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Chapter 1

Culturally Intelligent Leadership Matters

The first time I taught cultural intelligence principles to a group of executives in Minnesota, I miscalculated the time and distance it would take me to reach the hotel where the training was held. I did not have the conference coordinator's e-mail or phone number, which was useless to me anyway since my cell phone froze.

When I arrived at the site, the entire parking lot was packed with cars, and so were the side streets and adjacent parking areas for at least a four-block radius. When I finally found a parking space, I hurriedly picked up the large box in the back of my car that held my training materials. By the time I reached the conference room, I was tired and sweaty from walking in my 3-inch-high-heeled pumps. The coordinator was anxiously awaiting my arrival. Even though I profusely apologized for being late, she gave me "a look" that said, "how unprofessional."

As I entered the room, all eyes were on me, of course. Everyone was on time, and I, as the trainer, should have been there before the first person entered the room. Any reason I provided would have been a terrible excuse for this particular crowd, made up of professionals dressed in their business suits, with pens and paper in hand, ready to learn. They paid a lot of money for the conference, of which I was teaching only one half-day session.

What went through my mind as I set up my materials, quickly handing them out to the participants? *I messed up. Wow, this is really bad and unprofessional. They are not bringing me back, for sure. Those people in the corner look mad. At least that woman over there seems sympathetic—or was that a facial twitch?*

"Good morning," I said. "Thank you for coming. I see you're all early. And now that we've had the chance to get to know each other, let's begin the training." You can imagine the facial expressions I received from the audience: confusion, disbelief, bewilderment.

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is there something wrong with what I said? Let me explain. You all arrived here on time, as Americans generally would. I also arrived here on time, as a Hmong person would. You just happened to be on American time, and I'm following Hmong time. You might think I'm late, but in Hmong time, I'm actually quite early."

That broke the ice for the group, and I decided to use the experience to lead into the session about cultural intelligence.

“Since all of you were here really early, I’m sure you had the chance to introduce yourselves; find out about each others’ families, where you’re from, who you’re related to, right? No? Well, that’s not right. We can’t start the training if you haven’t had the chance to relax and just learn about each other. We better do that or else we’re going to face some problems later.”

The experience was the perfect opportunity to share and discuss the challenges involved in navigating cultural terrains. Turning my personal experience into a “teaching moment” gave the audience the chance to pause and reflect about the differences in cultural expression and behavior. The example was used to help the participants dig deeper and to draw out their Western, cultural assumptions. They learned to ask questions like the following:

- What are the differences in time between her culture and mine?
- How do Hmong people approach meetings and trainings?
- Is this behavior specific to the trainer, as an individual, regardless of her national culture?
- Is this behavior specific to her family and how she was raised?
- Why do I care if she was “late”?
- Can I let go of my emotional attachment for her to be here “on time”?
- What am I not seeing in this situation?
- What is my motivation for resolving this situation?
- How am I behaving? Do I need to change my behavior? If so, what can I do?

Why are these questions important to ask? Asking the questions that move you away from immediate reaction to positive action and reflection is necessary in cultural intelligence work. It enables you to have an awareness of the idiosyncrasies of culture, the peculiarities of its effects, and the role it plays in our lives. When you are able to accomplish this, you create a new awareness of your surroundings—you create a new picture of the situation. The practice of creating new awareness and understanding is your ability to be adaptable and flexible.

In the *Tao te Ching*, an ancient Chinese manuscript written by Lao Tzu and translated by Stephen Mitchell, Mitchell (1988). Lao Tzu explains how one can live their life in perfect harmony with conflicting forces. He writes throughout the book about the importance of a person’s ability to be flexible and adaptable. At birth, he says, we are all malleable. As we grow older, knowledge that we gain from our social and cultural environments often leads us to become rigid and blocked. Lao Tzu says

that flexibility is essential to growth and evolution, and that we need to choose adaptability over rigidity for survival.

