The Use of a Cultural Inventory in Global Leadership Training

John W. Bing, Ed.D.

Summary

This interactive session at **the Leadership Without Borders: Developing Global Leaders** conference in April 2001 focused on leadership training in a multicultural context. The specific inventory discussed, the Culture in the Workplace Questionnaire™, was also provided to participants in the conference online on six computers made available in the Cybercafé. Some of the participants were able to bring their own printout of this Questionnaire; others used a self-scoring version provided at the workshop. Overall, the session utilized discussion and exercises to promote active consideration of the role of this Questionnaire, and other inventories similar in purpose, in providing programs to employees and staff engaged in working with culturally different colleagues. The final exercise involved participants working in groups to design leadership development and training programs using cultural inventories.

Introduction

The first barrier to working internationally is ignorance of one's own cultural attributes, preferences, and characteristics. Without knowledge of one's own preferences, others' preferences may seem odd, different, and perhaps unpleasant or wrong-headed. These same differences influence both how leadership is perceived and in the same fashion mediate different views of appropriate roles of followers, members of teams, department members, staff of organizations, and so on.

Therefore, one of the most important aspects of training and development of employees and staff who are working with international colleagues is to provide them with an understanding of:

1. The nature of cultural differences
2. The role such differences play in the workplace
3. One's own cultural preferences
4. Other colleagues' cultural preferences
5. Implications of these differences to workplace effectiveness

6. An approach to working in a multinational, multicultural workplace

This interactive session was fortunate in having participants who were already very well acquainted with points 1 & 2. Discussion took place around the remainder of the issues. The following discussion refers to overheads utilized during the session, which are available online (see note at end of paper).

Discussion

The disagreement that occurred between the U.S. leadership and that of the People's Republic of China over the collision of two airplanes illustrates the opportunities and dangers in international/intercultural communications. When power is wielded internationally, cultural differences are sometimes filters, which distort messages, and are sometimes excuses for willful misinterpretation. In any event, leaders have an obligation both to understand what those differences are in order to send messages which are received in the way they are intended and to accurately interpret messages from the other side or sides.

Leadership and Culture

Leadership attributes are also, in part, culturally determined. For example, the notion that leadership is a relationship or process, not a personal characteristic, and that leadership is distributed equally among members of a group (Ajarimah 2001) are characteristics of group-oriented cultures. In individualistic cultures, leadership will more typically be seen as a unique quality possessed by individuals, rather than a quality to be found among all members of a group.

Of course national culture is not the only determinant of workplace behavior. The organization enforces its own practices. Individuals have their own personality, which they draw upon in all circumstances (and which are measured by a number of instruments, including the Myers-Briggs Type Indicator); and the larger social and political environment enforces its own rules on the workplace. All of these, as well as professional and generational

differences, must be taken into consideration when considering influences on leadership behavior in the workplace.

Mental Models

The Culture in the Workplace Questionnaire™ is based on the work of Geert Hofstede (Geert Hofstede, 2001). The mental map used by Hofstede in his original work has four dimensions (he later added a fifth), which are well known in the field of intercultural studies. The dimensions listed below are slight modified in their terminology from the original in order to provide more "teachable" terms:

Individualism - Collectivism
High Power Distance - Low Power Distance
High Need for Certainty - Low Need for Certainty
Achievement - Quality of Life

Hofstede's four dimensions are relatively easily understood.

In addition to the map defined by Hofstede, there are others as well, the best-known being the work of Fons Trompenaars, which consist of seven dimensions (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner 1998). Trompenaars developed a questionnaire that yields a cultural profile. Others, drawing upon the basic research cited above as well as on others, have constructed their own. All are probably incomplete maps of humankind's cultural terra cognita, but they represent a great advance over the tools available a generation ago.

Each pole of Hofstede's dimensions confers some advantages and some disadvantages to the possessor of these cultural preferences. For example, extreme individualism (which, according to Hofstede's research, is a U.S. characteristic) usually leads to initiative and individual rewards; but on the other hand, individualists are often isolated and have little loyalty to the group.

