

# The Global Leader's Journey: Success Strategies for Navigating the New World of Work



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# The Global Leader's Journey

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## The Global Leader's Journey: Success Strategies for Navigating the New World of Work

Globalization seems like a recent phenomenon to us, but in reality it has been around for a long time. Christopher Columbus was one of the first true “global” leaders. In the late fourteen hundreds he persuaded two of the venture capitalists of his day, King Ferdinand and Queen Isabella of Spain, to fund a risky and seemingly foolhardy venture that involved sailing west to find India in the east. As we now know, not everything went as planned. New and interesting opportunities did present themselves however, and Columbus' adventures in the New World received several more rounds of funding. On his fourth voyage, he found himself stranded while exploring the Caribbean. His error wasn't one of navigation but rather the limitations of the technology of his day. His worm-eaten ship was leaking so badly that it had to be beached for repairs in what is now known as St. Anne's Bay, Jamaica. He was stranded there with his men for over a year, waiting for his lieutenant's ship to return with assistance.

Columbus was dealing with many challenges common to today's global leaders. Initially the local inhabitants had welcomed captain and crew with great kindness, and opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges ensued. But over time, employee moral deteriorated. Survey results on board ship - which had not been great even upon arrival - reached an all time low. The physical situation meant that there were no problems with employee retention, but employee engagement was another thing. The sailors' poor moral caused their behavior to worsen, severely impacting their relationships with the locals. This might not have been such a serious problem except for the fact that in an early example of outsourcing, Columbus had contracted with the locals for food and fresh water for the employee cafeteria. Finally things got so bad and the behavior of the sailors so offended the locals, they cut off the ship's food supply. It took Christopher Columbus more than traditional navigational skills and vendor management techniques to get out of the situation. A long way from HQ, facing an unexpected crisis, he had to call upon his personal understanding of the local culture and the creative use of his own technology toolkit to solve the problem.

Columbus' global leadership challenges may appear different on the surface, but his story provides an early example of what defines a global leader and what makes global leadership different and much more difficult. In this article we will explore:

- what it means to be a global leader
- organizational strategies for selecting and developing global leaders, and
- personal challenges that navigating the global leadership landscape can create.

## What is a Global Leader?

In their book *The Lessons of International Experience: Developing Global Leaders*, Morgan McCall Jr. and George Hollenbeck describe the global leader as someone who does global work and has a global mindset.

What is global work? McCall and Hollenbeck list four primary characteristics of a global job:

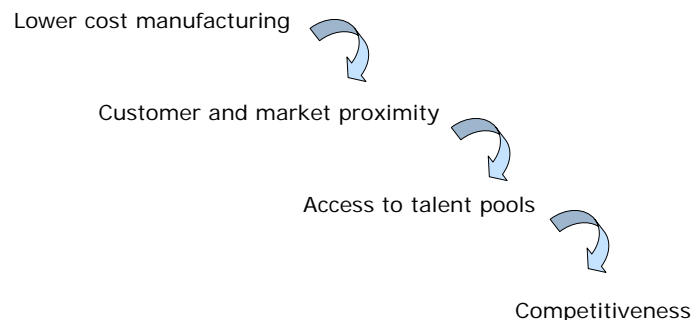
- Includes both business complexity and cultural complexity
- Is physically and psychologically a long way from headquarters
- Crosses multiple borders
- Outside the home country of the leader



Developing a global mindset requires more than a global job that crosses country borders. It also requires crossing cultural borders by *living* as well as *working* outside one's home country. It's the deep emergence in another culture that requires us to re-evaluate basic assumptions we make about ourselves and about other people. The global leader with a global mindset has been transformed, has extended their perspective, become more cosmopolitan, and changed their "cognitive maps" from the inside out.

## What's Different and More Difficult About Global Leadership?

From a business perspective, going global has always been about competitive advantage. What started as a search for lower cost manufacturing quickly morphed into the additional need for proximity to customers and markets.



