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SPECIAL REPORT

## Global leadership communication: A strategic proposal

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**Abstract.** Organizations face a myriad of challenges as the world interconnects through the process of globalization. In order to sustain viability and produce competitive advantage, organizations must develop a global communication strategy. Communication skills need to be developed at all levels of the organization, from a coherent mission statement to individual employee development. Organizations need global leaders, capable of moving in and through divergent cultural environments. Identifying and equipping these future leaders is an antecedent to success in the global marketplace. This paper offers an instructive model to guide organizations as they face increasingly complex, cross-cultural environments.

**Keywords:** global leadership, communication, cross-cultural, strategic planning

### Introduction

Organizations increasingly conduct business operations in a globalized context. Global conditions foster organizational interdependence across cultures and render boundaries irrelevant (Stohl, 2005). Maintaining organizational identity, managing multi-cultural distributed teams, and understanding implicit leadership preferences across cultures are salient concerns for multi-national organizations (Earley, 2002; Cheney & Christensen, 2001; Muczyk & Holt, 2008). Moreover, the issues are not constrained to multi-national corporations; native organizations often hire, collaborate, and communicate cross-culturally (Lauring, 2011). Thus, regardless of geographic presence, 21<sup>st</sup> century organizations face similar challenges.

One of the most salient concerns is effective communication within and beyond organizational boundaries (Brannen, Piekkari, & Tietze, 2014; Fall, Kelly, Primm, & Holmes, 2013; Lauring & Selmer, 2011). The structure and distribution of knowledge in cross-cultural settings demands organizations depart from traditional bureaucratic forms. Success in a global environment requires that organizations are flexible, intentional, and self-aware. In short, organizations need a global communication strategy to remain viable and to develop a competitive advantage (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012). The following strategic plan assists organizations as they build intercultural communication competencies, develop human capital, and pursue market share in the global economy.

### Communication Complexity

In order to identify areas of improvement and build internal capacity, the complexity of global leadership communication must first be acknowledged. The following description of the construct ensures a shared understanding. Uniformity is critical to the auto-communication process (Cheney & Christensen, 2001), as a collective understanding enables the reinforcement of internal values. The proposed definition of global leadership communication is designed from the extant literature on leadership, communication, and business (Byers, 1997; Kotter, 2011; Lauring, 2011) and reflects the inherent complexities of

the construct. Global leadership communication is the verbal and non-verbal transmission of knowledge across and through socially constructed cultural frameworks for the purpose of influencing, guiding, or motivating action. Viewing culture from a constructivist paradigm reveals the benefits of this explanation.

Rather than reinforcing a priori classifications of culture, this definition accepts that culture is socially constructed and enacted through continuous communication (Martin & Nakayama, 2014). Instead of conceptualizing culture as a stable arrangement of social norms, the post-positivist view advances the idea that individuals co-create their cultural identity through recursive communication (Hall, 2014; Holmberg & Akerblom, 2006). The process is not static, and the framework of socially reinforced cultural features is subject to individual variance. Furthermore, cultural disparities may be influenced by local and regional norms (Graen, 2006; Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006), necessitating a variety of communication competencies absent in the repertoire of traditional leaders. Organizations can narrow the scope of training by focusing on global leadership principles.

Complexities and boundary-spanning requirements are embedded in the global leadership construct (Mendenhall, Reiche, Bird, & Osland, 2012). As the world becomes increasingly interconnected, cultural norms and social preferences are magnified. The paradox of globalization (Stohl, 2005) requires leaders be adept at operating in culturally complex environments while creating vision and motivating action. Dynamic leadership activities do not take place in a vacuum; they exist in relation to specific contexts such as cultural norms. Leaders influence others through varied forms of persuasion and encouragement (Kotter, 2001), requiring an understanding of cultural schema. Global leaders must exercise caution in generalizing cultural differences and remain attuned to the moderating power of social and situational contexts (Levine, Park, & Kim, 2007). Navigating these environments requires global leaders to acknowledge the complex and fluid nature of communication. Successful organizations need talented leaders and clear strategies to address the challenges posed by today's business environment. Fortunately, a well-developed and executed strategic plan can provide support for both conditions.

