

Cultural Adaptation and Western Leadership Theory:
Implications for Globalization and Multiculturalism

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DOL 860C: Seminars and Praxis in Leadership

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August 23, 2009

First Revised: May 23, 2010

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To meet human needs in this global and rapidly changing world, organizations must take serious steps to develop workforces that successfully navigate the diverse issues of globalization (Rosen, Digh, Singer, & Phillips, 2000). Today's organizational environment, along with other aspects of human life, is becoming increasingly complex with global trends that are blurring cultural distinctions (Kim, 2001). The concepts of assimilation, adaptability, multiculturalism, and globalization, have become expedient to understanding the intermingling of people and cultures in today's world. This is reflected in the multiethnic nature of modern schools systems, which serve as a prelude to the socialization processes of the wider society (Smith, Bond, and Kağıtçıbaşı, 2006). Modern society requires that global leaders "change from being cultural outsiders to increasingly active and effective cultural insiders" (Kim, 2001, p. 10). Without the necessary cultural intelligence for adapting to host cultures, leaders will remain strangers to local communities (Earley & Ang, 2003; Kim, 2001). Leaders at the global level will do well with an understanding of the implications of cross-cultural adaptation principles to their leadership.

Cultural Adaptation

The challenge for global leaders is to integrate and interact in culturally different societies. One term that has been used to describe the process of transitioning to other cultures is cross-cultural adaptation, defined by Kim (2005) as "the phenomenon of individuals who, upon relocating to an unfamiliar sociocultural environment, strive to establish and maintain a relatively stable, reciprocal, and functional relationship with the environment" (p. 380). This definition is based on Kim's (2001) refined theory of cross-cultural adaptation, developed over a twenty-five year period (Kim, 2005) and viewed by scholars as a "communication acculturation

theory” (Gudykunst, Lee, Nishida, & Ogawa, 2005, p. 21). This theory informs this effort to identify the implications of three of its principles on three Western-based theories of leadership.

Western-Based Leadership

Modern society has become a “dizzying interface” (Kim, 2001, p. 3) of diverse thought patterns that drive human behavior. These thought patterns are usually generalized as either ‘Western’ or ‘non-Western’, though such a generalization might be confining because “there might be elements of ‘non-Western’ experiences and ideas built in to those ostensibly ‘Western’ approaches” (Bilgin, 2008, p. 5). While the term ‘Western’ is inclusive of a number of different nations, “modern thinking in the West about issues of management and organization is ethnocentric...it promotes a culturally determined and largely North American view of the world of work” (Blunt & Jones, 1997, p. 7). Global leaders have for many years relied on concepts that have been researched and defined in non-Western societies. It is worth noting that even though “many [of the] frameworks used to study human interaction in various settings have been developed in North America and Western Europe during the last three decades” (Earley & Ang, 2003, p. 1), “most of the relevant theories originated from the United States of America” (Brewster & Larsen, 1992, p. 409). This has meant that a significantly high number of the concepts in leadership literature have originated from the United States (US).

The concept of Western-based leadership, as used in this paper, refers to notions of leadership that are distinctly from the US. Three theories have been selected for this work: the style approach (Blake & Mouton, 1964/1985); skills theory (Katz, 1955; Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs & Fleishman, 2000); and path-goal theory of leadership (House, 1971). These three theories were selected because research for each of them was conducted on US soil (Northouse, 2007; Yukl, 2002). The style approach was developed from the works of diverse

researchers starting with Lewin and Associates at the University of Iowa (as cited in Lussier & Achua, 2004, p. 70); Stogdill and Associates at Ohio State University (as cited in Northouse, 2007, p. 70); Bowers and Seashore (1966) at the University of Michigan; and Blake and Mouton (1964) as cited in Northouse (2007). The skills theory is based on the work of Katz (1955). The earliest developers of the concepts of the path-goal theory, as cited in Northouse (2007) were Evans (1970) and House (1971). These theories will be analyzed based on three principles for cross-cultural adaptation identified in the communication acculturation theory (Kim, 2001).

