Determining the Impact of Cognitive Styles on the Effectiveness of Global Managers: Propositions for Further Research

Lichia Yiu, Raymond Saner

As more and more companies compete across international boundaries, senior managers face the challenge of improving the performance of their on-site managers, both expatriate and local. If these organizations are to be successful, then the expatriate managers need to work effectively with local managers and employees (Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989; Ohmae, 1985; Pascale, 1990) and with non-business constituencies (Saner, Yiu, and Sondergaard, 2000). In this sense, expatriate managers serve as the linking pins in many of these organizations. Much has been written about expatriate managers, but whether we know enough about what makes them effective remains a concern. This article presents six propositions that serve to guide future research. Scholarly interest in this topic should have practical implications for human resource development practitioners and researchers alike.

It is proposed here that perceptual and cognitive characteristics of individual managers may determine their ability to adapt to new settings. Until recently, not much interest has been shown in this perspective of expatriate manager effectiveness. For example, after examining the corporate structure of today’s large European, American, and Asian companies, Bartlett and Ghoshal (1997) proposed a model of managerial and leadership roles that are presumed to be essential for global organizations. Although the research has been helpful in many respects, the authors do not describe any further the perceptual-cognitive dynamics that might influence the shape of the interactions between managers and others around them. Perhaps Bartlett and Ghoshal (1997) have assumed that effective leadership behavior is universal and hence does not warrant further elaboration. In contrast, Hofstede (1980, 1991) has shown that culture and the corresponding perceptions of values have to be taken into account when discussing cross-cultural organizational practices.
Simply put, there is more to the effectiveness of expatriate managers than knowing about general management skills alone. This conclusion leads to the first research proposition:

**PROPOSITION 1:** To be effective in cross-cultural situations, expatriate managers should acquire complex perceptual-cognitive competencies in addition to specific managerial knowledge and skills.

Following from this proposition, it can be argued that nationalities and their respective national cultures affect individuals in numerous interconnected ways, most importantly in their language, demeanor, personal values, and cognitive schemas (Hambrick, Davison, Snell, and Snow, 1998). In terms of language, this aspect is crucial because it affects the person’s ability to participate during work-related and social activities. National background influences to a great extent the English proficiency of the person, which has become the *lingua franca* of today’s business world. The relative ease and familiarity in using English and the local languages does much to shorten or lengthen the psychological distance between persons of different cultural backgrounds and nationalities.

A substantial body of research has become available concerning the physical behavior, or demeanor, of different nationalities and cultures. Most commonly documented are those relating to eye contact, physical proximity, punctuality, conversational style, interruption patterns, and physiological reactions to emotional stimuli (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988; Hall, 1983; Mesquita, and Frijda, 1992). Differences in these behaviors tend to create irritation, reinforce stereotypes, and heighten the perceived psychological distances among cross-cultural teams. These differences can also cause breakdowns in communication and disrupt overall group cohesion (Hall, 1969).

Research by Laurent (1983) and by England (1975) has shown that the managerial values that executives bring to their tasks are predominantly the result of a national system of beliefs or cultural values. In general, Hofstede (1980) defined personal values as the broad tendency to prefer certain states of affairs over others. Further, Hofstede (1991) says that culture is the programming of the mind. Personal value dimensions that are often mentioned by management theorists are individualism-collectivism, universalism-particularism, power-distance, relationship to time, and uncertainty avoidance (Parsons and Shils, 1951; Kluckhohn and Strodbeck, 1961; Hofstede, 1980, 1991; England, 1975; Triandis, 1992; Trompenaars, 1993).

Finally, national culture affects one’s cognitive schema, or what one knows to be true, assumes, or perceives about the world at hand (Lord and Foti, 1986). March and Simon (1958) and Maruyama (1980) point out that individuals with diverse cultural-national backgrounds differ in the underlying knowledge they possess. In their comparative study, Mesquita and Frijda (1992) found that national culture affects what we know to be true but also
how we process and perceive new information. According to Berry (1976), cognitive style is actually a cultural phenomenon. Using the typology developed by Witkin (1978), cognitive style can be divided into two basic perceptual orientations: field dependence and field independence.

In presenting a bipolar schema, Witkin defines field dependence as representing a greater reliance on an external frame of reference and field independence as representing a greater reliance on an internal frame of reference. Hence, the field dependent individual tends to be more socially sensitive, pay more attention to emotional stimuli, and be interpersonally competent. In contrast, field independent individuals tend to be more autonomous, pay more attention to concrete facts, and are better equipped with cognitive restructuring and analytic abilities. Managers in a cross-cultural setting should be able to function simultaneously in both field independent and field dependent modes. That is, they should be able to alternate at different times between viewing a given situation in its totality and viewing key isolated facts within the situation. This argument leads to the following proposition:

PROPOSITION 2: The ability to master perceptual-cognitive complexity distinguishes successful expatriate managers from less successful managers.