## **Discussion**

Global leadership communication does not happen by chance; intentional planning and engagement is required throughout the organization (Oddou & Mendenhall, 2013). Organizational success demands an appreciation for the role of culture in strategic planning processes. Although building intercultural competence is necessary, organizations are not free to abandon traditional planning processes. Instead, organizations must embed culture in traditional operations. The following discussion offers a road map for organizations to develop global communication and leader skills over the short and extended time horizons.

### ***Culture Levels***

Culture is a complex phenomenon that can be viewed through macro and micro lenses. The distinction is critical to developing an effective global communication strategy. The target level must be identified prior to any messaging. To provide clarity, the working definition of culture in this strategic plan integrates multiple descriptions of the construct (Bartram, 2012; Gudykunst & Kim, 1992; Hofstede, 2011). Culture is the aggregate collection of values, beliefs, symbols, and norms acquired within a macro-social framework subject to individual variability and reinforcement.

At the macro-level, culture can be neatly segregated by behavioral patterns. The use of broad generalizations is evident in the scholarly literature and emphasizes a country-level view. Hofstede's (1984) seminal work classifying national cultures and the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness studies (GLOBE) are two significant examples (House, Javidan, Dorfman, & De Luque, 2006). Hofstede formulated his culture dimensions from an original sample limited to IBM employees working in 50 countries; to

support updated culture dimensions, GLOBE expanded data collection to over 1,000 organizations across 60 societies (Hofstede, 2011). Viewing culture through this orientation allows researchers to make predictions about cross-cultural interactions (Smith, Peterson, & Thomason, 2011).

A macro-level view allows for the identification of communication preferences, such as the use or omission of specific symbols and discourse. Paradoxically, the ability to offer predictive capabilities is also a weakness. Critics of national culture studies have been outspoken about the lack of individual variables such as generation, education level, socio-economic status, and social class among others (Graen, 2006). A macro-level view is incomplete, and organizations must appreciate the dynamics of culture at the small group or dyadic level.

The culture definition offered in this strategic plan highlights variability and individuality. At the micro level, culture is context specific; individuals refine culture to fit particular external influences (regions, religion, class, etc.) and environments. As a result, culture can both dominate communication and appear absent. Accordingly, communication should not be viewed as intercultural communication simply because cultural variability exists (Levine et al., 2007).

The elusive nature of culture is important to strategic communication. First, organizational leaders should temper their assumptions about intercultural communication processes; the differences may be less intrusive than expectations suggest. Second, organizations should be cautious about generalizing and blindly accepting preexisting national-level cultural labels, as within-culture variations exist (Yang, Harkness, Chin, & Villar, 2010). Last, organizations need to identify and develop individuals with the desire to seek cultural knowledge. Successful global communicators must understand national-level cultural distinctions and micro-level influences alike.

### ***Mission Statement***

Mission statements provide a tangible description of a company's purpose. They ensure adequate resource allocation, motivate and guide employees, and inform stakeholders about their relative importance (Smith, Heady, Carson, & Carson, 2003). Mission statements support the establishment of a strong corporate identity; this alignment of followers on shared organizational characteristics can foster significant positive outcomes. More importantly, a strong corporate identity can facilitate shared understandings of the organizational mission, increase commitment, and minimize fractured understanding (Gomez & Ballard, 2013). In order to permeate all levels of the organization and ensure stakeholder fluency, the mission needs to be prominently and frequently communicated (Whitley & Chambers, 2009). Failure to be proactive in this area may lead to identity dilution or substitution (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). Divergent groups may fill voids in the corporate identity, each with their own rationale and message. The following mission statement is proffered for illustrative purposes:

The mission of Company X is to provide premium quality widgets to our global customers. We promise to provide superior customer service, maximize value for our stakeholders, drive widget innovation, and be a good steward to the environment. We will strive to be global leaders in the field of widget making through intentional and strategic communication with diverse cultures, peoples, and locales.

The model statement is multifaceted, covering a range of company behaviors and objectives. The increasing complexity of the global business environment demands innovative and engaged followers (Kelley, 1992). The mission statement should support the organization's strategic priorities and inspire cohesive followership. The overarching theme is devotion to boundary spanning and cross-cultural communication to ensure competitive advantage. Effective cross-cultural communication has been shown to support innovation (Matthews & Thakkar, 2012) and reduce intrapersonal conflict (Pullin, 2010). The mission

statement forms the corporate identity and creates the conditions required for group unity. A sense of shared purpose should increase employee efficacy as they carry out identified objectives.

