

Learning to lead with cultural intelligence (CQ): When do global leaders learn best?

Recent Academic Research on People and Strategy

By Brad Winn

Identifying the right executives to lead international operations is one of the most challenging endeavors for organizational leaders and HR professionals. Key international assignments obviously require the right technical and leadership savvy, but often it is difficult to determine who will survive the initial culture shock and learn quickly thereafter to become culturally agile. Getting this right is critical to the success of any international venture. Getting it wrong can be a costly mistake.

The reality is that there are not a sufficient number of culturally intelligent global leaders available and they are extremely difficult to develop. In this issue of *People & Strategy*, we review a new study that addresses the question of how expats learn to lead before, during and after the culture shock of their new assignments. This research addresses two key questions: What are the HR strategies for recruiting and developing global leaders? Who should be selected and how can they learn more efficiently once they're on the job?

Until now research studies have not empirically examined how and when global leaders learn best to develop cultural intelligence. Ming Li of ESC Rennes School of Business, William H. Mobley of the University of Macau, and Aidan Kelly of University College Dublin (2013) recently published an important study to fill this gap and further inform HR practice. Their article was published in *Academy of Management Learning & Education*.

Learning to become culturally intelligent leaders

Previous research has shown that cultural intelligence (CQ) is an important quality for global leaders.

"In a world that is dynamically globally interconnected in a way we could not have imagined even a decade ago, global leaders are vital human assets for companies to implement global strategies. Global work is different from domestic work: while the "whats" remain the same, the "hows" are different. The main source of the differences in "hows" is cultural differences. The capability to manage such cultural differences, therefore, has become one of the important skills for global leaders," (Li, Mobley, & Kelly, 2013).

This new study investigates the importance of relationships between in-country experience, learning styles, and cultural intelligence. It examines how cultural intelligence can be developed within the context of corporate international assignments and through specific experiential learning styles.

We know that global leadership development doesn't necessarily occur because a person is sent overseas. Some leaders develop cultural intelligence quickly and others seem to be insular and develop more slowly or not at all.

"Without understanding more about this relationship, companies cannot make effective use of costly interna-

tional experience to develop global leadership capability....The study (refines) the conceptualization and measurement of the newly developed CQ concept. The results will inform business executives regarding the ways of accelerating their learning to develop CQ and inform organizations regarding the methods to select and develop their global talent," (Li, Mobley & Kelly, 2013).

So what are the factors that foster the development of CQ in the context of international assignments?

Cultural Intelligence (CQ)

Generally speaking, cultural intelligence refers to three abilities necessary for effectively interacting with people from different cultures. These abilities can be thought of as referring to the head (cognitive), heart (motivational) and body (behavioral). Li, Mobley & Kelly describe these three facets as follows:

1. Head. Cognitive CQ is a person's ability to develop patterns from cultural cues, drawing from both cognitive and meta-cognitive abilities. Cognitive CQ is the knowledge of the norms, practices, and conventions in different

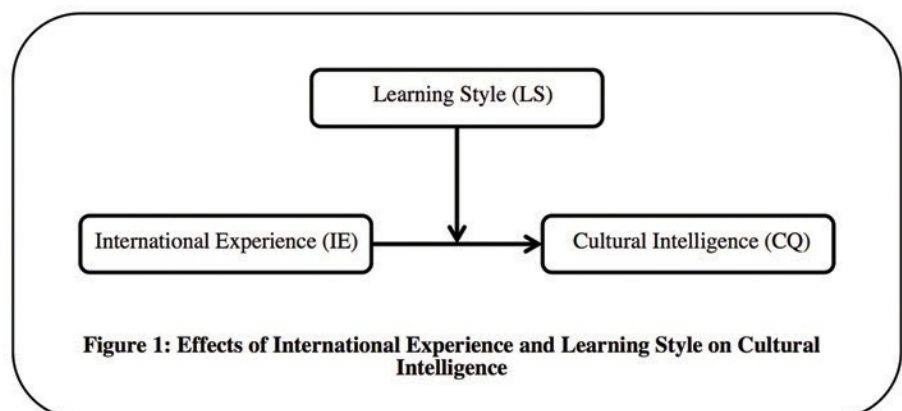


Figure 1: Effects of International Experience and Learning Style on Cultural Intelligence



cultures, including an understanding of economic, legal and social systems. Metacognitive CQ refers to the processes individuals use to acquire and understand cultural knowledge, including control over their thought processes. It happens when people form strategies before an intercultural encounter, check assumptions during an encounter, and adjust mental maps when actual experiences are different from expectations. With this knowledge, individuals can understand both similarities and differences among cultures.

