Intercultural communication competence and leadership: a new and more comprehensive research approach for the multicultural settings of the global economy

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ABSTRACT The purpose of this article is to indicate the existence of a relationship between intercultural communication competence and leadership. In order to do this the article presents conclusions from a wider literature review in the fields of intercultural communication and leadership. It identifies a gap in the existing literature as no studies relating intercultural communication competence and leadership were found. Five common elements in the two concepts are identified and discussed suggesting the existence of a link. Further, addressing the problems and suggestions identified in the literature a new approach for studying leadership in diverse and multicultural business settings is proposed. This opens up wide possibilities for future research.

Keywords: leadership, communication, diversity in organisations, globalisation, multiculturalism and work

INTRODUCTION

Today’s business environment is characterized by intensive intercultural interactions where companies are involved in a global network with strong economic interdependencies (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta 2004; Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel 2007). As a result, an increasing amount of business activity is taking place on the multinational scene, and even domestic working environments are becoming more multicultural (Javidan & House 2002; Jokinen 2005; Samovar & Porter 2004; Samovar et al. 2007; Thomas 2001; Wong, Wong, & Heng 2007). In these settings it has recently been proved that companies in many countries experience problems with leadership (Gallup 2006; Jokinen 2005; Sarros & Cooper 2006). A worldwide leadership study has found that thirty eight per cent of people in more than sixty studied countries remain critical of business leaders (Gallup 2006). They are perceived as not capable and competent, unethical and dishonest (Gallup 2006). Others have reported lack of managers skilled enough to lead businesses in the global economy (Javidan & House 2002; Jokinen 2005; Manning 2003).

The literature recognizes the crucial role of leadership in the multicultural environment of global business (House et al. 2004; Karpin 1995; Sinclair & Wilson 2002). It also argues that new skills are required from today’s leaders working in the global economy, because leadership itself became more multicultural (Sinclair & Wilson 2002) and it could be now defined as ‘influence across national and cultural boundaries’ (Mobley & Dorfman 2003: xiii). Further, it was argued that leadership was ‘enacted through communication’ (Barge 1994: 21) and communication competence was a prerequisite for effective leadership (Flauto 1999). Moreover, in the highly diverse global
environment, communication competence should become intercultural because people should be able to perceive things from the perspective of culturally different others (Chen & Starosta 1996). Therefore, leaders should develop their intercultural communication competence, which can be broadly defined as involving ‘knowledge, motivation and skills to interact effectively and appropriately with members of different cultures’ (Wiseman 2003: 192).

However, existing literature on leadership did not reveal the basis for effective leadership, possibly because of the excessively narrow focus of the studies (Yukl 2002, 2006). More recent research on leadership among various cultures has resulted in different opinions about what is required from global leaders in order to assist them in achieving success (Jokinen 2005). On the other hand, it has been argued that intercultural communication literature does not focus enough on business context (Varner 2000). Scholars investigating intercultural communication competence have developed numerous models that vary substantially between each other and lack empirical support. Moreover, this literature study found no research on intercultural communication competence and leadership. Further, communication issues in a vast number of leadership theories and models seem to be taken for granted and not directly addressed (Barge 1994; Gardner & Terry 1996).

Addressing the existing problems and building on the suggestions of a relationship between communication competence and leadership (Flauto 1999; Rouhiainen 2005) as well as on the argument that in the global environment, communication competence should be intercultural (Chen 2005; Chen & Starosta 1996; Samovar & Porter 2004; Samovar et al. 2007), this article presents conclusions from a wider literature review. It aims to indicate the existence of relationships between leadership and intercultural communication competence. In order to do this certain common elements of both concepts are presented. Finally, a broader and more comprehensive approach of research is suggested. One that combines the efforts of two until now rather separated fields.

Given the claim of too narrow focus of leadership studies and the suggestion that in order to be effective leadership should be regarded at the same level of complexity as the environment in which it functions (Barge 1994; Yukl 2002, 2006), the idea of combining two fields recognized as crucially important for the functioning of businesses in multicultural, diverse settings (House et al. 2004; Samovar et al. 2007; Sinclair & Wilson 2002) generates expectations for advances in investigating the
complex phenomenon of effective leadership in globally involved businesses. Findings from this widely focused research could thus also assist in creating new training programs to develop managers with skills that are reported to be in scarcity.

The purpose of the present article, as mentioned before, is just to indicate the existence of relationships between intercultural communication competence and leadership. However, it opens wide possibilities for future research. Even the investigation of the links between the concepts only will probably require a substantial amount of work by a number of academics. Furthermore, to be used in global settings, the findings will have to be proved valid in number of countries and industries.

