

Targeted coaching will
reframe leaders' mindsets
to work toward meeting in
the middle.



Integrating Cross-Cultural Competencies into leadership development

BY TERESA WOODLAND

Working across cultures can be a transforming experience, stretching us and stimulating growth and development. Interacting with people with different backgrounds and world views makes us more aware of our cultural identity. As diversity and globalization increase, leaders need to be able to engage and influence people from different cultural backgrounds, often in virtual contexts.

Achieving results in a cross-cultural context often requires us to expand our repertoire of approaches and adjust our mode of operating. In the process of learning to bridge cultural gaps, people become more sensitive to their environments, stakeholders, and the forces at work.

One approach to weaving cross-cultural development into leadership training focuses efforts on leaders' most pressing issues and leverages the complexity of real-life interpersonal dynamics. The following two cases illustrate how to tailor an approach to a leader's development level (that's to say, constructive developmental theory) and foster the advanced learning skills that people need to adjust themselves amid action.

Ground development in the work at hand

In each case, the coaching was structured around the leader's most important business issue. Through coaching, we identify how personal changes, growth, and development could improve the results.

- Stephen, a French engineer, was focused on achieving results. He was responsible for the construction of sophisticated manufacturing facilities in China. On-time, on-budget, and safe completion of these plants required collaboration from a complex web of stakeholders and was vital to midterm profitability for his organization.
- Li, a Chinese executive, was focused on forging a strategic partnership that was central to a leading multinational company's long-term business in China.

Explicitly linking the learning and growth to results encourages people to invest the time and energy required to undertake complex change. The complexity of pressing issues pushes a person to move beyond theories and schoolbook solutions. Getting things done involves engaging specific stakeholders, and this provides an opportunity for practical, real-time feedback and learning. Finally, linking development and results generates organizational and personal support for the person being coached.

Tailor approach to development level

Do you ever wonder why some people seem to be the same at 60 years old as they were at 30, while others are significantly different? Constructive-developmental psychologists describe these differences in terms of cognitive complexity or orders of mind. In *In Over Our Heads: The Mental Demands of Modern Life*, Robert Kegan, a leading scholar in the field, explains that throughout their lives, people “undergo a qualitative change in the way they organize their thinking, their feelings, and their social relations.” Cognitive complexity refers to how people make sense of the world around them. It is the additional sense- and meaning-making capacities some people take on as they grow.

Why does this matter?

A person's stage of psychological development shapes how the individual operates. At different stages of psychological maturity, we experience culture differently. For example, an exchange student who is at a socialized mind stage of development, characterized by the need to fit in with one's peers, will tend to measure other cultures against his own. A consultant who is at the self-authoring stage of development will be able to examine the cultures side by side and extrapolate the implications of cultural norms on a situation or relationship. And an executive who is at the self-transforming stage of development will embrace complexity and enjoy being stretched as she shapes situations.

Different coaching approaches are appropriate at different stages of development. For example, someone operating at the socialized mind stage of development will appreciate learning the norms of another culture so that he can operate effectively in it. He might benefit from skill building aimed at helping him to improve a specific approach (such as feedback conversation or culturally appropriate conflict resolution). A person operating at the self-authoring mind stage of development would be interested in objectively examining the interplay between elements of culture. Coaching might involve supporting her as she examines situations from different perspectives, determines how to act, and builds the skills to act competently.

Cultivate learning skills

An underlying goal of the development program is to improve how someone learns. The coaching programs presented in this article use Chris Argyris and Donald A. Schön's multi-loop learning framework (detailed in their book *Theory in Practice: Increasing Professional Effectiveness*) to structure learning.

Single-loop learning involves improving specific areas of skillfulness, bringing performance and execution in line with best practices. It might include skill building and behavioral coaching.

Double-loop learning involves stepping back; reflecting on plans, strategies, and consequences; and adopting a new strategy.

A person might say, “We executed our strategy perfectly and got this result. What changes in our strategy would enable us to improve the result?” Double-loop learning helps leaders quickly adopt new strategies, which can increase flexibility and success.

In most cases, helping a person to succeed in a cross-cultural leadership role requires a combination of skill building and behavior change (single-loop learning) plus strategy revisions (double-loop learning). Building learning skills helps a person become better at adjusting oneself amid action.

What does this approach look like in action?