2. **Heart.** Motivational CQ is a person's interest in experiencing other cultures and interacting with people from different cultures. It includes not only the intrinsic value people place on interactions with people from different cultures, but also their belief that they can function effectively in those situations. Motivational CQ directs, focuses, and applies energy toward learning about and functioning in cross-cultural situations. Individuals with higher motivational CQ tend to interact

some deeply held reservations in an unfamiliar situation and try to adopt appropriate behaviors to interact with people from different cultures. This adaptability of behaviors significantly helps executives improve communication effectiveness, build relationships with others, and lead in a global context.

International Experience (IE)

International experience provides concrete and intense cultural exposure. Companies utilize international experience as a primary vehicle for developing global leadership skills and cultural intelligence. That said, we know that some expats develop these skills more than others. What experiential factors affect how global leaders learn to become more culturally intelligent during their in-country assignments. Li, Mobley & Kelly describe the key factors as follows:

1. Developing new mental maps (head). Entering a new culture is often a confusing and disorienting experience, and expatriates are likely to experience culture shock after a few months in a new culture. While others might look

(heart). Even though it is likely that executives with high self-confidence and self-efficacy tend to take challenging international assignments, it is also important to recognize that individuals do develop their confidence and efficacy through international experience as new information and experience are acquired (motivational CQ).

3. Developing new intercultural behaviors (body). Knowledge and motivation will never be sufficient to be effective in interacting with people from different cultural backgrounds if the actual behavior that is required in certain situations is not displayed. The complexity of intercultural behavior is such that even if people know what they should do and have the necessary motivation, they do not always enact the behaviors. Behavior changes take time and practice; global executives are expected to develop their this from day-to-day happenings in their overseas work experience. It is likely the longer the overseas work experience, the higher the level of culturally adaptive behaviors will be demonstrated (behavioral CQ).

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more with people from different cultures. And, when they confront obstacles, setbacks, or failures, their level of interest and confidence also determines how persistently they will seek to learn from relevant experience.

3. **Body.** Behavioral CQ is a person's ability to appropriately enact selected behaviors in accordance with cognition and motivation, and to exhibit appropriate verbal and nonverbal actions when interacting with people from different cultures. Behavioral CQ requires individuals to overcome

at culture shock as a barrier, it is also a unique learning experience that challenges assumptions of the expatriate's own culture. Those expatriates then develop more complex mental frameworks that help them to reach accurate expectations, to form strategies of interacting with people from different cultures, and therefore, to develop...CQ. It is also from these experiences that expatriates learn cultural knowledge about different economic, legal, and social systems (cognitive CQ).

2. Developing new self-confidence

Learning Style (LS)

How do managers learn from experience? Experiential learning theory, developed by David Kolb (1984), explains that managers learn from experience through a holistic process of adaptation to the world which involves thinking, feeling, perceiving, and behaving. They do this through two fundamental processes: 'grasping the experience' and 'transforming the experience.' Ideally learners can "touch all the bases" – experiencing, reflecting, thinking, and acting – to learn from experience. However, in reality, few if any individuals can do so.

Experience accounts for a large majority of individual development. Through a lifetime of experiential learning, different people have developed different ways of grasping and transforming information. There are natural tensions between on the one hand "feeling and thinking" (grasping information) and on the other hand between "reflecting and acting" (transforming information). When ►



“grasping” information, some people tend to learn from the emotions they feel during a concrete incident, while others tend to learn more analytically or abstractly from symbols, books or teachers. When “transforming” information, some people tend to learn by actively experimenting or externally acting, while others tend to learn more through internal reflection.

