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The Impact of Cultural Factors on Leadership in a Global Church

Leaders around the world are finding out that globalization has complicated their lives. The rules found in old administrative manuals no longer work smoothly in a world of cultural diversity. What used to be "straight-forward" is now more difficult because your colleagues in the multicultural team bring their own perceptions and expectations to the table. Things that could be easily fixed "with a little good will" or "behind closed doors" have now become complex, culture-charged, and counter-intuitive. Information, once the carefully guarded power of the few in the hierarchy, is now readily available on the web and distributed widely in organizations and beyond. What is even more unsettling to some is that new winds of transparency create an environment where bosses used to solve problems by stalling, now find themselves reduced to irrelevance as workers on different sides of an issue can now "tweet" their perspectives, discuss their views on Facebook, posting supporting evidence for everyone to see. Today people who were once disconnected and geographically separated can now work together across continents in real time, seeing each other on their Skype monitors and hearing each other's voices, and working on projects together that formerly would not have been possible without days of travel.

While these developments are vividly described by authors like Thomas Friedman in *The World Is Flat* (2005) or Clay Shirkey in *Here Comes Everybody: The Power of Organizing Without Organizations* (2008), there is a fact that cannot be overlooked: we may not be that well prepared to work together with those to whom we are connected. There is a lot more than geographical distance that separates us from one another. More and more evidence points to the fact that the culture-inspired invisible assumptions, values, and norms that leaders bring with them create a distance between leaders working next door to each other that may be harder to bridge than the distance to a team member across continents (Branson and Martinez 2011).

What is the problem? Cultural diversity and distance without awareness of how cultural backgrounds affect thinking and behavior can be a destructive force in an organization, especially in a multicultural organization like the Seventh-day Adventist Church. In North America most churches have become multicultural and are faced with growing cultural diversity in their environment for which they are largely unprepared. The same is true for many countries and cities around the world where the church is present. Yet, while the church is facing an increasingly diverse population without and membership within, the development of intercultural competence for administrative leaders is still a rare concept.

Cultural Diversity in the Seventh-day Adventist Church

The Seventh-day Adventist Church faces cultural diversity issues at all levels. There have always been groups representing different perspectives on certain issues who could count on disagreeing on the basis of a shared culture, but many urban churches are becoming increasingly multicultural with members from different ethnic groups, tribes, and races. These differences often play themselves out when churches struggle with issues of worship (Maynard-Reid 2000), leadership (Lingenfelter 2008), gender (Vyhmeister 1998), and ministry and evangelism (Lane 2002). Since membership is optional and voluntary, problems arising from cultural issues may simply lead to members leaving one congregation for another, if that option is available, or dropping out of church altogether. The result is that in many areas of North America the number of ex-Adventists is far greater than the number of members on our books.

Cultural diversity is also a huge factor in the higher-level organizations of the church that employ professionally trained leaders and administrators. As a world church the Seventh-day Adventist Church now encompasses over 100 union conferences made up of over 500 local conferences responsible for some 130,000 churches and worship points representing some 20 million members or attendees from many nations, tribes, languages, and peoples. United by a strong identity as a global mission community this unity cannot be taken for granted if most of her leaders continue to view cultural perspectives as a nuisance to be eliminated rather than as a reality that needs to be acknowledged and addressed.

This chapter is attempting to make a modest contribution to that goal. In doing so I am building on the excellent contributions of Adventist missiologists and leaders reflecting on the cross-cultural realities of the church before me, especially the work of Jon Dybdahl, *Missions: A Two-Way Street* (1986) and *Adventist Mission in the 21st Century* (1986), the many articles that have appeared in different venues, but especially in the *Journal of Adventist Mission Studies*, and in the chapters of the important book

edited by Leslie Pollard, *Embracing Diversity* (2000). While diversity often refers to characteristics such as race, ethnicity, gender, nationality, age, physical abilities, socio-economic status, this chapter focuses on cultural differences and more specifically how cultural differences affect leadership situations.

