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The six principles for developing global leaders

Steps to achieving success

In today's global economy, companies must ensure their leaders have the skills to satisfy customers on a new geographic scale. As leadership is one of the few remaining ways to retain competitive advantage, HR professionals need to support and build leaders who can face this challenge head-on. Here, Ron Koprowski of the Forum Corporation discusses how to design a leadership development program that addresses the dramatically new global framework.

HAVING WORKED IN THE international arena for over 25 years, I find that part of the joy of this international work comes from the thirst other business professionals have shown for American processes and ideas: our free-market success, our ideas on management and leadership, our HR policies focusing on the importance of people in a company. Today, however, there's a subtle shift away from America and its ideals. Much of this shift is due to the recent corporate scandals, the economic recession, the number of companies who are laying off or closing local factories, and rapidly shifting investments and capital.

So how do American companies – and, in many cases, companies from developed countries – create a leadership development approach that fits into the turbulent business climate today and addresses and overcomes any cultural biases that may limit the value of development? This article addresses some of the principles that I've found work to make leadership training and development succeed in a global corporation.

The cultural challenge

Implementing a leadership development program on a global basis offers a unique set of challenges – something I witnessed firsthand in a recent client situation. Several Forum colleagues and I were meeting with a client team to help plan the global implementation of a newly tailored learning system.

A design meeting was held in Paris and attended by people from Germany, the UK, Hong Kong, Brazil, France, Italy, and the US. At the end of the first day, our facilitator started to summarize our decisions and agreements. As she paraphrased our agreements, a heated discussion ensued about what we understood and to what we had committed. We quickly discovered that our assumptions about language, meaning and context had shaped our understanding of the commitments in very different ways; yet we had all thought we had a common understanding throughout the day. Had we not discovered that our respective “cultural lenses” distorted our understanding, the work done at this meeting could have gone to waste.

How do companies get the results they want when they train across multiple cultures? How do they avoid the innumerable situations in which waste can occur? The work we've done at Forum reveals that while there may be no single best way to handle global implementation, several basic principles can increase the likelihood of success. The six principles for successful global leadership development that we have identified are:

1. Be clear about why you are developing leaders.
2. Use customer input to drive leadership development.
3. Involve the line.
4. Find a global way.
5. Build globally, adapt locally.
6. Get sponsors to live up to their commitments.

#1: Be clear about why you're developing leaders

Any leadership development effort should be clear about its purpose. In a global context, however, such clarity is critical in order to conserve resources, effect rapid change and ensure laser-beam focus. There are three broad approaches to leadership development. They all touch business strategy, but the choice of which development approach to use depends on the kinds of leadership behaviors and actions needed. The three approaches and their underpinning rationale are:

- In strategic change, a global leadership development needs to be a top-down initiative with necessary alignment that needs to be consistent in all countries.
- Similarly, building a corporate culture requires some elements of top-down, headquarters-driven initiatives. To be successful, however, culture-building activities need to overlay national and linguistic cultural elements. This development approach often needs to adapt the corporate charter to a local reality.
- The third approach often includes a combination of core programs and many local initiatives. This approach is much more individually focused and in a global setting needs the most local adaptation.

#2: Use customer input to drive development

Companies worldwide are responding to escalating customer expectations and demands for better service and higher-quality products. Competition is emerging from unforeseen places and chipping away at market share. And technology is transforming the way people communicate – spanning borders at speeds never before seen.

It has become increasingly critical that leadership development be designed to provide the skills and capabilities that set an organization apart in this highly competitive, global marketplace. For leaders to create productive, customer-focused work environments, they need to model what customers expect. The best way to make sure that happens is to monitor customers from all of the geographies an organization serves, and to incorporate that data into the design of a leadership development program.

For example, one financial services company we work with interviews customers as part of a preliminary needs analysis before leadership development design even begins. This company also makes sure that its design teams are made up of people with multinational customer experience. Another company we've worked with brings the "voice of the customer" into its leadership development either live or by video. This helps participants hear what is important to their global constituents in a very personal and genuine way.

#3: Involve the line

If you're building leadership development program for sales managers, then you need to involve people in sales – the recipients of that program – into the process. The



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same goes for customer-service people, managers, and project owners.

Early involvement helps build ownership for leadership development design and results. Line involvement also helps hammer out solutions to problems created by differences between one marketplace and another.

We recently hosted a breakfast symposium for HR, sales, and marketing executives in Singapore. These were senior leaders from companies facing challenges of market growth in declining economies. Much of the discussion focused on effective leader actions. These were very different people from those a decade ago who might have talked about "terminal objectives" and "criterion-referenced instruction." Rather, these were business people who discussed and focused on such issues as pricing cost, productivity, return on investment, and marketplace dynamics – essentially, the bottom line. It's clear that leadership development design and development only succeeds globally when it helps people improve their performance in an increasingly competitive world.

#4: Find a global way

Global implementation calls for solutions that work across cultural and geographic boundaries. When leadership development solutions are designed for global constituents, the solutions that work best tend to be those that represent a third way, rather than one constituent culture's "way" or another's "way."