According to experiential learning theory, a person’s natural tendencies toward grasping and transforming information will typically result in one of four dominant learning styles: divergent, convergent, assimilative, and accommodative. These experiential learning styles have the following characteristics (Ten-
nant, 1996):

1. Divergers are aware of how they feel about concrete experiences and transforming this information through reflection and observation. They are strong in imaginative ability, good at generating ideas and seeing things from different perspectives, interested in people, and have broad cultural interests.
2. Convergers analyze abstract concepts and transforming this information through active

experimentation. They are strong in practical application of ideas, unemotional, can focus on specific problems, and typically have more narrow interests.

3. Assimilators analyze abstract concepts and transforming this information through reflection and observation. They are strong in their abilities to create theoretical models, excel in inductive reasoning, and are more concerned with abstract concepts than people
4. Accommodators are aware of how they feel about concrete experiences and transforming this information through active experimentation. They are strong in doing things, more willing to take risks, solve problems intuitively, and tend to react to immediate circumstances.

Key Findings: Developing Culturally Intelligent Leaders

There is ample evidence that people as learn-

ers benefit differently from experience. We know that executives vary in their leadership abilities with regard to cultural intelligence. So how can potential global leaders best learn these critical skills?

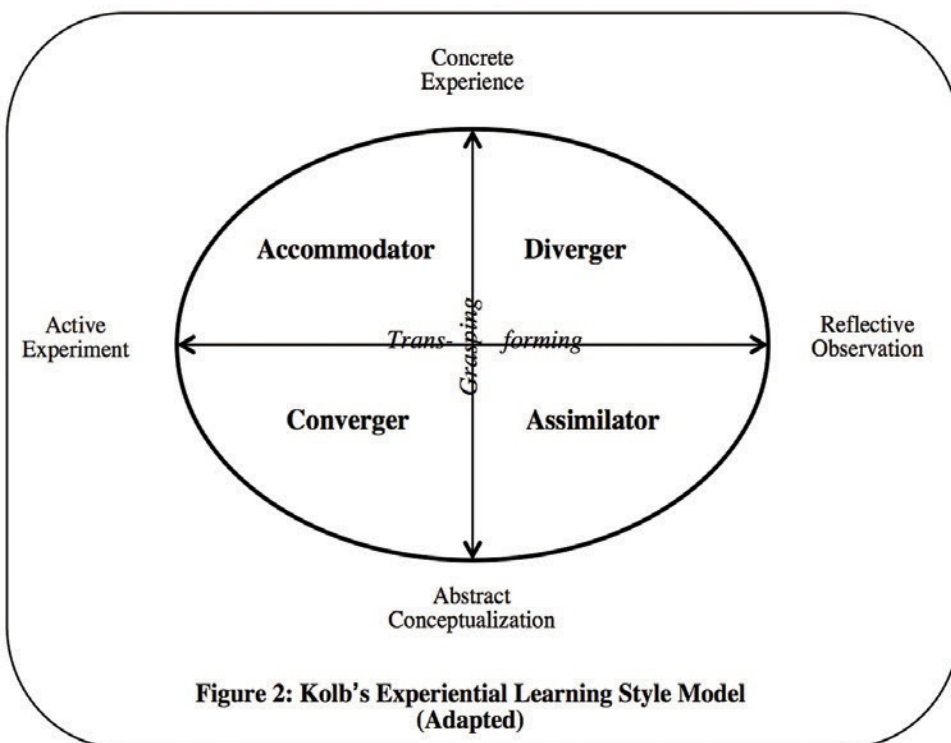
Developing the Skills of a Divergent Learner Matters

The first key finding from this new study reveals that “the divergent learning style fits the context of the overseas work experience, and is the most positive among the four learning styles for the development of cultural intelligence.” What are the skills necessary to develop cultural intelligence that are found in divergent learners? The authors describe the strengths of the manager who has a divergent dominant learning style as follows:

- a. Head. Managers with this learning style can connect their feelings closely to their immediate overseas experience, they are sensitive about meaning and values, and so they can acquire more cultural knowledge (cognitive CQ) from overseas experience.
- b. Head. They view concrete cultural situations from many perspectives and focus on the reflection, the checking of assumptions, and the adjustment of mental maps when actual experiences are different from expectations, thus developing higher metacognitive CQ
- c. Heart. They have a broad interest in cultures and people, thus can develop high motivational CQ.
- d. Body. Their engagement in feeling and observing different cultural behaviors also leads to a better understanding of appropriate behaviors in different cultural contexts; this results in high behavioral CQ.