Culture and Leadership

For many American leaders it comes as a surprise that not all cultures appreciate the notion of the leader as a person with authority to influence others. In the United States, people value charisma and decisiveness in their corporate and political leaders like Jack Welch or Lee Iacocca, two prominent former CEOs or former President Clinton. In contrast, some Europeans equate leadership with a necessary evil to be carefully watched (see Chhokar, Brodbech, and House 2007; Grauman and Moscovici 1986). While there is no one commonly accepted definition of what a leader is it may be useful to start with J. Robert Clinton's definition of a Christian leader as "a person with a God-given capacity and a God-given responsibility to influence a specific group of His people towards His purposes for the group" (1988:245). This definition highlights God's involvement in the process of leadership and characterizes it as a purpose-oriented influence process. This definition also compares well with typical leadership definitions found in business-oriented literature. Hughes, Ginnett, and Curphy (2009) define leadership as "the process of influencing an organized group toward accomplishing its goals" (5). A similar definition of leadership has been used by the GLOBE team of researchers who defined leadership as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members" (Chhokar et al. 2007:15). What many of these definitions miss, however, is the unique relationships Christians have as a community bonded by the love of God. "Leading, then, is inspiring people who participate with you in a community of trust to follow you—a leader or a leadership team—and be empowered by you to achieve a compelling vision of faith" (Lingenfelter 2008:19).

Of course, what one culture considers effective in a leader may not be perceived that way in another. In North America with its high individualist values management manuals emphasize individual initiative, achievement, and accountability. A different picture emerges from group-oriented cultures. Here the emphasis is on group achievement and the harmony within the group (Varner and Beamer 2011:270). Furthermore, these differences are not just interesting academic observations but are subtly present in the ways leaders are subjected to judgment by the often invisible yardsticks of values and expectations, and they indicate potential

areas of conflict when leaders work with people of other cultures.

For the last few decades the impact of cultural differences on the work of leading and managing organizations has been researched (Hofstede 1980a; 1980b; Lewis 1996; Trompenaars 1998; Schwartz 1999; Adler 2002). One of the most monumental recent efforts to study cultural differences and identify universally acceptable or despised leadership behaviors is the GLOBE study (standing for "Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness"). Its findings have been reported in two massive volumes titled *Culture, Leadership, and Organizations: The GLOBE Study of 62 Societies* (House et al. 2004) and *Culture and Leadership Across the World: The GLOBE Book of In-depth Studies of 25 Societies* (Chhokar et al. 2007). Building on the work of earlier large-survey studies GLOBE adopted nine general dimensions to operationalize the phenomenon of culture which are briefly explained in table 1.

Table 1: Nine Culture Dimensions That Influence Leadership Behavior and Expectations

1. *Assertiveness:* the degree to which individuals are assertive, confrontational, and aggressive in their relationship with others.
2. *Collectivism I (Institutional Collectivism):* the degree to which organizational and societal institutional practices encourage and reward collective distribution of resources and collective action.
3. *Collectivism II (In-Group Collectivism):* the degree to which individuals express pride, loyalty, and cohesiveness in their organizations or families.
4. *Future Orientation:* the extent to which individuals engage in future-oriented behaviors such as delaying gratification, planning, and investing in the future.
5. *Gender Egalitarianism:* the degree to which a collective minimizes gender equality.
6. *Humane Orientation:* the degree to which a collective encourages and rewards individuals for being fair, altruistic, generous, caring, and kind to others.
7. *Performance Orientation:* the degree to which a collective encourages and rewards group members for performance improvement and excellence.
8. *Power Distance:* the degree to which members of a collective expect power to be distributed equally.
9. *Uncertainty Avoidance:* the extent to which a society, organization, or group relies on social norms, rules, and procedures to alleviate unpredictability of future events.

Source: House et al. 2004:30.

These culture dimensions contribute to profound differences in specific beliefs and assumptions people have about leaders. These differences were then plotted on radar graphs for ten cultural affinity clusters of countries: Latin America, Anglo, Latin Europe (Italy, Portugal, Spain, France, Switzerland [French-speaking], Israel), Nordic Europe, Germanic Europe, Confucian Asian, Sub-Saharan Africa, Middle East, Southern Asia, and Eastern Europe. Each of these clusters differed in their mean scores for societal values and practices.

Pondering the implications of these differences one can easily imagine the conflicts that can arise, for example, between leaders from a culture which values future orientation more highly than workers of his multicultural administrative team who come from cultures that tend to focus more on the present, with a short-term strategic focus on more immediate rewards. These tensions are common even in North America when an evangelist comes to conduct evangelistic meetings expecting to baptize people who have made a decision for Christ immediately while local pastors may be focused more on the need to allow new converts to get acquainted thoroughly with their new faith community and help them grow into responsible followers of Jesus Christ, even in the face of difficulties. In multi-cultural situations these tensions tend to be more pronounced. In some cultures the reaching of short-term evangelistic goals almost always crowds out longer-term integration processes (which tend to be left to chance).

