

Adult Development Theory May Boost Global Leadership

Michael H. Hoppe

Anyone in a global leadership role has been given a tall order. The nature of the global leadership environment—increasingly volatile, uncertain, complex, ambiguous, culturally diverse, intricately intertwined, and advancing technologically at breakneck speed—causes many individuals in global leadership roles to ask: “Am I in over my head? Do I have the mental, emotional, and behavioral wherewithal to ever get a firm grip on this work? And if so, how can I best get to that point?”

What is often behind these questions is the acute sense that, to paraphrase Albert Einstein, we cannot hope to tackle the problems and opportunities of this new work environment with the same competencies and mind-sets used to create it—that we need to develop and apply ways of thinking and acting that at a minimum are at the same level of complexity and interconnectedness as the challenges and opportunities before us.

An example from the realm of technology illustrates this idea: an effective computer software engineer possesses one set of skills and mental capacities; an expert computer network manager has acquired a broader mind-set, additional competencies, and more inclusive frames of reference in order to be effective when

integrating multiple networks across distances, countries, and cultures.

We need to find ways to help individuals in global leadership roles have the necessary experiences and acquire the requisite skills to succeed. This process will naturally include challenging job assignments, such as working on international projects and working outside of one’s own culture. Moreover, global leaders need to be provided with opportunities to reach levels of individual growth that do justice to the levels of job complexity and human diversity that are hallmarks of their work. That task in itself requires a framework for leadership development that is conceptually and empirically sound and that can guide the development of individuals who are likely to succeed as global leaders.

The literature reporting on recent research in the field of adult development points to the potential for deriving such a framework for global leadership development from this field. There is clearly promise in applying an adult development perspective to the development of global leaders.

The main finding of this adult development research is the existence of predictable stages of development or distinctly identifiable levels of consciousness or internal *action logics*, the various principles that we use to construct our understandings of self and that noticeably shape how we interpret our surroundings and react when our power or safety is challenged. These principles, by extension, guide the ways in which we

understand others and our relationships to them. Moreover, they are conceptually and empirically different from common notions of intelligence in that they are concerned with the various ways in which we make sense of the world around us. In general, then, an adult development perspective postulates that we have the potential to develop increasingly complex levels of understanding of ourselves and the world in which we live, to broaden our behavioral repertoire, and to widen our inclusiveness of those who are different from us.

THREE STAGES

An overview of the literature on adult development by Cynthia McCauley, a senior enterprise associate and senior fellow at CCL, and colleagues identifies three stages of adult development, moving from *dependent* to *independent* to *inter-independent*, with the latter two levels including and integrating but also surpassing the previous level(s).

In the context of a global work environment, individuals who use the dependent sense-making lens are deeply embedded in their own, their society’s, and their organization’s needs, traditions, values, and practices and tend to apply them as the measuring sticks for everything and everyone else. These individuals struggle to recognize that their thoughts and actions are learned, tend to think in terms of either-or, and perceive difference as a threat to themselves. They see change as a necessary evil.

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Global leaders who think and act from the independent stance see themselves as the product of their past experiences, education, and culture. As they seek to grow toward their unique selves, they are curious about other individuals and cultures. They feel comfortable enlarging their own and their organization's boundaries to create mutually satisfying and productive relationships. They experience change as natural.

At the inter-independent level of functioning, global leaders look for the greater good, whether it's defined as that of their company, their customers, or humanity as a whole. They tend to think and act beyond predefined categories of culture, gender, religion, or social class and attempt to create systemic conditions that enable them and others to constantly transform. They embrace change and difference.

One of the implicit propositions in applying this theory to leadership development is that individuals will become more effective in their global leadership roles as they grow beyond the dependent stage. The descriptors of the dependent stage suggest that it is difficult to succeed in a global work environment unless one has reached (or at least is in transition toward) the independent level.

In an article in the April 2005 issue of *Harvard Business Review*, "Seven Transformations of Leadership," David Rooke and William R. Torbert describe how they found in their studies of thousands of managers and professionals that those at the dependent level were noticeably less successful in implementing organization-wide strategies than those at the independent stage were.

McCauley and her colleagues concluded that a growing body of evidence supports the view that leaders operating at the independent level are more likely than those operating at the dependent level to enact leadership in ways deemed effective in most modern organizations.

According to Rooke and Torbert, leaders at the inter-independent level show the most consistent capacity to innovate and successfully transform their organizations. However, at present it's hard to tell whether leaders at the inter-independent stage of development are the ones best suited and prepared to deal most effectively with the complexities, exceedingly fast changes, and cultural diversity of the workforce, clients, and constituencies in today's global work environment. So far the literature has identified only a small percentage of respondents who have reached the inter-independent level.

There is another reason for not automatically elevating the inter-independent stage to a prerequisite for effective global leadership: effective leadership requires what could be called effective *followership*. What happens when leaders' and followers' meaning-making structures are so far apart that they can't connect?


HOW TO HELP

How can we apply an adult development framework to help the majority of global leaders get their arms (and minds) around their work? A first step is to recognize the promise of this perspective. As Rooke and Torbert state, most developmental psychologists agree that what differentiates leaders is not so much their philosophies of leadership, their personalities, or their styles of management as it is their internal action logics.

A second step is to develop better and more efficient and user-friendly assessment instruments to gauge the meaning-making structures of individuals who are currently in or are on track for global leadership roles. This will, in turn, help us better understand which developmental activities best move individuals to the next developmental level. We know how some of these movements—for instance, from the dependent to the independent level—can be set in motion: a promo-

tion and the resulting greater responsibilities, a realization that the old ways of doing things just don't work anymore, an expatriate assignment, or participation in formal development programs. However, we need to become more deliberate and structured in leader development work.

A third step is, seemingly paradoxically, to go beyond the preoccupation with *individual* leader development. We need to develop in equal measure the capacity and the developmental level of groups, organizations, communities, and societies as a whole to deal with the increased volatility, uncertainty, complexity, ambiguity, and diversity in the environment and the speed of technological change. It would be beyond the abilities and stamina of most of us as individuals to succeed in an environment that uses action logics that are not reasonably well aligned with our own or with the problems or opportunities at hand. Another part of this third step is to broaden our thinking regarding the source of leadership. What if leadership could be seen to be as much a property of the collective as of the individual?

An adult development perspective on global leadership may make us realize that the majority of leaders function at a developmental level that rarely does justice to the complexities, diversity, and changes around them. Could it be, then, that we must let go of the image of the individual leader who has it all and can do it all? Might we be better off if we increasingly think of leadership as something that we do together and share and for which we acquire the mental, emotional, and behavioral competencies that enable us to lead together to bring about a better team, organization, or community for the benefit of society worldwide? 

Michael H. Hoppe is an enterprise associate at CCL. He holds a Ph.D. degree from the University of North Carolina.

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