The latest challenge is the global war for talent. Economist Richard Florida calls the most valued workers the creative class – skilled individuals ranging from money managers to makeup artists, software programmers to steadicam operators. In *Flight of the Creative Class*, Florida describes the global competition to attract these workers, workers

who decide first where they want to live and secondly who they want to work for. The new generation of workers, Gen Y, offer a whole new set of challenges and in the end will probably be “game changers” in terms of both the how and whys of global leadership.

Secondly, business is business, but the cultural context has a profound impact on *how* business is done. As Christopher Columbus learned so long ago, business is far less predictable in an international setting — and can be culture specific.

Finally, leadership looks different in different parts of the world. Global leaders spend their days working with other leaders who have significantly different and varied approaches to leadership. Global leaders lead people who may also have radically different and unanticipated expectations of what leaders do and how they do it.



Putting all the pieces of the global leadership puzzle together is not an easy task. How companies select and develop global leaders requires a more systemic and strategic approach than many organizations are accustomed to.

Aspiring global leaders themselves need to make some important and potentially difficult decisions in terms of their own career growth and trajectory. Global careers have more hazards and traps than local ones, and individuals need to consider which opportunities they want to pursue and which they do not.

### *Recent Research on Leadership and Culture*

A lot of the research on global leadership is anecdotal or autobiographical in nature. The quantitative research that does exist often includes only a small number of subjects. That is why a ten year study of cultural differences in leadership practices completed in 2007 by Dr. Rob Kabacoff, Vice President of Research and Development at Management Research Group (MRG), is so interesting and compelling. MRG has been in the assessment business for over 30 years and has a global data base that includes over 800,000 leaders (see [www.mrg.com](http://www.mrg.com)). The 2007 study tapped into this vast data base and included:

- 50,364 leaders in 20 countries
- 6,000+ organizations in 30 industries
- Self assessments using MRG's Leadership Effectiveness Analysis™ leadership model and assessment tools. (360 degree data are also available, but only the self data is included here.)

The self assessments in the study are based on the MRG Leadership Effectiveness Analysis™ model which measures six key functions of the leadership role on 22 specific behaviors:



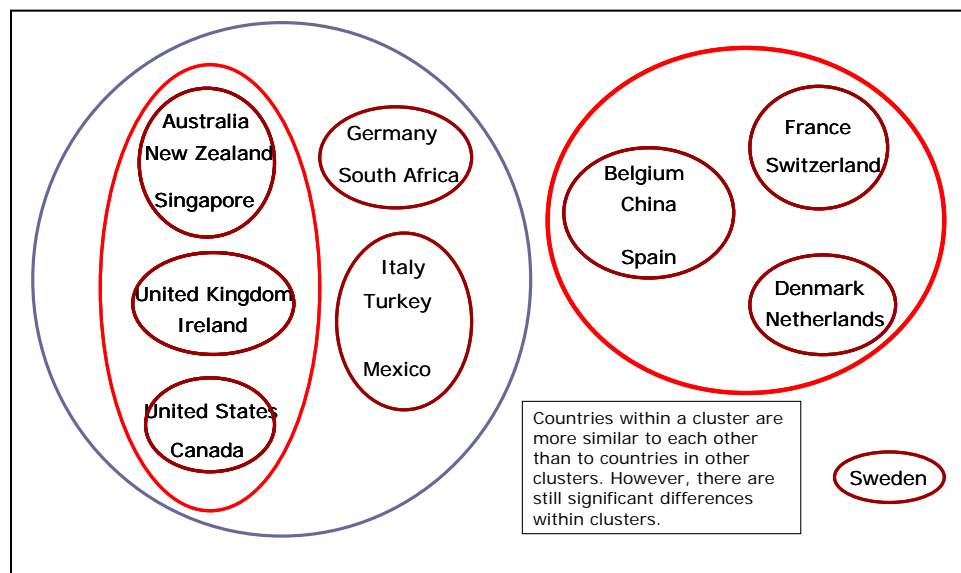
The assessments measure the amount of time and energy the leader gives to each of the 22 behaviors in carrying out their day-to-day responsibilities. It does not measure the individual's skill level or the importance of each behavior to their role.

