



How global leaders develop

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Abstract

Purpose – Globalization is driving an increased need for leaders who possess global leadership competencies that enable them to lead effectively. The purpose of this paper is to explore the developmental experiences of global leaders in order to understand the experiences that they report to be developmental, to understand what they learned from their experiences, and to explore how the leaders learned and developed from the experiences.

Design/methodology/approach – For this study, the researcher used Moustakas's phenomenological research method.

Findings – Conclusions indicate that global leaders: develop through first-hand global leadership experience; learn the importance of cultural sensitivity, relationships and networks, and curiosity or desire to learn; require a unique set of global leadership competencies; are driven by curiosity, openness, and a desire to learn; and develop and learn intuitively.

Originality/value – Utilizing a phenomenological research approach yielded new insight, from the perspective of the global leader, into how global leaders learn and develop the knowledge, skills, attitudes, motives or values, and mindsets that are important to their role, and suggested areas for further research. The findings of the study are useful in identifying implications for improving or adding to the methods, approaches, and tools organizations use to develop global leadership competencies.

Keywords Leadership development, Learning methods, Learning, Global leadership, Learning from experience, Human resource development

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Globalization, the ongoing process of interdependence and integration of economies, societies, and cultures that occurs through a worldwide network of global communication and trade, has rapidly developed over the past 25 years to the point that it is a reality today (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2008). Not only is it true that “the world is flat” (Friedman, 2005, p. 5) but also it is a world of “high chaos and continuous change” (Marquardt and Berger, 2000, p. 1) in which a rapidly growing number of companies “operate as if the entire world were a single entity” (Marquardt and Berger, 2000, p. 4).

This high degree of interconnectedness, which is being brought about through the impact of technology on communication, knowledge creation, and information sharing (Marquardt and Berger, 2000), is combining with the chaos and continuous change of today's business environment to create a highly dynamic, complex, borderless, multicultural context within which businesses must learn to operate or suffer the undesired consequences (Rosen *et al.*, 2000). Organizations must find constructive ways to adapt to survive, and the most adaptable organizations will be best positioned to explore the possibilities hidden amid the chaos and to respond with innovative solutions to the complex challenges they face.

Organizations are discovering that “globalization and its demands have shifted the skill set necessary to lead in the twenty-first century” (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2008, p. xi). Global leaders “face complex challenges of leadership because of the evolving globalized context in which they work” (Mendenhall *et al.*, 2008, p. 14) and must deal



with complexity that is significantly different from non-global contexts. As a result, global organizations “demand new kinds of leaders with new attributes and competencies” (Marquardt and Berger, 2000, p. 17), especially leaders with cultural adaptability and sensitivity (Fiedler, 1964; Hofstede, 1980). Nevertheless, many organizations are finding that their supply of global leaders, or even individuals with the potential to become global leaders, does not match the demand.

Despite the increased demand for skilled global leaders, as well as a proliferation of lists of competencies, traits, characteristics, and skills, all purportedly required for successful global leadership (Black, 2006; Black *et al.*, 1999; Bueno and Tubbs, 2004; Caligiuri, 2006; Caligiuri and Di Santo, 2001; Dalton *et al.*, 2002; Den Hartog *et al.*, 1999; Dotlich and Noel, 1998; House, 2004; Jokinen, 2005; Kets de Vries *et al.*, 2004; Lakhani, 2005; McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2008; Rhinesmith, 1996; Rosen *et al.*, 2000; Tubbs and Schulz, 2006; Yeung and Ready, 1995), the specific competencies and abilities constituting the required skill set remain unclear. Although some clarity may be emerging regarding the competencies that are essential for global leaders, the results are far from conclusive; therefore, pressing questions remain.

Just as there is no definitive description of the global leadership competencies needed by global leaders, the most effective means through which individuals develop as global leaders is uncertain as well. Many organizations rely on approaches that have been traditionally used in domestic leadership development programs, such as education, training, career development, 360° assessment and feedback, executive coaching, job rotation, special project assignments, and other developmental experiences. To develop global leadership capabilities in leaders, organizations utilize methods such as overseas travel, international teamwork, short- and long-term expatriate assignments, and developmental assignments and experiences. Many of the methods recommended for preparing global leaders to develop the leadership competencies they need to fulfill their role include some form of “learning from experience,” such as short- or long-term overseas assignments of leaders; projects and task forces; international teams, meetings, training programs, and forums; action learning programs; or international travel. Organizations tend to rely on “multiple experiences, encounters, decisions, and challenges” (Osland and Bird, 2008, p. 83) to prepare people to take on global leadership roles and to enhance the growth and development of individuals who are already in global leadership roles. Thus, global leadership is unique and requires both new and different competencies, as well as new and different global leadership development methods, from those required for effective non-global leadership.

Although progress has been made in identifying the competencies needed by global leaders, as well as how global leaders develop those competencies, research has not yielded definitive results to date. Further research into the experiences that global leaders find to be developmental, the capabilities and competencies global leaders need, and how global leaders develop those capabilities and competencies is needed (Marquardt and Berger, 2000; Mendenhall *et al.*, 2008; Osland and Bird, 2008). This study aimed to explore these areas in need of research by investigating the lived experiences of global leaders identified by them as important in their development as global leaders. Three questions were utilized to conduct the investigation: What experiences do global leaders describe as important in their development as global leaders? What do global leaders report that they developed or learned that contributed to their development as global leaders? How did global leaders learn what they learned that led to their development as global leaders?

Conceptual framework

The relationship between learning and leadership is central to understanding how global leaders develop the global leadership competencies they determine to be important to their role. It is through learning, “a process by which behavior changes as a result of experiences” (Maples and Webster, 1980, p. 21), that leaders are able to adapt and change to survive and thrive in a complex business environment that involves continuous change. This dynamic is relevant for global leaders as well as non-global leaders. Just as learning, as well as the ability to learn, enhances and develops leadership skills and, in a reciprocal relationship, leadership both seeks and produces learning, it appears that a similar relationship between global leadership and development through experience exists.

In this study, the construct of learning was operationalized by the variable development through experience, and the construct of leadership was operationalized by the variable global leadership. The specific relationship that this study sought to understand is the relationship between development through experience and global leadership. A global leader was defined as an organizational leader whose work involved responsibilities requiring him or her to lead portions of the organization’s or company’s business and personnel across the borders of country, language, time zone, and culture. Figure 1 depicts the conceptual framework for this study.