In the same way, high power distance (or preference for a supervisor who provides clear instructions and direction) has the advantage of creating clear hierarchies and well-defined reporting relationships, but sometimes leads to arbitrary policies and weak subordinate initiative.

Example of the Influence of the Four Dimensions in Leadership

The influence of the four dimensions on a specific case of leadership is reported in a study of the effect of national culture on automation in airline cockpits (Sherman & Helmreich, 1996). In this study, high power distance and high need for certainty predicted a high level of acceptance of cockpit automation; pilots from high individualistic cultures were reported to be less likely to accept automation. U.S. pilots were therefore more likely to resist aspects of cockpit automation than their peers from countries where acceptance of authority and structure is more prevalent.

If the effect of culture on leadership issues among airline pilots, long thought to be a rather homogeneous group, is strong, culture's influence is likely to be equally pronounced on the leadership of organizations.

How to Use Culture Profile Instruments (CPI)

In this interactive session, participants computed their scores and then discussed in pairs how their leadership styles might differ on the basis of their results. Such instruments can be used in the following ways:

1. In relocation training, a CPI can be used to focus the work plan of employees an a new cultural work environment, using national averages to help expatriates learn a greater range of behaviors and reactions than they may have developed in their own culture.
2. In management training, a CPI can help managers understand their own cultural profiles and learn how to manage (and be led by) colleagues who are culturally different.
3. CPIs can be used in coaching sessions to help employees navigate culturally complex workplaces.
4. An example of the use of a CPI, in this case the Culture in the Workplace Questionnaire™ in leadership training, follows.

Leadership Training in the Health Care Industry

The Culture in the Workplace Questionnaire™ was utilized in leadership training with a global management team in the health care industry. This is a Fortune 100 firm that has incorporated intercultural training in much of its leadership training. It was used during a half day of a three-day program. The global team consisted of Marketing Directors, IT Directors, R&D heads, and New Business Development Directors. The questionnaire was provided in advance over the Internet.

1. The trainers first described the Hofstede dimensions and how the dimensions may influence workplace behavior. After reviewing their individual scores, participants then discussed the overall combined score for their team for each dimension.
2. The participants were then regrouped to discuss major business issues for which their team was responsible and which were previously identified.
3. Each of four groups then considered one dimension's influence on business issues-for example, the influence of

high power distance on the rollout of new training programs in specific countries.

4. Each group then made recommendations on a single dimension's influence on that business issue which were then transformed into action items (e.g., to make certain that text of a new product introduction conforms in all respects to local rules and regulations, and that this fact is brought to the attention of the appropriate local officials, an important factor in high need-for-certainty countries).

5. A plenary session then selected two-to-three action items to address over the period until the next meeting of the team.

Such an approach both teaches and demonstrates culturally effective leadership within a global company.

Design of Leadership Programs

At the end of the interactive session, participants were asked to think about designs for leadership training using cultural profile instruments. Although there was no dearth of approaches or ideas, some of the respondents spoke of the barriers to such approaches within organizations. This is especially true when intercultural leadership challenges are associated with top management, seldom accountable to human resources staff.

Conclusion

Some 25 years ago, near the beginning of cross-cultural training programs for business, there were few well-tested instruments that could be utilized in training and development programs. Over this period, approaches have been developed from basic and applied research that provide effective training for leaders of complex international organizations. Culture Profile Instruments are an important part of the curricula that can now be applied in the field of leadership development.

References

Ajarimah, Ahmad A. (2001). *Major challenges of global leadership in the twenty-first century.* Human Resources Development International, 4.

Hofstede, Geert. (2001) *Culture's Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations* (Second Edition). Thousand Oaks CA. and London: Sage.

Sherman, P. J. & Helmreich, R. L. (1996). *Attitudes toward automation.* In Proceedings of the Eighth *International Symposium on Aviation Psychology*. Columbus, OH: Ohio State University.

Trompenaars, Fons, and Hampden-Turner, Charles (1998). *Riding the Waves of Culture: Understanding Cultural Diversity in Global Business* (Second Edition). New York: McGraw-Hill.

John W. Bing is President of ITAP International.