Extended First-Hand Intercultural Experience Matters

The second key finding is that duration of the international experience matters. There is tacit intercultural knowledge that is not explicit and only becomes understood through extended first-hand experience. Many overseas assignments tend to be 18 months to 2 ½ years. The authors of this research believe that in general executives





have a better chance of developing real international leadership based on CQ with longer in-country experiences – perhaps ideally approaching five years.

“We found that the length of overseas work experience is positively related to the level of CQ....These findings imply that cultural intelligence does not develop overnight. The longer one is immersed in a different culture or cultures, the higher level of CQ one may develop. Such experience in a different culture is central to developing CQ,” (Li, Mobley & Kelly, 2013).

learning modes during their international experience to develop cultural intelligence. Those executives with a convergent learning style, for example, can pay more attention to their feelings and reflect by watching and listening very carefully and developing interpersonal skills to better develop their CQ.

2. Select for CQ potential and development

The authors show that this study offers valuable insight into the selection and development of global leaders. The assessment of learning style points the way to developmental qualities rather than making

coaching is an important development process to prevent derailment and unleash the potential of executives. The experiential learning cycle (feeling, reflecting, thinking, and acting) offers a framework and process that coaches can undertake to facilitate the learning from these experiences not by just doing it, but by being able to reflect and gain conceptual insight while doing it.

5. Offer learning and cultural support mechanisms

To facilitate experiential learning, it is also important for corporations to create a supportive learning environment since feeling and emotions have primacy in determining whether and what people learn. Positive feelings of interest and intuitive connection facilitate learning and negative emotions such as fear and anxiety block learning. Therefore a supportive learning organizational culture is desirable in order to facilitate the development of CQ among leaders and staff in a corporation and develops global operation capability.

It becomes critical for companies to understand executives' learning styles and design appropriate developmental opportunities to help them deal with cultural challenges.

Implications for HR Leaders: Five Strategies for Fostering Culturally Intelligent Leaders

During this time of unprecedented international interconnectedness, HR and organizational leaders have a growing responsibility to carefully select and develop effective global leaders. Simply sending executives on an overseas assignment will not, in and of itself, ensure they learn to lead with cultural intelligence. Here are five important ways HR professionals can take action:

1. Uncover the potential impact of learning styles

The executive who has the greatest potential for developing culturally intelligent leadership is the divergent learner. The authors state that executives can self-evaluate their learning styles and understand their potential to develop cultural intelligence from possible international experience. More importantly, executives can manage their

decisions based on personality traits alone. Many companies typically need to send their technical experts to overseas operations to transfer knowledge, and quite a high percentage of technical professionals have a convergent learning style. Therefore, it becomes critical for companies to understand executives' learning styles and design appropriate developmental opportunities to help them deal with cultural challenges.

3. Implement adequate durations for international experiences

Cultural adeptness is difficult to teach in a classroom training setting. The authors conclude by stating that the most effective way to train for cultural intelligence is through concrete international experience, especially international experience of adequate length. Therefore, it is important that longer term (approaching 5 years) overseas experiences are provided for potential global leaders.

4. Assign cross-cultural coaches

During these assignments, cross-cultural

End Notes

A distinguishing strategy for multinational companies is to ensure their leadership pipeline is tailored for an increasingly competitive global workforce. Human resource leaders have an important role to play in the selection and development of culturally intelligent leaders as well as orchestrating their international experiences to optimize learning. Much is at stake as HR professionals act to uncover the potential impact of learning styles and design effective international experiences to help executives learn to lead with cultural intelligence.

*When do global leaders learn best to develop cultural intelligence? An investigation of the moderating role of experiential learning style. Ming Li, William H. Mobley, and Aidan Kelly. Academy of Management Learning & Education, 2013, Volume 12, No.1, pp. 32-50. Readability for an Executive Audience: ****.*

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