Leadership learning through experience

Managers make meaning from their experiences through communication and interaction with others in their organization (Schwandt, 2005). As organizations

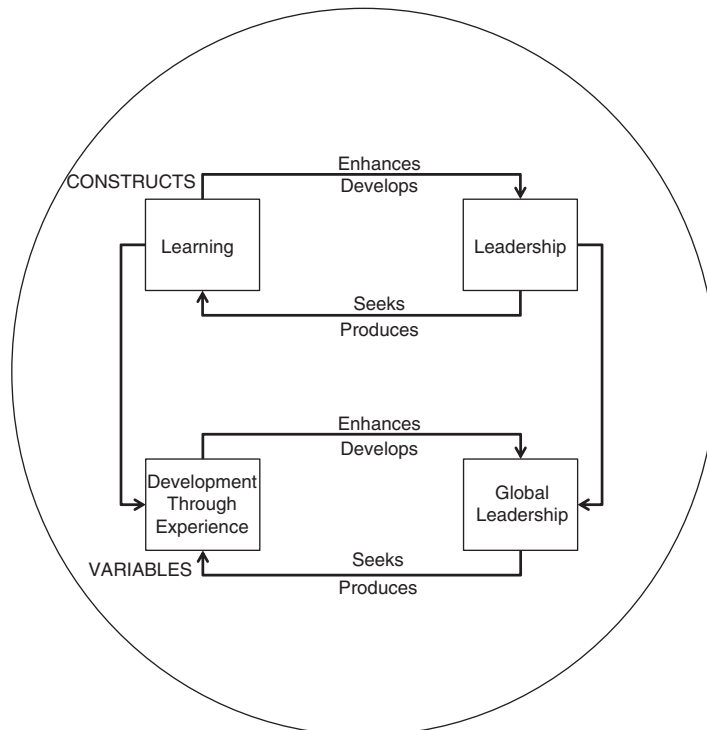


Figure 1.
Conceptual framework

and leaders confront environments that are increasingly characterized by ambiguity, uncertainty, and equivocality, they engage in sensemaking to establish some degree of certainty. Managerial learning is enhanced when learners have the opportunity to solve problems that draw on their own experiences, as well as when they interact with others in reflective dialogue that engages them in seeing what they say (Weick, 1995). Leaders learn how to be effective leaders by processing their experiences and adapting their behavior to facilitate achievement of their goals.

Many scholars hold that “most learning occurs on the job” (Keys and Wolfe, 1988, p. 216) through both “planned and unplanned on-the-job experiences” (Wexley and Baldwin, 1986, p. 278); “numerous adult educators have underscored the fundamental role that experience plays in learning in adulthood” (Merriam and Caffarella, 1999, p. 221). Learning is an essential skill for a leader, one through which he or she experiences phenomena, reflects on and analyzes experience, creates meaning from the experience, decides what (if anything) to do differently in the future, and ultimately implements new, changed behavior (Barnett, 1989). According to Van Velsor and Guthrie (1998), “most managers are *not* active and continuous learners. Most people learn easily within their comfort zone but find it much more difficult to learn when operating under new challenges” (p. 242). Merely having an experience does not guarantee that one learns from that experience (Fiedler, 1970); therefore, the ability to learn is one of the most important competencies for successful leadership (Argyris, 1991; Dechant, 1989).

The ability to learn involves “learning how to learn, which is the ability to introspectively analyze your own cognitive processes [...] and to find ways to improve them. It also involves self-awareness, which is an understanding of your own strengths and limitations” (Yukl, 2006, p. 204). Clearly, learning, specifically the ability to learn, exerts a strong influence on leaders’ ability to adapt to and thrive within the turbulent business environment in which they must operate; therefore, it is a critical component of the conceptual framework for this research study.

Global leadership development through experience

The ability to learn from experience is critical for global leaders as well. The dominant theme in the global leadership development from experience literature is that the ability to learn from experience is essential for global leaders. Spreitzer *et al.* (1997), Eichinger and Lombardo (2004), Conner (2000), Black *et al.* (1999), McCall and Hollenbeck (2002), Dalton *et al.* (2002), Marquardt (2003), and Van Velsor and Guthrie (1998) all emphasized the importance of global leaders having the ability to learn from experience. Marquardt (2003), Mendenhall (2006), and Mendenhall *et al.*, 2008 described this ability as essential to the development of global leadership competencies. In this study, development is defined as participation in assignments or experiences with the purpose of developing new competencies and capabilities that enable one to effectively fulfill a job role.

Investigating global leaders

This investigation of the phenomenon of how global leaders develop was approached from the phenomenological epistemology, which is aligned with a constructivist orientation, leading the researcher to focus on apprehending “the *meaning of experiences* for individuals” (Creswell, 1998, p. 86). The “empirical phenomenological approach involves a return to experience in order to obtain comprehensive descriptions that provide the basis for a reflective structural analysis that portrays the essences of

the experience” (Moustakas, 1994, p. 13). The epistemology was consistent with the goal of the study, because rather than seeking objective answers or testing a hypothesis, the study engaged participants in interviews to solicit their verbal description of the experiences they found to be important in their development as global leaders, as well as what they learned from those experiences and how they translated their lived experiences into new global leadership capabilities. Instead of assuming that an objective, fixed body of knowledge or set of facts about global leadership competencies and development exists outside the experience of global leaders and is true for all global leaders, the study assumed that reality for global leaders is “socially constructed” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 1) and reflected “a sober recognition that knowledge must always be knowledge from a certain position” (p. 10).

The author developed the research study questions in order to explore the relationship between development through experience and global leadership. The specific elements of the conceptual framework explored in the research study were framed through the three research questions regarding specifically what experiences global leaders would describe as important in their development as global leaders, what they would report that they developed or learned that contributed to their development as global leaders, and how they learned what they learned that led to their development as global leaders? This research study sought to: develop a deeper understanding of the relationship between development through experience and global leadership; understand the learning processes, steps, actions, and tactics that global leaders report having used or participated in that led to developing important global leadership competencies; and understand the specific new insights, perspectives, understandings, skills, and behaviors developed by global leaders and reported by them as contributing to their developing important global leadership competencies.