No leader working with multicultural teams should be surprised by challenges that arise out of differences in expectations, cultural values, and attitudes, and to differences in systems of ethics (Adeney 1995). Adventist leaders should recognize that while some conflicts come from personality differences (see Matena 2011), many tensions in multicultural situations are probably due to differences in systems of ideas, values, and norms people have been encultured into over a lifetime.

Cultural expectations also influence which attributes and behaviors are seen as distinguishing followers from leaders, effective from ineffective leaders, and moral leaders from evil leaders. These convictions that people have individually about leaders the GLOBE study called "implicit leadership theories." When these beliefs were aggregated "to the societal level of analysis" researchers were able to identify six leadership dimensions they could use to develop unique profiles for the societies studied which they called "culturally endorsed implicit theories of leadership" or CLT. The six cultural leadership dimensions are listed in table 2 with a brief description and an indication of the subscales used.

Table 2: Six Global Culturally Endorsed Leadership Theory Dimensions

1. *Charismatic/Value-based Leadership*: indicates the ability to inspire, motivate, and expect high-performance outcomes from others on the basis of firmly held core values. This dimension includes six subscales: visionary, inspirational, self-sacrifice, integrity, decisive, and performance oriented.

2. *Team-oriented Leadership*: indicates effective team building and implementation of a common purpose or goal among team members. Collaborative team orientation, team integrator, diplomatic, malevolent (reverse scored), and administratively competent are the five subscales.

3. *Participative Leadership*: reflects the degree to which managers involve others in making and implementing decisions. The two subscales are autocratic and non-participative (both reverse-scored).

4. *Humane-oriented Leadership*: indicates supportive and considerate leadership, including the qualities of compassion and generosity. Includes modesty as a subscale.

5. *Autonomous Leadership*: refers to independent and individualist leadership.

6. *Self-protective Leadership*: focuses on ensuring the safety and security of the individual or group member—looking out for yourself. Including five subscales: self-centered, status conscious, conflict, inducer, face saver, and procedural.

Source: House et al. 2004:675.

These leadership dimensions could broadly be described as equivalent to what people describe as leadership styles. What was fascinating to study are the reported results of the interplay of the culture and leadership dimensions which show a rich variety of preferred leadership styles and approaches governed by the preferences and values of each culture. When the leadership dimensions were compared in the different societal clusters it became clear that what constitutes good leadership is strongly influenced by cultural perspectives.

In table 3 I try to list some of the differences for selected clusters of countries. For instance, note that the Anglo cluster strongly endorses Charismatic/Value-Based leadership and Participative leadership qualities while scoring Self-Protective leadership and Autonomy as low, indicating that the latter is seen as an impediment to effective leadership. On the other hand Middle Eastern societies scored Charismatic/Value-Based leadership, Team-Oriented leadership, and Participative leadership as their lowest while showing preference for Self-Protective leadership (highest score). What do these differences mean in practice? Given the current climate of suspicion between Western and Arab countries these

differences should alert us to the fact that more than good intentions are needed to overcome mutual distrust.

Table 3: Examples of Societal Cluster Rankings for CLT Dimensions

Societal Cluster	Rankings of Culturally Endorsed Leadership (CLT) Dimensions					
	Charismatic/ Value-Based	Team Oriented	Participative	Humane Oriented	Autono-mous	Self-Protective
Latin America	High	**High**	Medium	Medium	**Low**	Medium / High
Confucian Asia	Medium	Medium / High	Low	Medium / High	Medium	High
Nordic Europe	High	**Medium**	High	**Low**	Medium	**Low**
Anglo	**High**	Medium	High	High	Medium	Low
Sub-Saharan Africa	High	Medium / High	Medium	High	Low	Medium
Middle East	**Low**	**Low**	**Low**	Medium	Medium	High

Note: **Bold** indicates the Highest or Lowest score for a specific culture dimension. *Source*: House et al. 2004:684.

The GLOBE study went even one step further. Researchers also identified 22 leadership attributes and behaviors that seemed to be universally desirable and 8 that are universally undesirable across cultures (House et al. 2004:677-679). These are listed in tables 4 and 5. In addition they found 35 characteristics that are culturally contingent and account for most of the variance across cultures (see table 6).

