

THE DNA OF GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

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These are the missing bones that carry the keys to assessing, developing and managing global leadership competencies. From Arizona to Zimbabwe, scientists, teachers and practitioners have been on an expedition to discover, examine and excavate the very roots or origins of leadership competence and what drives it.

The authors have great hope that this article will help to revolutionize the world of leadership with their discovery. Research and experience suggests, however, that defining global leadership competencies is most effective if some of the more stable elements that drive human performance are understood. The article will first present the reader with an overview of the management fads that perpetuate confusion about leadership competencies. Assumptions and research will then be offered to support the notion of identifiable DNA structures that drive global leadership competencies.

Two thousand years from now, as historians look back over this time, the intense interest in global leadership competencies could very well be remembered as a twenty-first century version of the dark age's pursuit of the Holy Grail. What everyone seems to be searching for is a rare and mystical treasure called global leadership competence. Global leadership competencies promise to be just what is needed to steer a seaworthy vessel through stormy seas on a perilous journey through the portal of the next millennium.

Having learned the value of preparation from Noah in the Biblical story, many are paying heed to the new millennium storm warnings. In every corner of the world, organizations are feverishly preparing to defend the shores of the global village as it battles the sweeping tides of social, political and economic change. Dramatic innovations in communications and computer technologies, global alliances, escalating customer demands and fierce competition are rocking even the most stable industries. As organizations chart and navigate their courses, the interest in global leadership competency is quickly becoming a necessity.

The emerging global leadership challenge is to leverage the driving forces of the new millennium with new strategies, structures and methods for managing resources. To accomplish this, organizations realize they must build leadership capacity. Just scan the list of best-selling business books or walk into any training department of any large organization to confirm the "building leadership capacity" imperative.

Many organizations, however, are simply swimming around in a sea of ink and rhetoric when it comes to recognizing and developing leadership competencies. Everywhere, it seems, meetings are taking place, books are being written and performance is being assessed on the basis of competence. However, it appears that more is being written and discussed than applied.

No one seems to be able to agree on what a competency really is. Is it a skill? Is it a behavior? Is it knowledge? Or, is it a value? For example, a competency that deals with diversity has been described this way, "sensitivity to different races, cultures, nationalities, sexes and disabilities". Many would agree this competency is more of a value. However, if that is the case, developing this competency presents a formidable challenge since values tend to evolve over a lifetime.

The difficulty we have in agreeing on what competencies are required for global leadership is practically dwarfed by the complexity of the competency development challenge. Ultimately, our inability to agree on one true definition or demonstration of leadership perpetuates its ethereal and elusive properties.

The movie, "The American President" provides further insight into our dilemma. In the story, a popular American President is confronted by one of his trusted advisors who believes the President's refusal to address an issue of character is seriously eroding his endorsement with the public and providing a strategic advantage to his opponent.

Bordering on insubordination, the angry advisor challenges the president by reminding him of a leadership truth (paraphrased)... “The people crave leadership. In the absence of genuine leadership, they will listen to anybody with a microphone. They will crawl across the desert to find it and if they see a mirage, they will drink the sand!” The president responds with a note of bitter resignation: “This country has had many beloved presidents who couldn’t find a coherent sentence with both hands and a flashlight. The reason they drink the sand isn’t because they are thirsty. It’s because they don’t know the difference.”

The challenge for global leaders and those that rely on them, whether they are leading a struggling third-world country to self-sufficiency, saving the planet from irreversible resource depletion as environmental crusaders or running a flower market in Rio De Janeiro, is to *know the difference*. The main obstacle to knowing the difference is our individual and collective biases.

THE PUSH/PULL AND “WHOOSH” OF MANAGEMENT FADS

The current debate between what is more important, leadership or management, provides an illustration of the difficulty in understanding, let alone guiding organizations with what appears to be polarized philosophies. The numerous fads and trends represented by the volumes that have been written about management and leadership could easily fill the bookshelves of a new specialty store titled, “Leadership R’ US”.

Traditional organizations characterized by bureaucracies and military models of command and control leadership are disdained. And yet, when asked for examples of extraordinary leadership, many still regale us with names of famous generals. While it is understood that different models are needed, our automatic responses have been indelibly imprinted by our first hand cultural experiences and learning.

As appropriate as military war games may still be to competitive positioning, increasing customer loyalty is correlated more with employee satisfaction than brilliant strategy. Relying solely on emotional intelligence to change a deeply entrenched command and control management culture in an organization on the verge of technological extinction is about as effective as rearranging the deck chairs of the Titanic would have been as it was sinking.

