Global Leadership Development

Becoming a Global Leader

Can effective leaders in one region/country duplicate their success on a worldwide level?

by Jeremy Solomons

(Three columns, commissioned by the Business Coaching Worldwide eZine)

Column 1 *(published in February 2010)*

As business becomes more and more global, many organizations are asking themselves if an effective leader in one country or region can duplicate her or his success on a worldwide level?

For example, Lucia Mannone may have a proven track record in the southern European region, but is she still able to develop new client relationships, manage projects, and run teams in the very different markets of Latin America and East Asia? And if she can't, what is the best way to prepare her and other budding global leaders like her to be fully productive and effective in the future?

This is the first of three articles that will explore and explode some common myths around global leadership development and then come up with some alternative approaches that coaches can use to help all leaders be successful across international boundaries.

In order to do this, let's go back to Lucia. She is a 38-year-old Italian senior marketing officer for a German medical instrument company. The company headquarters are in Stuttgart and she is based in Milan. She has worked on Italian national accounts and then the southern European region for the last 12 years and her performance and that of her teams have been consistently high.

As her company is expanding in the key markets of Argentina, Brazil, China, Japan, Mexico, and South Korea, she is now being asked to take on a more global role. Her technical knowledge is beyond compare and her ability to motivate her colleagues has been demonstrated again and again, even during economic downturns and company restructurings. But she has not traveled much beyond the Mediterranean, except for a professional conference in Baltimore and family holidays in Phuket and Cancun.

For someone like Lucia, the first step is usually to help her become more "culturally competent," but this can be interpreted and realized in many different ways.

Myth 1: The Behavioral Approach

A typical way to launch "cultural competence" coaching might be for Lucia to read one or two of the many books or websites that outline all the things to do—and more importantly, not to do—in a particular country.

If Lucia is like most businesspeople and she does not want to give offense or look stupid, it might be very helpful for her to learn how to give someone a business card in Osaka or what not to discuss at an initial business lunch in Monterrey. All of these hints and tips can certainly help with those important first impressions, but what happens after you kiss, bow, or shake hands?

Lucia might have done her homework and diligently learned the top 50 or 100 or even 500 etiquette tips for working and communicating with Brazilians or Koreans, but what would she do in situation 501? Unfortunately, she would have no idea what to do or say, because the behavioral approach on its own only gives the "whats" and the "hows" but not the "whys." There is no context for the content. No framework for the structure.

Myth 2: The National Values Approach

In order to get at the "whys," Lucia might then be directed to some well-grounded research on the differences between national values. The innovative works of Geert Hofstede and Fons Trompenaars are frequently studied during this stage of global leadership development.

Through her reading, Lucia will probably be delighted to discover that the traditional importance that Italians place on such values as family, relationships, creativity, aesthetics, love, passion, and even *calcio* (football/soccer) are also shared by Brazilians. She might be surprised to find out that the Chinese value "face"—social harmony and personal honor-just as the Italians do. In China, it is called *mianzi* and in Italy, *bella figura*. And she might appreciate the warning that "respect" does not mean the same thing in Mexico as it does in Italy or that the Japanese are much more concerned with centralized authority than the autonomy-loving Italians.

Similarly, explanations of the different concepts of "quality" and "seriousness" in Germany and Italy might shed light on some long-running tensions with certain people in the Stuttgart headquarters. But this approach can only help so far, because it is based on a rather dangerous assumption: that everyone—or even most people—within a national culture will conform to the norms of that culture.

This is a particularly dubious claim in the vibrant cultures of international business and among young people, where change is a constant and deviation from the norm is much more prevalent.

On an individual level, Engineer Lee may not be very Korean in his value system, because he studied for his undergraduate degree at Delft University in the Netherlands and his master's degree at MIT in Boston. And Señor Trujillo may not be very Mexican as he grew up in seven different countries on three continents as his mother was a diplomat.

And what about Lucia herself?

At first glance, it would seem that she is typically Italian, having lived and worked there her whole life apart from her frequent business trips around Europe and a few work and pleasure jaunts beyond the continent.

But what if you knew that she was an orphan from North Africa, who was brought up by her *nonna* (adoptive grandmother) in a clean, safe, but very modest home in a small town outside Naples. As a math genius and natural athlete, she excelled in school and was the youngest MBA ever to graduate from the prestigious Bocconi University in Milan. She is now married to a struggling artist and has three young children, one of whom has cerebral palsy.

How might these unique environmental and genetic factors affect her personal value system and how she behaves and communicates with other people?

We will explore this and related issues in the next Global Leader Development article to be published in the June issue of *BCW*.

In the meantime, if you want to respond to any of the points raised in this column, please email the article author at jersol@aol.com.

