

Global Leadership Development:

What Global Organizations Can Do to Reduce Leadership Risk, Increase Speed to Competence, and Build Global Leadership Muscle

By Steve Terrell and Katherine Rosenbusch



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 where it is a reality today (Mendenhall, Osland, Bird, Oddou, & Maznevski, 2008). It has become widely accepted that “the world is at once borderless, multicultural and a burgeoning hybrid of cultures. Expanded tourism, the dissemination of pop culture, global migration, Internet communities—all these have led to unprecedented worldwide connectedness” (Rosen, Digh, Singer, & Phillips, 2000, p. 22).

Not only is it true that “the world is flat” (Friedman, 2005, p. 5), but the world is also one of “...high chaos and continuous change” (Marquardt & Berger, 2000, p. 1), in which a rapidly growing number of companies “operate as if the entire world were a single entity” (Marquardt & Berger, p. 4). Former U.S. Secretary of Labor Robert Reich (1991) declared in his book *The Work of Nations*, “We are living through a transformation that will rearrange the politics and economics of the coming century. There will be no national products or technologies, no national corporations, no national industries. There will no longer be national economies” (p. 3). The reality of globalization means that the world has become so interconnected that “the only way to succeed is by competing with everyone from everywhere for everything. Starting now” (Sirkin, Hemerling, & Bhattacharya, 2008, p. 20).

This high degree of interconnectedness, which is being brought about through the impact of technology on communication, knowledge creation and information sharing (Marquardt & Berger, 2000) in today’s organizations, 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 consequences (Rosen et al., 2000). Thus, the challenge of globalization is that organizations must “adapt or die” (McCallum, 2001, p. 73); “adaptability will be the characteristic that ultimately most distinguishes successful from unsuccessful enterprises” (p. 74). Organizations must find constructive ways to adapt to survive, and the most adaptable organizations—those that possess a high degree of dynamic capability (Winter, 2003)—will be best positioned to explore the possibilities hidden amid the

chaos and to respond with innovative solutions to the complex challenges they face. The challenge is daunting for even the best-prepared organizations.

Organizations in the new global context must master geographic, cultural and intellectual reach in the development of a global mindset as well as global skills (Mendenhall et al., 2008). Global organizations face complexity in the dynamics of multiplicity, interdependence, ambiguity and flux (Mendenhall et al., 2008). These forces are driving an increased need for global leaders who possess new competencies that enable them to respond and lead effectively (Marquardt & Berger, 2000). 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. A recent study of more than 12,000 leaders across 76 countries, conducted by Development Dimensions International and The Institute of Executive Development, found that the majority of executive development professionals who responded “cited the shortage of global executive talent as the primary business challenge related to globalization faced by their organization” (Smith, Caver, Saslow, & Thomas, 2009, p. 10).

Research Overview

In recent qualitative research, the authors explored the experiences of global leaders that they found to be important in their development and training to become global leaders. Three questions were investigated:

- What experiences do global leaders describe as important in their development?
- What do global leaders report that they developed or learned in order to become a global leader?

- How did global leaders learn what they learned that led to their development as global leaders?

The study sample consisted of global leaders in six multinational companies and industries with significant operations in the United States. The leaders were born in Argentina, Australia, Belgium, Brazil, Germany and the United States, 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 United Kingdom and the United States.

Study participants were identified utilizing purposive, criterion-based sampling (Patton, 1990). The criterion for the participants was that each individual 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 & 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.

The results of this research study indicated that global leaders (a) develop through first-hand global leadership experience; (b) learn the importance of cultural sensitivity, relationships and networks and curiosity or desire to learn; (c) require a unique set of global leadership competencies; (d) are driven by curiosity, openness and a desire to learn; and (e) develop and learn intuitively. Exhibit 1 notes the conclusions and the corresponding implications for practice.

This article explores the implications of these findings for global leadership development practice.

Study Conclusions and Implications for Practice

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. The global leaders in this study described a variety of experiences, including intensive immersion in 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.

Some participants came to believe that relocating to another country was essential to development as a global leader. For example one study participant stated, “The biggest learning I had was, just to have to live in a different country ... where you don’t speak the language, and where cultural habits are different, and where you actually need to know how to get your way around. In the way we operate in a global organization, I think the conduct of business is pretty much the same. I think that when I attend local meetings within [the company], there is a certain rule of the game that is the same anywhere ... but once you get out of the meeting room, and have to go to the grocery shop, that’s obviously when you hit real-life. For me, this was the point when I started to grow as an individual, and when I started to develop a different perspective.” Another leader declared, “I don’t know how you can begin to empathize with other cultures and other points of view if you’ve never left the country.”