Moustakas’s (1994) phenomenological long interview method was used to gather, organize, and analyze the data. This method allowed the researcher to delve deeply into the research subjects’ experience of developing as global leaders, while at the same time managing time constraints on the leaders’ time. By seeking to learn how global leaders describe, in their own words, the experiences they report to be important to their learning and developing as global leaders, as well as what they learned and how they learned new skills and developed new capabilities, the study sought to access “the objective repository of vast accumulations of meaning and experience” (Berger and Luckmann, 1966, p. 7) these leaders had constructed through their position in the global leadership context. The research method was chosen for this study because the goal of phenomenological research is to interpret the actions of individuals in the social world and the ways in which individuals give meaning to social phenomena. Thus, the study sought to explore the meaning study participants ascribe to certain aspects of their experience as global leaders, that is, as they grow and develop.

Organizations were chosen through the use of convenience sampling, based upon the following criteria: the organization conducted a substantial portion of its regular business on a global basis, that is, across national or cultural borders; the organization employed individuals in roles as global leaders, whose role involved doing global work; and the organization agreed to identify leaders to participate in the study.

The study sample consisted of global leaders in six global companies and industries with significant operations in the USA. The leaders were born in Argentina, Australia,

Belgium, Brazil, Germany, and the USA, and worked in the pharmaceutical, satellite television, medical devices, consumer products, women's health and beauty, and financial services industries. Several had taken long-term expatriate assignments lasting one or more years; others had participated in several short-term international assignments of several months; still others fulfilled global roles in their home country but had no expatriate experience. At the time the study was conducted these individuals were based in Belgium, Brazil, Germany, the UK, and the USA. Study participants were identified utilizing purposive, criterion-based sampling (Patton, 1990), the criterion's being that participants must be high-performing global senior-level leaders within that organization, who had been in a global role for at least five years in the organization in which they were employed. For this study, a "senior level leader" was a leader who held a position within the range of positions from a direct report to a direct report of the CEO and down to (and including) managers of other managers. The organization (i.e. a human resources executive or other senior executive) identified the subjects to be interviewed as being high-performing senior-level global leaders, and "high performing" was determined by the organization's criteria. Recognizing that there is not just one type of global leader, the term "global leader" was defined as someone "who do[es] global work" (McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002, p. 32), meaning his or her normal, day-to-day work responsibilities involved leading other organizational members in multiple countries, time zones, languages, national cultures, or organization cultures.

During the interview, the researcher asked the interviewee to identify an experience that he or she found to be highly developmental of himself or herself as a global leader and then to describe the experience. The researcher utilized follow-up, probing questions to obtain additional information and descriptions of the phenomenon. Follow-up questions addressed various aspects and constituents of the phenomenon or experience described by the participant. The interviewer asked additional, unanticipated questions to pursue more detailed descriptions of experiences that seemed to have relevance or to require additional description.

The researcher analyzed the interview transcripts using specific qualitative techniques of analysis recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994), including: noting patterns and themes, memoing, clustering, and identifying implications. These techniques enabled the researcher to understand how study participants developed the global leadership competencies they reported to be important in their role as global leaders. After identifying implications, the researcher compared the findings to the global leadership competency and global development literature and interpreted the findings.

Invariant meaning horizons and themes

The research subjects' experiences were found to have several elements in common, despite the diversity of each individual's experience of developing as a global leader. Analysis of the verbatim transcripts, using phenomenological reduction and imaginative variation, identified 28 constituents, which were then clustered into five themes. The themes were evaluated against the individual horizons or statements to ascertain whether or not each horizon was accounted for in the themes and to ensure the themes did not include meanings or subjects that did not appear in the individual horizons. Table I displays the 28 constituents clustered into the five themes, organized by what the leaders experienced, what they learned from their experiences, and how they learned what they learned.

Table I.
Invariant meaning
horizons

| What they experienced | What they learned | How they learned |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| Living and working in different geography and culture | Intensive cross-cultural experiences | Relationships |
| Becoming aware of and dealing with one's cultural biases and assumptions | Development programs | Developing and maintaining relationships and networks |
| Need to immerse oneself in local culture | Professional meetings | Face-to-face interactions with people in their world |
| Understanding via direct, personal experience vs intellectual understanding | Global travel | Seeking to understand others from the beginning |
| Multicultural exposure and first-hand experience | Site visits | Power of being open and genuine; connecting as human beings It is okay to not have all the answers; humility |
| | | Curiosity, openness toward experience and learning from experience |
| | | Learning "in the moment," accidental, incidental, and serendipitous |
| | | Observation of people and organizational dynamics |
| | | Asking questions; listening deeply, and attending to others |
| | | Learning from mistakes and failures |
| | | Reflection |
| | | Transfer and generalization to other situations |

Table II displays the research subjects' pseudonyms, matching their comments to specific invariant meaning horizons. The research subjects reported that through these experiences they gained many valuable lessons (what they learned), which tended to cluster around the themes of cultural sensitivity and relationships. Cultural sensitivity was a key area of learning for the leaders in this study. They realized the need to be open to different environments and cultures, as well as the importance of appreciating, valuing, and leveraging cultural differences. For example, one global leader stated:

[...] there were quite a few different skills that were learned, whether it was things like project management, relationship management, or collaboration skills, having cross-cultural sensitivity. Recognizing when you say one thing in one place it doesn't necessarily translate to the same thing in another place. Being truly able to have a global mindset, you know at different points in time through the initiative there would be an appearance of one region skewing above or below another region and how, how do you start to balance that, to give appropriate recognition, and to recognize those differences within the culture.

These global leaders quickly learned the importance of paying attention to the subtle clues and nuances of the behavior of people in cultures with which they were not familiar to be able to appropriately interpret interactions in group settings, to develop effective social and business relationships with colleagues, and to avoid offending people in unfamiliar cultural settings. They developed the ability to understand different points of view and perspectives as a result of being surrounded by multiple perspectives from multiple cultures and being forced to grapple with the differences. "Jeff's" approach to developing as a global leader was framed by the openness to experience that he gained from his childhood adventure of moving for a year with his family from Argentina to the USA. It was this extremely disruptive experience that set the tone for the rest of his life, teaching him that he needed to be open to experience (a "lesson learned" from the experience) as well as instilling the attitude of "openness to experience" as an important way of learning as a global leader. As he put it:

Those type[s] of experiences start training your mind, your behavior, or your attitude, your overall disposition to move away from certain environments, and bias you a little bit toward one front, while other people don't have that [...] That started shaping me to move away and to not to be so limited or so anchored to one place or one culture.

