
Foreword

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Leadership has long been considered the magic elixir that brings employers, employees, and other stakeholders together in ways that facilitate organizational effectiveness. It is often considered the essence of good management and the aspirational goal of countless would-be executives. Indeed, when a meeting of the World Economic Forum in Davos, Switzerland, brought together over a thousand corporate executives, heads of state, and cabinet ministers to discuss world problems, one observer characterized the meeting as having a unified overarching theme: the importance of developing global leaders—in corporations, nation states, and non-governmental organizations. The observer further suggested that the two most popular words in the business lexicon today are “global” and “leadership,” and when you put these two words together people in suits begin to salivate. In other words, anyone and everyone who works across cultures needs to master the basics of global leadership.

So far, so good. But how do managers actually accomplish this? How can they become global leaders? How can they impact the people around them? How can they lead groups more effectively? How can companies benefit from more effective leadership? And how can universities and educators contribute to these changes? In other words, how can we develop more effective global leaders and how can such leaders actually make a difference for organizations and the people associated with them? Such is the topic of this volume.

Leadership is a topic that often escapes clear definition and mutual understanding, despite the plethora of books and articles written about the topic over decades. Exploring this topic from a global perspective only serves to multiply the complexities and opportunities for misunderstanding. Part of the problem here is that managers tend to view leadership from a top-down perspective (how do we get people to follow?), while employees often view it from a bottom-up perspective (why should we follow?). And outsiders often view it from both perspectives. Such frames of reference can become important obstacles to misunderstanding and action. Moreover, much of what is written about leadership frames the concept largely in terms of Western beliefs, values, and cultures, and then offers models to the world as keys to managerial success, a viewpoint that is of little value for managers charged with the responsibility of getting things done globally.

As a result, existing theories of leadership are often found wanting for two specific reasons: (1) a failure to recognize and accommodate contextual variables, such as cultural differences, in leadership and work environments; and (2) an inability to offer useful suggestions for developing managers who can accommodate such differences.

Consider one example: leadership differences between China (and much of East and Southeast Asia) and much of the West. What is generally referred to as Western civilization traces its origins to the culture, beliefs, and traditions of ancient Greece. The Greeks developed the concept of *eidos* (ideal), as a perfect form that humans should aspire to and achieve as *télos* (goal). In this scheme, the work of a leader consists of bridging the gap between *télos* as an ideal state and reality (or actual practice) with a goal of achieving perfection. By contrast, the concept of an ideal or archetype that could serve as a model for action and a desirable final

state of affairs never developed in ancient China or in much of Asia. Instead, reality in the Ancient East was seen as a process emanating from the interaction between opposing and complementary forces, or yin and yang. Order did not result from an ideal to be accomplished but from a natural propensity of processes already in motion. Because the emphasis is on current processes evolving here and now, Eastern thinking focuses on very concrete and specific situations of everyday life, rather than abstractions of the essence of an ideal form. Since Eastern thinking tends not to abstract and generalize in the search for an ultimate *eidos*, traditional Chinese language did not include words for essence, god, being, ethics, and the like. Indeed, even today's modern Chinese and several other Asian languages incorporate these concepts only from a need to translate them from Western languages.

Understanding this difference helps explain the separate paths of social thought and practice in these two divergent regions of the world. In many cases, Western thinking is difficult to understand or interpret without reference to concepts such as "the ideal." Current thinking about leadership, as taught in many parts of the world, is based on the original Greek concept of the ideal and purposeful action. Strategy is conceived as the art of arranging means towards desired end states. Corporate vision and mission make for a concrete definition of organizational ideals. Executives manage by objectives, and leaders strive actively to move the firm closer to achieving business goals and ideals that are carefully and publicly defined and implemented.

Eastern tradition, on the other hand, emphasizes positioning oneself in the flow of reality in a more passive way, so that we can discover its coherence and benefit from its natural evolution. Rather than establishing a set of objectives for action, one has to flow within the potential of each situation and the dynamics that the situation affords. A common metaphor that can be found in traditional Chinese texts tells of a general and his soldiers benefiting from a given evolution of events, rather than behaving with particular heroism or bravery. As such, leaders must locate themselves so that the desired path of events becomes the only viable alternative, the same way that they do not force their opponent, militarily or commercially, into a situation in which their only alternative is to behave bravely against them.