### ***Objectives***

Objectives are specific and measurable statements reflecting a goal; they outline the necessary actions required to achieve the organizational mission. Organizations often fail to manage their objectives, focusing too much on a single priority at the expense of all others (Dodd & Favaro, 2006). To alleviate this tendency, organizations should address components of each objective over the course of established temporal benchmarks. The following proposed objectives for our model organization, Company X, demonstrate the concept.

#### *Year one*

The year one objective is to develop a strategic communication plan to highlight the company mission among consumers and stakeholders in their global market. In order to meet this objective, organizations will need to conduct a SWOT analysis of current external communication practices in the global regions where it has a market share. Self-reflection will allow organizations to evaluate its brand perception and assess current strategies (Goodrich, 2013). Organizations must review the external identity created by stakeholders and contrast this image to their internal image; this is the first step in managing the total identity (Cheney & Christensen, 2001). If these two paradigms are not reconciled, external groups may define an image counter to the wishes of organizations. A thorough understanding of the current reality and underlying contradictions will inform the leadership in preparation for stage two.

In stage two, the organization will use its SWOT analysis to prepare a strategic communication plan targeting specific locales in current or proposed markets. External communication should be tailored to individual regions based on existing transmission norms. A variety of communication channels are available to transmit information to a stratified audience (Whitley & Chambers, 2009). Organizations need to identify the preferred distribution method in each location to exploit message delivery. In addition to choosing an appropriate channel, organizations need to consider additional delivery variables such as frequency, time, and messenger. Since individual communication styles vary, local norms must be identified prior to dissemination of the mission statement (Hartman & McCambridge, 2011). Suppose Company X wanted to establish a presence in Uganda via Internet marketing and web point of sale. Knowledge that Internet penetration is only 16% of the population (Freedom House, 2014) and print media reaches only 5.5% of the populace (Anderson & Hitchins, 2007) would be critical information.

#### *Three-year focus*

The objective for the three-year focus is to develop global cross-cultural work teams to innovate new widget designs for local markets. Company X will need to deploy cross-functional teams comprised of culturally diverse employees to develop new products for regional consumers. Careful selection and management of teams has been shown to increase efficacy and produce innovation (Katzenbach & Smith, 2005). Innovation is a byproduct of group tension; teams need to work through conflict and develop trust. Conflict needs to be task oriented as opposed to interpersonal, necessitating efficient intercultural communication skills (Maznevski & Chui, 2013). Company X will need to leverage data collected during internal assessment, discussed later, to identify individuals capable of integrating into these teams. Individuals will need to grow an environment of trust through frequent and sustained communication with team members (Chen, Wu, Ma, & Knight, 2011). Developing global teams could yield significant returns for Company X in the development of new widgets. The

range of perspectives and diversity of cross-cultural teams has been shown to yield higher performance and creativity (Maznevski & Chui, 2013).

#### *Five-year stretch*

The five-year stretch mission will be to communicate with stakeholders, residents, and government officials to identify new Greenfield projects for global widget expansion. Greenfield project sites in foreign locales present significant hurdles for organizations, including human resource management and employee satisfaction (Glover, 2001). Company X's executives need to develop a relational approach to leadership, supported by cultural awareness and flexible communication. A relational orientation has been recognized in numerous leadership theories from leader-member exchange to transformational approaches (Offerman, 2012); individual connections are the primary link between these competing theories. Individual relationships afford leaders the opportunity to establish trust and common dialogue. The context supports competitive advantage in the form of credibility and access to resources (Chen & Miller, 2011). The advantages are difficult to replicate and should ease the challenges of establishing Greenfield projects.

#### ***Leader Competencies and Training***

Effective communication is a critical intercultural competency. Individuals capable of effective cross-cultural communication can limit potential misunderstandings, minimize social barriers, and reduce ethnocentrism (Lauring, 2011). Organizations should recognize building intercultural communication skills is an ongoing and progressive course of action (Adenoro, Popa, Bletscher, & Albert, 2012). A systematic process of leadership training is needed to build employees' intercultural communication skills and develop competitive advantage. The recommended course of action includes high-priority action plans and deliberate forecasting over a five-year period. The training programs are intentionally diffuse and inclusive of a wide variety of employees in order to maximize potential performers (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 2002).

