of the model and the learning embedded in it. Participants in this study indicated that knowledge

related to cross-cultural issues, the global environment and the self were essential requirements for global leadership. Although knowing about cross-cultural issues and understanding the global environment with its socio-economic and political complexities is informing higher educational curricula and the content of training in the workplace, knowing about the self does not receive the attention it deserves. This study shows that self-awareness and knowing oneself was critical to the work of the participants in this study. As one of the leaders noted “I think it’s starting to know and understand your limitations – is very important.” Another leader shared that:

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, operationalized in this study as a way of being, is characterized in the literature by openness, collaboration, awareness, mindfulness, appreciation, flexibility and cosmopolitanism (Adleret *al.*, 2001; Javidan *et al.*, 2006; Levy *et al.*, 2007). Five themes related to orientation emerged from the participants accounts of global leadership. Transcendence, plasticity of the mind (flexibility; thinking differently; rebalancing; openness; having multiple frames of reference), mindfulness, curiosity, and humility were woven into the stories of these leaders. Integrity, passion, and fortitude were supporting these ways of being. As one of the participants noted, “[. . .] a lot if it is asking questions [. . .] you have to have some sense of natural curiosity about you.” The knowledge and orientation were in turn tied to a set of behaviors and enacted in the leaders’ communication, building supporting networks, negotiation, and implementing change. 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.” Another leader also shared that,

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.

The leaders exhibited humility and surrounded themselves with people they can learn from on a continuous basis. Their learning journeys in the development of their global mindset showed evidence of informal learning (only in very few cases workshops and courses were mentioned), during everyday work and life experiences. This included learning from mistakes, and from others (e.g. mentors, clients, employees, experts, friends, networks, media, reading, travelling). 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 through self-reflection and reflection with others

The ability to celebrate difference was a main theme that emerged from the stories of the global leaders. In order to recognize the differences, celebrate them and learn from

them, participants had to become aware of their “otherness” and they learned about it through self-reflection. They often referred to their reflection on being women or of another ethnicity or of a very different upbringing (e.g. being nomads since childhood or being raised in a very small, conservative, rural community) and their learning about themselves. The participants also referred to thinking about or thinking back to events that they found challenging or memorable to analyze them and understand their outcome in the company of others. Self-reflection leading to the “self-awareness of otherness” as well as reflection with others were at the core of learning and developing the global mindset of these leaders.

5. Conclusions and implications

Our research indicates that global leaders are continuous learners. In fact, they view global leadership through the lens of learning as it 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 based on self-reflection and reflection with others and thus, 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 and 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.

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 (Laneet *al.*, 2006, p. 20).

Working with people from different countries/cultures is the norm in global workplaces. Indifferent of the location of organizations or their project teams and their leaders (e.g. in the home country of the leader or host countries) leaders could benefit from the help and support of HRD professionals. HRD professionals are called to address the “you don’t know what you don’t know” phenomenon by offering cross-cultural training programs and experiential learning opportunities to support leaders in global work environments. These programs and activities have to be internalized through a self-reflective process that will allow the participants to make meaning of their learning. HRD professionals are also called to support the immediate/day-to-day needs of these leaders. Thus, they should have a rich portfolio of methods (e.g. facilitation of group discussions), tools (exercises leading to reflection such as journaling) and resources (e.g. list of peers with expertise in handling different cross-cultural situations that are external to the project who are available to discuss issues and give advice). Building self-reflective opportunities and reflective opportunities with others is at the core of learning and development of global

leaders. Further research of these processes and their impact on the development of a global mindset is recommended. A long term impact of global leaders role modeling reflective practices with the support of HRD professionals is the development of a reflective organizational culture. Since all members of organizations are also members of societies in which they live, learning how to be self-reflective and reflective with others can impact their relationships in the society leading to deeper understanding of each other and hopefully to a more peaceful world.

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