



THE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE OF CULTURAL SKILL AND AGILITY

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ABSTRACT

Leaders need to learn what it takes to understand a culture well enough to be able not just survive, but truly thrive as a global professional. There are numerous examples of organizations attempting to go global only to fail. Or push a once successful leader into a different culture only to watch that leader disconnect and not be effective. Committing, truly desiring and focusing on developing cultural skill and agility will allow a global professional and their organization to gain a competitive advantage and succeed where others may fail. This requires a robust cross-cultural training program that becomes an everyday practice of the aspiring global professional. This article seeks to frame the challenge that desiring global professionals have in different cultures than their own and shows what it will take gain a competitive advantage in the worldwide marketplace to make cross-cultural leadership a strength rather than barrier to success.

Keywords: Global Leadership, Global Training, Leadership Development

INTRODUCTION

In the 2014 fictional film, John Wick, actor Keanu Reeves plays a former Russian mob hitman who left his life of crime to marry a girl. Unfortunately, his quiet life with his wife in the countryside of New Jersey is tragically disrupted when she dies of a terminal illness. Shortly, after she dies, he receives a puppy at his door sent to him as a final loving act from his now deceased wife. He bonds with the puppy as he mourns the loss of his wife. A chance encounter with three Russian gangsters from his old mob leads to John becoming the target of a car theft and the killing of his puppy. Out for revenge, John jumps back into his former life and culture of the Russian mob as he seeks the death of those involved in killing his dog and stealing his car. He uses his understanding of the Russian mob culture to get close enough to find, target and eventually obtain his revenge.

In much the same way, the cultural skill and agility that enabled John to understand the Russian crime culture and use it to his advantage enables successful global professionals to achieve their goals – although, hopefully not for a life of crime. Cultural understanding cannot be achieved through academic study alone but requires ambitious global professionals to seek ways to “live” within the culture – to understand how to operate and to embrace the societal rules that shape, define and generate success. Through this understanding of culture and its impacts, global professionals will be able to improve their cultural skills and agility to gain the competitive advantage they need to achieve success.

UNDERSTANDING CULTURAL CODES

Global professionals when operating in their home country and culture naturally gain a perspective of how to live, operate and conduct business. Transactions make sense. Deal making, although an art and varied, follow certain understandable rules. They are comfortable because they intuitively know their own cultural norms or code. They simply get it and use their cultural understanding as a competitive advantage over those who do not.

Take that same person and place them in a different culture and they may find themselves unable to obtain even a mediocre baseline level of success. Why? In a way, the culture has

frozen them and what should be normal and comfortable is now not and they simply cannot relate. They may lack confidence or even worse act foolishly and cause damage to relationships. The culture and their knowledge of the culture that enabled them to operate and be successful has now changed and, in many ways, has turned into a trap full of unknowns, missteps, misunderstandings and mistakes. Their lack of cultural understanding is inhibiting them to operate as they had before. In short, they are now seen as a failure where once they were successful.

When IBM was on the brink of disaster in the late 1990s, it knew that culture, especially a lack of a common healthy corporate culture across the world was at the heart of crippling this once powerful international corporation. Clients in different parts of the world were not understood and were grossly under served. Louis Gerstner in his book, *Who Says Elephants Can't Dance?*, discusses how, as CEO, he challenged IBM to create success by embracing the art of understanding their varied client's cultures and the competitive advantages it brings. IBM operated in almost every country which posed an enormous challenge – how do you create a common culture for the company and at the same time embrace the various cultures of the world? After all, the culture code of selling and servicing technology solutions to clients in Birmingham, Alabama is very different than Osaka, Japan. So, what they did was quite clever – they changed the challenge from a geographic focus to a customer first focus. They changed the internal culture of their organization to no longer emphasize geographic profit centers, but rather success would be measured client by client first. This enabled operational practices to vary based on the culture norms or code of the client regardless of where they were in the world. In country experts would study, live, work, and play within the country. Enabling these professionals to embrace much of the culture around them as they sought to understand, relate, and serve their clients. They learned to meet their clients where they were from a cultural perspective and not try to force a one size fits all solution on them. They learned to sell and serve the way their clients wanted and transformed the culture of their own organization in the process.