#### *Short-term*

Organizations need to determine the baseline competencies of their employees before initiating training programs. A validated and reliable survey instrument may be used to gather the necessary data. Survey instruments may be delivered, completed, and scored entirely online. Surveys offer a non-judgmental and unobtrusive method for employees to gauge their own level of cross-cultural skills. Business leaders frequently used this reflexive process to evaluate their performance in a range of areas such as vision setting, succession planning, and time management (Kaplan, 2007). Similarly, practitioners recommend the use of surveys to identify developmental needs in conjunction with formalized training (Tompson et al., 2008).

Surveys will also allow organizations to identify individuals with a high potential for global team membership and expatriate assignments. Global leadership communication requires employees capable of deploying a range of communication behaviors in varying contexts according to cultural norms (Osland, 2013). The Global Competencies Inventory (GCI) is a reliable and validated survey used to measure 17 characteristics linked with successful intercultural behaviors (Bird & Stevens, 2013). The survey can be delivered online in approximately 45 minutes. The GCI has been used to study the potential of employees to navigate expatriate assignments and multiple cultures (Smith & Victorson, 2012).

#### *Mid-term*

The mid-term objectives are exclusively focused on providing employees with a range of role-playing and short-term immersion experiences. The purpose of these experiences is to place employees into relevant cross-cultural dilemmas and learning environments. The

cognitive challenges presented by these activities spur global competency development (Caputo & Crandall, 2012; Oddou & Mendenhall, 2013). Since these development programs are time and budget intensive, organizations should screen potential applicants using the GCI instrument.

The next developmental stage requires intentional selection of personnel. Employee interest, capability, and strategic positioning are all valid concerns. Organizations should identify the critically important positions that support its mission (Huselid, Beatty, & Becker, 2005) and align potential global communicators to those slots. Organizations will face significant challenges if they fail to align personnel to positions supporting both the mission and individual abilities (DeLong & Vijayaraghavan, 2003). Organizations can avoid these issues by utilizing multiple data inputs, including the GCI, to manage human capital.

#### *Long-term*

On an extended time horizon, an organizations needs to invest in immersive experiences for its key personnel via expatriate assignments. Expatriate assignments have a lengthy track record among American organizations and there is general agreement on the positive value. Embedded assignments foster an experiential learning environment where employees can build cross-cultural skills and behaviors (Fowler & Blohm, 2004). Immersive environments allow expatriates to "... let go of their personal frame of reference" (Osland, 2013, p. 30) and adapt communication to cultural norms. Without this extra-cultural benchmark, employees are likely to misinterpret or vilify communication differences (Berger, 1998). The ability to identify differences and flex accordingly defines intercultural competence. Expatriate assignments provide the most rigorous and intensive context to develop intercultural communication skills.

#### **Conclusion**

Leaders are often romanticized as possessing an ability to succeed where others might fail (Ciulla, 2001). CEOs, employees, and the organizations they support will not survive in the knowledge era absent the ability to win; the global marketplace has no room for marginal performers. Organizations that will rise to the pinnacle will have developed and leveraged their cross-cultural communication capabilities. The ability to communicate across cultures is a nested competency of global leadership and supports organizational activities (Bird, 2013). In addition to developing individuals, organizations need to cultivate their communication infrastructure.

Organizations must intentionally develop a global communication strategy. Developing a mission statement that reinforces a commitment to serving global consumers is a first step. The mission statement aligns internal and external stakeholders as the company develops specific communication objectives. Developing a shared ideal ensures followers focus on achieving objectives in furtherance of the organizational goal (Kelley, 1992). Intention and energy are not sufficient to ensure proficient and successful completion of communication objectives; employees need to be screened and trained. The use of validated assessments should precede the selection of individuals for specific training pathways. Leadership development should be tied to specific time horizons, with cognitive complexity being cumulative in nature.

Mendenhall (2011) suggests leaders and global complexity are inexorably bound. It is only through the development of a global communication strategy that organizations can support individuals as they develop the competencies required to ensure their shared survival and success. Desire and need are insufficient facilitators of effective cross-cultural communication. Targeted and effective training of global leaders and managers has been woefully ignored and disjointed (Alon & Higgins, 2005; Cabrera & Unruh, 2013; Jones, O'Leonard, & Bersin, 2012; Muczyk & Holt, 2008). To be successful in the increasingly

complex and globally interconnected world, organizations must develop a comprehensive and strategic communications plan with a focus on building global leaders.

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