In order to fulfil the purpose and suggest a new approach for research, this article presents the conclusions from the review of existing literatures on leadership and intercultural communication. It starts with the showing some existing assumptions about communication in general that can be observed in leadership theories and its’ recent models. It also reports on a number of studies on both communication and leadership. In doing so it reveals gaps in the existing literature. Further, it presents a number of models of intercultural communication competence and provides a comparative analysis indicating some shared elements. Following, the same elements are discovered in leadership research. Finally, it concludes by indicating the existence of relationships between the two concepts in question and it suggests a new comprehensive approach to the study of leadership in diverse, multicultural business settings.

COMMUNICATION AND LEADERSHIP IN THE EXISTING LITERATURE

Each group of leadership theories seems to enclose different assumptions about communication (Barge 1994; Gardner & Terry 1996). For example, it could be stated that in trait theory the role of communication is limited to certain communicative abilities or traits, such as verbal fluency or talkativeness (Barge 1994). In behavioural theories communication can be perceived as one of the behavioural tools and as the effect of using different communication styles or behaviours (Gardner & Terry 1996). Later, in transformational leadership it seems to be assumed that leading an organization through change, empowering people, convincingly presenting a vision in a dynamic environment requires acknowledgement of numerous factors and appropriate adjustment of communication which will impact the acceptance of change and thus leader’s success (Barge 1994; Gardner & Terry 1996).
The link between leadership and communication appears more pronounced in recently developed leadership models. Hede (2001) in his integrated leadership model includes communication as one of the basic dimensions of leadership behaviour. The flexible leadership model developed by Yukl and Lepsinger (2004) underline that effective communication across the whole organization is ‘a common denominator for understanding and meeting the different types of leadership challenges’ (Yukl & Lepsinger 2004: 223). However, even the last models are still general and superficial about the relationship between leadership and communication. They also do not address the role of competent communication in multicultural settings.

Communication and leadership can also be found as subject of a number of studies approached from various perspectives. Examples include studies conducted by Schultz (1980) on communication behaviours as predictors of leader emergence, Penley and colleagues (1991) who examined relationship between managers’ performance and levels of communication skills. More recently, Gaddis, Connelly and Mumford (2004) studied the impact of leader affect on subordinates when communicating negative feedback and Clifton (2006) showed how conversation analysis can help in improving leadership and communication skills.

Some authors also investigated different aspects of communication in relation to leadership in cross-cultural settings. For example, Vaught and Abraham (1992) found the interpersonal communication capabilities of Indian managers being very similar to those from the US. However, the overall scores in both countries were only low to average. Zander (2005) concluded, after studying employees in 16 countries, that using similar or the same language in different countries did not mean people would have similar preferences for leadership-related communication styles.

Relationship between communication competence and leadership has been found (Flauto 1999; Rouhiainen 2005). Rouhiainen (2005) has recently studied communication competence of leaders in knowledge based organizations. However, the review of literature reveals a scarcity of studies on the link. It thus could be concluded that while the importance of competent communication for leadership seems obvious, even the relationship between communication in general and leadership is not actually addressed. It therefore seems that this link has been assumed rather than proved or deeply investigated in the literature (Flauto 1999).
Furthermore, it is important to acknowledge that competent leadership has been argued to stem from communication competence of the leaders (Barge 1994; Flauto 1999). Therefore, communication competence becomes a prerequisite for competent leadership (Flauto 1999). Moreover, competent communication in today’s global and diverse societies needs also to be intercultural (Chen 2005; Chen & Starosta 1996; Samovar et al. 2007). In this literature review no studies were found on intercultural communication competence and leadership. In addition, considering recently reported global problems with leadership (Gallup 2006; Javidan, Dorfman, Sully de Luque, & House 2006) on one hand and arguments about the importance of intercultural communication competence on the other (Chen 2005; House et al. 2004; Saee 2006; Samovar et al. 2007), it appears to be necessary to fill the gap and investigate possible relationships between the two concepts.

**MODELS OF INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE**

Numerous models of intercultural communication competence have been developed in the literature. Those presented in the present article do not form the complete list. Rather the most recent examples have been selected given the changes mentioned at the beginning. Ruben’s study and Chen’s early models are provided to illustrate the path of development.

**Seven basic elements**

In the early study Ruben (1976) discovered seven basic behavioural elements contributing to communicating competently inter-culturally, namely, display of respect, interaction posture (related to avoiding valuations and judgments when responding to others), orientation to knowledge (involving the consciousness about individual perspectives), empathy, self-oriented role behaviour (seen as flexibility in functional task related roles in finding balance with roles in positive relationship-building), interaction management (displayed in driving discussion or interaction on the basis of adequate estimation of others’ necessities), and tolerance for ambiguity.