Actually, the ever popular, “People are our greatest resource!” is a relatively new concept. Henry Ford’s view of people as a necessary cost was reflected in his comment, “When all I want is a good pair of hands, unfortunately, I must take them with a person attached!”

In fact, Alfred Sloan’s management theories, which are still being taught in business schools today were silent on the subject of people, emphasizing a relentless attention to “scientific methods”. William Whyte’s best selling book, “The Organizational Man”, whose individual initiative and creativity are subjugated and controlled by the organization is quickly becoming an artifact. It seems there’s a rather large speed bump in the road for organizations who want the archetype of the organizational man when they can no longer offer employment security or even a decent upward tilt of a career ladder.

The American labor strikes in the 1930’s resulted in the painful, and sometimes, breach birth of employee rights. Since then, management philosophies have swung back and forth like the pendulum of a clock. One could almost hear the “whoosh” of the pendulum swinging from the command and control model to the new respect for people philosophy.

Douglas McGregor’s “Theory X and Theory Y” model illuminated the underlying psychology of a leader’s beliefs about whether employees can or cannot be trusted to perform. Joe Batten’s book, “Tough Minded Leadership” proposed a leadership model that attempted to embrace both sides of the tough-soft paradox.

The expression, “engaging the hearts and minds of the people” has only found its way into the corporate lexicon the last few years. A consistent theme in the long parade of management concepts since the 1970s appears to be an attempt to capture the minds, if not the hearts of workers, with concepts such as “Job Enrichment”, “Employee Involvement”, “Quality of Working Life”, “Employee Development” and “Job Satisfaction”.

Japanese inspired “Quality Circles” and teamwork, those hallmarks of Japanese organizational success that worked so well within a homogeneous and comfortable culture of lifetime employment, have not produced the same results in America where rugged individualism is typically reinforced and rewarded by compensation and recognition. Recently, empowerment, Stephen Covey’s, “Seven Habits of Highly Effective People”, values-based leadership and Daniel Goleman’s “Emotional Intelligence” and values-based management reflect a trend towards leadership “heart” in support of a new business model some are calling, “compassionate capitalism”.

“Management By Objective” still stands as a worthy effort to get agreement between employees and their managers on what needs to be done. Wow! What a concept! The problem, confirmed by studies, is that management and employee perspectives vary widely with reference to what, how and why relative to work.

If one can comprehend the significance of this difficulty, it just might be possible to get the mind around why the baby-science of leadership with all its fads, trends and icons is struggling to define global leadership competencies. As we scan the oceans of experience, looking for a northern star to point the way to organizational excellence, one cannot help but stumble over the stunning examples of machiavellian leadership: Hitler and Mussolini. And so we wrestle with still more questions and a nagging concern that “character” must be at least as important as vision, goal orientation or influence.

Meanwhile, legions of professionals are designing and delivering leadership training and development programs in the hopes of planting the seeds and nurturing the crops that will eventually yield fruitful leaders. A common objective in all these programs is teaching participants a common language to use when discussing leadership. After a critical mass of participants has experienced the training, the lexicon of the organization reflects an impressive ability to articulate the new “leadership language”.

Unfortunately, in many organizations, the ability to articulate the new “leadership language” may not be directly correlated to increased demonstrations of leadership. One training and development manager from a large organization said that often, training efforts are not measured to determine their effectiveness. Many programs are launched with a “spray and pray” type of christening.

In a recent article published by Forbes, titled, “Management’s New Paradigms”, Peter Drucker outlines the folly of “one-size-fits-all” management and organizational models. The main problem with “one-size-fits-all” models is that they fit almost no one in particular. Drucker also points out that the distinctions between managing social, public administration and a business organization is more perceptual than actual. The main differences between managing a software company, a hospital, a bank, or a volunteer organization apply to only ten percent of the work. What really differentiates organizations is their mission, which determines strategy, which defines structure.

Drucker also suggested a need to respond to an increasing need for multiple organizational structures to accommodate different needs. For instance, the very difficult challenge of managing foreign currency exposure requires total centralization, while customer responsiveness and satisfaction demands total local autonomy.

Another very eminent millennium challenge is creating successful succession plans for leadership. While many of our business, social and political leaders are treated as superheroes, there seems to be a large disconnect between the standards set by these icons and the principles of leadership development and succession planning in many organizations today. Leadership development and succession planning typically consists of a series of haphazard promotions, training programs and a heavy reliance on relationships with executive search firms.