In a world where organizations must be change-focused, adaptable, and flexible in their intercultural work, leaders are being asked to help people work through, and come to terms with, the changes that differences often bring. Organizations and leaders that expect change are those that tend to thrive—they anticipate and envision different scenarios of environmental change, both internally and externally. Lawler & Worley (2006). Leaders who are bound to a single viewpoint or perspective are no longer effective when leading because the perspectives narrow the opportunities for sustainable organizational growth. When leaders are change focused and embrace an adaptability mindset, they can be better informed, make the right decisions, and provide the right resources to motivate their employees to succeed and perform at their best levels.

1.1 The Difference between Managers and Leaders

Warren Bennis famously wrote in his book *On Becoming a Leader* that a manager does things right and leaders do the right thing. Bennis (1985). Like other leadership scholars, Bennis makes a clear distinction between **leadership**¹ and management and between **managers**² and **leaders**³. A manager’s behavior and activities focus on controlling, planning, coordinating, and organizing. This differs from a leader, whose behaviors and tasks focus on innovation, vision, motivation, trust, and change. Bennis (1985).

Table 1.1 Difference Between Management and Leadership.

Managers	Leaders
Cope with complexity by...	Cope with change by...
planning for goals	setting direction
budgeting for goals	developing a future
establishing agendas and tasks	having a strategic vision for change
organizing roles and responsibilities	aligning of people
structuring staff and jobs	communicating direction
delegating people	creating coalitions
monitoring and implementing results	being commitment focused
identifying deviations	motivating and inspiring
planning and organizing to solve problems	leveraging human value and potential

1. The act of delivering results in the short term while building change capacity for the long term.
2. Individuals who conduct business and direct a team through activities that focus on controlling, planning, coordinating, and organizing.
3. Individuals who guide or direct a group or an organization through activities that focus on innovation, vision, motivation, trust, and change.
4. A tool that businesses can use to help leaders work through intercultural dilemmas and create understanding across and between cultures.

Note. Adapted from Kotter, *What Leaders Really Do* (1999). Cambridge, MA: Harvard Business Review.

Cultural intelligence⁴ requires leadership, not management. It calls for what Ronald Heifetz Taylor (1999) defines as courageous leadership, that is, the courage to see reality and help others see their realities: the realities of who they are, how they behave, what talents and skill sets they have or are missing in this global world, and what opportunities should be capitalized upon and seized. Leaders must be able to see and anticipate what skill sets are needed in the future, not just develop their employees’ skills for the moment. Goldsmith (2006).

Culturally intelligent leaders must create an environment where **diversity**⁵ and **culture**⁶ flourish, and where conflicting values can be safely expressed and explored through dialogue. Barry Salzberg, CEO of Deloitte, says that organizations and leaders must ask themselves the hard questions: Does our corporate culture really accept the differences it invites, and do we really embrace the different perspectives that come from increasing our commitment to recruiting? Salzberg (2008), p. 123. This type of perspective demands leaders who work toward transformation, or what Couto calls *citizen leaders*, “transforming leaders who engage others in efforts to reach higher levels of human awareness and relationships.” Couto (1995).

5. An instance of being composed of distinct and unlike elements or qualities, such as interests, people, ideas, perspectives, ability, and regions that can be visible or invisible.

6. The shared beliefs, values, and assumptions of a group of people who learn from one another and teach others that their attitudes, behaviors, and perspectives are the correct ways to think, act, and feel.

1.2 Importance of Leadership in a Global Economy

Over the years, leadership scholars have found in their studies that, when talking about the leadership process, culture matters. Koopman, Hartog, & Konrad (1999). In general, the leadership literature points to the critical need for cross-cultural and global leadership, especially given the pressing need to build networks and relationships Goldsmith, Greenberg, Robertson, & Hu-Chan (2003). and to create an appreciation for differences and similarities. Bennis noted that, although leadership competencies have remained the same, it is “our understanding of what it is and how it works and the ways in which people learn to apply it has shifted.” Bennis (1985), p. 3.

Leadership theories and models available thus far, while helpful in understanding leadership development, are inadequate paradigms for a full understanding of the changing nature of leadership in the 21st century. Goldsmith et al. Goldsmith et al. (2003), p. 7. argued for new forms of leadership that include thinking globally, appreciating **cultural diversity**⁷, developing technological savvy, building partnerships and alliances, and sharing leadership. Research into **cross-cultural leadership**⁸ revealed that understanding national cultures is critical to leadership development and that organizations must accept differing perceptions of leadership. Derr, Roussillon, & Bournois (2002), p. 298.