However, 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. One participant, working as a U.S.-based consultant conducting leadership assessments in Japan, learned “that you can’t just take American principles, like PDI’s Successful Managers’ Handbook, and just translate it ... the concepts just don’t apply. It’s not just the language or the words, it’s deeper stuff ... the colloquialisms that we tend to use ... and how different they are... things that we take very much for granted.” Other 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. One leader, who attended an international conference with 60 surgeons from 34 countries, described a highly challenging — yet rewarding — “week-long meeting having meals and social experiences across that same continuum ... an incredible immersion within one week to really learn both the business globally as well as the culture’s social interactions” to which she attributed deeply personal learning about the importance of global sensitivity, of being patient, tolerant, and non-judgmental and the value of diversity.

However, the common element among all of these highly diverse, and intensely personal 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.

Implication: Provide intensive cross-cultural, global leadership development experiences. Organizations seeking to increase the numbers of leaders with global leadership capabilities who are prepared to effectively fulfill leadership roles that span organizational and cultural boundaries may consider providing potential leaders with this type of experience through developmental assignments, such as intensive cross-cultural experiences that cause them to confront their own cultural biases and assumptions and to develop capabilities needed in global leadership roles. Some examples of suitable developmental assignments include global project team assignments and meetings that involve global, cross-cultural team members and focus on business issues or problems worldwide; global travel and site visits, providing exposure to multiple countries and cultures while conducting business; global

EXHIBIT 1. RESEARCH STUDY CONCLUSIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE	
Conclusions	Implication for Practice
1. Global leaders develop through first-hand, cross-cultural and global leadership experience.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide intensive cross-cultural, global leadership development experiences.
2. 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.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Foster multicultural understanding and sensitivity for potential global leaders. • Prepare potential and current global leaders to develop and maintain relationships and networks. • Foster curiosity and a desire to learn about other countries and cultures among potential and current global leaders.
3. Global leaders require a unique set of global leadership competencies to effectively fulfill their roles.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Promote the need for an attitude of openness toward experience and learning. • Provide knowledge and tools to enhance global leaders’ ability to learn from experience.
4. Global leaders develop and learn intuitively, dynamically employing ad hoc learning approaches.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrate intuitive, ad hoc learning approaches and structured global leadership development practices.



Long-term expatriate assignments that require global leaders to relocate, live in, and work in a country other than their native country can be highly developmental, as long as the leader approaches the assignment with openness to experience and actually learns from the experience.

leadership development programs that include team members from multiple cultures around the world; travel to, and work in, other countries; projects that focus on global business issues or problems; action learning programs; and 360-degree feedback that addresses global leadership competencies. Long-term expatriate assignments that require global leaders to relocate, live in, and work in a country other than their native country can be highly developmental, as long as the leader approaches the assignment with openness to experience and actually learns from the experience.

Providing these kinds of developmental assignments to leaders who possess the capabilities to learn from them, while at the same time equipping the leaders with skills and tools to proactively and intentionally learn from them — as discussed in other implications in this document — could enhance the effectiveness of the assignments and accelerate global leader development.

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. These were the primary “lessons learned” by the global leaders in this study, and similar findings have been reported by other researchers including Fiedler (1964), Spreitzer, McCall and Mahoney (1997), Black et al. (1999), McCall and Hollenbeck (2002), and Eichinger and Lombardo (2004).

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 lessons learned by these global leaders, as they acquired the skill 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.”

Implication: Foster multicultural understanding and sensitivity for potential global leaders. To support development of this important capability, organizations should consider adopting practices that foster multicultural understanding and sensitivity for potential global leaders as one element of their approach to global leadership development. Additionally, organizations should foster increased self-awareness regarding cultural sensitivity through cultural sensitivity assessment and feedback, coaching and mentoring. They should provide training, feedback, coaching, mentoring, and other tools to convey the importance of understanding, appreciating, valuing and leveraging cultural differences. Another practical way to address this is to actively and purposely engage individuals from multiple cultures in teams, business meetings, presentations and work sessions that focus on international, multicultural, and global issues, problems and challenges.

Implication: Prepare potential and current global leaders to develop and maintain relationships and networks. Development and maintenance of relationships across cultural borders is vital to global leader effectiveness. These relationships are enhanced by a high degree of cultural sensitivity. The implication of this conclusion is that organizations should consider adopting practices that enable potential and new global leaders to effectively establish and maintain relationships across cultures as one element of their approach to global leadership development. They can also assist in preparing potential or newly identified or assigned global leaders with the mindset, tools and skills needed to understand the importance of relationships and establishing relationships in global leadership roles through cultural familiarization training, readings, discussions, assessment, feedback and coaching.