| Research subject (pseudonym) | Living and working in different geography and culture | Intensive cross-cultural experiences | Cultural sensitivity | Relationships | "Intuitive," ad hoc learning approaches |
|------------------------------|---|--------------------------------------|----------------------|---------------|---|
| Lou | × | | × | × | × |
| Jeff | × | × | × | × | × |
| Bill | × | | × | × | × |
| Sam | × | | × | | × |
| Pat | × | | × | × | × |
| Emma | × | | × | × | × |
| John | × | | × | × | × |
| Tomas | × | | | × | × |
| Isabella | | × | × | × | × |
| Emily | × | × | × | | × |
| Madison | | × | × | | × |
| Jacob | × | × | × | | |

Table II.
Research subjects
and invariant meaning
horizons

Having to wrestle with different opinions and approaches and, sometimes, vastly different value systems taught them to be tolerant and non-judgmental, even when facing offensive behavior on the part of colleagues and associates. Finally, they learned to be flexible and adaptable to deal with the constantly and rapidly changing and evolving global business environment. As another global leader stated, "So you have to be open-minded and flexible to make sure that you can influence people, and work with them to get the results that you are looking for."

The theme of relationships was another central developmental area for these global leaders. They learned the power of seeking to understand others from the very beginning of their interactions with people who were part of their global experience, as well as the power of being open and genuine in helping them to "connect" as human beings. Face-to-face interactions with people on their own "home turf" enabled them to develop and maintain relationships and networks that were vital to their effectiveness as global leaders. One global leader in the study discovered that the ability to develop relationships was a key to her ability to work through challenging interactions, such as when several men in an advanced medicine program completely discounted her opinion, which she attributed to global cultural differences regarding gender roles. Rather than judging them for their actions, she shared her perspective and reactions and worked with them to overcome the differences so as to "have a mutually respectful relationship for the remaining time there." Another leader found that relationships were key to "establishing a network, being able to get work done through others, and in some cases done through others that you didn't even know yet." Yet another global leader emphasized the importance of relationships by stating "when you start moving around from one country to another and working in different cultures you need to step up significantly to succeed. Because you don't have the luxury of building those relationships throughout a smooth, long time. You need to build those relationships that influence and those connections very quickly."

As they encountered complex business and people-related challenges in their roles as global leaders, these research subjects discovered that it was okay to not have all the answers all the time. They learned that the ability to approach people in a humble manner, demonstrating deference and respect for the thought and work that had already been performed locally, set the stage for developing a relationship. This humility, in combination with the patience to listen and learn from others, was often a key to establishing productive relationships.

Composite structural description: how global leaders learned from experience

The composite structure underlying the global leaders' development in this study was characterized by an intuitive approach to learning from experience, in which the leaders employed dynamic, reflective, and situation-specific learning approaches to succeed in their global role. Three factors seemed to link the leaders' learning approaches: first, their attitude or stance toward learning; second, their tendency to learn intuitively, utilizing ad hoc learning tactics during their experiences; and third, their use of reflection after completing experiences as a means of learning and applying lessons learned. Table III displays the common learning approaches and their respective specific learning tactics.

The research subjects demonstrated an attitude of openness to experience and a willingness and desire to learn, as well as curiosity and excitement about what it would be like to work and live in another part of the world. Their attitude of

| Attitude or stance toward learning | Learning approaches during experiences | Learning approaches after experiences |
|---|---|---|
| Openness to experience | Observation of people and organizational dynamics | Reflection-on-action |
| Motivation, willingness, and desire to learn | Learning from mistakes and failures | Transfer and generalization to other situations |
| Curiosity about working and living in other parts of the world | Learning “in the moment,” accidental, incidental, and serendipitous | |
| Discovery and exploration | Self-reflection, reflection-in-action | |
| Desire, intention, and willingness to gain something positive from experience | Listening and attending to others | |

Table III.
Global leader learning approaches

discovering and exploring, coupled with their desire, intention, and willingness to get something positive out of their experience, imbued their experience with energy and a passion to learn and succeed. The subjects approached the global leadership opportunity with arms and minds open wide to both experience and learning from experience; they viewed their global leadership experiences as opportunities to discover and explore new things. It was this open-minded approach to experience, their motivation to learn, and their belief that learning is central to developing as a global leader that appears to have set the stage for their growth and development when placed in intense, challenging global leadership challenges.

These global leaders expressed a strong tendency to learn intuitively, in an unplanned and unstructured manner. They had a real desire to learn, as inquisitive individuals, and demonstrated a true openness to experiencing accidental, incidental, and serendipitous learning from the developmental experiences they described. At the same time, the challenges they faced stretched them beyond their previous capabilities, and this situation caused some sense of disorientation or discomfort; this discomfort in turn was a further motivation to be open and to adapt to new circumstances. Whether structured or unstructured in their approach, goal oriented or not goal oriented, these global leaders’ learning while engaged in global leadership experiences was characterized by close observation of and attention to people and organizational dynamics, learning from mistakes and failures, learning from experience “in the moment,” self-reflection, and listening and attending to others. While some of these leaders found that over time they became “more reflective” and learned naturally from experience, others engaged in more structured reflection:

[...] on our anniversary every year we actually talk to each other about how we think the year went. What one of us could do to improve, how our relationship is going, is there anything we want to try to change or improve. And we used that time as well when we were in Europe to talk about what the prior year’s experience has been like, and what it meant to us and what we gained from it. So, I’d say those were reflection points that we could use.

As the research subjects completed developmental experiences, they reflected on their experiences and drew lessons learned, which they then sought to apply going forward in other situations. The numerous experiences from which they intuitively learned culminated in the acquisition of many small insights and learnings that, when accumulated over time, produced wisdom and increased global leadership capability

for these leaders. They continuously employed dynamic, reflective, and situation-specific learning approaches, regardless of the challenge or condition. It was through the utilization of an intuitive approach to learning from experience, as well as intensive cross-cultural situations, that these global leaders were able to grow and develop and to succeed in their global roles.

Global leadership competencies

As one component of the data analysis, the researcher employed the qualitative analysis techniques of counting, noting patterns and themes, and clustering (Miles and Huberman, 1994) to identify potential global leadership competencies that might be identified in or inferred from the research subjects' comments. The study utilized Boyatzis's (1982) definition of competency, cited by Spencer and Spencer (1993) as being "underlying characteristics of people" that indicate "ways of behaving or thinking, generalizing across situations, and enduring for a reasonably long period of time" (p. 6) and reflecting motives, traits, self-concept, knowledge, and skills or abilities. For the purpose of this study, the definition was expanded to include attitudes and mindsets, worldviews, or outlooks.