When looking at this data it is important to remember that we are not measuring cultural differences *per se*, but rather how leaders from different cultures approach the leadership role and how much emphasis or lack of emphasis they place on the 22 behaviors included in the MRG model.

Kabacoff's research posed two questions:

- How do leaders in different countries approach the leadership role?
- In what ways are their approaches similar and in what ways different?

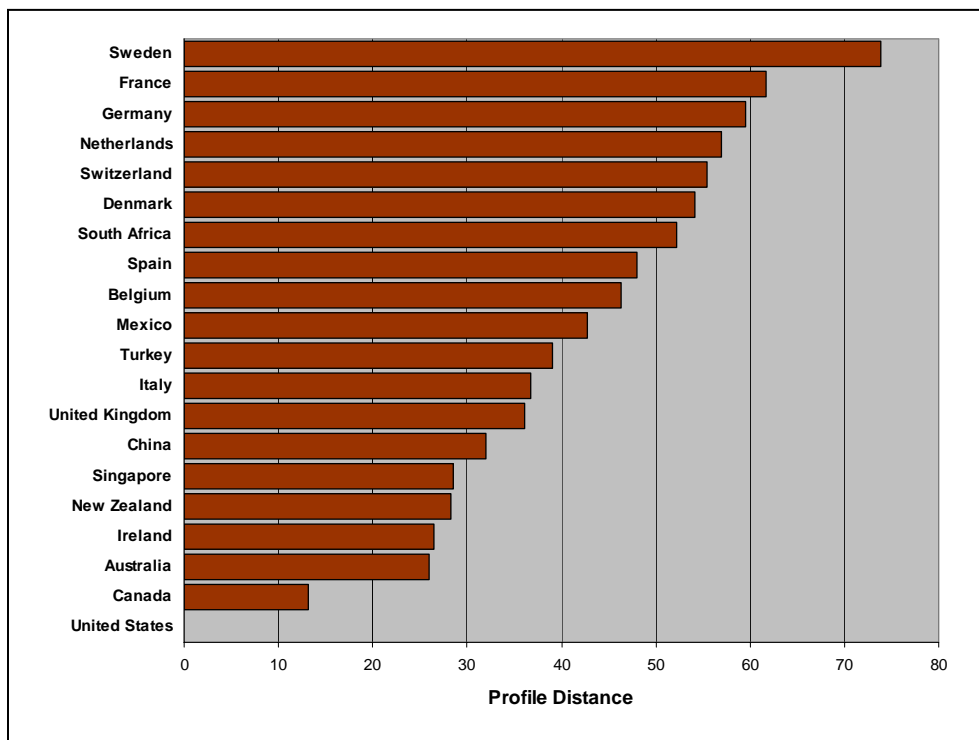
We will look at the second question first.



When comparing leadership approach on the 22 behaviors in the model, key similarities and differences between and among countries emerged. Leaders in countries within a circle or set of circles are more similar to each other, and leaders in countries outside the circle(s) have a more dissimilar approach.

The results of Kabacoff's analysis provide some surprises. The fact that leaders from the United States and Canada, or for that matter the U.K. and Ireland, approach their leadership roles in a similar way would probably be expected by most of us. Even the connection between France and Switzerland makes a certain amount of sense. But few of us would predict the constellation of Belgium, China and Spain or Italy, Turkey and Mexico. It is interesting to note that Swedish leaders are alone in their circle, having a completely unique approach to the leadership role that does not correlate with any of the other countries included in the study.