This means that what works in one culture may not work in another. It's widely recognized that Americans tend to think that their solutions can be universally applied. However, other cultures can be just as biased.

This principle played out in a recent design team meeting in which North American representatives wanted to build the use of e-mail into a sales communication process. The Brazilian representative resisted because her people preferred talking through issues in person or by telephone. A combination of telephone conference calls and limited e-mail evolved as the best solution. While the content of the sales messages and communication remained consistent across regional and

Ron Koprowski

is a senior vice president and head of the leadership practice in one of Forum's Market Groups. He works exclusively with several of The Forum Corporation's global accounts, focusing on the implementation of global and large-scale leadership interventions. He has published articles in a variety of periodicals on global leadership development.

national boundaries, the delivery channels were tailored to fit local preferences.

It's also important to keep some key communication points in mind as markets globalize, organizations expand and employees move into virtual teams.

- *Cultural dynamics.* Be sensitive to the different constituencies in virtual teams and the linguistic, value-driven and behavioral issues that may arise.
- *Changed working conditions.* The difficulty of synchronous global communication may compromise standard working practices.
- *Awareness.* Some key employees may not be conscious of the fact that they're sitting in a virtual team, and will need training in new ways of working.
- *Project phases.* Employees will need to be coached on which communication channels are the most effective for different projects and project phases.
- *Roles and responsibilities.* An awareness of the skills, strengths and weaknesses of team members is essential.
- *The quick fix.* In virtual teams, the lack of human context can exacerbate minor problems and cause blockages in processes. Any breakdown in communication should be dealt with quickly.

#5: Build globally, adapt locally

Define what must be hard-wired into leadership

development – those fundamental concepts that must be stressed with the same meaning wherever the leadership development is delivered. Then use locally relevant examples or methods to help learners figure out how to apply the learning to their work.

In a recent client situation, where the intention was to take successful US leadership development courses and customize them for use in 12 countries, the concept did not work. We simply underestimated the cultural baggage that had been loaded into the US-developed programs. In revising the design process, we discovered that soliciting global input, although more time consuming up front, gave us the foundation for a universal program. Cultural adaptation then became facilitator driven. (See sidebar, left, for two models for resolving conflicts.)

We also used an editing technique called “information mapping”¹ to streamline our use of language – graphics were often substituted for words, and analogies and colloquialisms were scrupulously edited to ensure universal understanding. It was a real challenge for some of us to give up our use of the baseball term “flys and grounders” and substitute it with “handling difficult situations.”

#6: Get sponsors to live up to their commitments

Global implementation usually supports a corporate-wide strategy. Sponsors at a company's headquarters and at each level of management need to be enrolled and committed to the global leadership development strategy.

Distance, time, language, and cultural context all take their toll on its implementation. Global leaders need to answer the following questions:

- Why are we launching this development initiative?
- What is the benefit to our company?
- How can you benefit?
- How do we expect you to use this new learning?

Without consistent, visible sponsorship, the focus and importance of a leadership development initiative could be lost across borders.

In this demanding global economy, companies must be sure their employees learn the skills that will help them respond to and satisfy customers on a new geographic scale. And leadership development must adopt a dramatically new global perspective in order to make this happen. As leadership is one of the few remaining ways to retain competitive advantage, HR professionals need to ensure they are supporting and building leaders who can face this challenge head-on

References:

¹The Information Mapping © method is a systematic approach used to analyze information needs, organize information based on how readers need to use it, and present information based on specific delivery media.

↓ RESOLVING CONFLICT

Working with multiple nationalities in a pharmaceutical company, we used two models that demonstrated the idea of building globally and adapting locally. The topic was conflict resolution and is a great example of the challenge developers of leadership programs face in multicultural situations. People in one country tend to avoid direct confrontation or accommodate the other person. In another, compromise is the norm. In still another, win-lose may be the dominant style. Leadership developers first need to understand the local style for dealing with conflict and then extract global principles. To describe the variety of approaches people have in dealing with conflict we found the Thomas-Kilman Conflict models very useful with multicultural audiences. This model basically describes the diversity of approaches that people demonstrate when faced with conflict. It's a very useful tool with multicultural audiences because it describes modes that often predominate in different cultures: national, company and even family.

The second model was intended to describe how conflict can be resolved once recognized. Forum's AGREE model worked well in this context. The principles in this model are Acknowledge; Ground Rules; Reframe; Explore; Evaluate. In most cultures, effective conflict resolution seems to follow a pattern in which there is a recognition that disharmony exists, rules for dealing with that disharmony, a means to neutralize emotion and better understand the differing perspectives, an exploration of options and finally some process for evaluating a resolution. In the pharmaceutical company example, AGREE was introduced as a set of principles, and local facilitators had participants discuss their challenging situations and the styles that people demonstrated using the Thomas-Kilman framework. They then practiced resolving the conflict by applying AGREE in these realistic situations.

→ CONTACT

Ron Koprowski
The Forum Corporation
E-mail: Ron.Koprowski@forum.com

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