In truth, expatriate managers cannot rely solely on cognitive style to help them make meaning of situations and to adapt to new cultures. Relying solely on cognitive style might ultimately lead to miscommunication and misjudgments on both sides. For instance, those expatriate managers having a field independent orientation might be perceived as being arrogant or too distant by others. In contrast, the field dependent manager might be perceived as indecisive and perhaps incompetent. Expatriate managers need to employ other tools, such as in-depth knowledge of the new culture itself. Beyond this knowledge, managers need to reflect as much as possible about the distance between the new culture and their own culture. This leads to the third and fourth propositions for consideration.

PROPOSITION 3: The greater the cultural distance, the more important it is for managers to make cultural adaptations in their language, demeanor, personal values, and cognitive ability.

PROPOSITION 4: The greater the cultural distance, the greater the difficulty to adjust to the new culture, which increases the importance of integrating the differing cognitive processing skills of field independence and field dependence.

Cultural adjustment seems to be an ongoing and interdependent cycle of role sending and role taking. Harvey (1974) argues that managers should not only master the cognitive understandings of other cultures but also gain a
subjective familiarity of the other culture, almost like an insider. Like a chameleon, the expatriate manager needs to know how to activate different constructs to mediate between sometimes contradictory role expectations. That is, roles should be understood in their environmental contexts. Admittedly, such psychological plasticity cannot be achieved without managers undergoing profound change.

For instance, when working in countries of high power distance and high collectivism, some managers, particularly those who are field independent, might not be sufficiently sensitive to the social cues in the situation and rely too much on their own frames of reference. Such expatriate managers often take on an aggressive role, like the proverbial bull in the china shop. This is often the stereotype held by local managers and employees of U.S. expatriate managers. However, in countries of medium to low power distance and high individualism, field dependent managers might be overly sensitive to the social cues and relay too much of this information onto their own frame of reference. In this case, managers mistakenly play a too-passive role, to the extent that they may be perceived as overly reluctant to act. Clearly, understanding the notion of role is essential for management effectiveness in a cross-cultural context.

Research in the field of instructional technology demonstrates that cognitive styles tend to vary depending on the instructional approaches used by the teacher (Meng and Patty, 1991). An important finding from their study is that field-intermediate subjects (mixed cognitive style) are qualitatively different from the field-dependent subjects in regard to their learning responses. These findings support the authors’ view that an integrated perceptual-cognitive style exists separate from the bi-polar cognitive schema originally postulated by Witkins.

Perceptual-cognitive abilities can be modified through regular studying even into adulthood, according to Simpson, Portis, Snyder, and Milles (1995). Their research has demonstrated that a significant movement toward a field-independent cognitive style appears possible based on data collected through the Group Embedded Figures Test (GEFT). However, no research data exists so far which could demonstrate the opposite migration toward a more field-dependent cognitive style. However, the authors hypothesize that exposure to appropriate learning situations could lead to the strengthening of field-dependent cognitive abilities. Thus, building on the previous propositions, the following two propositions suggest:

**PROPOSITION 5:** The ability to take on an appropriate role in a cross-cultural context is based on the abilities to perceive cultural stimuli and to integrate the perceptual and processing styles of field dependence and field independence; that is, to develop integrated perceptual-cognitive abilities.

**PROPOSITION 6:** Effective global managers develop integrated perceptual and cognitive processing styles and are able to create new meanings in cross-cultural
contexts. Their development is a function of progressing through a hierarchy of experiences, both through structured training and development opportunities and through less structured, actual overseas experiences.

In general, the six propositions suggest ways of improving managerial effectiveness in cross-cultural situations. The propositions link several theoretical areas of individual and organizational research. Perhaps most importantly, they suggest that global leadership is a cultural phenomenon and that individual managers require new forms of managerial skills to adapt to their new cultural situations. For one thing, managers should have a deeper ability to reflect on their own culture and compare it with their new culture.

Future HRD research should help clarify how this process occurs and what effect it has on an individual's perceptual orientation and cognitive functioning in the long term. The cultural adaptation process could have profound effects on the psychological and cognitive functioning of individuals. Sustained cultural adaptation may be equal to beta change (enlargement of belief systems) and gamma change (frame breaking and reconfiguration of cognitive structures and processing modes).

References