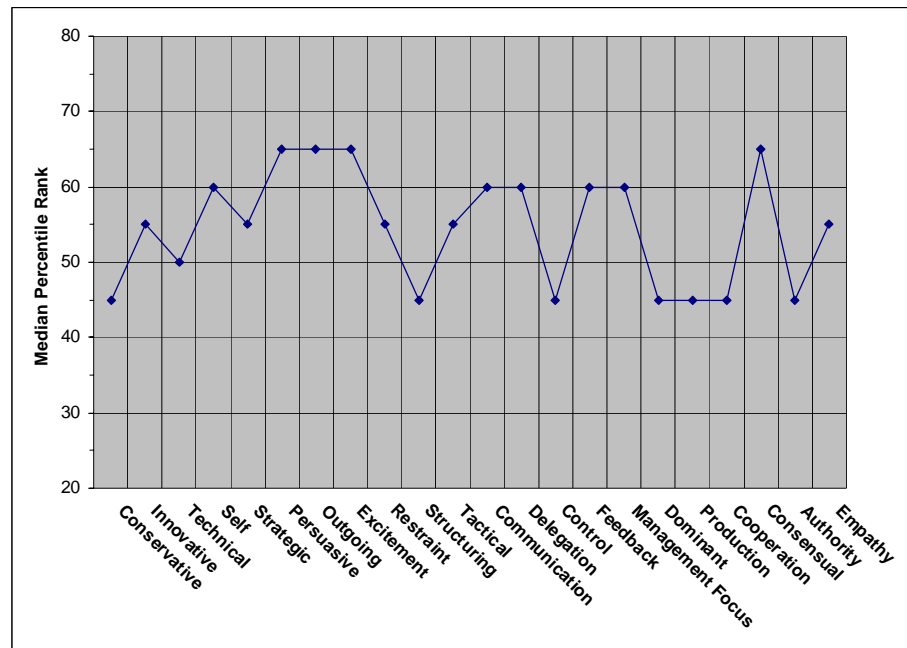
Next let's look at how leaders from different cultures are different from each other. Here Kabacoff used the U.S. leadership style as the basis for comparison. The following chart shows the degree of difference from the U.S. leadership style of the leaders in the 19 other countries.



As you can see, Canadian leaders are most like U.S. leaders and Swedish leaders are the least like them. Let's take a closer look at a few of these comparisons just to see how different leadership style can be across cultures.

## United Kingdom

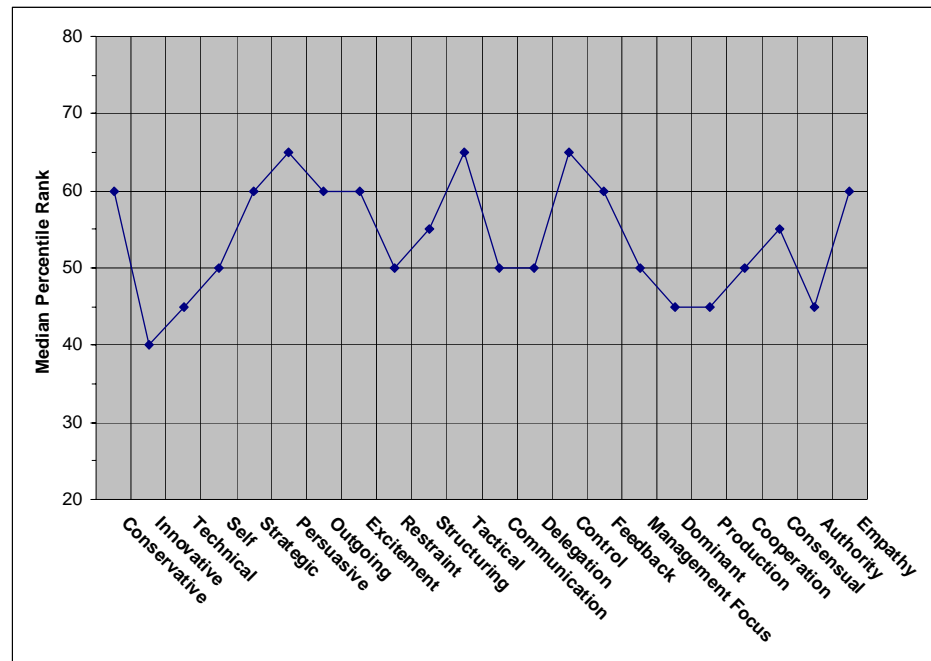
The comparison of U.S. and U.K. leaders is a good example of the need to avoid assumptions in the global context. Based on a common language, and an inter-connected historical, legal, and educational framework, you might expect U.S. and U.K. leaders to be similar in approach and style. However, students of country culture have long described the U.S. and the U.K. as “two peoples separated by a common language.” Kabacoff’s data on leadership culture would certainly support that dictum. Leaders in China and Singapore have a more similar style to the U.S. than do those in the U.K. In the following graph the median U.S. leader is represented at the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile rank. The blue line signifies the median U.K. leader and the degree of difference between the U.K. approach and the U.S. approach on the 22 behaviors in the MRG model. We won’t go into any detailed data analysis here, but suffice it to say that statistically these differences (anything over 10 percent) are huge and would be observable in day-to-day interactions.