Analysis of the interview transcripts utilizing the technique of counting coded items yielded 56 distinct items considered by the researcher to be potential global leadership competency elements. The items were then grouped into clusters or themes, by similarity of meaning or related meaning, in the context of the interviews. The researcher organized the 56 competency elements mentioned by the research subjects in their interviews into seven clusters:

- (1) cultural awareness and sensitivity;
- (2) global mindset or perspective;
- (3) learning from experience;
- (4) developing and maintaining relationships;
- (5) communication;
- (6) traits or attitudes; and
- (7) knowledge and skills.

Table IV displays the 56 potential global leadership competency items mentioned by the research subjects, clustered into the seven themes; the table also indicates the number of subjects who mentioned each item as well as the number of times each item was mentioned. Although this is a qualitative research study, the table demonstrates the value and importance of incorporating a quantitative element in the analysis to aid in identifying themes.

Discussion and conclusions

Conclusions were developed by reviewing and reflecting on the purpose and significance of the study, the research question, and findings of the study within the context of the global leadership literature. The conclusions address three elements of the what:

- (1) the experiences global leaders found to be important in their development as global leaders – what they experienced;

| Item mentioned by global leader | No. of subjects mentioned | No. of times mentioned |
|---|---------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Cluster – Theme 1: Cultural awareness and sensitivity</i> | | |
| Ability to see different perspectives | 4 | 5 |
| Being aware of, understanding, sensitive to, and adapting to cultural differences | 10 | 36 |
| Curiosity, desire to learn about other cultures | 5 | 7 |
| Global mindset | 3 | 4 |
| Open to differences in various cultures | 4 | 7 |
| Open minded | 5 | 12 |
| Self-awareness | 5 | 9 |
| Views working across multiple cultures and locations as opportunity | 1 | 1 |
| Willing to explore | 3 | 3 |
| <i>Cluster – Theme 2: Global mindset or perspective</i> | | |
| Ability to see different perspectives | 4 | 5 |
| Align multiple perspectives | 1 | 1 |
| Dealing with ambiguity | 2 | 3 |
| Dealing with complexity | 4 | 11 |
| Flexible, adaptable | 7 | 16 |
| Global mindset | 3 | 4 |
| Learning about different ways of doing business | 1 | 1 |
| Living without a comfort zone | 1 | 2 |
| Managing multiple priorities | 1 | 1 |
| Thinking beyond the borders of one's home country | 2 | 2 |
| Understanding the impact of one's decisions on the rest of the world | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Cluster – Theme 3: Learning from experience</i> | | |
| Asking questions | 1 | 1 |
| Attitude of discovery | 1 | 1 |
| Growing through execution against challenge | 1 | 1 |
| Learning agility | 3 | 3 |
| Learning from experience | 8 | 13 |
| Learning from mistakes | 5 | 6 |
| Listening | 7 | 8 |
| Observant, paying attention | 4 | 5 |
| Perceiving and being aware of interpersonal dynamics | 1 | 6 |
| Quickly integrating information | 1 | 1 |
| Rapid learning | 1 | 1 |
| Reflection | 1 | 1 |
| Self-reflection | 1 | 3 |
| Willing to learn | 3 | 4 |
| <i>Cluster – Theme 4: Developing and maintaining relationships</i> | | |
| Authenticity | 2 | 3 |
| Getting work done through others | 1 | 2 |
| Giving people the sense they are valued | 1 | 1 |
| Humility or humbleness | 1 | 1 |
| Language skills | 4 | 9 |
| Relationships with people | 6 | 15 |
| <i>Cluster – Theme 5: Communication</i> | | |
| Building a network | 2 | 2 |
| Communication | 6 | 11 |
| Language skills | 4 | 9 |

Table IV.
Potential global leadership
competency items
(continued)

| Item mentioned by global leader | No. of subjects mentioned | No. of times mentioned |
|--|---------------------------|------------------------|
| <i>Cluster – Theme 6: Traits or attitudes</i> | | |
| Courage to make a hard decision | 1 | 3 |
| Driving for results | 1 | 1 |
| Intelligence | 1 | 1 |
| Objectivity | 1 | 1 |
| Passion | 1 | 1 |
| Patience | 5 | 5 |
| Self-confidence | 1 | 1 |
| Tolerance | 1 | 1 |
| Working hard | 1 | 1 |
| <i>Cluster – Theme 7: Knowledge and skills</i> | | |
| Leading the business | | |
| Aligning, engaging, providing direction | 1 | 1 |
| Business acumen | 3 | 5 |
| Organizational knowledge | 2 | 2 |
| Technical or functional knowledge | 2 | 2 |
| Leading people | | |
| Developing people | 1 | 1 |
| Empowering others | 2 | 3 |
| Staffing key roles | 2 | 3 |

Table IV.

- (2) the lessons and insights global leaders reported having learned from their experiences – what they learned; and
- (3) the global leadership competencies described by global leaders as important to their roles – what they needed to be competent.

The conclusions also address two elements of the how:

- (1) attitudes and behaviors that seem to have predisposed global leaders to be receptive to development through experience; and
- (2) how they learned what they reported having learned from the experiences.

Conclusion One: Global leaders develop through first-hand cross-cultural and global leadership experience. The global leaders in this study developed the capabilities they needed to effectively fulfill their role as global leaders through first-hand, personal participation in intensive cross-cultural and global leadership experience that challenged their perspectives and assumptions and stretched their comfort zones. Through their experience of developing as global leaders, they gained important new insights, perspectives, and skills in the areas of cultural sensitivity, relationships, and the need for curiosity and a desire to learn.

The experiences described by the global leaders in this study included early foundational experiences, such as being a sales representative. They also included intensive, immersive cross-cultural experiences such as global travel on work, personal, and mission-related trips; hands-on, action-learning-based global leadership development programs; global or international professional conferences; overseas site visits; short-term work and project assignments; holding global jobs, without relocating to another country or culture; holding global jobs, after relocating to another

country or culture; and relocating to another country to take a new non-global job. It is important to note that not all of these experiences involved the leader's moving to and living in a country other than his or her native country; many valuable developmental experiences involved short-term assignments, visits, or projects that involved little travel. Experiences such as global leadership development programs, professional meetings, global travel, and short-term site visits all had profound and prolonged positive impact on the respondents' development as global leaders. The common element among their experiences of developing as global leaders was that they developed by gaining first-hand, direct, and personal cross-cultural and global leadership experiences and that these experiences challenged and stretched them both as leaders and as human beings.

