Meet the Challenge: International Leadership Education Strategies

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The United States has been recognized as the world center for leadership development and advancement. Realizing the need to align leadership education with the desire to lead dynamic global operations, research has been intensified in the design and delivery of international leadership education programs. However, gaps exist between the expectations for the leaders and the course content. Supported by leadership teaching experience in Asia and the United States, this paper aims to provide insights into handling the leadership and ethics education challenges worldwide.

When teaching Leadership and Ethics to executive MBA learners in Vietnam, I witnessed an encounter between two learners. One was an older male and the other was a younger female, and the conversation took place in the classroom during a break. The male learner was red-faced, yelling at the female in Vietnamese while she was walking away from him. The classroom was almost full at the time. Everyone watched but no one said anything. I looked at both of them, puzzled. They were both good students. The male was an executive at a private company and the female held a managerial position in a government office. The male noticed me watching, shouted a few sentences, and stopped.

After the class, I asked the male learner what had happened during the break. He simply said they had a disagreement. When I pressed him as to why he had to yell at the female student, he said, "I just want to aggravate her. She is okay." I told him that she was not okay with the way he handled the situation even if she seemed alright. When I asked for female learner's perspective, she indicated that she would not fight with a man, particularly one that is older than herself. The incident and her answer lead to the focal points of this paper, which are the challenges faced by leadership educators when working with international students and how to fill the gap between course teachings and expectations for leaders. Whether leadership education is taking place domestically or internationally, it appears the call for the awareness of national cultural impact is stronger than ever. The training and development of leaders has to consider global dynamics. Instructors may have to on take dual roles when teaching leadership.

In this practice-based paper, I will review the national cultural impact on leadership characteristics worldwide. The challenges this impact creates in leadership education will be evaluated. Then, I will propose actions for dealing with these challenges. Finally, I will discuss the business implications related to these findings.

THE NATIONAL CULTURAL IMPACT ON LEADERSHIP CHARACTERISTICS

Hofstede (1980, 1991) distinguished national culture according to six dimensions: 1) Power Distance, 2) Uncertainty Avoidance, 3) Individualism vs. Collectivism, 4) Masculinity vs. Femininity, 5) Long-Term Orientation vs. Short-Term Orientation, and 6) Indulgence vs. Restraint. Confucianism was also discussed in the context of Long-Term Orientation vs. Short-Term Orientation. Building on and expanding Hofstede's study, Javidan and House (2001) separated Masculinity vs. Femininity into two independent categories: Assertiveness and Gender Egalitarianism (Hofstede, 2006). While proposing that male and female leaders model their behaviors based on genderless expectations, Snaebjornsson, Edvardsson, Zydziunaite, and Vaiman (2015) revealed that perceived leadership behavior is different between men and women. The event I witnessed during teaching appeared to support their claim.

National cultural characteristics are at play every day in international organizations. Leaders from Western countries, such as the United States, Germany, and Switzerland, exhibit more masculinity, while leaders from Asian countries exhibit more femininity (Chen, 2015). From the leadership perspective, Gender Egalitarianism seems to be more apparent in Vietnam. Chinese people value charismatic, team-oriented, and humane-oriented leadership. Maintaining group harmony and interpersonal ties are the key theme of the leadership characteristics in this society. In contrast, Americans endorse a transformational style. The Irish prefer indirect and non-confrontational leadership, while Germans favor a straightforward, high-autonomy, and low humane-oriented style of leadership. Table 1 illustrates the different leadership priorities from China, Germany, and the United States. Fundamentally, western philosophy-oriented leadership education has potential conflicts with the values held by countries in Asia and other parts of the world. This situation reminds me of another part of the class previously discussed.

The students discussed a case describing a situation where some foreign companies were consistently ignoring the pollution problems when operating in Vietnam. The question proposed was what had been done to cause this issue. Learners claimed that the government had fined the companies, but that the illegal practices had not been stopped. When asked what else has been done from the citizens' side, the students answered, "virtually nothing". My prompt to them was, "As a leader, what can you do for the citizens?" Though my question was left unanswered by the students, I could tell that they were thinking about it.

