

# Commentary

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## Intercultural leadership – A need for now and the future in chemical industry. A personal observation based on experience.

### 1 Introduction

“The world is small today” and “the number of multicultural teams increases every day. Consequently, cultural wisdom has a huge impact on increasing team performance” (Karayel, 2021).

Cultural Wisdom is a key competence factor in today's Business, but seems still heavily underrated regarding importance and steering in Industry. “Cultural wisdom means having curiosity towards different cultures, respecting their points of view, daring to learn from differences with an open mindset and integrating cultural intelligence in a way that creates harmony in the team” or organization (Karayel, 2021).

In today's career picture of a leadership role in a globally active company, intercultural leadership tasks are increasingly becoming the standard in two respects.

1. It is important to ensure that foreign delegations are successful. These assignments should be prepared by exploratory visits, pre-departure culture training including accompanying families, accompanied during the assignment by post-arrival training/coaching and finally include re-entry training before the return, also here including accompanying families (Gibson, 2021).
2. It is important to ensure that global and intercultural teams, which often work together virtually, can be successful and harmoniously efficient. It happens more and more often that in the middle of a career one is suddenly promoted from a local leadership role to a leadership role that has to take multicultural aspects into account, directly impacting a global team.

Both cases described call for “intercultural leadership” and, in my experience, should be prepared and controlled with appropriate development measures for the respective leaders. Today, these take place selectively in the corporate environment, but in my experience they have a clear need for optimization.

Here is the attempt to deliver perspectives to improve the situation.

### First personal global leadership experiences

Immediately after finishing my PhD work as a chemist in Germany, I moved to Boston for doing academic research at Harvard University for two years. I had my family with me. We were not prepared at all at that time, neither with a pre-visit nor by a pre-departure training. And indeed, we were heavily caught by surprise. We started learning, daily and step-by-step. A lot of learnings were exciting, explorative, but some experiences were also quite embarrassing, because we just were not aware of some “unwritten rules”. U.S. and German behaviours seemed so similar to us from a helicopter view, but down on earth in detail, they were not.

Another important reality at that time was the fact, that my research environment was truly global. The members of the research group came from all over the world and I met and worked together with people with twelve different nationalities during that time, ranging from India to China and Taiwan, from Australia to Canada and Europe including France, Italy and happily another German member. And some Americans as well. This was from 1988 to 1990 and gave me a pre-sense, what it means to deal with different cultures in a common team. It was a time of continuous learning.

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I was not aware then, but today I know, that this early stay abroad prepared me well for an intercultural leadership role. Cultural observations and intuitions date back to this time and a foundation was built to enhance my cultural wisdom.

Years later, I was in a mid-career situation at a big corporation, I had been working closely for a few days at an integration workshop after an acquisition with a Mexican engineer who was at home in Texas. Obviously, I did not correspond to his expectation of a German chemist. He was surprised and might have thought I had a different cultural background, which was not the case. I took his personal question, "Bernd, are you really German?" as a big compliment, but it also highlighted to me that there were different expectations of cultural stereotypes in the room.

### Global leadership challenges

During my professional career, on the way from plant manager to global manufacturing leader, I suddenly faced a significant challenge when I became responsible for production plants with employees from different countries and cultures across the globe. I took on a mix of different work cultures also, because the division had emerged from two different acquisitions. The respective site leaders were directly reporting to me and came from eight different nations.

I can still remember that I was just overwhelmed with the cultural complexity of my team. My employees were spread over different nations around the globe. From China to U.S., from Singapore to Canada, from Spain to Sweden, Netherlands and Germany. And nevertheless, we had to work together across all national boundaries and only virtually with not more than one face-to-face-meeting per year. We all had to produce the same products with the same or similar properties, with best possible quality. And we had to do this safely without accidents and incidents and with best available technology, where we owned the intellectual property through patents and process know-how. We were a global team and we all wanted to be successful and harmoniously efficient.

Learning was the order of the day. On-the-job. However, there was neither an official guidance from the Corporation nor an easily available guideline in literature – on my first view. So, I was prompting an Internet search on "Intercultural Leadership Excellence", as this is what I was looking for.

What I found was an excellent external support, a mentor and cultural mapping literature. I was reading first about leading across cultures (Lewis, 2006) and learned later also about Erin Meyer's culture mapping tool (Meyer, 2014).