The types of experiences that the global leaders found to be developmental in this study are very similar to those described by other researchers in the global leadership development literature. Dalton (1998b), Black *et al.* (1999), Dalton *et al.* (2002), McCall and Hollenbeck (2002), Marquardt (2003), Dalton and Ernst (2004), and Oddou and Mendenhall (2008) all described various categories and types of developmental experiences that are consistent with the types of experiences identified as developmental by the global leaders in this study. Research into developmental experience to date has tended to emphasize certain types of experiences yielding specific lessons (Evans, 2000; McCall, 1988, 2004; McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002; McCall *et al.*, 1988). Much is known about the kinds of experiences that executives and global leaders find to be developmental; however, much less is known specifically about how global leaders translate their experiences into lessons learned. Further research into the experiences that global leaders report to be highly important for their development as global leaders could be valuable if the specific learning and translating approaches – the how – were to be explored in greater depth. Understanding the internal, cognitive learning processes that global leaders use to generate meaning and insight from experience would be a highly valuable contribution to theory development related to global leadership. Thus, additional phenomenological research into the question of how global leaders develop through experience would make a valuable contribution to understanding the phenomenon.

Conclusion Two: Global leaders learn the importance and value of cultural sensitivity, relationships and networks, and curiosity or desire to learn as a result of their developmental experiences. Cultural sensitivity was a central component of the lessons learned for the global leaders in this study. They experienced, and learned through their experiences, the importance and value of cultural sensitivity by living and working in different geographic areas and cultures. Cultural sensitivity played a key role in these global leaders' development of relationships across cultural borders and enabled them to develop and maintain relationships and networks that were vital to their effectiveness as global leaders. Although curiosity and a desire to learn could be considered prerequisite to successful development as global leaders, these characteristics also were described as important learning points by these global leaders, as they learned to listen deeply and learn from others while maintaining an attitude of discovery and exploration. For example, one research subject described the importance of listening as "having eyes and ears wide open, you know really being able to listen to all views, verbal and nonverbal, you know hearing even what's not said." Another study participant stated, "through my approach of listening to people and building a very trustful relationship in a very short period time, people would say he's been able to build the bridge very well between people from very different backgrounds."

These lessons learned also were echoed in McCall and Hollenbeck's (2002) research into what effective global executives need to learn. Their findings that learning to deal with cultural issues and adapting to different cultures, learning to handle multiple and multifaceted relationships, and "growing personally in ways that enhance adaptation and growth under tough circumstances" (p. 102) are all consistent with the findings and conclusions drawn from this study. Similarly, Fiedler (1964) observed that a cultural gap between leaders and followers is one factor that that can make a situation challenging, and emphasized the importance of the leader adapting his or her leadership approach to fit a given situation.

The global leaders in this study talked about certain attitudes and specific behaviors that might contribute to development as global leaders. These individuals were driven by curiosity and the desire to learn. They possessed an openness to experience that led them to actively explore new challenges, and they were motivated to learn about other parts of the world. Their attitude of discovering and exploring, along with their desire, intention, and willingness to extract positive learning from even negative experience turned their cross-cultural or global experiences into adventures that they described with energy and verve. These global leaders approached their global leadership experience with minds open to both experience and learning from experience, and saw their global leadership experiences as opportunities to discover and explore new things. One study participant described this as being "open and willing to explore those things in an open environment" and stated further that you need to "go through that experience with an attitude of discovering, like a Boy Scout, I mean let's get some fun out of this, let's discover how this works. I mean, go in with the curiosity, the attitude, the right attitude to learn, the willingness to get something positive out of that."

Their open-minded approach to experience, their high degree of motivation to learn, and their belief that learning is central to developing as a global leader appears to have laid the groundwork for their development when working in challenging, intense, and complex global leadership challenges. This conclusion is consistent with the research of Spreitzer *et al.* (1997), Black *et al.* (1999), McCall and Hollenbeck (2002), and Eichinger and Lombardo (2004).

Further research into what global leaders learn from the developmental experiences they report as important to their development is needed. Previous research (McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002; McCall *et al.*, 1988) has discussed the lessons executives report having learned as a result of participating in developmental experiences; however, it is not clear that an experience will always produce a specific lesson, as experience is an individually constructed phenomenon and is thus individually perceived through unique personal filters and is subject to interpretations. March (2010) pointed out:

Experience has to be converted into lessons learned, and the conversion is both difficult and unending [...] Knowing what happened is sometimes possible, though it is often difficult. Knowing why it happened, and thus being able to make inferences about the events of the past, involves forming implicit or explicit causal inferences in situations that invite debate and error [...] many variables that seem likely to be important are difficult to observe and elusive to measure. As a result, the lessons derived from experiential learning are rife with unjustified conclusions, superstitious associations, misleading correlations, tautological generalizations, and systematic biases (p. 107).

Two global leaders, participating in the same developmental experience, may derive vastly different lessons, because the events of ambiguous experience are "given meaning through flexible interpretations" (March, 2010, p. 110). If one relies on "Experience A" to produce "Lesson 1" on a consistent basis, one will no doubt be

disappointed, because “interpretive flexibility assures that any specific experience will be consistent with a variety of different lessons” (p. 111). Observations of experience can justify very different evaluations of what was observed:

The same managerial behavior can be labeled as either “bold” or “impetuous,” while its opposite can be labeled as either “careful” or “timid.” The difference between an “arrogant” manager and a “self-assured” one can be as difficult to discern as the difference between an “insecure” manager and a “consultative” one (March, 2010, p. 111).

Research into this aspect of the phenomenon of how global leaders develop (i.e. learn valuable lessons) through experience could contribute new insights about the relationship between types of experiences that can be more useful and valuable in ensuring that potential or new global leaders gain the lessons they need to effectively fulfill their roles.

Conclusion Three: Global leaders require a unique set of global leadership competencies to effectively fulfill their roles. The global leaders in this study described many competency elements as being important for them to demonstrate or possess to fulfill their global leadership roles. These potential competencies were categorized according to the clusters of: cultural awareness and sensitivity; global mindset or perspective; learning from experience; developing and maintaining relationships; communication; traits or attitudes; and knowledge and skills. In this study, cultural awareness and sensitivity is reflected in being aware of, understanding, sensitive to, and adapting to cultural differences. It includes being open-minded, being open to differences in various cultures, having curiosity about other cultures, and having a desire to learn about other cultures. One global leader stated the importance of cultural awareness and sensitivity in terms of “how they make decisions, or how their brains work in terms of the whole process. I found some of those cultures not straightforward on the decision process” and used Brazil as an example: “People would move around the bushes but they don’t get to the straightforward, logical thinking to make a decision. As I learned those, I would say, particularities of each culture, it gave me a much better understanding, I think, of how to deal with those people.”