Organizing Principles for Cross-Cultural Adaptation

According to Kim (2001) past research in cross-cultural adaptation failed to adequately consider large scale and small scale components of adaptation, partitioned critical areas of investigation, generated incomplete explanations of individual experiences, did not achieve a fusion of factors in the adaptation process, and settled on independent ideologies that need to be focalized. Given these shortcomings, it was necessary “to identify the patterns that are commonly present among a clearly defined set of varied individual cases and to translate these patterns into a set of *generalizable and interrelated principles* that maximally reflect the evolutionary process of cross-cultural adaptation” (Kim, 2001, p. 39, emphasis in original). The motivation for leaders operating in culturally different societies is adaptation to local cultures.

Using an open-systems perspective, Kim (2001) developed three assumptions:

- Assumption 1: Humans have an innate self-organizing drive and a capacity to adapt to environmental challenges.
- Assumption 2: Adaptation of an individual to a given cultural environment occurs in and through communication.

- Assumption 3: Adaptation is a complex and dynamic process that brings about a qualitative transformation of the individual. (pp. 35-38)

Using these assumptions a number of “axioms”, defined as, “generalizable statements that identify patterns of interaction between constructs” (Kim, 2001, p. 41), were developed. This procedure enabled the identification of ten axioms that “serve as the general principles operating in the cross-cultural adaptation process” (Kim, 2001, p. 89). Of the ten axioms, three have been selected for the purposes of this analysis of Western leadership theories.

Three Organizing Principles

Kim (2001) argues that the volume of data available from research on cross-cultural adaptation is multifarious, behooving investigators to “examine a vast array of books and articles to gain a thorough understanding of the field” (p. 10). Accurate framing concepts are essential in analyzing and narrowing down the monumental data into theoretical principles that can be easily understood. Three of the theoretical principles yielded by Kim (2001) have been selected for this analysis. For the purposes of organizing this work in a linear manner, the principles selected have been subjectively labeled as ‘the central dynamic of adaptation’, ‘the manifestation of intercultural transformation’, and ‘environmental influences in stranger transformation’ (see axioms 2, 5, and 9 in Kim, 2001, p. 90). This labeling correlates with Smith, Bond, and Kağıtçıbaşı (2006) who observed that in many factor analyses, “there is some degree of subjectivity in deciding how to name the factors that emerge” (p. 35). A brief discussion of the three principles follows, starting with the central dynamic of adaptation.

The central dynamic of adaptation. Kim (2001) proposed that “underlying the cross-cultural adaptation process is the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic” (p. 68). Based on the idea that host cultures exert a “coercive conformity pressure on strangers to acculturate to the existing

cultural order,” (p. 55) this principle highlights the stranger’s inability to affect cultural change. When outsiders enter a new culture, many of them do so as individuals, consequently with little power to alter the local culture. This internal battle can be summarized as the struggle “between the need for acculturation and the resistance to deculturation, the push of the new culture and the resistance of the old, and between the existing conditions inside the stranger and the demands of the external environment” (p. 55). This process causes stress in the stranger in a new culture, necessitating a commitment to yield to the new environmental demands.

As the stranger opens up and begins to adapt to the new culture, personal growth starts to take place. This process, the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic (Kim, 2001), is not a linear process but a cyclic movement whereby “strangers respond to each stressful experience by ‘drawing back,’ which in turn activates adaptive energy to help them reorganize themselves and ‘leap forward’” (p. 57). This assessment corresponds to Pederson (1995) who viewed transformation as “a series of degeneration and regeneration events of crises in a nonregular and erratic movement of change” (p. 4). By successfully managing diverse aspects of life in the new culture, internal changes occur and are manifested in the stranger’s intercultural transformation.

The manifestation of intercultural transformation. The second organizing principle selected states that “intercultural transformation is manifested in increased functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity” (Kim, 2001, p. 69). Although an individual’s professional development is important in another culture, cultural adaptation is facilitated by the internal changes that continually take place as the individual interacts with the new culture. In a study of 175 international students in the US, Oguri and Gudykunst (2002) found that a stranger’s self-assessment, along with their perceptions of the new culture, impacted their ability

to cope in the host culture. These internal measures have been conceptualized by Kim (2001) as “three facets of internal change” (p. 61). These facets play a critical role in cultural adaptation.