Measuring above the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile, the U.K. leaders are far more likely to approach their leadership role in an open, friendly, and energetic manner than would their U.S. counterparts. They also spend far more time communicating in general, including selling their views to others, being clear about expectations and giving feedback on whether or not their expectations are met. They spend more time actively soliciting the ideas and inputs of others. Measuring below the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile, the U.K. leaders are less oriented toward being structured, driving for results, or respecting those in authority.

## China

Even though Chinese leaders had fewer differences to U.S. leaders than their U.K. counterparts had, there are still major differences in style. In general, Chinese leaders could be described as more analytical and less prone to taking direct action. They are less innovative and willing to take risks, but far more oriented toward considering the lessons of the past and thinking about the implications for the future when making decisions. They are also less likely to make independent decisions and then drive hard for results in a competitive manner – they would be more likely to solicit the ideas and input of others and create an inclusive decision making framework. The Chinese leadership style is also more persuasive, outgoing, energetic and friendly than the U.S. style.



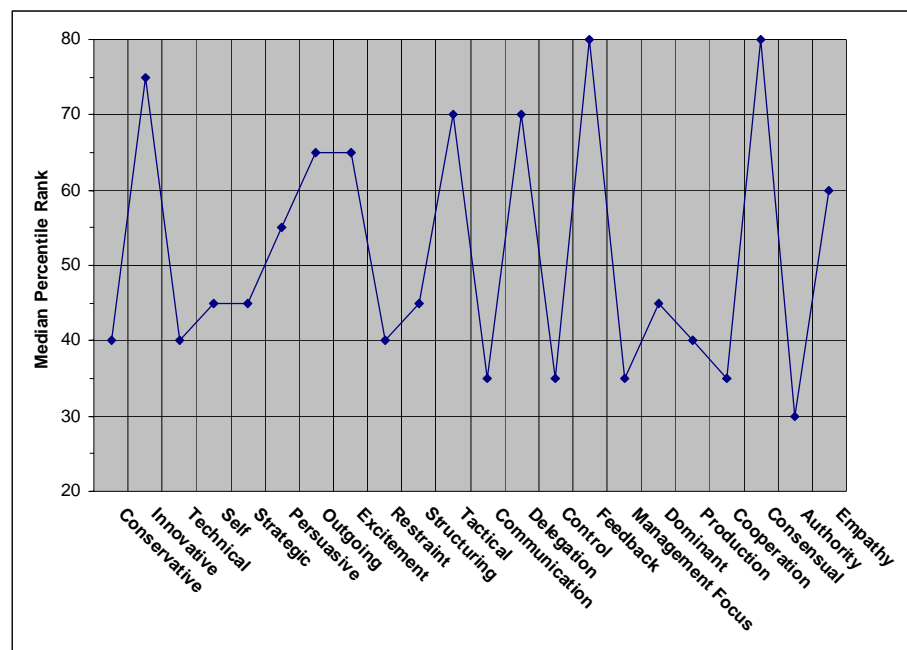
China is a large and diverse country going through significant change. It will be interesting to see if their leadership approach changes as Chinese managers and employees shift to a more transparent, Western capitalist mode. It should be noted that a third of the Chinese leaders in this study were from Hong Kong, a third from Beijing and a third from Shanghai. There may also be some interesting differences among and between those three groups that were beyond the scope of study.