Maybe an appropriate new slang for global leadership would be “*Niche Management*”. One thing is apparent, global leadership must be custom fit to the multinational, multicultural, multilingual, multi-media world that defines our relationships with our colleagues, subordinates, suppliers, customers, competitors, affiliates and parent organizations.

FROM HORSE BREAKING TO HORSE WHISPERING

“Horse Whispering” is a fascinating technique being taught in large, progressive organizations like Disney, Xerox, GM and AT&T. “Horse Whispering” punctuates the overarching shift from command and control to the new respect for people philosophy. In traditional horse breaking tactics, the horse is subdued, overpowered and coerced until it succumbs to its master’s bidding. Critics of traditional horse breaking tactics claim it succeeds only at the cost of the horse’s spirit.

In contrast, the “horse whisperer” succeeds by respecting, honoring and whispering to the horse’s true nature in an attempt to gain the horse’s trust and win the role of a quasi leader. A fascinating paradox of the “Horse Whispering” process is that the would-be master must first understand the true nature of the horse by communicating and behaving in ways that reduce fear before attempting to lead the horse. Ultimately, the horse allows itself to be led only after it has intuited that domination by the master will not result in harm.

Global leaders must be ever vigilant in recognizing the need for adaptations of structure, systems and processes within their organizations to accommodate shifting needs. In addition, they must be ready to adapt how they relate to those they lead with the ease and grace of a chameleon. In multinational organizations with multicultural workforces, this means much more than learning a new language and becoming familiar with customs. In the spirit of “horse whispering”, the global leader must first remove fear, engender trust and discern the true needs, interests, aspirations, passions and values of the people they lead. In theory, this sounds plausible. In the current reality of many global leaders, it borders on impossible.

THE RAGS TO RICHES RULE

It is our assumption that Maslow’s model of motivations based on a hierarchy of needs can be helpful in determining what global leadership competencies are required for a particular situation. In effect, a country, organization or group that hasn’t mastered lower, physiological and security needs cannot be motivated by higher order needs such as meaningful work or recreational and leisure activities. Building on this assumption, an organization concerned with meeting lower order needs requires more of a management theme in a leadership/management competency model.

The “rags to riches” rule applied to global leadership/management competencies is this: the lower an organization is on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the more the leadership/management competency needs to be demonstrated with a classic military, command and control theme. The higher the organization is on Maslow’s hierarchy of needs, the more the “horse whispering” theme will be effective. It is interesting to note here that, just as extraordinary levels of customer service soon become minimum expectations, those who have once been led by a “horse whisperer” will not be eager to march under the flag of a military general.

BANKING AND CONTROLLING THE RIVER OF ENERGY

To illustrate how the rags to riches rule works in determining which leadership/management theme is appropriate to a situation, imagine a violent storm causing a riverbed to overflow and flood the land. In this type of crisis, the global leadership competencies needed to dam the river might include an ability to think critically and solve problems, take charge and make tough decisions quickly.

By contrast, imagine a lazy, peaceful river flowing next to a field of tall wheat, ready for harvest. In this context of prosperity, the river is viewed as an opportunity to enhance the quality of life. The global leadership competencies required to add value to the resources of the river might include an ability to

envision future river development, inspire others with the vision, transform the vision into realistic plans, persuade others to get involved and motivate them to help make the vision a reality.

As a metaphor, the river provides a useful way of differentiating the two themes of the leadership/management competency. The leader theme of the global leadership/management competency can be compared to what the bank of a river does. The bank stays close to the length and breadth of the river, providing a firm boundary guiding it along a predetermined course toward a definite destination. The bank is so in tune with the ways of the river, that it almost seems a part of it.

The management theme of the global leadership/management competency is similar to what a dam does. A bank directs and controls the flow of the river by intervention. It stops or releases the flow in order to derive the maximum power from the river or to avert danger.

Unfortunately, there is no “one-size-fits-all” formula for precisely which theme is required in a leadership position. Most global leadership positions require elements of each. When selecting or developing global leaders, the position needs to be analyzed, as well as the life cycle of the organization to determine the need for one theme over the other. Some leaders possess innate talent for one of these themes.