Although, I had my intuition and brought knowledge and experience gained from my early stay abroad, it wasn't until I read Lewis' book, that it fell like scales from my eyes. Although understanding the risk of reinforcing stereotypes, Lewis' three-types-model provided me with important insights into possible behaviours of the members of my global team. It gave me hints on how to develop steering elements to be taken into consideration, also during multinational team-meetings.

Lewis' model differentiates between three leadership/communication styles and maps those depending on cultural origin.

- Linear-Active, task-oriented highly organized planners
- Multi-Active, people-oriented loquacious inter-relators
- Reactive, accommodating and respect-oriented listeners

The focus had to be on people and their behaviours. I understood the typical stereotype behaviour of a German in an almost fully linear-active mode versus the multi-active very people-oriented style of the Mexican and Spanish members of my team and also versus the reactive, very careful listeners of the Chinese members. It was all about to understand the behaviours of the team members in dependence of their culture, which was built on respective values and their education.

I approached this topic of "intercultural competence" in such a way that I first dealt with stereotypes of cultures, understanding clearly, that it was a generalization that wanted to be reflected and adapted in the respective individual contact. Because in the end it is always an individual view and it depends on the ability to change perspective, to be able to ask empathetic questions and to be tolerant of contradictions. Zooming then into individual and personal styles of my team members, was a listening exercise and a learning process. My goal was to develop the ability to understand, value and trust my employees in their respective cultures and to be able to pass on these insights to my direct reports as well, always having the idea of a true virtual team in mind.

I introduced specific cultural trainings (including for myself) and I organized a physical meeting once a year so that the virtual conference calls got a real face and workshop elements could be used for intercultural exchange. Since then, cultural trainings and workshop elements for intercultural exchange have been an integral part of the team building process of my organizations. Some typical learnings depicted on respective flipchart pages read as follows:

- Learn to read and interpret body language.
- Understand each other demands and communicate about the expectations.
- Take time to explain the "rules". Time consuming, but important.
- Be willing to learn about other rules, adjust to the environment, be flexible.
- Be open-minded, learn about other culture, travel.
- Be willing to listen
- It is all about TRUST.

Building mutual understanding and finally building trust was the objective.

## Success factors to increase performance of a global team

### Cultural wisdom

Cultural wisdom has to be developed in an exploratory way, not only in the bi-cultural relationship, but in the entire diverse team of different cultures.

In fact, travel opens up new horizons. Especially when it comes to countries where you own responsible management tasks. For example, when I mentioned at the plant in Nanjing, for which I was responsible for among other plants, that I was planning a three-week holiday trip to China together with my family, this had a very positive influence on my standing at the plant and opened up many opportunities for private exchanges of conversations. The Chinese employees were so proud that I was exploring their home country in my private time and together with my family.

National Heritage or Art History are on occasion a beautiful addition to a business trip. It is particularly impressive, when historical events can be seen in the context of a different point of view as personally experienced in the National Museum

of Singapore in a country being a melting pot of many Asian cultures. Some understanding of historical circumstances will increase the ability to listen and to participate in small talks to this topic.

Listening and learning is the order of the day, and to connect with the local employees. I planned and used small talk topics. Because: Small Talk is Big Talk. Sport as a topic almost always works. Personal topics from family life are also confidence-building measures and important to learn more about the daily life of your counterparts. And one will also find opportunities to learn from other cultures and adapt best practices (see for example Hiller, 2022). Making connections is the be-all and end-all.

One more example: I have had the opportunity to be involved in the trainee program of my former employer. Recruitment interviews, accompaniment, mentoring. Our candidates for the Frankfurt office were international and came beside Germany from many other parts of the world. I gladly took this opportunity to educate myself. One of my favorite points of discussion was the question of how I would best find an introduction to the respective culture of my counterpart's home country. The learnings from those conversations were often real eye-openers.

"Look for opportunities to increase your cultural intelligence level as much as possible. The more you learn about different cultures, the more inclusive you will become" (Karayel, 2021). And this will have a strongly positive impact on team performance.

