

Today, managers need to lead and motivate teams with very different cultural backgrounds and values. **John Frost** and **Mark Walker** explain how.

Cross cultural leadership

IT IS NOW commonplace for leaders to be working for companies that have a global footprint. As such, effective leadership demands more than just what it takes to be successful in your own cultural environment. Leaders increasingly need to be able to work in unfamiliar situations and cultures in which the leadership skills that they

have honed in their local market are no longer enough – and may even be counter-productive when used in a new context. And yet despite the apparent onward march of globalisation, many leaders appear to be unprepared for this major change in their responsibilities and poorly equipped to grow from their new experiences. So whether you are

leading a multi-cultural team or taking up an appointment in a different country, what are some of the key leadership challenges that you could face and how can you best prepare for them?

One big challenge relates to our own cultural frame of reference. We all bring values, beliefs and experiences to bear in our role as leaders, many of

which are deeply rooted in our national or regional culture. These form our personal frame of reference. We all know that the simplest gestures, aspects of body language or tone of voice can mean something perfectly acceptable in our culture – and something quite insulting or obscene in another! It can take time, study – and trial and ▶



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◀ error – to understand how our frame of reference may need to change. And of course a collective organisational culture can often hide us from the realities of local cultures which only become apparent when we work closely with individuals or teams in different countries or regions.

PROJECT GLOBE

Take heart, though, not everything which has made us successful at home needs to be unlearned in the new global environment. Project Globe, a multi-phase research programme conducted across 65 cultures in 170 countries and initiated in the 1990s by The

Wharton School of Management at the University of Pennsylvania, is an attempt to understand the relationship between culture and leadership, organisational and societal effectiveness. One aspect of the project looks at which leadership attributes are seen as universally positive or universally negative, and which may be interpreted differently according to the cultural frame of reference.

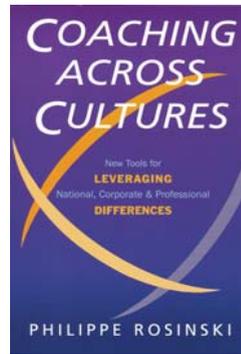
The good news is that many core leadership attributes will set you in good stead anywhere in the world (for example, honesty, trustworthiness, decisiveness, intelligence, positivity, being a good

communicator). These are worth developing and applying wherever your leadership role takes you. Similarly, attributes such as ruthlessness, irritability, egocentricity and a dictatorial approach will reduce your leadership effectiveness wherever you work.

Perhaps more challenging,

though, is the realisation that some attributes (such as ambition, logic, enthusiasm, individuality, sensitivity and willingness to take risks), which are generally seen as positives in our culture, will be perceived very negatively in other environments. As with so many cultural variables, the

Good leadership attributes in any culture	Bad leadership attributes in any culture	Attributes which may be misinterpreted in different cultures
Honesty, trustworthiness, decisiveness, intelligence, positivity, being a good communicator	Ruthlessness, irritability, egocentricity, a dictatorial approach	Ambition, logic, enthusiasm, individuality, sensitivity, willingness to take risks



See p47 for a book review of 'Coaching across cultures'



Physical separation is also complicated by working in different time zones. Does all your communication respect this? When is the most effective time to have a telephone or video conference? Do the times that you set for calls or meetings reflect both the needs of the team as well as the business and you as the leader?

Understanding and respecting the different cultures of the people that report to you is a vital part of developing the rapport that you need to lead a global team. Do you really understand the culture that they live and work in, or do you just focus on their job role? What are the differences between team members working in Europe as opposed to those in the Asia Pacific region? If you don't know then it is very difficult to lead them effectively.

It's also easy to fall into cultural stereotypes if you don't understand the cultural environments of your team members. And, of course, all this takes time – it's not something you can pick up in a whistle-stop visit with back-to-back meetings. How many times have you visited a country without learning something new about it? Differing cultural attitudes to time are often a key distinguishing feature. In Asian countries the conception of time is past-oriented (ancestors, values), in Latin American countries and southern Europe, it is more present-oriented, and in Western Europe and North America, it's more future-oriented (achieving goals).

awareness that there may be a different interpretation to yours is the first step to becoming a more effective global leader.

VIRTUAL TEAMS

Another increasingly frequent global leadership challenge is that of leading a virtual team with multiple cultures. In one multi-national company we work with, the chance for global teams to get together face-to-face is limited and thus their communication needs to be of the highest quality. It is important to understand not just what your team is thinking but also what the individuals are feeling – no easy task when you are separated by 12,000 miles.

KICK THE HABIT

Developing as a leader when taking on a global role or starting work in a new country may involve kicking a few old habits that you have picked up along the way. Your tools and techniques and the cultural norms that have made you successful in your local market may need to be modified to suit the new cultural norms. It is often as much about the ability to unlearn old skills and thought patterns as it is about the willingness to learn new ones.

SIX TIPS TO HELP YOU BECOME A MULTI-CULTURAL LEADER

- 1. Prepare** yourself for the new role both intellectually and emotionally. Be open to learning. One of the key skills here is ambiguity tolerance. When all around you is unfamiliar, treat it as a learning opportunity rather than feeling uncomfortable. Keep a sense of humility when dealing with other cultures. Enjoy the experience.
- 2. Preserve** empathy for others by understanding their needs and how they feel in different situations. What does your team expect from you as a leader? What do you need and expect from them? If there are differences you will need an open and honest debate on how you can reconcile them. Making assumptions or enforcing your cultural norms on others is not right.
- 3. Research, respect and understand** the new cultures that you are working in or with. Find a way of learning something about the culture. Where can you get this knowledge? Who can be a mentor to you in your company or outside it? Understand how to respect new cultural norms.
- 4. Don't substitute** technology for the **value of face-to-face meetings**. Video and audio conferencing are excellent but not the same. To get to the higher levels of communication with your team you need to be face-to-face with them preferably as one group at least twice a year. "But... the budget!" we hear you cry. Challenge it and make it work for you. The quality of your communication will equal the quality of your performance, which will in turn be a factor of the relationships that you create with your team members.
- 5. Be aware** of your own limitations. Being honest about your strengths and weaknesses before taking on a new role is critical. Create a development plan that makes full use of the new experience and challenges your need to move out of your familiar zone. How will this role add value to you as a leader and as a person?
- 6. Take care** of your self. Focus on your health and well-being as well as the job. It is all too easy to burn out under the pressure of leadership in a multi-cultural environment combined with extensive travel and long, anti-social hours.

For less experienced leaders this can be doubly challenging – not only do they have to face the normal pressures of learning to lead but they also have to adapt to new cultural environments which can lead to uncertainty, paralysis and high levels of stress. Faced with these challenges, we have put together some tips for the multi-cultural leader (see box above).

Leading in a multi-cultural environment offers plenty of challenges to leaders, but it can also be one of the richest experiences of their careers – and will be – if they enter it well prepared and with an open mind.

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