Functional fitness in a new culture increases as a stranger undertakes “repeated activities resulting in new learning and internal reorganizing” (Kim, 2001, p. 62) that enables successful daily engagement in the host culture. This engagement is actualized through a communicative process that takes place between the stranger and the local culture. Continued positive interactions with the host culture result in the “ongoing validation” (p. 63) of the stranger’s experiences. This communicative process, which takes place as the stranger interacts with native individuals and their communities, is essential for the psychological health of the outsider in a new culture. The outsider who does not develop an ability to successfully navigate stress in a new culture will be unable to develop an intercultural identity necessary to operate in the host culture. The ultimate goal for the outsider is to achieve “a greater maturity and psychic integration as well as an increased capacity to cope with varied environmental challenges” (Kim, 2001, p. 67) that influence the stranger transformation process.

Environmental influences in stranger transformation. Kim (2001) theorized that “environmental conditions (host receptivity, host conformity pressure, and ethnic group strength) influence, and are influenced by, the stranger’s intercultural transformation” (p. 90). In a study of students living abroad, Angulo (2008) found that students who were received as new members of the family or country “received self-verifying feedback on new identities” (p. 78). Host environments exercise pressure on strangers “to adopt the normative patterns” (Kim, 2001, p. 79) of the local communities. The stranger’s ethnic group strength, as reflected in continued use of a second language, economic status, and community involvement impact transformation.

It is worth noting that the theoretical domain for the organizing principles in this model is delimited by “boundary conditions” (p. 34) that constrain strangers to the influence of their home culture environment, reliance on the host culture environment, and uninhibited contact with the new environment. Given the voluminous nature of cross-cultural data, the limitations clarify the context and scope of Kim’s (2001) study – the stranger’s environment. The boundary conditions serve to narrow the focus of this study unlike a wide-angle study like Hofstede (1980) which sought to identify the dimensions and consequences of national cultures. Similarly, the organizing principles in this analysis have implications for Western-based leadership theories.

Implications of the central dynamic of adaptation for the style theory of leadership

The principle of the stress-adaptation-growth dynamic as foundational to cross-cultural adaptation suggests that leaders employing the style approach should handle the stresses of their environments by retreating, reflecting, and reengaging. One of the earliest developers of the style approach, Hemphill (1949) viewed the leader’s “efficient functioning” and “combination of attributes” (p. 225) as essential to the success of a leadership effort. In applying the stress-adaptation-growth model, the leader would alter personal behavior to function effectively amidst stressful situations, adjust personal attributes to adapt to the environmental challenges, and learn from every experience to continue providing good leadership.

A critical dynamic to the style theory is the dichotomy between consideration behaviors and initiating structure behaviors in their leadership style (Christner & Hemphill, 1955). This is related to Kim (2001) who alludes to an internal battle that complicates the stranger’s struggle to adapt to a new culture. Leaders can avoid the stress that could result from such a struggle by using Blake and Mouton’s (1985) managerial grid to determine how best to combine these factors. The use of a model or grid can aid in leader development and cross-cultural adaptation.

As indicated earlier, the style theory was developed in piecemeal fashion over a period of about forty years by researchers at the universities of Iowa, Ohio State, Michigan, and Texas.

Landmark studies were conducted at Ohio State, where a Leader Behavior Description Questionnaire (LBDQ) was created for cultivating leadership skills (Bowers & Seashore, 1966, p. 240), and Michigan, where the concepts of employee orientation and product orientation were introduced (p. 242). The implication of these studies is that by taking time to understand themselves, leaders can learn how to develop an orientation that shows concern for local communities while still maintaining their technical professionalism in the new culture.

