

Do Like I Do

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INTRODUCTION

Global markets are forcing increased competition, flatter organizations, international partnerships and alliances, and virtual teams. It is now common to have multi-cultural teams located in multiple countries that communicate and perform the project work via the internet. It is also more common to find such projects led by Project Managers (PM's) who are culturally diverse - born in Moscow, educated in France, working in London.

Projects are unique endeavors, often with a short cycle time, and normally with challenging budgets. PM's are frequently assigned to a project at the start of the execution phase, and must quickly build and motivate the temporary project organization (TPO) to meet the goals and objectives of the project. Couple this with the multi-cultural virtual teams and the result is a dynamic environment, where cross-cultural leadership intelligence (XLQ) is essential (Grisham 2006) - copy of thesis available at www.thomasgrisham.com. Experience and the literature, show that there is seldom time for the exploration of political, social, cultural, contractual, and technological issues - the team must hit the ground running.

A leader with high XLQ must have a solid understanding of herself or himself and have a high degree of emotional intelligence (EQ) (Goleman 1996), for to lead others one must first know oneself. The externalization of this intelligence is leadership behavior, and the persona that is seen by the stakeholders in the TPO. The conduct of a leader, her behavior, will dictate how the stakeholders perceive and resonate with the PM. The stakeholders will watch the PM to see that actions and behavior match rhetoric: "do like I do, not like I say".

XLQ

The XLQ model provides a simple outline of leadership attributes that can be used to assess leadership skills for international PM's. For the model, it does not matter if the PM was born in China and raised in Malaysia, or born in Finland and raised in Japan since it is a universal, or *etic*, model (Triandis and Gelfand 1998). My definition of leadership is the *ability to inspire the desire to follow, and to inspire performance beyond expectations*.

Culture has been defined by Margaret Mead (1955) as (Pg. 33): "a body of learned behavior, a collection of beliefs, habits and traditions, shared by a group of people and successively learned by people who enter the society." Substitute TPO for society, and the definition is appropriate for International Project Management. Also, the Mead definition functions well for individual culture, team culture, societal culture, corporate culture, and TPO culture.

The XLQ model is shown in Figure 1. The center of the wheel is trust, without trust there cannot be leadership, and there will be great resistance to change.

Transformation is required if the various firms or organizations are to feel comfortable adapting their existing procedures to blend with those of the other participants on a project. The judicious exercise of position power by the PM is required in the empowerment of the Project Managers from each of the participant firms and organizations. Empathy is required to show that the leader has a demonstrable, and immutable, concern for the viewpoints of all the other participants in the TPO.

To nourish and grow a TPO team culture requires effective, open, persistent, and patient communications. Team cultures coalesce around a PM who can establish, and articulate, goals and objectives, and who can inspire the team to *achieve beyond expectations*, particularly those of the individual participants themselves. One of the many ways of nurturing this growth is through metaphor, poetry, and storytelling (Grisham 2006). In TPO's there is often little time to grow a team culture, and the use of metaphor and storytelling by the PM, and about the PM, can accelerate the growth.

Imitation

Meltzoff and Prinz (2002) find that: “The ‘likeme-ness’ of others, first manifest in imitation, is a foundation for more mature forms of social cognition that depend on the felt equivalence between self and other. The Golden Rule at first occurs in action, through imitation. Without an imitative mind, we might not develop this moral mind.

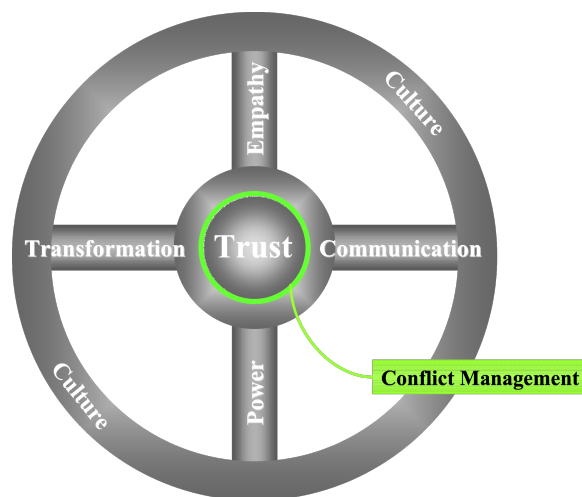


Figure 1 - XLQ

Imitation is the bud, and empathy and moral sentiments are the ripened fruit. It is found in most major religions. Meltzoff and Prinz point to numerous clinical tests that demonstrate that children not only learn to mimic behavior and actions, but also understand the underlying goals of those actions. People develop the habit of imitating behavior, and intention, from childhood. For a leader this is critically important, for it suggests that followers will copy not only the physical actions, but will adopt what they believe to be the underlying emotional and ethical motivations. Think of the connection between this desire to mimic and trust, empathy, transformation, power, and communication.

Recent research into mirror neurons has uncovered some remarkable biological aspects of imitation. Iacoboni, Molnar-Szakacs et al. (2005) reported that work with monkeys has shown that mirror neurons fire when object directed actions by an animal, like grasping or manipulating, occur (Rizzolatti, Fadiga et al. 1996). It has also been found that mirror neurons fire when an animal observes another animal performing the same class of action. Other research has shown that the mirror neurons also fire when the sound of an action occurs in the dark (Kohler, Keysers et al. 2002).

The work of Iacoboni, Molnar-Szakacs et al. focused on human subjects and tested the relationship between context, action and intention. Their findings suggest that coding (creating the neuron pathways) the intention associated with the actions of others is formed by mirror neurons, and that these neurons suggest motor acts that are likely to follow in a given context. They also found that intention is ascribed by inference from the action and context. This research suggests that imitation of actions is “wired” in along with the intention of the action. For a leader then it is important that the context and intention are made clear when actions are taken. If people have a physiological disposition to mimic, then the behavior of the leader is crucial as it will be mimicked, good or bad.

Perceiving similarities between oneself and others allows people to empathize with their social partners, and to predict the emotions, behaviors, and mental states of others. It also helps people to infer intent. Research has shown that producing a facial expression generally associated with an emotion is sufficient to elicit that emotion (Strack, Martin et al. 1988), which is one of the earliest forms of emotional empathy and social referencing. The desire or need to be part of a group, to feel that others in the group are “like-me,”

and to strive to emulate the actions, values, and deeds of a leader are again part of our humanness.

Conclusion

Social research has proven that people imitate others beginning almost at birth, and research on the brain is beginning to show that people may in fact be “wired” from birth to imitate the actions of others, both good and bad. As people we watch others, and emulate their actions, and what we perceive to be their intentions. There has not been much cross-cultural clinical work, but the existing body of research points toward a genetic like capacity of all humans to imitate.

For an international PM, the dimensions of XLQ are integrally linked with imitation. If the team trusts the leader implicitly, then they will be inclined to copy her behavior. The display of empathy and transformation, and the emulation of both, will serve not only to increase the stature of the leader in the eyes of the followers, but will also create a spiral of teamwork and esprit de corps. It will also enhance the referent power of the leader, leading to even greater and enduring trust.

The research on imitation has also shown that people intuit the meaning of the intentions from the actions of others. Of course the intentions can be misunderstood, which can lead to a diminution of trust among other things. Fortunately, through trial and error, the followers can test their assumptions against the actual intentions of the leader who is open, and listens actively; a leader who is a good communicator. This can in turn lead to communications at a more subtle level, offering a richer more effective means of transferring tacit knowledge within the team.

A leader with high XLQ can leverage her or his effectiveness by setting the example for others to follow, what Chartrand and Barg (1999) call the chameleon effect: do like I do.

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