### Ambiguity tolerance

New behaviors, often contradictory to one's own instilled, had to be applied and adapted to the situation. Be tolerant for ambiguities, be able to ask empathic questions and understand the importance of the change of perspectives. This combination of social competencies is described by Anna Fuchs as core for intercultural (she calls it transcultural) contacts. A transcultural attitude goes hand in hand with the invitation to both accept differences in perceptions, perspectives and competencies and to discover them as resources in order to expand one's own perspectives and possibilities for action (Fuchs, 2022).

My site visits in Mexico were always accompanied by surprises. Important information of respective challenges

could have been shared easily before my travel. But it was not, because difficult messages to convey are better to be done in their minds face to face. I accepted that and was always prepared for one or more unexpected explanations when I showed up.

My skip level team meetings in Sweden were always quiet, when I took over responsibilities there. Not much discussion in the room. I thought so. In reality, I could not endure periods of silence, just a few seconds usually. The response time to questions in Sweden is longer as I was used to. After I learned that, the discussion had been quite lively.

During my numerous business trips to Dallas, Texas in U.S., I had become accustomed to a ritual. I usually worked five to six hours during the ten-hour flight from Frankfurt, Germany. But the last two hours of flying I watched an actual movie in the original American version. This not only helped me to listen, it actually transformed me a bit into a different way of thinking and behaviors. I actually became more relaxed, more spontaneous and was also more in the mood for a little joke – changing from my German Me to my American Me.

### Sensitivity in language use

Positions in the team had to be conveyable in a balanced way for everyone. For almost all of my team, including me, English was the second language. And that was a good thing. It helped. Promoting inclusive communication is a leadership task.

The real learning began during my professional career in a global Chemical Company, based at Dallas, Texas. First thing to understand were the multiple idioms and what they really mean. "It's not rocket science", "in a nutshell", "ballpark figure", "no-brainer", "on the back-burner", just to name a few. Some of my favourite learnings as compared to the quotes of a workbook for effective communication in a multilingual world (Gaynor and Alevizos, 2019).

- Recognize what filler words you use. Avoid the temptation to fill every gap in the conversation. Adding pauses is a good way to adjust the pace of your language (pages 10, 13).
- If using an idiom, try to paraphrase to make the meaning clear, for example, "Shall we call it a day?" means "Shall we stop?", (page 17).

- By including rather than excluding other languages, non-native speakers have the chance to express ideas or concepts that they may have difficulty articulating in English (page 32).
- Sharing a joke can seem like a good way to defuse a difficult situation or just put people at ease. Be aware, though, that different cultures find different things funny (page 46).

Looking back, I either had discovered topics that I did intuitively the right way or I spotted items, that I should have done the way described. And in addition, I found the list of idioms, a lot, including those mentioned above (page 57ff).

In my experience, it is very helpful, to find workbooks with valuable examples, written in a handy and concise way for busy leaders like me when I was leading a team with members spread from eight different nations around the globe. There is general not much time to reflect on topics other than those closely related to the "real" business topics. One has to function. Period. It is a question of behavioral discipline to protect oneself from falling back into one-dimensional cultural behaviors, due to high stress. How this can be achieved, is described elsewhere (Scharbert, 2009).

### Conclusion

The management and performance measurement of foreign delegations in companies are still often neglected. And even more so the preparation of managers when they take over a globally composed team.

The focus on Diversity, Equity & Inclusion (DEI) has shed some light on the cultural side of diversity and thus drawn attention to the topic of "intercultural competence". However, the step towards intercultural leadership excellence and the associated leadership development would have to be initiated much more broadly.

And where is the business case for this? This is indeed a good question, which will be answered when more data has been collected in comparison. In any case, I am convinced that it will pay off if managers of international teams go through an appropriate development curriculum.

So, what is to be done? Courses on the subject are available at universities and colleges and continue to grow. What is lacking are the offers of education and training for those

who, in the course of their professional development, suddenly and sometimes unexpectedly face the challenge of a global leadership role, mostly in mid-career.

Furthermore, more focus needs to be placed on the support and control of the training process with regard to the development of intercultural leadership skills within the companies. That also would be a pre-requisite for a relevant data collection to be used to identify what a successful intercultural leadership role performance looks like.

In a global leadership role, I used my available budget wisely also for intercultural trainings for my team and myself. And before accepting a delegated role abroad, I actively researched respective professional cultural mentoring for me and my family.

Learning is the order of the day.

## Literature

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