**Development of Chen’s models**

Chen (1989; 1992) proved the seven Ruben’s elements to be significantly correlated and used them in a review of intercultural communication competence research where four main dimensions of the concept were identified namely, personal attributes, communication skills, psychological adaptation and cultural awareness. Personal attributes indicate one’s knowledge about oneself including positive
self concept and self awareness. Communication skills indicate one’s verbal and nonverbal behaviours where the need for flexibility and empathy is acknowledged. Psychological adaptation relates to managing frustration, stress, alienation and ambiguity in order to adjust to a new environment. Finally, cultural awareness assists in understanding social values, customs, norms and systems of interacting cultures. Exploring adaptation of students from different countries to American culture, the author found significant interrelationships between some of the dimensions. However, the research did not considered multicultural interactions among the subjects. The author concluded that studies of intercultural communication competence should consider cognitive, affective, self-awareness and cultural awareness approaches (Chen 1992).

**Three processes model**

Chen’s (1992) suggestions were followed in the next model where affective (intercultural sensitivity), cognitive (intercultural awareness) and behavioural (intercultural adroitness) processes were argued to be inseparable parts of the holistic image of intercultural communication competence (Chen & Starosta 1996). Affective element concentrates on feelings and emotions, building intercultural sensitivity. Four personal attributes are required for this purpose according to the authors, namely, self concept, open mindedness, non judgmental attitude, and social relaxation. The cognitive element is responsible for understanding interacting cultures and therefore assists in reducing situational ambiguity and uncertainty. The behavioural element or intercultural adroitness is ‘the ability to get the job done and attain communication goals in intercultural interactions’ (Chen & Starosta 1996: 367). The authors mentioned, among others, flexibility and empathy as behaviours that assist in reaching cultural adroitness.

**Global communication competence**

More recently the above model has been further modified to form a global communication competence model (Chen 2005). The author does not comment on the substitution on the term intercultural by the term global in the name of the model. However, both notions are used together throughout its explanation, which could indicate that they can be employed interchangeably. A global mindset forms the foundations of the new model. It is interrelated with three other components, namely, unfolding the self, mapping the culture, and aligning the interaction. The global mindset is responsible for one’s
broad perspective of the world, and therefore requires openness and flexibility. Unfolding the self is related to personal improvement that requires combining scientific, philosophical and religious perspectives on viewing the world and means ‘ceaselessly purifying oneself, continuous learning, cultivating sensitivity, develop creativity, and fostering empathy’ (Chen 2005: 8). Mapping the culture appears as passive and active understanding of interacting cultures. It thus proves one’s cultural awareness that allows perceiving things from another culture’s perspective. Finally, aligning the interaction requires intercultural adroitness (and therefore, empathy and flexibility) and integrates mental, affective and cognitive abilities allowing for effective and appropriate action during intercultural encounter.

**Spitzberg’s assumptions about intercultural communication competence**

A different approach to intercultural communication competence is presented by Spitzberg. ‘The model portrays the process of dyadic interaction as a function of two individuals’ motivation to communicate, knowledge of communication in that context, and skills in implementing their motivation and knowledge’ (Spitzberg 2000: 376). The model is composed of a series of assumptions divided into three levels of analysis of individual, episodic and relational systems. Individual level is related to one’s characteristics required in normative social setting. The author suggests here a positive relationship between motivation, knowledge and skills of the interactants on one side and communicative competence on the other. An episodic system describes one’s features that increase his/her competence in another person’s perception during a given episode of interaction. More specifically, a higher communicative status will positively influence other person’s impression of one’s competence. Also if one fulfils the other party’s expectations it is likely to influence his/her perceived image of competence. Therefore, fulfilment of co-actors positive and normative violation of negative expectancies is expected to increase the perceived competence. The relational system presents more universal requirements needed across various relationships in order to raise the level of communicative quality, referred to as relational competence. The author suggests a positive relationship between this competence on one side and mutual fulfilment of autonomy and intimacy needs, mutual attraction, mutual trust, access to social support and relational network integration on the other.
The model needs to be considered having in mind two important factors. First of all, the predicted relationships are relative. Therefore, there is always a turning point and excess of any of elements can have reverse effect on communication competence. Secondly, communication competence depends on all the interactants and therefore all of them should take the responsibility for the outcomes of the encounter.