THE NATIONAL CULTURAL IMPACT ON ETHICAL PRACTICE

Ethics are a set of moral guiding principles (Ciulla, 1998). Just as national cultures are different among various countries (Hofstede, 1980, 1991), the existence of differences in ethical expectations and practices is also noticeable. Ethical guiding principles have been evolving throughout their philosophical development around the world (Jackson, 2014). Doing the right thing is a common understanding of ethical practice, yet the interpretation can vary from country to country, and what is a right or wrong is judged differently from culture to culture (Ardichvili et al., 2010; Boatright, 2012). Palmer (2009) urged leaders to demonstrate ethical conduct through both personal actions and interpersonal relations that can be observed at three levels: the leader's individual morality, the means of their leadership, and their leadership mission. Nevertheless, people in countries such as China, Germany, and the United States prioritize different ethical behaviors from their leaders (Resick et al., 2011).

TABLE 1
DIFFERENT ETHICAL LEADERSHIP PRIORITIES

Category	China	Germany	United States
Accountability	Secondary	Secondary	Top
Consideration and respect for others	Top	Top	Top
Fairness and non-discrimination	Top	Secondary	Secondary
Character	Top	Secondary	Top
Organizational and social orientation	Secondary	Top	Secondary
Openness and flexibility	Secondary	Secondary	Secondary

Thus, the strategy to address cross-cultural ethical issues needs to be revisited with careful execution. Worldwide, corporate leaders and trainers bring to employees their own moral principles and ethical learning, both of which are embedded in their own national culture. If the leader's principles are deemed agreeable with those of the followers, cooperation can be easily achieved. However, if their principles diverge, doubt and disagreement can create conflict and prolong the process of cooperation. Resentment from the foreign partners will damage the leader as well as the organization's reputation. Hence, while abiding the ethical principles from the leader's country of origin, seeking a mutual understanding will help leaders to communicate the ethical values they attempt to deliver. Eventually, they will forge organizational value alignment, and that creates the foundation for the future implementation of those values.

THE CHALLENGES TO LEADERSHIP AND ETHICS TEACHING WORLDWIDE

The United States has been recognized as the world center for leadership development and advancement, and universities in the United States have aligned themselves with such expectations. Realizing the need to align leadership education with the desire to lead dynamic global operations (Festing, 2012; Hoffman & Shipper, 2012), research has intensified in the design and delivery of leadership teaching and education. However, evidence is lacking as to "how and to what extent the teaching of leadership can draw from or be integrated with the developmental challenges that business students experience in the 'real world'" (DeRue, SitKin, & Podolny, 2011, p.370).

First of all, the academic footing is insufficient. I once guest-lectured a group of MBA students in the middle of their program in the United States where the class could not distinguish transformational and transactional leadership. They could not recall whether that had been covered in their earlier courses. The host professor and I came to realize that there might be gaps in the leadership curriculum design. Likewise, Asian students may not be familiar with Western philosophies. They may not be familiar with many current business cases due to their lower English language abilities and the inaccessibility of case information from other countries.

Secondly, a disconnect still exists between leadership teaching and a deeper level understanding and appreciation of cultural diversity. Li, Mobley, and Kelly (2013) found that it took an average of five years for people to be fully immersed in a foreign culture and to develop a corresponding cultural intelligence. A crash course on national customs before expatriating may not be enough for developing international leaders.

Thirdly, the role of instructors is currently isolated. Their responsibilities are mostly in the scope of fulfillment of their contracts. The effectiveness of their teaching and their impact on the learners, their organizations, and society are not evaluated. However, the incident I witnessed while teaching in Vietnam was a perfect example that, sometimes, leadership instructors may not isolate themselves to the role they are assigned when the circumstance warrants a deviation. They may have to perform a dual role in

leadership teaching when instructing international candidates or teaching overseas. Teaching, consulting, and coaching may not be separated.

Fourth, the sentiment toward Western values may be different from country to country and even from region to region within a country. For instance, people in the coastal cities in China are more receptive to new ideas, while those in the inner regions are more conservative. Being insensitive to this difference may create resentment towards ethical teaching from the start. Thus, the objective of such instruction may not be fulfilled. Furthermore, the teaching materials have to be well-cultivated to bear the national culture and the available information in the country.

To summarize, the challenges in leadership and ethics education are that universities and instructors do not fully understand the effectiveness of their leadership and ethics teaching. The needs of the society and organizations where learners operate provide slow feedback to universities. Figure 1 illustrates the current state of leadership and ethics teaching in relation to learners, organizations, and society.

