Leadership: Beyond the Western Model

Key Concept
Understanding and relying on traditional Western models of leadership alone is no longer sufficient in a world where most companies operate globally. Progressive organizations need to accommodate cultural differences and approaches to leadership. It is crucial that their managers learn to understand and adapt to this and work hard to acquire the competencies needed to prosper.

Idea Summary
Leading employees from different cultural backgrounds has become an everyday reality and challenge for managers. An understanding of cultural differences, as well as how these differences play out in interpersonal and group relationships, is no longer optional but a critical tool.

To start with, the authors look at the assumptions typically encountered when considering the essence of global leadership:

- **Universal approach**: the belief that leadership traits and processes are relatively constant across cultures. Most Western theories of leadership are built on this premise.
- **Normative approach**: i.e. focusing on enduring personal skills and abilities that are thought to characterize effective global managers. These models are prescriptive in nature, and suggest how managers should approach leadership in global settings.
- **Contingency approach**: based on the assumption that there are no universals in describing effective leadership. This approach looks at leadership as a culturally embedded process, not a series of personal traits of the manager or followers. Here the focus is on the leader as a local manager, not a global one, and it is assumed that the characteristics for success will vary with the situation.

According to the authors, all three “miss the mark” in sufficiently explicating the leadership construct as it is related to global diversity. As such, they suggest that focusing more squarely on two issues would do better to advance understanding of leadership processes: (a) the meaning of leadership as a cultural construct and (b) the variations in local expectations regarding leader behaviour. In short, in their view we must move beyond traditional Western models of leadership and take a more cosmopolitan approach to the subject.

Business Application
To illustrate how local cultures can influence the definition and application of successful leadership, the authors discuss doing business in China as an example. What is generally referred to as Western Civilization traces its origins to the culture, beliefs, and traditions of ancient Greece. By contrast, the concept of an ideal or archetype that would serve as a model for action and a desirable final state of affairs never developed in ancient China.
Understanding the difference between traditions and how they historically developed in one country compared to another helps explain their separate paths of social thought and practice.

The authors point to at least two important lessons for managers:

1. It can be highly instructive for managers facing global assignments to think about how they conceptualize leadership and managing people. Spending a bit of time considering just what leadership means can go a long way towards preparing managers for success in upcoming global assignments.

2. With this understanding managers on global assignments can and should go the extra mile to understand the uniqueness of the local environment and work to accommodate cultural differences where they exist. This is not to suggest that managers ‘go native’. Such a move risks losing authenticity as a manager, leading to confusion and often distrust among subordinates.

The key advice is not to try to imitate local behaviour; rather, seek to understand local conditions and then act in authentic ways that are compatible with local expectations.

They also suggest that companies avoid sponsoring leadership programs that stress a few keys to successful leadership, ignoring critical variations in local environments. However, the onus is nevertheless on managers to prepare themselves for work with people from different cultural backgrounds, something the authors highlight as potentially very rewarding.

Further Reading

Further Relevant Resources
Carlos J. Sanchez-Runde’s profile at IESE Business School
Carlos J. Sanchez-Runde’s personal website
Luciara Nardon’s profile at Carleton University Sprott School of Business
Richard M. Steers’s profile at University of Oregon Charles Lundquist College of Business
IESE Business School’s profile at IEDP

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