Implications of the manifestation of intercultural transformation for the skills theory

Beginning with the work of Katz (1955) and culminating with the efforts of Mumford, Zaccaro, Harding, Jacobs, and Friedman (2000), the skills theory has been instrumental in explaining how leaders develop learnable skills. The changes identified as one experiences intercultural transformation are all learnable aspects of individual development. Kim (2001) emphasizes that the three facets of functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity “are to be considered as developmental continua on which individual strangers can be placed as different locations” (p. 61). Leaders should know that skills are acquired over time. The leader is expected to continually work at manifesting higher skills that enable greater effectiveness and equip people with the tools for their own development.

Katz (1955) posited that the skills approach “is based not on what good executives *are* ... but rather on what they *do*” (p. 33, emphasis in original). Similarly, attaining functional fitness, psychological health, and intercultural identity requires new behaviors that ensure successful engagement in the host culture. Moreover, as the leader continues to interact with others through

a two-way communicative process, the exchange process becomes an avenue for identifying new skills for further development. Additionally, the growth process depends on the leader's efforts.

The three facets of intercultural transformation correlate with the three personal skills of skills theory: technical, human and conceptual (Katz, 1955, pp. 34-36) and the three competences identified by Mumford et al. (2000): problem solving skills, social judgment skills, and knowledge (p. 23). This implies that there is a strong link between the leader's commitment to personal development and the ability to navigate environmental challenges. Thus, by cultivating essential skills, the leader can successfully integrate into new environments that facilitate the acquisition of higher capabilities.

Implications of environmental influences in stranger transformation for path-goal theory

House (1996) acknowledges that the first formulations of path-goal theory "took as its underlying axioms the propositions of valence-expectancy theory" (Lessons Learned section, para. 3), which is founded on the idea that individuals are cognitively calculating. On the other hand, the communication acculturation theory (Kim, 2001) views strangers as collaborators in exchange relationships with their new environments where influence goes in both directions. This open-systems perspective implies that a leader should be flexible in interactions and negotiation with individuals in a different culture, rather than attempt to manipulate the motivational needs of those individuals. Similarly, 'foreign' environments should be open to the stranger's learning process and avoid any conformity pressure, which is "reflected in the level of intolerance, prejudice, and discrimination aimed at strangers" (Kim, 2001, p. 80).

The view of cultural adaptation as a communicative relationship between the stranger and the new environment implies responsibilities on both sides. The host culture has a responsibility to create conditions in which strangers and their ethnic groups are well received, whereas the

stranger has the responsibility to stay in contact with “the immediate social milieus in which they carry out their daily activities” (Kim, 2001, p. 78). The implication for path-goal theory is that there are payoffs in both directions. The knowledge of such responsibilities enables both parties to define specific goals, outline how the goals will be attained, remove any barriers in each other’s paths, and provide support to one another. Understanding the motives each party’s actions facilitates the reduction of cultural misunderstandings (M. Kim, 2005). In sum, leaders in a new culture should recognize that their behaviors affect local cultures and be open to the influence of local cultures on their own behavior. Without this understanding, global leaders will become part of the statistic of expatriates who do not finish their international assignments.

Conclusion: Ramifications for Global Leadership

Mendenhall, Osland, Bird, Oddou, and Maznevski (2008) argue that “as the world becomes increasingly interdependent, complex, uncertain, and dynamic, the challenge to understand and operate within that world will become even more difficult” (p. 174). Based on the communication acculturation theory (Kim, 2001), leaders should make an honest effort to engage with others cultures, view cultural strangers as partners, and accept to be changed. Leaders should recognize that adaptation stress is part of the growth process, develop a personality fit for cultural adaptation, and frame a perception of self beyond individual attributes to more universal identity conceptualizations. A study by Price-Waterhouse Coopers (as cited in Figg, 2000) found Western executives shunning international assignments and many managers “circumventing overseas relocation by utilizing technology such as email or videoconferencing in conjunction with more frequent business trips” (p. 13). This approach does not enable cultural transformation. Mendenhall et al. (2008) argue that there must be some “intentional modification of behavior in order to interact with culturally different others” (p. 69).

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