## Sweden

If you asked U.S. employees if they would like to work for a Swedish manager, probably most would not be sure what to answer. But if you asked them if they would like to work for a manager with the following characteristics, many if not most would give you a resounding “yes”:

- Innovative, open to new ideas and willing to take risks
- Outgoing and enthusiastic
- Excited by and engaged in the work
- Able to delegate accountability and responsibility
- Inclusive in the decision making process
- Frequently providing feedback on performance
- Actively seeking the ideas and input of others
- Empathetic, establish supportive relationships

Swedish managers are significantly different from U.S. managers on almost all leadership dimensions. They are less restrained, spend less time structuring and controlling the work of subordinates, and are far less apt to defer to individuals in positions of authority. They are far more



innovative, open to change, and inclusive in their leadership style. In fact, Swedish leaders are different than U.S. leaders in every way possible.

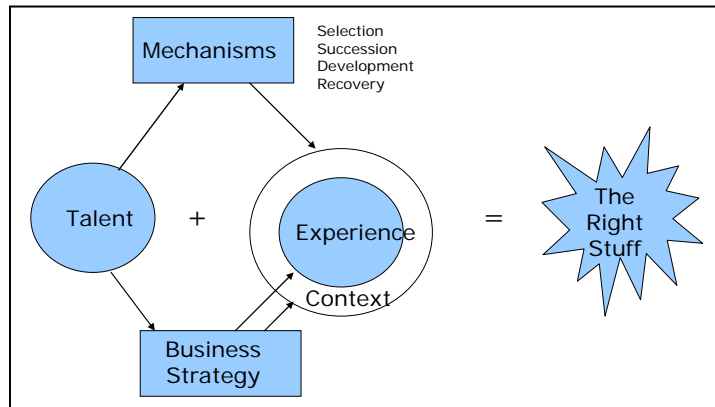
The MRG data supports the groundbreaking work of Fons Trompenaars. In the early 90s, Trompenaars was one of the first to assess how country culture can impact business culture. His research also identified the Swedish corporate culture as unique and Swedish leaders as innovative, co-creative managers who lead by example and engagement.

### *Strategies for Developing Global Leaders*

Given the complexities, what can individuals and organizations do to develop the next generation of global leaders? McCall and Hollenbeck found that "...the available research on the development of global executives is relatively sparse. If the literature agrees on anything, it is that experience is the primary vehicle for developing global leadership

skills.” They propose a model for just such development including four key factors: talent, mechanisms, business strategy and experience.

Let’s start by looking at the Business Strategy component of the model.



The McCall/Hollenbeck Model

## Business Strategy

The first lens for understanding the global leadership requirements of an organization is the **business strategy**. There are three key questions the organization needs to answer:

- How many executives of what kinds and of what mix of nationalities will be needed?
- What lessons will these executives need to learn?
- What kinds of experiences are available to teach those lessons?

## Experience

The next challenge is to define and create the **global development experiences** required, keeping in mind that “challenging experiences force people to learn new things; bland experiences don’t.” Global experiences can take many forms including:

- Foundation Assignments – experiences on which later experiences are built
- Major Line Assignments – significant business situations where the individual is in charge
- Shorter-Term Experiences – special projects, consulting roles, and staff advisory jobs are common, but major educational experiences, negotiations, or stints at headquarters might also be used
- Perspective Changing Experiences – which include culture shock, career shifts, changes in scope or scale, family or personal challenges, or dealing with a crisis

Even if the organization can identify and create the opportunities, there are still significant challenges. A joint study by Mercer and Oliver Wyman found that issues of filling vacancies were most frequently problems

around mobility. One reason can be management's reluctance to part with their talent for the greater good. Structuring incentives so managers are rewarded for developing and promoting staff is critical.