7. The cultural differences or variety of people in a group or an organization.
8. Leadership that focuses on understanding cultures within a global market.
9. A Western-based perspective of adopting a masculine point of view, either consciously or unconsciously.
10. A leadership approach that seeks to promote positive change in individuals, with the goal of creating permanent, inspirational change, including transforming followers into leaders.
11. A leadership approach in which a team member is tasked with authority over other team members, providing guidance and direction either on a permanent or an intermittent basis.

Leadership theories and programs that operate from a Western-based, **androcentric framework**⁹ hinder the shift that is required for understanding leadership on a broader level. Situational leadership theories, Northouse (2007), pp. 15–108. which focus on leadership traits, skills, and styles, are inadequate models in this regard because their basic foundation (understanding the individual as leader) implies a Western-based ideology of leadership that does not exist in many national cultures; therefore, the underlying concepts of this style of leadership do not always translate universally. Other theories, such as **transformational**¹⁰ and **team leadership**¹¹, emphasize the collective voice as essential yet neglect the cultural implications for leadership. Even cultures that share similar Western beliefs about organizational structure still operate differently based on their unique cultural contexts. Mutabazi (2002), p. 204.

In a global economy, it is becoming increasingly more important to understand the wants and needs of those we serve, that is, the internal and external stakeholders. Having awareness of this need means that leaders must be able to shape the culture of their organizations to address changing stakeholder needs. Edgar Schein noted that leaders can do this by having a “personal sense that they are the creation of the cultures of the countries, families, occupations, and reference groups, and that

culture plays a huge role in the capacities of their organization to form.”Schein (2006), p. 259. Culturally intelligent leaders need be strategic in aligning the culture of their organizations with the people who work in them. This **organizational culture**¹² becomes an advantage for leaders, making it easier for them to respond to external environmental factors, which include culture shifts.

Debbe KennedyKennedy (2008), pp. 35–40. proposed the following five qualities that leaders need in order to address and use cultural differences to the advantage of their organization:

- *Leaders must make diversity a priority.*
- *Leaders must get to know people and their differences.*
- *Leaders must enable rich communication.*
- *Leaders must make accountability a core value.*
- *Leaders must be able to establish mutualism as the final arbiter.*

These five characteristics I have seen as important differences between the ways that managers and leaders handle cultural conflicts and situations. Culturally intelligent leaders are those that elevate diversity to the top of organizational planning and view it as a critical factor to innovation and creativity. Innovation in diversity begins with a definition of diversity, which many organizations lack or have poorly articulated. If they do, diversity definitions are focused on race and ethnicity and do not explore the dynamic dimensions implicit in culture. In a 2007 study on diversity in the workplace, the Society of Human Resource Management *Human resource management guide* (n.d.). reported that only 30% of organizations have a shared definition of diversity in the workplace. However, 75% feel that diversity can be used to improve work and relationships. A focus for, and an articulation of, defining diversity and its importance in the work force can open dialogue for organizations.

Having culturally intelligent leaders in organizations matter because they help to develop a curiosity for differences in the workplace in employees. They help to provide access to information and intentionally gather cultural knowledge on a daily basis that will help them and others learn more about differences and the influence of differences in the workplace. Additionally, leaders can foster creativity and curiosity when they set aside some time, on a day-to-day basis, to practice and master their cultural intelligence skills.

12. The shared beliefs, assumptions, behaviors, and values that comprise an organization’s social and psychological environment.

When I have seen culturally intelligent leaders in action, they cultivate an environment of trust, which is critical when working with differences in the workplace. Patrick LencioniLencioni (2002). wrote that trust is a critical foundational element in interpersonal relationships. Leaders must be willing to be

vulnerable in intercultural interactions, openly admitting what they know and don't know about culture and cultural differences. They must be able to admit that they might not be able to resolve intercultural differences. By demonstrating vulnerability, a leader enables richer communication and creates an inviting space and environment for intercultural dialogue. In this situation, people are more willing to ask for help and to provide one another with constructive feedback; they take risks and learn to appreciate the differences in skills and style that each person brings to the work environment.

