

Leading in a Multicultural Context

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Introduction

The “global community” has become a standard part of our vocabulary over the past two decades. Almost everyone now accepts that we will interact with people from many cultures routinely in our daily lives. However, the connection between culture and leadership has not been as widely acknowledged. The need for leaders who can cross cultural boundaries is growing. In his book Global Literacies: Lessons on Business Leadership and National Cultures, Robert Rosen reports on interviews with one hundred leaders of major corporations in 17 countries. When asked what factors would predict success for a company in the twenty-first century, the top two responses were (1) developing leaders and (2) competence in multicultural settings. At Franklin College we decided to pursue the challenge of developing a multicultural leadership course for our traditional, homogeneous student population.

Leadership Course

Funding from the Ball Brothers Foundation Venture Fund enabled us to bring together experts from seven cultures, Russian, Norwegian, Taiwanese, Hispanic American, African American, and Native American, as well as the dominant American culture to examine the differing assumptions about leadership in these cultures. Further funding from Ameritech enabled us to develop a technologically advanced course that included video-conferencing and virtual world simulations as teaching tools. The purpose of this paper is to provide an overview of the connections between leadership and culture and a brief discussion of the classroom experience.

Cultural Framework

Understanding culture requires looking at the basic assumptions that a group of people make about their lives, their relationships, and their environment. To help students recognize these assumptions the cultural framework developed by Geert Hofstede in his book Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind was chosen. (Aspects of other frameworks were also introduced such as Trompenaars & Turner in Riding the Waves of Culture and Wilson, Hoppes & Sayles in Managing Across Cultures: A Learning Framework.) Hofstede’s framework includes four dimensions: individual/collective; power distance; uncertainty avoidance; and tough/tender. A brief explanation of each of these follows.

The individual/collective dimension examines the source of identity for people, the value placed on the person as opposed to the group. “Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.” (Hofstede, 51)

The second dimension of the cultural framework concerns the “orientation to authority” (Wilson, Hoppe, Sayles, 12) in a society. In societies with a large power distance, everyone accepts that there is inequality in the world and there will be status differences between people. Hence, rulers are entitled to special privileges and in return they provide security for the people. By contrast, societies with a small power distance, believe in the equality of all people.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to a society’s “response to ambiguity.” (Wilson, Hoppe, Sayles, 15) It can “be defined as *the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations.*” (Hofstede, 113) In societies with strong uncertainty avoidance people prefer structure and rules to govern their organizations and relationships. Change causes anxiety and is not considered desirable.

The final cultural dimension considered relates to attitudes towards achievement. This is referred to by Hofstede as masculine/feminine orientation and by Wilson, Hoppe & Sayles as tough/tender. “Tough” cultures value competition, achievement, challenge and recognition whereas, “tender” cultures are more concerned with relationships and achieving a balance in life.

Leadership Framework

At the same time that this course was being created, the Franklin College faculty developed and adopted a framework for leadership-themed courses for freshmen as a graduation requirement. The four aspects of leadership, which the faculty chose to emphasize, were vision, power, decision making, and conflict resolution. (In addition the freshmen courses include the history of leadership theory and the connection between leadership and the liberal arts.)

In studying the role of vision in leadership, the development of the vision, the content of the vision, and the articulation of the vision are important. Power is a central feature of leadership. The sources of power, the uses of power, the extent to which power is shared determine the success of a leader. One key role of leaders in all societies is to make decisions for the group. Studying the process of decision-making includes who is included in the process, the collection of data, the generation and examination of alternatives, the role of values, and the role of logic and intuition. Finally, leaders must often resolve conflicts, both within their group and between their group and other entities. The attitudes toward conflict, the preferred responses to conflict and the techniques for resolution vary from society to society.

Connections Between the Frameworks

There are multiple ways in which the cultural assumptions affect the four leadership dimensions. For example, in collective cultures people seldom think of their own individual vision, rather they are focused on the family or the organization. Their personal prospects are subordinated to the good of the group so an exercise in formulating personal mission statements will seem unimportant or unnecessary. In the book Intercultural Interactions: A Practical Guide there is a case study where a Frenchman turns down a promotion because it would require leaving the country. His Japanese employer is bewildered because it is not appropriate for the Frenchman “to place his personal inclinations above those of his role as an employee of the company.” (Cushner & Brislin, p. 158) It is also often the case that individuals in community oriented cultures will prefer to avoid conflict and will seek to collaborate, whereas individualistic cultures create people who enjoy competition and will openly and easily challenge anyone’s ideas.