As a result, leadership performance in the Western tradition results from minimizing the gap between the goal and the achievement, the planned and the attained. Action in the West is seen as a separate entity, an external disruption to the natural order of things. In East Asia, by contrast, leadership performance results from a minimization of action itself, leaving the situation to achieve its full potential in terms that benefit the organization. Eastern leaders thus focus on continual processes following their own internal dynamics, uninterrupted. Western action is seen from the Asian perspective as being extemporaneous, quick, direct, and costly, while the Eastern "effortless action" is slow, indirect, progressive, and natural. Western leaders act, while Asian leaders transform. This transformation—as opposed to action—extends itself through time, as if without beginning and end, imposing itself albeit in natural ways. Because it comes from the inside of the situation, it imposes itself softly, without resistance. Changes emanate by themselves and do not require heroic efforts and determination, as they are part of a continuous progression that is barely noticed.

This does not imply that the concept of action is not present in traditional Eastern thought. However, it is a subdued type of action: slow, subtle, anticipatory, and naturally inserted in the natural flow of events. Rather than sudden action, occasions are anticipated, providing for the outcome of what will naturally appear. As a result, Chinese and many other Asian leaders pursue objectives in modest ways, silent and almost anonymous, compared to the grandiloquent apparatus and appearance of the heroic decision maker often seen or imagined in the

West. Action is freed from activism and becomes discrete and subtle, confounded in the course of events, ignorant of particular protagonists.

As a result of these differences—multiplied countless times around the world—we often find it difficult to even articulate a useful definition of leadership, let alone action plans for leadership effectiveness. Some languages do not even have a word for the concept. In others, the translation invokes a variety of images, including dictator, parent, expert, and first among equals. Some of these terms have strong connotations of highly directive or authoritarian styles of leadership that many people reject. Leaders are not necessarily to be trusted, and people wonder about their motives and true goals, or about other potentially undesirable behaviors and characteristics.

To make matters even more complex, not only does the term “leader” translate differently across various cultural groups, but the meanings that are construed from these translations can also differ, sometimes significantly. For example, in individualistic societies (e.g., Australia, Canada, United Kingdom) leadership typically refers to a single person who guides and directs the actions of others, often in a very visible way. In more collectivistic societies (e.g., China, Japan, and South Korea), however, leadership is often less associated with individuals and more closely aligned with group endeavors. In hierarchical societies (e.g., Indonesia, Mexico, Saudi Arabia) leaders are often seen as being separate and apart from their followers, while in more egalitarian societies (e.g., Denmark, Sweden) they are more approachable and less intimidating. The rather common Anglo-American celebration of the accomplishments of various leaders stands in stark contrast to Lao Tzu’s ancient observation cited above, that effective leaders work quietly and let workers (or employees) take the credit.

Cultural differences also influence followership. In many egalitarian societies, terms such as “followers” or “subordinates” are seen as being inappropriate. For instance, subordinates in the Netherlands are frequently referred to as co-workers (*medewerkers*) instead of subordinates, and leaders are careful to avoid appearing condescending.

With such a diversity of opinions concerning the characteristics and proposed appropriate actions of effective leaders, what does this suggest about our ability to apply largely Western-based leadership theories across borders? What does this say about our ability to build or implement leadership development programs that will work all over the world? Even more, what does this say about so-called leadership gurus who travel the world with their packaged leadership programs?

So, here is the challenge: Whatever the location, global leaders up and down the hierarchy face the same problem of how and when to adapt their leadership styles to fit local circumstances in order to achieve corporate objectives—if this can actually be done.

What follows in this book is a serious effort to explore the etiology of global leadership from multiple perspectives and disciplines by many of the foremost thinkers on the topic. Some of the chapters reported here focus on theory building, while others report on empirical investigations. Some build on previous models, while others represent entirely new thinking. Some focus on generational issues, while others focus on technological and environmental impacts. Some are value-laden, while others are not. And finally, many of the chapters focus on how to improve global leadership training within a global context so future managers will be better prepared for the new world that awaits them. Taken together, this book represents a compendium of theories, research, and action plans, all focusing on what people with diverse cultural backgrounds and working in diverse organizations around the world can learn in order to become better managers and corporate citizens. For those interested in improving their global leadership understanding and skills, this volume is an essential read.