Implication: Foster curiosity and a desire to learn about other countries and cultures among potential and current global leaders. The global leaders in this study emphasized the importance of being curious and learning about other cultures as a part of developing as global leaders. By listening deeply and learning from others, while maintaining an attitude of discovery and exploration, global leaders foster cultural sensitivity and enhance their ability to establish and maintain productive cross-cultural relationships. The implication of this conclusion is that organizations, as one element of their approach to global leadership development, may need to adopt practices that foster curiosity about other countries and cultures, as well as a desire to learn about them, within potential and new global leaders. Organizations may wish to provide feedback, coaching, training or mentoring in learning the patience to listen deeply and learn from others while maintaining an attitude of discovery and exploration. The organization should also promote the need to be humble, ➤

tolerant and nonjudgmental in global leadership roles through observation, feedback, coaching and mentoring.

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 competencies 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 (a) cultural awareness and sensitivity, (b) global mindset or perspective, (c) learning from experience, (d) developing and maintaining relationships, (e) communication, (f) traits or attitudes and (g) 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.

The competencies described by participants in this study are all, in some way, connected to openness to experience. As one participant indicated, “If you want to be a good global leader, you have to have a degree of openness and self-reflection, and you have to have a humbleness ... and you’re willing to learn and you’re willing to rely on others.” This quality of seeking learning; of having the ability to question and ask “why;” being able to appreciate the opinions and approaches of others and valuing them for what they bring; and being able to understand and appreciate different viewpoints, reflects the importance these leaders placed on openness to experience in their development.

Implication: Promote the need for an attitude of openness toward experience and learning. The global leaders in this study evidenced an attitude of openness toward experience and learning and gave testimony to its positive effect on their learning and success in global roles. As a result of their openness, they were ready to perceive opportunities, see things in new ways and develop new skills. Leaders’ attitude or stance toward learning has been identified as an important factor in leader effectiveness. Global leaders who are open to new experiences and willing to learn from them tend to gain more understanding and learn more effectively from their experience. Such individuals also tend to seek and have more experiences from which to learn and engage in them with a desire to learn (Black et al., 1999; Dalton et al., 2002; Kolb, 1984; Lombardo &

Eichinger, 2000; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; McCall et al., 1988; Spreitzer et al., 1997).

Organizations may wish to provide potential and new global leaders with feedback, coaching and other development support regarding these factors. Global leaders may not be conscious of their current level of competence or incompetence in required global leadership competencies; developing increased awareness of their level of competence through feedback, coaching and other means could enhance and accelerate their development as global leaders. This strategy might involve actions such as identifying and measuring the factors that should be evident in potential global leaders’ attitude or stance toward learning, such as openness toward cross-cultural or global experience; motivation, willingness and desire to learn from experience; curiosity about working and living in other parts of the world; an attitude of discovery and exploration; and a desire, intention and willingness to gain something positive from experience.

Implication: Provide knowledge and tools to enhance global leaders’ ability to learn from experience. The global leaders in this study learned intuitively, in an unplanned and unstructured manner. They learned through observation of people and the organization, seeking and accepting feedback from others, mistakes and failures, active experimentation, reflection-in-action and other ad hoc learning tactics. Practitioners of global leadership development may find it useful to consider educating and training global leaders in specific learning approaches or tactics that enhance learning from experience.

Practitioners could encourage global leaders to utilize various approaches to evaluate what works best for them, including analyze prior experience and then actively experiment with new approaches; try out new

behaviors; use mistakes as the basis of analysis for learning (Dalton, 1998a; Dalton et al., 2002; Eichinger & Lombardo, 2004; Knowles, 1980; Kolb, 1984).

Global leaders who take responsibility for their own learning and development are likely to learn more from their experience than those who rely solely on the organization to provide for their development (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; McCall et al., 1988). Assuming this responsibility is typically enacted by identifying one’s learning needs, setting goals of what one desires to learn from an experience, adjusting the circumstances of learning experience to maximize learning potential, debriefing following the experience to identify what was learned and appraising one’s own learning capabilities (Candy, 1991; Dalton et al., 2002; Tough, 1979).

