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 frame 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 error – to understand and navigate these cultural differences.
Take heart, though, noteverything which has made ussuccessful at home needs to beunlearned in the new globalenvironment. Project Globe, amulti-phase researchprogramme conducted across 65cultures in 170 countries andinitiated in the 1990s by The

Attributes which may
be misinterpreted in
different cultures

A MULTI-CULTURAL LEADER

KICK THE HABIT

VITAL TEAM

Prepare yourself for the newrole both intellectually andemotionally. 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.

Six tips to help you become
a multi-cultural leader

1. Prepare yourself for the new
role both intellectually
and emotionally. Be open
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Keep a sense of humility
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2. Preserve empathy for others
by understanding their needs
and how they feel in different
situations. What does your
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leader? What do you need and
expect from them? If there are
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open and honest debate on
how you can reconcile them. Make
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
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it and make it work for you.
Your quality of 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 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
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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
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Leading in a multi-cultural
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challenges to leaders, but it can
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of working with senior leaders
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‘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’

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 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? Different cultural attitudes to time are often a key distinguishing factor. In Asia countries, the perception of time is past-oriented (ancestors), 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).

KICK THE HABIT

As a multi-cultural leader you will need to be face-to-face with your team members. Video and audio conferencing are excellent but not the same. To get to the highest level 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.

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 experiences 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?

Take care

Of your self. Focus on your health and well-being as well as the job. It is all too easy to burnout under the pressure of leadership in a multi-cultural environment combined with extensive travel and anti-social hours.

PROJECT GLOBE

A MULTI-CULTURAL LEADER

SIX TIPS TO HELP YOU BECOME A MULTICULTURAL LEADER

1. Prepare yourself for the new role both intellectually and emotionally. Be open to learning. One of the key skills here is ambition and willingness to take risks. 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.

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 on others is not right.

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 highest level 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.

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A fast-moving, 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, irrationality, 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 many cultural variables, the 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 multinational 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.

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, preoccupation with detail and 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 opportunities for self-development but it can also be one of the richest experiences of their career – and will be – if they enter it well prepared and with an open mind.