Assumptions about power distance also determine an individual’s definition of a “good” leader. In high power distance countries, ascribed positional power is more likely to be respected than achieved or expert power. Decisions in high power distance countries are made by those who have the power. It is the role of their followers to support them and work to make their decisions successful. Individuals in low power distance countries are more likely to prefer leaders who practice participative or collaborative decision making.

In cultures where there is a strong tendency to avoid uncertainty and ambiguity, people will want rules and procedures that insure decisions are made consistency. They tend not to be comfortable delegating decisions to be based on the current situation. Initiative and dynamic responses are not welcomed. Similarly, people in these cultures often seek to avoid conflict because it creates unclear situations and unfamiliar risks, which are threatening.

Tender cultures tend to be inclusive and less achievement oriented, hence visions for their organizations are more likely to include all perspectives as well as a concern for the environment. Winning or making the most money will be kept in balance with the need for satisfaction in life and a good working environment. Similarly, in tender cultures the need for individualized power may be less evident and individuals who exhibit a high need for power may be less likely to succeed.

Of course, whenever one studies complex topics such as culture and leadership, it is always important to note the dangers of stereotyping and over-simplification. National characteristics represent “average” people based on statistical analysis but they cannot possibly capture the uniqueness of each individual. Hence, students are cautioned that these frameworks are provided as a structure to initiate their study rather than as a box into which they can cram every person they meet.

Pedagogical Approaches

The material described above was most easily taught through lecture and discussion. However, leadership is not just about knowledge it is also about action. Three other pedagogical techniques were used in the class to illustrate these concepts and also to develop students' personal leadership skills.

A number of small group, experiential exercises were designed to help students develop four skills essential to working in multicultural groups. The four skills are

1. listening for the intended purpose
2. taking another's perspective
3. willingness to suspend judgment
4. taking a balcony perspective and self-monitoring

(#1 is based on work by Gil Hickman at the University of Richmond; #4 is based on material in Leadership Without Easy Answers by Ron Heifetz)

A grant from Ameritech provided support for videoconferences with the professors who developed the original course and with Dr. Hofstede. This enabled the students to not only learn directly from people in another culture but also to practice their skills in facilitating the discussions. Students were placed in small groups to coordinate the videoconferences and to prepare reports on the cultures represented.

A technique frequently used in cultural studies classes is a classroom simulation such as Bafa Bafa. However, a major concern about classroom simulations is the ability of students to genuinely enter into the experience. Through the Ameritech grant, a virtual world simulation was created for use in the class. By using virtual worlds, the hope was that students would more easily take on different persona and play roles without inhibitions or distractions. The Active Worlds Educational Universe (AWEDU) was the virtual reality platform. AWEDU uses Active Worlds technology to host three-dimensionally rendered online, multi-participant, synchronous, virtual reality environments for qualifying educational institutions.

After an introduction to the basic functions in the virtual world, students were placed in groups and asked to "build" a world that would reflect a specific set of cultural assumptions that they were given. The creativity of the classes was amazing. Once the world was designed and built, each group of four students took the rest of the class on a tour of their world. Through their behaviors and interactions, they also modeled their cultural assumptions. After each tour, the "tourists" in the world were asked to identify as many characteristics of the culture as they could. This exercise required the students to understand the practice as well as the theory of leadership in different cultures.

Conclusion

The two groups of students who have taken this class to date have rated it very favorably and have responded well to the variety of pedagogical techniques. Most interesting though has been their increased understanding of their own cultural assumptions and the

impact that those assumptions have on how they define and practice leadership. Most rewarding to the instructor is a postcard from a student, who went to Japan to teach English the year after taking this class. He said, "My experience in Japan so far has been incredible. I seem remarkably well adjusted and experienced minimum culture shock. I credit this mainly to the knowledge I gained in the Multicultural Leadership Class. Thank you."

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