It is important to note that throughout history, we have seen many countries, organizations and groups evolve through the stages of Maslow’s model. There is obviously much to learn from the study of great powers such as the Roman Empire, Spain and Great Britain who evolved in impressive and obvious ways, but were unable to retain their stature. A clear-cut answer to this unfortunate reality simply does not exist.

The global leadership challenge in a context of affluence is the risk of an insidious weakness. The organization can be overtaken by far less formidable foes as they sleep-off the aftermath of victory. Organizations who have grown fat on the rich diet of success sometimes lapse into a form of lethargy. In this state, the organization misses or ignores threats requiring a quick response like a shot of adrenaline into the muscle. For organizations still struggling to survive, this adrenaline response is not atypical. It’s a way of life. This advantage should be leveraged by astute leadership.

DNA STRUCTURES OF GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES

In a world heading at breakneck speed towards mass customization, suggesting that there is a finite, measurable set of global leadership competencies is outright heresy, not just irresponsibility. The focus of global leadership development efforts must be aimed at developing the capabilities required to lead and manage organizations in the multinational, multicultural, multilingual, multi-media world that defines relationships with colleagues, subordinates, suppliers, customers, competitors, affiliates and parent organizations.

Those who are charged with the development and grooming of global leadership can take some comfort from the extensive research and validation of the behavior and attitudes of leaders around the world. The research shows that people, no matter what their race, nationality or culture are not nearly as unpredictable as the environments in which they must live and work.

Based on over twenty years of research and validation of William Marston’s model described in his book, *‘The Emotions of Normal People’* (1920), leaders can count on the predictability of behavior patterns that people develop over time. The attributes of these behavior patterns comprise the virtual equivalent of a DNA structure that underpins certain competencies.

Likewise, the research of Eduard Spranger into the attitudes or what people value provides an even more reliable portion of a DNA structure to competencies. Although an emerging trend indicates that successful people around the world tend to be more flexible with their behavior patterns as situations demand, a person’s attitudes or values, which are formed more slowly, remain constant. The down side of prolonged behavior adaptation is that it takes considerable energy to adapt one’s natural or instinctive behavior pattern.

The ability to match the true instinctive behavior patterns and attitudes of people to the competency demands of their work is becoming a critical global leadership competency necessary to maximize performance within a context of continuous change. Evidence of the influence of behavioral patterns is illustrated in the classic tension between a flamboyant, free-wheeling, Vice President of Marketing and an ultra-conservative, analytical Vice President of Finance. History shows that businesses use two main strategies to solve bottom-line problems: 1) Sell more and 2) Cut costs. Organizations will adapt their structures to accommodate these strategies by appointing leaders with track records of achievement implementing the current prevailing strategy. Usually, the over expansion and over spending by leaders with marketing backgrounds are followed by conservative leaders with financial backgrounds to bring the organization into balance.

To simply dismiss these situations as “quirky organizational phenomenon” is to miss an important truth. People with conservative and analytical behavior patterns, by nature, tend to lack a futuristic perspective and frequently find their way into technical areas such as information systems and finance. People with influencing, spontaneous behavior patterns, by nature, tend to be optimistic about the future and frequently find their way into non-technical areas such as sales and marketing.

It would be a mistake, however, to assume that the people within an organization are in positions suitable to their natural behavior and attitudes. In fact, the chief cause of job dissatisfaction and stress that many individuals experience in their jobs stems from their inability to understand their own behavior and attitudes or that of others. The reality is that many people find their way into the wrong jobs and stay because of a need for security. The inability to understand one’s behavior and attitudes translates into an inability to direct one’s self in a career.

Another difficulty is that attitudes and values are typically more difficult to recognize than behavior. Individuals often have difficulty distinguishing between what they think should be important to them and what their real passions are. Assisting individuals to discover their true aspirations and passions and placing them in positions where they can fulfill them while contributing to the organization is what an astute global leader must do for both the benefit of the worker and the organization.

In fact, attitudes comprise an important DNA structure in global leadership competencies. For instance, the DNA structure for the leadership theme of the global leadership/management competency is a combination of a fairly high value for Utilitarian (practical and economic) and Social (benevolent or other-focused) endeavors.

Similarly, the DNA structure for the management theme of the global leadership/management competency is also a combination of a fairly high value for Utilitarian (practical and economic) endeavors, but differentiated by a fairly high value for Individualistic (controlling one’s destiny or the destiny of others) rather than Social endeavors.

