

Crossing the Cultural Divide: A Leadership Challenge in a Globalizing World

By Shane Sokoll



My neighbor John, originally from India, works as a project manager for a U.S.-based high-tech company that has offices in over 50 countries. John lives in Texas, while currently leading a data-migration project for a customer in Germany. He assembled a team of employees from within his company to work on the project. The team members reside in the U.S., Brazil and Europe, and they work from their own homes located in their respective nations. In the book *The World Is Flat*, New

York Times' journalist Thomas Friedman describes the phenomena in which John lives. Friedman documents ten developments in the 21st century that allow individuals and organizations to interact on a global platform never experienced before in history (Friedman & Wyman, 2006). John's story clearly demonstrates that oceans and mountains no longer separate us.

Organizations with cross-border teams such as John's are increasingly common, which is escalating the need for leaders with cross-cultural competencies. In 2008 The Center for Applied Behavioral Research at Development Dimensions International (DDI) conducted a survey of 13,700 leaders around the world. According to DDI's Global Leadership Forecast 2008/2009, "HR professionals in all organizations estimated that one in five leaders (20 percent) has multinational responsibilities" (Howard & Wellins, 2009, p. 28). Leaders that were polled by DDI listed "being able to read cultural nuances and adapt one's leadership style accordingly" as the second most important skill needed for managing across international borders (Howard & Wellins, 2009, p.28). Although many of the physical barriers that once divided us are being removed, the challenge remains of bridging the cultural divide between people groups in order to successfully work together.

Ethnocentrism: An Uncommon Word for a Common Tendency

An initial step towards developing cross-cultural competencies is to look inward. Ethnocentrism, the tendency to view life and the world from only one set of eyes – our own, is a barrier to successful global leadership. As members of the society in which we live, our shared values, beliefs, and behavioral norms are often taken for granted (Evans, Pucik, & Björkman, 2011, p. 96). The Merriam-Webster dictionary explains ethnocentrism as “the tendency to interpret or evaluate other cultures in terms of one's own” (*Merriam-Webster unabridged*, 2005). Assessing others through our own values, customs, language, norms, expectations, and rules has caused many conflicts and difficulties for leaders in multinational environments. Leaders and organizations who aspire to succeed in the international arena must take an honest look at themselves. Identifying one's own ethnocentric tendencies lays the foundation to begin the transformation process of developing cross-cultural competencies.

Cross-Cultural Transformation

If you are feeling a little uneasy about your ethnocentrism at this point in the article, be assured that your experience is common and part of the transformational process. One month after graduating from college, I began working in a foreign-based organization far from home. Being enthusiastic about living abroad, I thrust myself into the cultural mix of a vastly different world. However, a few months later, I often thought of returning home because living in a foreign land with “foreigners” was well - “foreign”. People search for safe zones - a familiar place where we know the rules and “everyone knows our name,”- like the theme song of the 1980s hit television sitcom “Cheers” so clearly portrays. In fact, the song had to go through its own cross-cultural transformation, before it ever aired on NBC (Porter).

Gary Porter, one of the writers, shares that the producers “wanted the opening words of their theme song to “strike” a larger, more universal cord than it initially did.... [They] were adamant about wanting the lyrics for their opening credits to be less specific and more ‘global’ in nature” (Porter). The sitcom is based in a bar called “Cheers” located in the city of Boston, but the production team understood that their audience must reach far beyond New England in order to remain on the air. Being from Massachusetts and a dedicated hometown baseball fan, the next part of the story is somewhat unnerving. In response to the producers’ wishes, Gary and his co-song writer swapped the phrase of “Red Sox” for “home teams,” so that even New York Yankee fans could identify with the line, “Singing the blues when the home teams lose” (Porter). Even a Red Sox fan, who might not be happy about the song's change, can appreciate the wisdom and cross-cultural approach of the producers.

The Cheers Song & Our World

The Cheers story demonstrates timely principles for reaching a vast audience far beyond one's individual and organizational "world". Influencing and leading individuals outside of one's own national borders requires the inclusion of their cultural interests, values, and norms as we develop global strategies to achieve organizational objectives. The book titled, *The Global Challenge*, presents an international business case about the U.S.-based company Lincoln Electric, which effectively illustrates this principle. Lincoln Electric has enjoyed much fame across the U.S. due to its strategic operations and ability to maintain a highly motivated workforce that produces at levels far above the industry average. The company experienced exponential growth and prosperity for over 70 years. However, when it attempted to enter the global market, its rapid expansion into Asia, Europe and Latin American failed miserably (Evans et al., 2011, pp. 43).

According to the case, many of the human resource management practices that motivated Lincoln's U.S. workforce were not culturally adaptable or even legal in some countries (Evans et al., 2011). The failed global expansion produced an "aha" experience for the company's executive team as they were confronted with their ethnocentrism and need for cross-cultural competencies. In order to achieve the same success on a global scale that the company had come to expect at home would require a transformation. Lincoln retracted most of its international initiatives. The next 10 years were spent evaluating the lessons learned from their expansion attempts and developing leaders with cross-cultural competencies. When Lincoln entered the global arena a second time, now as a transformed organization, they were able to achieve record profits similar to their U.S. operations. Individual and organizational transformation was needed for global leadership success (Evans et al., 2011, p. 43).

The World is Flatter – Barriers Still to Cross

Yes, many of the physical obstacles to cross-border interaction and global organizational expansion have been removed. However, as we now have access to one another, there is still much to learn regarding cross-cultural collaboration. Individuals and organizations brave enough to travel the exploration path of self-awareness and other-awareness, have the potential to reach new heights of achievement and success. Who will embrace humility, commitment, time, patience and inclusion of others and their cultures in order to become transformed, effective global leaders? The world of the 21st Century awaits leaders with cross-cultural competencies.

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About the author:

Shane is currently a faculty member at Concordia University Texas in the city of Austin where he teaches and serves as Director of the Bachelor of Arts Degree in Human Resource Management. He is presently working on a PhD in Organizational Leadership with a major in Human Resource Development from Regent University. As volunteers, Shane and his family assist international students at the University of Texas by helping them to learn about and successfully interact with Americans and U.S. culture.

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