**Process model of intercultural communication competence**

Hajek and Giles (2003) argued that intercultural communication competence should be perceived as a combination of skills, traits and knowledge of cultural history of interacting cultures. The authors argue that the type of interactants, their cognitive preparedness (regarded as community ideology and acculturation orientation, combined with Hofstede’s cultural dimensions), and cultural orientations (related to self-monitoring of one’s openness to changes) constitute the basis for the processes explained in the model. These variables affect the learning and development process of the interactants. They are argued to impact communication management of people in a cumulative effect resulting in various possible forms of competent behaviour including dealing effectively with a psychological stress, establishing personal relations, learning new and unlearning old cultural habits or use of appropriate langue, and increased levels of empathy and flexibility. It is to be acknowledged that the described process is argued to be bidirectional and that the outcomes could then also have the effect on further communication management or one’s learning and development.

**Culture general model of intercultural communication competence**

Arasaratnam (2004) proposed a culture general model of intercultural communication competence based on the literature and both qualitative and quantitative studies of perception of an interculturally competent communicator from other culture, among student of an US university originated from fifteen countries. Five variables, namely, motivation (interest in getting to know people from other cultures), experience (in intercultural events or formal training in intercultural communication), empathy, global attitude (openness to various cultural perspectives) and ability to listen and pay attention, were identified as the components of the model (Arasaratnam 2004). The model is being further empirically tested. However, to date, the studies have only been conducted in university settings (Arasaratnam 2006).
Model of excellence in intercultural communication competence

Similar argument to Spitzberg’s (2000) about the responsibility for the interaction is found in Saee’s (2006) model of excellence in intercultural communication competence. Supporting the research with previous literature and qualitative research among twelve managers from the Australian hospitality industry, the author isolates factors that contribute to intercultural communication competence.

Three basic steps can be noticed in the model. In order to reach intercultural communication competence it is necessary firstly to understand the theoretical foundations. Secondly, various abilities need to be developed aiming for establishing meaningful interpersonal relationships, dialog conducting as well as coping with psychological stress. Finally, there is a need for behavioural dimensions such as respect, empathy, openness, nonjudgementalness, tolerance of ambiguity, ability to perform role behaviours and interaction management as well as adaptability, trust, listening skills, equity/equal treatment of all individuals in intercultural context, education, patience, and competence in a second language.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE MODELS – COMPARISON

The above models present a variety of approaches, theoretical perspectives or level of analysis, from purely behavioural (Ruben 1976) approach through focus on processes (Chen & Starosta 1996; Hajek & Giles 2003) to dyadic interaction (Spitzberg 2000). Substantial differences can also be seen in theoretical fundaments of the models. Hajek and Giles (2003) use communication enhancement of aging and communication predicament of aging theories to build up their model. Saee (2006) uses what one could call a multi-theory perspective building upon, among others, psychological adaptation theories, uncertainty reduction or general systems theory. Moreover, the analytical approach varies across the models from individual (self reported) (Saee 2006), individual (other reported) (Arasaratnam 2004) to multiple level (Spitzberg 2000). Support could thus be found for the opinion that there is a tendency to adopt very different starting points and perspectives in the studies which elevate the level of difficulty in combining their outcomes (Bradford, Allen, & Beisser 2000; Koester, Wiseman, & Sanders 1993).

It is also to be noted that the majority of the models lack sound empirical support. Only two of them (Arasaratnam 2004; Saee 2006) were developed on the basis of both literature and empirical study,
and only one has been validated by empirical study (Arasaratnam 2004, 2006; Arasaratnam & Doerfel 2005). Arasaratnam’s model is probably also the only one tested among representatives of more than two cultures (Arasaratnam & Doerfel 2005). Nevertheless, the study was conducted exclusively in one country and in the context of university students. This fact could also be seen as a limitation for the universality of the model as communication competence was argued to differ depending on the context (Samovar & Porter 2004; Samovar et al. 2007). One could also find support for Varner’s (2000) argument about insufficient focus on business in intercultural communication literature as the majority of studies are conducted in university settings.

However, there are certain common elements that are shared among the models. Empathy appears as one of them. It is one of the basic Ruben’s (1976) elements; it appears as part of necessary communication skills (Chen 1989, 1992) or behavioural adroitness (Chen & Starosta 1996), desired communicative outcomes (Hajek & Giles 2003), one of the main variables (Arasaratnam 2004), personal improvement (Chen 2005), or a desired behavioural dimensions (Saee 2006). Similarly flexibility, openness, trust, and tolerance for ambiguity can each be noticed as components of several models simultaneously. The above mentioned shared elements do not form an exhaustive list. However, the aim of this article is not to produce such a list but to indicate the existence of common elements between intercultural communication competence and leadership.

INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE ELEMENTS AND LEADERSHIP STUDIES

The same elements that are shared among various intercultural communication competence models are also related to leadership in existing studies. Empathy, openness, role flexibility and tolerance of ambiguity were already perceived as desired features of managers working in cultures different from their own twenty years ago (Harris & Moran 1987).

Empathy

More recently, empathy was found to be one of the desired mental characteristics of global leader (Jokinen 2005) and one of the key competencies for leaders working within culturally diverse teams (Iles & Hayers 1997). Yukl (2002) recognized empathy to be necessary for adjusting influence strategy to different people. It was also found to be one of the routes leading to the recognition of an
individual as a leader (Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth 2002). Other researchers argued for empathy as one of the characteristics of transformational leaders (Ashkanasy & Tse 2000; Gardner & Stough 2002).

**Trust**

Building trust was also advocated for as one of the requisites of transformational leadership and its importance recognized by various authors (Casimir, Waldman, Bartram, & Yang 2006; Connell, Cross, & Parry 2002; Ferres, Travaglione, & Connell 2002; Gillespie & Mann 2004; Rubin, Munz, & Bommer 2005). Also a strong association was found between trust and a leader effectiveness (Gillespie & Mann 2004). Furthermore, building trust both inside and outside of the organization appears as a must for leaders who want to develop in their companies the strategic flexibility required in the competitive, global business environment (Hitt, Keats, & Yucel 2003).

**Openness**

Openness to new perspectives was found to be among the key competencies needed for cross-cultural leaders managing diversity in the organization (Manning 2003). Transformational leaders also were argued to be intellectually open (Bass 1985; Kouzes & Posner 1987). Various researchers proved openness to be present among successful international managers (Black & Gregersen 1999; Sinclair & Wilson 2002). Black and Gregersen (1999) argued that openness was composed of two elements, namely cosmopolitan orientation that allows one to remain open to others’ values and acts, and cultural flexibility that implies willingness to interact with other cultures.

**Flexibility and tolerance for ambiguity**

Flexibility appears to constitute one of the most crucial factors in today’s leadership (Barge 1994; Caligiuri & Di Santo 2001; Sinclair & Wilson 2002; Yukl & Lepsinger 2004) in various ways from adjusting the performed style (Hede 2001) to flexibility in strategic leading of the whole organization (Hitt et al. 2003). Flexibility was also found to be indispensable for work and the successful leading of multicultural teams (Iles & Hayers 1997). Authors of the Globe project argued it was needed, together with tolerance for ambiguity, for success of global leaders (Javidan et al. 2006; Javidan & House 2002). Tolerance of ambiguity is required especially in order to cope with the stressful situations created in intercultural interactions (Javidan et al. 2006; Sinclair & Wilson 2002).
The elements discussed above are only an indication of existing relationships between the concepts. The shared field seems to be much broader. It includes, for example, self awareness, identified as one of the core competencies of global leadership (Jokinen 2005), and one of two main results of authentic leadership, a new “root concept” underlying all positive forms of leadership (Avolio & Gardner 2005; Avolio, Gardner, Walumbwa, & Luthans 2004; Gardner, Avolio, Luthans, May, & Walumbwa 2005). Moreover, on the conceptual level competence in both intercultural communication competence and leadership were defined in terms of effectiveness and appropriateness (Barge 1994; Wiseman 2003). Both fields also share the issue of cultural and contextual universality which remains a subject of ongoing discussion (Arasaratnam 2004; Arasaratnam & Doerfel 2005; Bass & Riggio 2006; Parry 2001; Parry & Sarros 1994; Yukl 2006).

**CONCLUSION**

In order to meet the aim of the article conclusions from leadership and intercultural communication literature review has been reported. Findings have indicated the lack of studies relating communication and intercultural communication competence. Links to communication in existing leadership theories and models have also been illustrated and found insufficiently expressed. Addressing the gap in the literature, five elements forming the intercultural communication competence models have been found present in leadership studies. A conceptual similarity has also been pointed out. The existence of relationships between intercultural communication competence and leadership is suggested. Considering the revealed gap in the literature as well as the suggestions that leadership has been to narrowly focused, it is proposed to investigate possible relationships between leadership and intercultural communication competence in future research. Moreover, it is proposed to approach leading in diverse, multicultural business settings more comprehensively through the combination of the two concepts. This could also assist in advancing investigations of successful global leadership by broadening the focus of research. Further, it could possibly allow for development of comprehensive programs for leaders involved in multicultural interactions, the need for which seems proved (Gallup 2006; Javidan et al. 2006).
REFERENCES