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Column 2 *(published in June 2010)*

As business becomes more and more global, many organizations are asking themselves if an effective leader in one country or region can duplicate her or his success on a worldwide level?

In the first column in this three-part series - published in February 2010 - we looked at how Lucia Mannone - a 38-year-old, Italian, senior marketing officer for a German medical instrument company with little global experience beyond Europe – could help her company expand in the key markets of Argentina, Brazil, China, Japan, Mexico, and South Korea.

She could begin to become more globally competent through the "Behavioral Approach" of learning *what* to do and what not to do in different countries. Then she could move on to the "National Values Approach" of understanding *why* people behave the way they do in different countries.

But both approaches are limited in how far they can help because they only embrace some of the factors that affect human behavior and can easily lead to misleading stereotypes, such as "Mexicans are more interested in family, relationships and security than getting quality work done on time and moving up the career ladder" or "the Chinese are always avoiding conflict and will never directly own up to a mistake".

So what are the other factors that may be influencing individual or group behavior?

Additional Factor 1

This columnist revisited the first stereotype – about Mexicans being family- and relationship-oriented, etc. –while doing some recent values work for two teams at the Central Mexican subsidiary of a large German company.

Although most of the members of each team were Mexican nationals who had never lived outside Mexico, there was a clear preference for such values as personal achievement, getting the job done, risk-taking, individualism and egalitarianism, which would not be considered as typically "Mexican", according to the research of Geerd Hofstede and others.

Nor would these values be considered typically German either.

So what was going on here?

Beyond national culture, it seems that organizational culture was at play.

These Mexican employees had deliberately chosen to work for an innovative, hi-tech global communications company that happened to be headquartered in Germany and have a subsidiary in their home town.

As this company expands across the world, it is developing its own unique value system and way of doing things, which may have little in common with the traditional culture and values of Germany or any other single country or region.

So, for example, if Lucia Mannone is now trying to develop a new strategic partnership with a large Korean *chaebol*, she should probably spend a lot more time learning about that company's values, history, traditions and culture than that of Korea as a whole.

Additional Factor 2

Let's go back to the oft-quoted lament that "the Chinese are always avoiding conflict and will never directly own up to a mistake".

While this may be true in some cases, it is certainly not true in all of them and even if it does appear to be true in a particular case, it may be masking a much larger issue.

For example, a US-based hi-tech company was noticing that many of its software engineers, including all of the East Asian ones, were grossly under-reporting errors in responding to monthly questionnaires.

It would have been easy to zero in on the East Asian engineers and try to deal with issues of national "face", honor and pride.

But then managers noticed that they were getting similar omissions in other parts of Asia, Europe, Latin America and even North America.

Maybe the corporate culture was becoming too "success oriented" and employees were reluctant to report mistakes for fear of letting down their colleagues and harming their future career prospects?

But that was not the case at this organization, which did not have a hyper-aggressive, punitive culture. It was well understood that occasional errors were part of the learning process.

So what else was going on?

From careful analysis and many interviews, it seemed that the under-reporting was more to do with the "professional" culture of the software engineers, for whom an "error" is like an admission of incompetence and failure.

So the managers decided to eliminate all mention of "errors" from the monthly questionnaires and instead they asked the software engineers for their lessons learned, best practices and suggestions for improvement.

Suddenly, the managers starting getting a flurry of invaluable insights and ideas from the previously reticent engineers and, not coincidentally, errors were drastically reduced.

By recognizing the value and power of "professional culture", global leaders can actually help their colleagues find a new way of connecting across the world.

For example, this may be a good way for Lucia to build trust and rapport with her marketing counterparts in Tokyo or Buenos Aires as they may well have studied exactly the same textbooks as she did in university but they were just in Japanese or Spanish.

Unfortunately, "professional culture" can sometimes work the other way if two "experts" butt heads over who knows best about some arcane technical issue.

But it is certainly something to bear in mind when trying to develop relationships and build business around the world.

Additional Factor 3

As any budding global leader can now see, it is a lot more than national customs and values that explain why someone behaves the way they do half way around the world.

Like a "Cultural Detective", a competent leader will try to work out what behaviors are influenced by geographical culture or organizational culture or professional culture … or a mixture of all three.

And even then they may not have the whole answer because they also need to understand the "individual" culture of who each counterpart is: her background, family, race, ethnicity, education, sexual orientation, thinking style, character, personality, etc.

Just as Lucia Mannone may not be typical of her country, her company or her profession, anyone she meets with around the world may well be similarly unique.

Given this complexity and uncertainty, how can a global leader possibly be effective with counterparts he or she may have never met or may never meet?