Getting employees to make major moves and take on the significant risks of global assignments for the good of the company and for their own development can also be a challenge. The common advice is to move people as early in their career as possible, before they have a lot of personal commitments and in plenty of time for the organization to reap the benefits of their new global perspective. Sheila Curran, Executive Director of the Duke University Career Center, suggests that people start early. At many of the top schools like Duke, Tufts or Brown, over a third of the junior class take the opportunity to complete part of their education outside the United States. One senior high tech global executive in the Silicon Valley recommends catching mobile staff early in their careers, preparing them for work life in the "global campus" of today's organizations. APL, who has been in the global shipping business for over 150 years, uses their commitment to global opportunities as a key university recruiting tool.



The focus does not need to be just on the younger worker. MORE Magazine, designed for women over 40, suggests that "going global" can be a perfect way to shake up your career. In their December 2007 issue, they devoted a whole article on the career rewards of "exporting yourself" with an overseas assignment.

Even though mobility might be easier for the pre-nesters and the empty-nesters, there are some assignments that will require more senior experienced executives to handle. Those moves may require that family and other personal commitments be taken into account. This will mean greater challenges for both the executive and the organization to put the right package together.

## **Mechanisms**

In order to respond to the opportunities, pitfalls and obstacles of global development, organizations need to have the right, and rigorous, **mechanisms** in place for global leadership development. These include selection, succession, development and recovery schemes. Succession and recovery go beyond the scope of this article. But we will take a much deeper look at selection and development of global leaders.

## *Metrics for Selection*

How do we know who will be successful in the global leadership arena? Are there attributes we can look for in selecting individuals for global development? A piece of the answer is going to be very specific to your industry, your company's strategy and culture, and the countries where

your company wants to do business. But at a high level, there are some things you can be thinking about.

Cynthia Barnum, an international consultant who has personally lived and worked in seven different countries, would argue that global leaders select themselves; that going global is a mindset change that occurs from the inside out and includes four steps:

- Recognizing that the global community already exists
- Deciding that you want to join it
- Committing yourself to the adaptation process
- Learning the global business culture

For Barnum, “The global business community is just like any other community, only it’s newer and more complex. It has a particular set of values, attitudes, and behaviors that distinguish its members from any purely local or national culture..... members of the global business community can recognize each other.”

McCall and Hollenbeck’s research identified four “mega-competencies” for global leaders that map back fairly directly to Barnum’s approach. Global leaders:

- Are willing to pay the price of admission
- Have a sense of adventure
- Learn more
- Take learning to heart

## Leading in a Diverse Environment

Is there any way to predict who might work well across country and cultural boundaries? Are there specific leadership characteristics or behaviors correlated with effectively working in a diverse environment? Can we identify leaders who are more likely to be effective with people from different backgrounds, cultures, belief systems, and/or lifestyles? To answer this question, we will turn once again to the MRG global data base. In a separate study, Rob Kabacoff looked at 43,837 managers and executives from 20 countries. Based on 360 feedback (boss, peers and direct reports) he found that the following behaviors were the best indicators of leadership effectiveness in a diverse environment. In order of relative importance the top five leadership behaviors are:

**Empathy** – demonstrating an active concern for people and forming supportive relationships with others

**Cooperation** – accommodating the needs and interests of others, being willing to defer your own objectives to assist colleagues with theirs

**Consensual** – valuing the ideas and opinions of others and collecting their input as part of your decision-making process

**Self (lower score)** – having a more inclusive decision making style, less likely to feel that they have the only answer to a question

**Strategic** – taking a long-range, broad approach to problem solving and decision making through objective analysis, thinking ahead and planning

The key message here seems to be “we” vs. “me”.