THE PITFALLS OF FAILING TO UNDERSTAND THE IMPORTANCE OF CULTURE

Hubris has killed many a company. Dismissal of the need for cultural understanding and how it enables a global professional and organization to be successful can be disastrous. At its root, a society is made up of individuals that together form a collective culture. These individuals are unique and have their own individual personal values. If a global professional meets just one or two individuals from a particular culture, they may make a snap judgement and gain a false understanding of the culture of an entire country.

Movies produced in America with actors such as John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Arnold Schwarzenegger have reinforced a cultural stereotype of Americans that fails to fully describe America's entire culture. You cannot watch a few movies and understand America any more than you can meet one or two people from another country and say you know that culture – let alone how to sell to and serve clients with products and services in that culture.

Walmart and Best Buy (among others) have tried to push its American culture of the “big box store” and low prices to locations with various cultures around the world. In Europe, customers prefer to shop in smaller stores which offer products they are focused on buying. They do not want to go to one place to get it all. Convenience to them means something completely different in their culture. Similarly, in Japan, Walmart's “Every Day Low Prices” marketing campaign fell flat because instead of communicating a good value, its products were considered cheap and thus inferior. What works for these organizations in America did not translate across cultures. They arrogantly thought that customers around the world were all the same. They did not take the time and were not open enough to learn, understand, and embrace the varying cultures of their customers that would have given them not only clues, but an entire roadmap of what it would take to make them successful.

DEVELOPING CULTURAL SKILL AND AGILITY

So how do you do it? What does it mean to become a global professional that understands and engages with and in a culture well enough that they have developed the skills and cultural agility to be successful? Paula Caligiuri in her book, *Cultural Agility*, stresses the importance of developing an on-going never-ending cultural training and development mindset. Developing cultural skill and agility is not a one and done weekend workshop. It takes a lifetime of small investments and practical applications of newly discovered cultural skills to develop into a successful global professional. This commitment is required by organizations into their aspiring global professionals. She stresses the importance of developing a cross-cultural training program by “framing” cultural differences, “gaining” culture specific knowledge, “discovering” ways to put new insights into practice, and “understanding” the changes process. This four-step learning process of frame, gain, discover, and understand is a highly effective way for global professionals to be successful in other cultures.

Besides organizational commitment, it requires a true desire of the professional to become a global leader. In his book, *What the Dog Saw?*, Malcolm Gladwell asks the question: “Are smart people overrated?” Being smart is how a professional may be hired and what we see, but it does not necessarily define them or measure how successful they may become. In the case, of a successful global professional they must also desire to be one. The best cultural knowledge cannot be put into practice as a truly competitive advantage unless the professional truly has a desire to be operating successfully in different cultures than their own.

Developing cultural skills and agility also requires focus. An organization may go global and operate in hundreds of countries, but to ask a global professional to be able to operate successfully in more than a few would be a colossal task and may end up being counterproductive. The mindset may exist, but the body may fail. Gaining that global cultural mindset and then applying it in a focused and deliberate manner will allow that global professional to gain a competitive advantage over the generalist who is being asked to cover too much and not able to focus on gaining deep knowledge of a particular culture’s norms and codes.

CONCLUSION

Failure to commit to understanding a culture can take a once successful professional and humble them quickly. Global professionals and their organizations must have the commitment, desire and focus to become successful in different cultures. Framing, gaining, discovering and understanding cultural norms and codes is critical to the development of a true global leader. Being a leader on the global scale requires a professional to learn, embrace, and practice within the culture of those they desire to serve. If they do, then they will gain the skills and cultural agility that will give them a competitive advantage as a cross-cultural leader in the fierce global marketplace.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

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