Stephen, the French engineer, was acting primarily from a socialized frame of mind. He identified strongly with other European engineers who shared his standards and had deep expertise and a certainty about how things should be done. Like others in his peer group, he solved problems by designing solutions.

His most important and challenging stakeholder was a powerful Chinese contractor. Stephen and the contractor were locked into a pattern in which Stephen pushed the contractor to apply global standards and the contractor rebuffed his input as irrelevant in China.

The development work focused on approaches suitable for Stephen’s socialized frame of mind (understanding cultural norms). The single-loop elements included targeted skill building (for example, difficult conversations, stakeholder analysis). He appreciated tools that helped him analyze individuals’ and

groups’ perspectives, priorities, cultural norms, and preferred modes of operating. The insights he gained helped him craft new strategies for engaging and influencing key stakeholders.

Stephen stretched out of his comfort zone as he defined his desired network of support and experimented with double-loop learning—such as varied approaches that were adjusted according to results—by reaching out to people, sharing more of himself, and allowing his colleagues to deepen their support of him. He was delighted by his colleagues’ warm responses to his requests for feedback and support. The preliminary adjustments in approach required skill building and practice and he gradually became strong in shifting his approach as situations warranted.

Although the construction projects continued to be challenging, Stephen and his team worked better with one another and were able to improve their collaboration with contractors. As a result, the contractors increased their focus on safety and quality while still meeting a demanding construction schedule.

Strengthening a strategic partnership

Li, the Chinese executive leading the joint venture, was in transition from a self-authoring frame of mind to a self-transforming frame of mind. His ability to simultaneously entertain multiple perspectives and his curiosity about and insight into the systems in which challenges were occurring enabled him to embrace the complexity of his challenges. With support, he also was able to recognize and navigate through elements of his cultural



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identity, which supported his growth and transformation.

Delays in launching manufacturing were threatening to weaken the organization's competitive situation and overall profitability. There were signs that an us-versus-them mentality was emerging, with team members seeking to please their parent company instead of focusing on the success of the joint venture as a separate entity.

During the coaching, Li framed the complex challenges he faced. Although getting the joint venture started was Li's main challenge, he realized that the delay was merely a symptom of larger issues. To succeed long term, the two joint venture partners would need to collaborate more effectively. He appreciated that he needed to help his leadership team shape a corporate culture that would create a foundation for success as well as create alignment among stakeholders.

Through applying tools such as Kegan and Lisa Lahey's *Immunity to Change* framework, Li identified the underlying assumptions and internal conflicts that were driving people's behavior. This enabled him to navigate sensitively through challenging situations. It also helped him build his team's skills in working with stakeholders.

One major element influencing the relationship between the Chinese partner and the joint venture organization was the transition the Chinese company was going through as it dramatically increased its scale and became a global player. The Chinese company needed and wanted to move from relationship-based management to being a transparent, process-driven organization.

That required changing how decisions were made and, thus, leaders changing their behaviors and thinking. The senior leaders no longer would make the majority of decisions. Instead, they would put in place systems and processes to support more distributed decision making. For some of the leaders, that meant giving up part of their identity as a leader ("People respect me as a leader because I make the important decisions"). Li worked with his team to see the organization as a complex system,

which enabled them to discuss the forces at work within the system and use that understanding to better support the Chinese company in its transition. This approach helped things move forward in the joint venture much more smoothly than before.

Over the course of the coaching, Li appeared to make the transition from being at the self-authored stage of development to the self-transforming stage of development. This was most obvious when he discussed how resolving the situation was causing him to be aware of how he shifted identities, including his cultural identity. Although Li had grown up in China, he had spent most of his life working in a Western environment and had adopted many Western mindsets. As he dealt with manifestations of traditional Chinese cultural issues, such as hierarchy and face, he refined his cultural identity.

This growth enabled him to have a complex and effective relationship with the chairman of the Chinese parent company. He was able to appreciate the internal conflict the chairman was facing as he led his company through the transition from a medium-sized rule-of-man-governed company to a global, process-driven organization.

Help them build support

Finally, support is essential for those striving to grow as they achieve results across cultures. Development needs to be rooted in a solid home base where not everything is a stretch. People need tangible support to get things done; in other words, remove barriers. They need sounding boards, wise counselors, and camaraderie as they try new approaches. They also need emotional support as they change how they view themselves and show up in the world.

Although the cases involve national culture, the approach is relevant to anyone required to engage people from different backgrounds.

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