Having a global mindset or perspective goes hand-in-hand with cultural awareness and sensitivity in that it concerns the ability to deal with different perspectives, as well as the ability to align multiple perspectives and deal with ambiguity and the complexity endemic to global business. One study participant described global mindset as:

[...] having an appreciation for all differences, so I think about the value of diversity within that. When I think about having a global mindset, recognizing those that you’re impacting around, around the globe. So thinking about all cultures, thinking about the value that you can bring when you take in different ideas, instead of focusing on what may be traditionally viewed within one venue. Whether that’s within a country or region or within a function because then again you could have a shallow mindset based on a functional view as well. And I think it’s, for me it’s just being very open, to, to other’s ideas. And, being able to connect with that, not setting aside and or dismissing, you know giving it value and hearing it out.

The need to be good at learning from experience is almost a given, as the fast pace, constant change, and inevitable turbulence inherent in the global environment demand that global leaders be agile learners who quickly learn from everything at their disposal and turn every experience into a learning opportunity. These leaders’ perspective is effectively captured in the words of one of the global leaders who participated in this study:

I think you have to be somebody who is energized by that and maybe that ties to being you know, lifelong learners. I’m someone who despite that fact I don’t do a lot of formal learning,

I very much am curious, intellectually curious and like to learn. And I think that has been something that has helped me be successful working across multiple cultures and multiple locations, because I see that all as opportunity. I don't see it as something to work, to manage.

As they encountered different cultures with different values and found themselves dealing with more complex organizational challenges, these global leaders found that they needed to be good at developing and maintaining relationships. This skill involves engaging with people authentically and humbly to facilitate goal achievement through positive cross-cultural relationships. Developing relationships was a significant and worthwhile investment of time and energy for the global leaders in this study, as described by one participant who stated "making an investment in the relationship at the beginning and better understanding others at the beginning" of a new global assignment "was for me a potential road to success," and sends a message that "you understand the environment you're operating in and people trust you as being someone that understands them."

Communication is a facilitator of relationship development as well as cultural awareness and sensitivity, and was viewed as central to global leader effectiveness by the leaders in this study. Traits or attitudes represent individual characteristics that were viewed by some people as important in specific situations or organizations but not necessarily mentioned by numerous global leaders in the interviews. Knowledge and skills include specific items that various research subjects mentioned as being important in the context of fulfilling their role; however, these items were not mentioned by numerous leaders very frequently and are more accurately classified as skills and knowledge related to any leadership role, not necessarily global leadership.

The five clusters or themes related to potential global leadership competencies are similar to those identified by previous researchers and authors. The themes of cultural awareness and sensitivity as well as global mindset or perspective also have been identified as important in global leadership by Kets de Vries and Mead (1992), Moran and Riesenberger (1994), Rhinesmith (1996), Rosen *et al.* (2000), Dalton *et al.* (2002), McCall and Hollenbeck (2002), Hofstede (1980), and Marquardt and Berger (2003), among many others. Similarly, Hofstede (1980) noted that views of leadership vary among different cultures, and pointed out the need for global organizations and their leaders to address the dilemma of whether to adapt to local culture or try to change it (Hofstede, 1980). The need for global leaders to learn from experience has been addressed by Spreitzer *et al.* (1997), Black *et al.* (1999), Conner and Marquardt (1999), Dalton *et al.* (2002), McCall and Hollenbeck (2002), and Marquardt (2003). Developing and maintaining relationships has been identified as important to global leader effectiveness through Lobel's (1990) discussion of "relational skills" (p. 39); Kets de Vries and Mead's emphasis on building and maintaining organizational networks; and Beechler and Javidan's discussion of the need for global leaders to "build, secure, and leverage trusting relationships" (as cited in Javidan, Steers, & Hitt, p. 219). Bueno and Tubbs (2004), as well as others, have addressed competencies related to communication, clearly central to developing and maintaining effective relationships and networks.

There is a need for further research to clarify the global leadership competencies required to effectively fulfill global leadership roles. The literature reviewed in this study alone identified at least 70 items that various authors considered to be important global leadership skills. Although they may all be important, it seems unlikely that they are all at the same level of importance; thus, further research would be useful in

helping bring order to the chaos that is the current state of global leadership competency models.

The need for further research into global leadership competencies is complicated by the fact that there is no such thing as “one global job” (McCall and Hollenbeck, 2002). As a result, “the search for global executive competencies has failed to uncover a universal set of competencies” (p. 34); nevertheless, the quest continues. One possible productive area for future research related to this issue is the exploration of what is meant, exactly, by the term global job. The term global is used frequently and inexactly to describe jobs that may be considered global by one person but not by someone else if different criteria are applied. Exploring the concepts of global, global leader, and global leadership to ascertain the nuances of meaning within the use of the terms could help bring clarity to the discussion about global leadership competencies. If there are different degrees or types of globality (Sirkin *et al.*, 2008), there may also be a corresponding spectrum of global jobs or roles, each with unique competency requirements. If this spectrum of global jobs exists, what are the points on the spectrum? Some of the components of this global role spectrum may involve: relocation vs no relocation to another country; relocating to, living in, and working in another country while in a global job vs not relocating, but living and working in one’s home country while in a global job; and leading a globally distributed team composed of individuals from other countries, cultures, time zones, and languages while living and working in a country other than one’s home country vs leading a globally distributed team while living and working in one’s home country. If this spectrum of global jobs exists, what are the global leadership competency requirements for the key points on the spectrum? Shedding light on these questions would contribute to an increased understanding of the phenomenon of how global leaders develop.

In addition to the need for clarification of the global leadership competencies required to effectively fulfill global leadership roles there is a related need for examination of extant global leadership competency assessment instruments to determine if a better instrument could be developed. The Global Competencies Inventory (GCI) (The Kozai Group Inc, 2008), the Global Mindset Inventory (GMI) (Javidan *et al.*, 2007), and the Global Executive Leadership Inventory (GELI) (Kets de Vries *et al.*, 2004), three well-known assessment instruments utilized in global leadership development, each focus on different, specific sets of competencies. Further research into global leadership competencies and assessment instruments would contribute to an increased understanding of how global leaders develop and how to help them develop through assessment and feedback.