Global leaders who actively reflect on their experience will be more likely to learn from their experience more quickly and deeply. Reflection is central to learning from experience (Boud et al., 1985; Boud & Walker, 1990; Boyd & Fales, 1983; Cox, 2005; Daudelin, 1996; Kolb, 1984; Mumford, 1994; Schön, 1983, 1987), and learning from experience is enhanced when individuals analyze their experience to derive new meaning and to create and integrate ideas and concepts (Boud et al., 1985; Candy, 1991; Kolb, 1984; Marquardt, 2004; McCall et al., 1988). Reflection should be encouraged by practitioners of global leadership development through teaching global leaders how to utilize it in day-to-day work as well as during structured developmental programs, and possibly testing various approaches to enhancing reflection skill development to determine which approaches tend to produce greater learning.

Establishing developmental action plans for global leaders that incorporate the use of

EXHIBIT 2. GLOBAL LEADER LEARNING APPROACHES

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	

specific learning approaches and tactics can expand the “bag of tricks” available to a global leader from which he or she can draw to learn. Setting expectations that global leaders should incorporate the use of specific learning approaches or tactics into their day-to-day operating routines may promote increased awareness of learning from experience. Organizations may wish to provide coaches to encourage and develop global leaders’ adoption of specific learning approaches or tactics in their day-to-day operations. And holding global leaders accountable for use of specific learning approaches or tactics in their daily work life, through performance management goals and measurements, will send a clear message about the importance of learning from experience.

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.

Three factors seem to link the leaders’ learning approaches: (a) their attitude or stance toward learning; (b) their tendency to learn intuitively, utilizing ad hoc learning tactics during their experiences; and (c) their use of reflection after completing experiences as a means of learning and application of lessons learned. Exhibit 2 displays the common learning approaches and their respective specific learning tactics.

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 the new circumstances. Whether structured or unstructured in their approach, goal-oriented or non-goal-oriented, these global leaders’ learning while engaged in a global leadership experience 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.

One leader described his experience of moving to the United States from South America, and how he adapted to his new setting: “There is this period that you need to have all your antennas, radar, everything alert, so you can learn and then from there on you understand the dynamics so you just move on. But it’s a process of yourself learning, observing, understanding and talking to people to put all those, to link all those points together.” While two study participants described themselves as more structured (or “planful,” to use one person’s word), most participants were much more likely to utilize a “learn on the fly” approach: “I’m a very experiential learner, and so while I try to supplement — you know, before I go somewhere I’m going to read through some certain things — I’m not the kind of person who does great sitting in a classroom for two days, I’m too impatient... I would much rather ... go out and bulldoze my way through, learn from my mistakes and do it better next time.” For these individuals the learning process is “a lot of times accidental, a lot of times it’s the ‘Oh yeah, should’ve done that.’” In essence, learning to become a global leader was described as being immersed in a continual stream of experiences from which these individuals created meaning, gained insights and developed and fine-tuned a set of constantly evolving and changing capabilities that enabled them to meet the challenges of their global roles.

Implication: Integrate intuitive, ad hoc learning approaches and structured global leadership development practices. Much of global leader development and learning from experience appears to depend on whatever business challenges are brought about by circumstances, in combination with the leader’s predisposition and ability to intuitively learn while engaging in that experience. Only one of the global leaders in this study indicated that he utilized a “structured, planful” approach to learning



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as a global leader, and this was limited to reflective learning through journaling about his experience in Europe while traveling with his wife during a 5-year assignment in Switzerland. This laissez-faire approach to global leader development leaves much to chance and may result in unnecessarily lengthy developmental time frames, as well as leaders' developing some important global leadership capabilities but not others. Global leadership development practitioners may wish to experiment with the use of developmental goal setting, enhancing leaders' ability to learn from experience and other related practices to determine the impact on global leader development.

Given that development of global leaders is an important issue for most global companies, finding a way to capitalize on and integrate the intuitive, in-the-moment approach to learning and developing reported by the global leaders in this study with the structured organizational approaches to development typically utilized by global organizations may reduce the time required to achieve competency by global leaders and may also increase the depth and breadth of knowledge and skills gained. Organizations may also find it useful to evaluate how much they invest in structured developmental approaches versus the provision of potential or actual global leaders with tools they can use to generate more development and learning, in a more consistent manner, from their work experience. After all, leaders spend most of their available work time actually working, living their experiences, not in a structured learning environment. Preparing them with knowledge and tools that enable them to more effectively learn and develop from their experience could prove to be beneficial.

Conclusion

Global leaders are in increasing demand in today's highly complex, interconnected business environment. 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 they should develop, that is, the global leadership competencies needed to perform global leadership roles, as well as how, that is, the

methods global leaders use to develop those competencies. Adopting the global leadership development practices identified in this paper holds out the promise of reducing the risk of unprepared leaders, accelerating the development of capable global leaders and building the global leadership muscle needed to respond to the evolving challenges of global business organizations. **P&S**

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