Table 4: Universal Positive Leader Attributes

Trustworthy	Motive arouser	Win-win problem solver
Just	Confidence builder	Administratively skilled
Honest	Motivational	Communicative
Foresighted	Dependable	Informed
Plans ahead	Intelligent	Coordinator
Encouraging	Decisive	Team builder
Positive	Effective bargainer	Excellence oriented
Dynamic		

What do these insights mean for Christian leaders working in multi-cultural situations or cross-cultural contexts in the SDA Church? Notice that the first three universally endorsed leader attributes are all related to integrity. Self-protective, bullying, and malevolent attributes are generally viewed as destructive in view of effective leadership (Kärrman 2011; see also Nuñez & Gonzalez 2009) even though, as Lipman-Blumen (2005) has shown, how difficult it is to escape from *The Allure of Toxic Leaders.* Most interesting is certainly the long list of culturally contingent attributes. Individualistic attributes are not universally appreciated and status conscious characteristics are despised in some areas while highly valued in other settings. Despite its omnipresence in the literature, the willingness to take risks is not a universal sign of effective leadership. In contrast, in Scripture leadership is often related to a strong element of self-sacrificial love connected to personal risk based on trusting faith in God's power.

Table 5: Universal Negative Leader Attributes

Loner	Non-cooperative	Non-explicit	Ruthless
Asocial	Irritable	Egocentric	Dictatorial

Table 6: Culturally Contingent Leader Attributes

Anticipatory	Enthusiastic	Intuitive	Self-sacrificial
Ambitious	Evasive	Logical	Sensitive
Autonomous	Formal	Micromanager	Sincere
Cautious	Habitual	Orderly	Status-conscious
Class conscious	Independent	Procedural	Subdued
Compassionate	Indirect	Provocateur	Unique
Cunning	Individualistic	Risk taker	Willful
Domineering	Intragroup competitor	Ruler	Worldly
Elitist	Intragroup conflict avoider	Self-effacing	

Given these research insights we have to ask how Adventist leaders can profit from these insights. Obviously behind these rather broad and general observations that tend to be based on average scores there is a lot of room for specific questions and observations. Leaders know too well that even in mono-cultural settings change is at best difficult. Just as the human body is protected by its immune system to prevent potentially dangerous change, individuals and organizations struggle to overcome what seems to be a well-functioning psychological immune system preventing even well-intentioned change (Kegan & Laskow Lahey 2009).

Some leaders may be tempted to argue that because these studies have been done among middle-level business managers these insights do not apply to leadership realities within the Adventist church. Our common

beliefs and values are so strong that they tend to give Adventist organizations a unique organizational culture. Our uniform organizational structure that spans the globe, some say, probably moderates or possibly erases the influence of national cultures. But interviews with international leaders working at the General Conference tend to contradict such views as illusions. In the business world, evidence is clearly accumulating that shows that people bring their own cultural assumptions even into their international workplace.

In an intriguing study, Laurent found more pronounced cultural differences among employees working in subsidiaries of the same multinational company than among people working for different companies in their native lands (Adler 2002). Preliminary results from a study of the influence of local cultures on the practice of servant leadership and power distance seem to suggest that similar results could be documented also within the Adventist organization. Organizational culture does not erase national cultures. To lead the church effectively either in multicultural local settings or in international settings Adventist leaders must learn to recognize the differences they are dealing with in order to use them wisely to further the mission of the church. Ignoring these differences or simply wishing them away allows cultural differences to become toxic and cause problems to become often irreconcilable. But this does not have to be. Even business organizations are learning fast that leaders can learn to lead amidst growing diversity and across organizational boundaries.

While difficult "boundary spanning leadership" is one of the most important leadership challenges for the global Seventh-day Adventist Church (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason 2011), this is not a new challenge. The Early Church faced a similar challenge as it wrestled with the meaning of becoming a global community of faith. Yes, being a cross-cultural servant may be one of the most difficult callings for today's Christian leaders as Duane Elmer (2006) has so eloquently pointed out, but our beloved Lord who gave his life for the world is asking for nothing less (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 10:42-45; John 20:21; Acts 1:8).

For this reason I call on Adventist leaders and researchers to seriously consider if it would not be beneficial for the Adventist church to study the impact of cultural differences on the expectations and practices of Adventist leaders more comprehensively. Such a study could put the finger on the pulse of the cultural and spiritual forces that actually shape our global conversation within the church. It would also encourage church leaders from around the world as they realize how their cultures contribute to the glory and honor of the nations that will one day soon be part of our ultimate offering to the Lord (Rev 21:26).

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