We will explore this and related issues in the third and last Global Leader Development column to be published in the October issue of *BCW*.

In the meantime, if you want to discuss any of the points raised in this column, please email the article author directly at jersol@aol.com.

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Column 3 *(published in October 2010)*

As business becomes more and more global, many organizations are asking themselves if effective leaders in one country or region can duplicate their success on a worldwide level?

In the first two columns in this three-part series (February and June 2010 *BCW*), we looked at how Lucia Mannone --a 38-year-old, Italian, senior marketing officer for a German medical instrument company with little global experience beyond Europe – could help her company expand in the key markets of Argentina, Brazil, China, Japan, Mexico, and South Korea.

We identified different ways she could become "globally competent":

1. By understanding and comparing the different countries' values and behaviors;
2. By taking into account the organizational culture of her own company – in both its headquarters and its offices around the world – and that of its key clients;
3. By drawing the best from each person's professional culture, whether they are marketers, doctors, or operations people.

But there is still one "culture" that stands out above all others if Lucia or anyone else wants to be successful globally.

And that is "individual" culture.

Even though anthropologists maintain that culture is a group phenomenon, we all carry around our own individual culture with us, molded by both Nature and Nurture.

On the Nature side, our "culture" is formed by such things as our genes, our personality, and our character.

On the Nurture side, we are shaped by our family or origin, the community around us, our education, and our opportunities for different kinds of life-altering experiences, such as spending six months between high school and college on a kibbutz in Israel (as this columnist did).

Together, they help build our understanding of who we really are and why we behave the way we do.

Across borders, this means that before even attempting to interact with someone from Korea or Mexico, budding global leaders really need to ask themselves some very searching questions about their own "individual" culture.

These questions might include:

- What does it mean, in a general sense, to be a truly global leader?
- What does it mean *to me personally* to be a truly global leader?
- What do I hope to achieve?
- How will it enhance my career, my work, and my personal life?
- In what ways might it actually impinge on my career, my work, and my personal life?
- What natural strengths, learned talents, overarching passions, and core values do I already possess to be a global leader?
- What gaps do I have and what hot buttons and blind spots do I need to be aware of?
- How can I best overcome my shortcomings through meditation, stretch assignments, travel, studying, coaching, etc.?
- What else do I need to be successful on a global level?

Once these questions have been addressed and future global leaders are much clearer about the who's, what's and why's of branching out across the world, then they can start to learn more about the individual cultures of the key counterparts with whom they will be interacting.

This is obviously easier if colleagues or counterparts have the chance to spend time together both in formal meetings and informal activities over a period of time.

The CEO of a successful US consumer goods company would spend one week a month visiting different corporate offices around the world to hold town hall meetings and get to know the people he was leading.

Another global energy company has a standard practice of launching any new virtual project by bringing all the new team members together in one place for two weeks. It has continued this practice even after 9/11 and during the recession, believing it important for team members to get to know each other before they start working together across distance. And it has paid off again and again.

When colleagues and counterparts don't have the chance to spend significant face time together, it can be much harder to get to know each other's individual culture. But it is not impossible. They just have to make a more concerted, conscious effort.

Technology and advances in social media networking can really help nowadays.

For example, a newly forming global team can easily set up an internal website – Facebook-style – with team member profiles, strengths and weaknesses, likes and dislikes, photos, videos, etc.

Each team can then co-create a communication charter, accommodating individual preferences for face-to-face, phone, email, text and/or IM interchanges.

Just because an East Asian colleague is always available at 11:00 p.m. for a multipoint conference call, don't assume that this is what he really wants.

He may actually prefer to speak in the early morning, which would mean his colleagues in the Americas will have to stay up late once in a while when call times are rotated in order to "share the pain."

These are just a few of the many specific ways that global leaders can understand who they are working with and how to get the best out of them without being neglectful or manipulative.

Traditionally, the best piece of advice about how to be successful globally relates to the Golden Rule that is common to many different religions and cultures: treat others as *you* want to be treated.

It seems very logical and fair, but across cultures, there is a fundamental flaw.

You are assuming that others are like you and, as such, want to be treated like you.

As we have seen in the last three columns, there is a whole host of cultural factors – geographical, organizational, professional and individual – that can make a seemingly familiar person be very different from you.

So this columnist would strongly urge you to practice the Platinum Rule instead: treat others as *they* want to be treated.

This way, you are acknowledging the potential differences between you and then gradually, as you get to know the other person by spending time with them and asking appropriate questions, you can actually find that he or she is not that far away from you and that you do have a lot in common.

By acknowledging the differences and seeking the commonalities, any leader can reach out and not just survive in a global context, but thrive and leave the world a slightly better place.

Enjoy the journey!

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