Of course, the beliefs and customs of a culture play an incredibly significant role in influencing beliefs, attitudes and values. Global leaders must recognize that behavior can be adapted, but attitudes and values are relatively rigid. Interestingly, our research and experience indicates that the attitude DNA structures of global leadership competencies transcend borders. A linkage between managerial values and decision making has been widely documented. Dr. David D. Palmer’s research on personal values included male and female managers from both the United States and India.

Group I was comprised of individuals who scored above the mean in Utilitarian, Individualistic and Theoretical attitudes. Group I placed their emphasis on economic utility and rationality. It could be predicted that they would be less likely to support decisions that were not clearly financially advantageous to their organizations. Group II was comprised of individuals who scored above the mean in Social, Aesthetic and Regulatory. Group II tended to favor more strongly those decisions which involved employee safety, personnel development and water pollution.

WHAT YOU SEE MAY NOT BE WHAT YOU GET

Research also shows that people will adapt their behavior when the opportunity for gain or the threat of loss is great enough. If an individual has developed a natural affinity for managing multiple tasks and a high level of activity, a competency such as flexibility is almost instinctual and, therefore, won't take much energy to demonstrate. Training these people on managing multiple priorities will enhance competency.

On the other hand, an individual who has developed a natural affinity for working steadily until they finish each task will typically experience stress while attempting to demonstrate the competency of flexibility. Training these people on managing multiple priorities will produce flexibility at a cost. They will have a tendency to revert to their natural behavior when the pressure is off.

The more specifically an organization defines and rewards desirable behaviors and attitudes, the more people will try to adapt, depending on how low they are on Maslow's hierarchical scale of needs. This can result in a false appearance of culture change. What may actually be happening is a type of behavior and attitude masquerade. One of the most insidious consequences of this leadership challenge is that vital energy needed for those emergency adrenaline-moments may not be available because people are expending their energy adapting to ensure that their security needs are met.

THE DNA OF POSITION PERFORMANCE

What we now know about the DNA of global leadership competencies can assist organizations in matching the behavior patterns and attitudes of people to the demands of a position. This knowledge can also assist organizations to understand the challenges in trying to get people to adapt their natural behavior patterns and attitudes to accommodate organizational needs. Recognizing that competencies are configurations of behavior, attitudes, beliefs, knowledge, intelligence and skills is essential for global leaders. Global leaders who ensure that the natural talents of individuals are matched with the most important requirements of their job can create the optimum environment for performance. People whose natural behavior matches the requirements of their jobs and are rewarded for their true aspirations and passions naturally:

1. Perform better
2. Enjoy the intrinsic rewards of their work
3. Are loyal and enthusiastic
4. Often need to be told to go home

The main responsibilities of the global leader to these people will be to:

1. Keep them informed to align their efforts with changes
2. Make sure the building is open
3. Make sure they have the resources to do their job
4. Encourage them to maintain balance with activities outside of work

As a rule, a "hands-off" leadership style tends to work best with people who are well matched to their positions. Micro-management or command and control techniques may drive these people to the competition. Although this kind of "hand-in-glove" fit between people and positions may be difficult to maintain in the face of continuous organizational change, the effort promises to return rich dividends in terms of self-directed performance, positive morale and commitment.

The matching process starts by identifying position requirements in terms of the competencies required for superior performance. Every effort must be made to ensure this process is objective and let the job talk. Position requirements must be analyzed in terms of:

1. Behavior
2. Competencies (including soft as well as hard skills)
3. Attitudes
4. Knowledge or experience

An objective process for analyzing position requirements is needed whether the focus is leadership or management, technical, professional or driving a truck. The chief obstacle to realizing the extraordinary benefits of matching people to their positions is our bias.

Global leaders must also be effectively matched to the requirements of the position. The life cycle, economic viability and health of the country, organization or group ultimately will determine the need for an individual whose natural talent is a management or leadership competency. The advice to be given to future global leaders is this: *Don't be tempted to follow a "one-size-fits-all" approach.*

SUMMARY

It may very well take another millennium before innovations in technology and communications allow global leaders to weave a single fabric from the rich diversity of cultures and talents in our world. Paradoxically, the strongest, most durable fabric cannot be tightly woven. Rather, it might resemble a vast and graceful patchwork quilt. To weave this way, global leaders must acquire the knowledge, skill and wisdom of a rare form of master craftsmanship. The product of their craft will be a quilt of diverse cultures and talents, connecting their brightest colors seamlessly in a complementary design, capturing and preserving for all time, the best traditions of each.