Conclusion Four: Global leaders develop and learn intuitively, dynamically employing ad hoc learning approaches. The global leaders in this study developed global leadership capabilities needed to effectively fulfill their role as global leaders by intuitively utilizing ad hoc learning tactics during their experiences. They engaged in experiences poised and eager to learn, with an attitude of openness toward experience and learning, viewing learning from experience as an integral part of fulfilling their role as global leaders. These global leaders possessed curiosity about working and living in other parts of the world and approached cross-cultural and global experience with an attitude of discovery and exploration. One global leader in the study stated “intellectual curiosity is another thing. We haven’t talked too much about that, but I think it’s an appreciation of ‘boy, this is really neat let me try to figure out how this works.’ Whether that’s getting a drivers license in the UK, or whether that’s a complex business problem, it’s all around ‘Yeah, I can appreciate this for the learning.’”

They demonstrated an intention and willingness to gain something positive from experience, whether the experience was perceived as positive or negative. As another participant put it, if you go into a global leadership experience “with an attitude of seeing only the dark side, the pain, the difficulty, the frustration, that’s not going to serve you because you’re going to see everything negative.”

While actively engaged in developmental experiences, the global leaders in this study learned intuitively, in an unplanned and unstructured manner. Rather than identifying developmental goals prior to embarking on global assignments or experiences, they had a strong tendency to experience accidental, incidental, and serendipitous learning. One senior global leader shared his experience of learning from failure, stating that he tried “a new strategy and I had some pretty good failures there you know, I really stepped into a couple of things that I regret, that I shouldn’t have done, but you know what I’ve never made that mistake again. And you know nobody died and I have not been fired but it was a good learning and I think that’s the important thing.”

Through close observation of and attention to people and the dynamics around them, seeking and accepting feedback, and learning from mistakes and failures, they gained new insights, perspectives, and skills “on the fly.” A “just in time” learning mentality that depends on emerging circumstances that stretch and challenge their capabilities and cultural assumptions characterizes the development approach of global leaders.

Use of such an ad hoc, reactive approach to learning seems to fit with the complex, fast-paced business environments within which these leaders operate. Much as they respond to immediate business challenges and the demand for quick action with rapid analysis and solutions, global leaders apply this same mentality to learning from their experience. Rather than using deliberate, analytical, goal oriented, structured (i.e. “slow”) approaches to development as global leaders, they move within the poly-rhythms of the organization and environment, learning “in the moment” from decisions, actions, and feedback, flexibly adapting and changing their approach to better achieve desired business outcomes. Similar conclusions about the learning approaches used by global leaders have been drawn by Spreitzer *et al.* (1997), McCall and Hollenbeck (2002), and Eichinger and Lombardo (2004).

The global leaders in this study developed enhanced global leadership capabilities by intuitively utilizing ad hoc learning tactics during their experiences. They engaged in the experiences they described with openness to new experiences and readiness to learn and viewed learning from experience as a natural, integral part of fulfilling their role as global leaders. They learned intuitively and spontaneously, in an unplanned and unstructured manner, and used a range of learning tactics chosen – perhaps unconsciously – in an ad hoc manner based on the demands of the situation.

At the same time, a small number of global leaders reported gaining significant learning and development from participation in structured, planned leadership development programs, in which they dealt with real global business challenges or realistic global business cases; their colleagues’ being from other countries; and sessions’ being held in various countries around the world. Further research into the relationship between specific experiences or types of experiences and the development of specific global leadership competencies or types of competencies would contribute to an increased understanding of the role of experience and learning from experience in how global leaders develop. Research into and theory about how global leaders develop has assumed that identifying certain experiences described by global leaders as being developmental and pointing to the lessons learned from having those experiences is

largely sufficient to guide individuals and organizations in their quest for global leadership development. Although the research has dealt a glancing blow to the question of how leaders translate their experiences into new global leadership capabilities, in essence, it has failed to deeply explore the issue. This question deserves further exploration.

Global leaders are increasingly in demand in the highly complex, interconnected business environment of today. They often shoulder leadership and management responsibilities that simultaneously span multiple countries, time zones, languages, national cultures, and organizational cultures. The complexity experienced by global leaders presents them with significant challenges and offers them equally significant developmental opportunities. Consequently, global organizations are in need of knowledge and insight into what should be developed, that is, the global leadership competencies needed to perform global leadership roles, as well as how those competencies should be developed, that is, the methods used by global leaders to develop the competencies. This research study of the phenomenon of how global leaders develop has provided potentially valuable contributions to the body of knowledge about this vital subject in a way that advances both practice and theory development in the area of global leadership development.

Limitations

There are some limitations associated with this study. Phenomenological research focusses on identifying meanings and essences of experience, not measurements or explanations (Moustakas, 1994). Because this was a qualitative research study, any findings cannot be generalized for other populations outside the study sample group. Findings will apply only to senior-level global leaders.

The study was conducted using Moustakas's (1994) phenomenological research method, with a group of 12 research subjects. If a different methodology, such as Seidman's (2006) phenomenological research method or case study were utilized, different or more in-depth results from exploring the same questions might be obtained. Finally, and more obviously, if the research question were studied utilizing a quantitative method, such as a survey of global leadership development methods, the findings might differ from those gained from this study.

Because participants reported on their own experience, the study relied on participants' level of self-awareness and ability to verbally describe and share their perspective on important global leadership competencies and their experience in developing those competencies. The study relied on participants' recollections of past events that might have occurred long ago; consequently, the collected information might have been subject to problems related to memory, interpretation, rationalization, or manipulation by the interviewees. The study relied on subjects' participating in good faith, answering questions truthfully and openly, and not consciously or intentionally modifying their responses for any reason. Subjects might have given answers they thought the researcher wanted to hear (fake good) or answers they thought the researcher did not want to hear (fake bad).

The study relied on the companies that participated to identify individuals that each company considered to be high-performance global leaders. Each company might have utilized different definitions of high performance and thus there might have been variations of actual performance levels within the interviewee sample.

The study relied on the researcher's ability to understand and interpret correctly the study participants' descriptions of their experience. To address this limitation,

the researcher utilized epoche to set aside any preconceived notions, beliefs, understandings, or biases to ensure that the reported experiences were explored with an open mind.

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