FIGURE 1
ISOLATED LEADERSHIP AND ETHICS TEACHING CYCLE
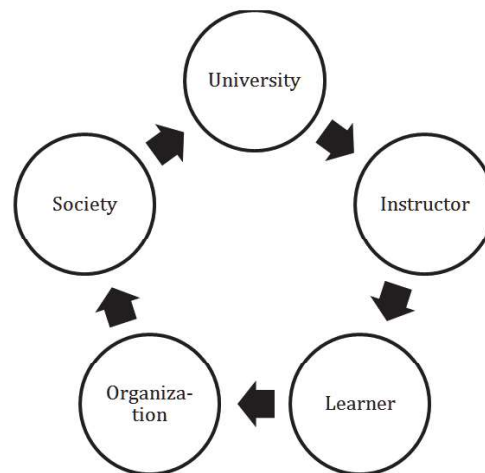
LEADERSHIP EDUCATION STRATEGIES

In light of the challenges faced by leadership educators, coaches, and consultants, Collinson and Tourish (2015) urged instructors to teach leadership critically. Lobel and Gist (2011) argued for developing dual-agenda leaders. Klimoski and Amos (2012) stressed evidence-based leadership education. Together, these ideas may shape leadership education strategies that better fit the contemporary need for leadership development.

The first element of the strategy should be recognizing the importance of cross-cultural effects and designing course contexts that consider cultural dynamics (Collinson & Tourish, 2015). The cultural specificity of leadership may bring to the learners awareness of the many other ways that leadership can manifest beyond the United States/Western value-centric leadership model. Topics such as cross-cultural leadership, national cultural studies, or Eastern philosophies/ethics may broaden learners' vision and understanding of leadership dynamics.

Evidence-based learning is not a new subject. However, putting it into the context of leadership education may "require an integrated curriculum which would combine an underlying framework for learning with key competencies in a systematic progression over time, one that aligns with the program goals" (Klimoski & Amos, 2012, p.691). Translated to curriculum design, adding International Experience as a required course in an MBA program would make evidence-based, cross-cultural learning

possible. To make this happen, a dialogue must take place to justify the increased cost in terms of long-term value creation.

In terms of teaching ethics, beginning with a brief philosophical history of moral principles is a good way to engage international students. This method of introduction is not threatening to students and inclusive of philosophers from many countries. Students will be more receptive to the ideas to which they relate, so this approach eases any guarded thoughts and easily brings consensus.

The objective of developing dual-agenda leaders is to shift leadership focus from a self-centered world view to one where an individual appreciates and protects the welfare of all people (Lobel & Gist, 2011). Thus, the values are benevolence and universalism. Likewise, leadership educators, coaches, and consultants may find themselves carrying dual-agendas when teaching, coaching, and consulting domestic and international leaders. Overseas teaching and consulting experiences may allow them to better fulfill their roles. Figure 2 illustrates the future view of leadership and ethics teaching in relation to learners, organizations, and society.

FIGURE 2
INTEGRATED LEADERSHIP AND ETHICS TEACHING CYCLE
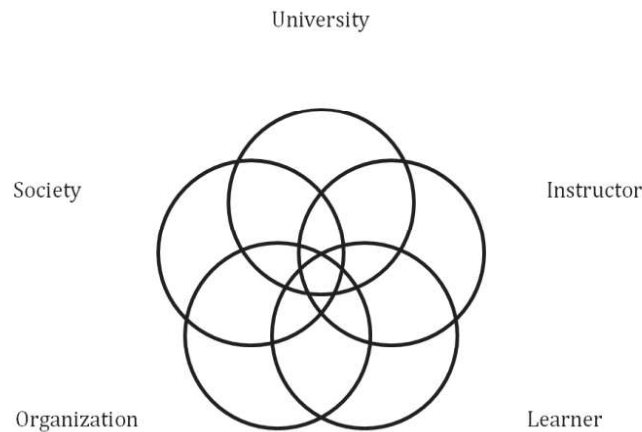
CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The growing world economy calls for the development of leaders with global mindsets. The once Western value-centered leadership education style has been challenged by the success of a mixed-value philosophy. For instance, Indian American women leaders have revealed that one of their success factors has been the balance of Eastern and Western mindsets, a viewpoint which broadened their abilities and provided them the flexibility and fluidity to adapt to their environments (Hayer, 2015). This shift leads to the awareness of revisiting leadership education design and delivery. Leadership educators, coaches, and consultants are required to take dual-roles to cope with the challenge.

The proposed strategies also have business implications. The practices encourage leaders to be more mindful when selecting a globalization strategy. Organizations may want to first focus on and clarify their mission and values before localization. Localized practices should conform to the ethical values in the local country as well as those in the parent company's country of origin. Regular communication and training should also take place to bring awareness to the global impact of certain initiatives. Therefore, adopting consensus and a commitment to implementation are important.

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