For diversity and culture to flourish in organizations, everyone in the workplace must hold each other accountable toward differences. My experiences working with leaders of different sectors, both formal and informal, have shown me that the creation of a mission and vision for diversity can only take an organization so far. Culturally Intelligent leaders create standards of accountability, explaining what is expected of each employee and of themselves in intercultural interactions.

As an example, I was brought in to facilitate a workshop about cultural differences for public sector employees. In this workshop, the city manager and a city council member were present; they wanted to demonstrate to their employees the importance of culture and their commitment to diversity in the city. At the end of the session, they stood up and addressed the participants, reminding them that the workshop they participated in was only one of many to come. Moreover, the city manager and city council member told the employees that they would do whatever it took to ensure that everyone was held accountable for delivering culturally relevant services to the department's clients. In this way, "Putting differences to work is greatly enhanced when personal responsibility is a common thread woven tightly into everyone's fabric." Kennedy (2008).

When everyone is held accountable for their choices and behaviors in an intercultural workplace, there is a higher level of respect and trust among workers. Everyone is encouraged to perform his or her best and to hold themselves to the highest standards in working with each other. Intercultural conflicts still occur, but the responses to these conflicts from individuals are different.

Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal Bolman & Deal (2008). wrote that organizations are a coalition of individuals and groups with different interests, preferences, and beliefs. The differences among individuals and groups can change, but this usually occurs very slowly. Leaders must be able to identify mutual interests, values, and beliefs in order to create a culture of mutual **interdependence**¹³. Because conflict is unavoidable, and often necessary, it is best for leaders to create a picture of mutual dependence that is both beneficial and progressive for employees.

13. The connections and relationships between, among, and within systems, including cultural, political, legal, social, economic, and familial.

Leadership matters even more when cultures are intertwined in the workplace. Leadership and culture are like two pieces of rope. On their own, they can be used to bundle objects, connect one thing to another, and even support weight. When threaded and intertwined, they do all of these things but are much stronger and have less chances of being snapped. A rope is firm and strong yet flexible and pliable. Because change is constant, leaders can use their cultural intelligence to steer organizations, and those they lead, toward finding innovative strategies and solutions to intercultural issues.

Like an anthropologist, culturally intelligent leaders explore, discover, and find cultural artifacts in their business environment that are both barriers to, and promoters of, growth. A culturally intelligent leader will accomplish this from an “outsider” perspective while keeping his or her “insider” perspective in line. Ronald Heifetz (1994) says that one should take a leap to get a balcony perspective when one has been on the dance floor too long; this enables one to see a bigger picture of what is really going on in the intercultural business workplace. Reminding yourself that what you see is only one perspective of a bigger picture can help you to pay attention to what you did not notice or what you cannot see. Cultural intelligence requires leaders to take a critical role in guiding different values in order to bring them into alignment with the business. However, leaders need not do this alone; in fact, they should invite and encourage members to assist in addressing diversity and then challenge them to be culturally intelligent as well.

1.3 Chapter Summary

- Culturally intelligent leaders are change-focused and change-ready. They anticipate different scenarios for change and enable their organizations and people to embrace change.
- Many leadership scholars differentiate between management and leadership and managers and leaders.
- Managers are responsible for controlling, coordinating, planning, and organizing. Leaders are people who inspire, motivate, unite people, and create visions for the future.
- Cultural intelligence requires leadership and leaders, not management and managers.
- Historically, leadership theories and frameworks are based on Western ideologies and perspectives.
- Leadership theories and frameworks must incorporate a global perspective that considers differences in perceptions of leadership and leaders.
- Leaders must be able to create cultures where differences thrive. They may accomplish this by: making diversity a priority, getting to know people and their differences, enabling trust, holding each person accountable for differences, and establishing mutual interdependence.
- Leadership and culture are intertwined like two halves of a rope threaded together. At times, leaders must be able to step away from what they are experiencing to understand the full impact of culture on leadership.