How do we develop the sensitivity necessary to work across and with multiple cultures? Cynthia Barnum offers a three-step program for developing this particular global competence:

- First Perspective: understand *your* perceptions of yourself
- Second Perspective: understand *their* perceptions of you and your culture
- Third Perspective: understand *their perceptions of each other*

In other words, we can only understand others by viewing the world through multiple cultural lenses, not just our own.

### *Metrics for Development*

Once we have selected individuals for the global leadership path, are there leadership capabilities that will be more important than others in the global business arena? Are there specific leadership capabilities that are correlated with effectiveness *across* cultures. Kabacoff looked at whether there were specific leadership behaviors that would distinguish the most effective executives no matter what their country of origin or current cultural context. He dipped back into the MRG data base, this time selecting 1,199 senior executives (CEOs, Presidents, and SVPs) from 15 countries and 400 organizations. Once again based on 360 feedback, Kabacoff found some common denominators for the successful global executive. The top five leadership behaviors most likely to increase a leader’s effectiveness across cultures (in order of importance):

**Strategic** – taking a long-range, broad approach to problem solving and decision making through objective analysis, thinking ahead and planning

**Communication** – stating clearly what you want and expect from others; clearly expressing your thoughts and ideas; maintaining a constant flow of information

**Excitement** – operating with a good deal of energy, intensity and emotional expression; having a capacity for keeping others enthusiastic and involved

**Persuasive** – building commitment by convincing others and winning them over to your point of view

**Technical** – acquiring and maintaining in-depth knowledge in your field or area of focus; using your expertise and specialized knowledge to study issues and draw conclusions

The data paints a picture of the successful global executive as a person who knows what they are talking about, has a clear vision of where they are going and why, and can get others excited by sharing the journey with them. If we go back to the beginning, we can appreciate that Christopher Columbus' innovative view of what was possible, his ability to sell that vision, and his navigational skills to get there, were critical to his success as one of the first global leaders.

## **Derailment**

The reasons global leaders get derailed are similar to those that would derail any leader anywhere. The difference in the global arena is the complexity of both the business and the people environment. There is also a higher price tag for derailment in a global assignment for both the individual and the organization. The global leader may not even be aware of what the pitfalls or roadblocks might be, or how to read the messages in the environment that he or she is headed in the wrong direction. They may find themselves a long way from home and operating without the support networks, mentors, and subtle cultural "cues" they are used to having.

Research indicates that the universal fatal flaws that derail even the most talented global executives include:

- Failure to learn or to adapt to change
- Bungled relationships with key people, or underestimating the importance of relationships in getting things done
- Believing that what made them successful in the past will make them successful in the new environment
- Failure to take needed actions or to deliver on promises
- Failure to ask for help
- Narrow or parochial perspective
- Lack of people skills
- Loss of contact with the rest of the company
- Select ineffective people

## **Managing a Global Career**

Organizations need to build the systems and processes that will allow them to successfully identify, grow and develop global leaders. But the organization can only do so much. Individuals need to understand that the ultimate responsibility for their career lies with them. Once an individual has decided they want to be part of the global business

community and play a leadership role in that community, there are many paths to get there.



Life experiences are the best crucibles for development, but other experiences can also work. The important thing is that these experiences occur in the global arena. Culture shock is the unique global experience, and lessons of culture are the unique global lessons.

Those who get the important experiences will learn the important lessons; those who do not, won't.

### *About the Author*

**Helen Peters, M.A.**, heads the Leadership Development Practice for Torchiana Mastrov & Sapiro, a leading San Francisco Bay Area provider of Executive Search, Leadership Development and Career Management services. She has over ten years of experience as an executive coach and leadership development expert working within a large multinational company and as an independent business manager and consultant.

Ms. Peters has over twenty years of business management experience, with significant international experience in IT, Human Resources, and General Management, including living and working in Europe for over five years. She has conducted published research and speaks regularly on a wide range of leadership topics including keys to leadership effectiveness, cross-cultural issues in leadership, and leadership and gender. Helen co-developed and continues to be an active participant in the HR Leadership Program, Executive Development Center at the Leavey School of Business, Santa Clara University.



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