

WHITE PAPER

# **Context Matters: An Ethiopian Case Study** Adapting Leadership Development Methods to Serve Different Cultures

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# Executive Summary

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Leadership Beyond Boundaries (LBB) is an initiative of the Center for Creative Leadership (CCL®) that strives to unlock human potential through international leadership development. Building upon decades of knowledge from CCL's research and training practices, LBB's mission is to make high-quality leadership development inclusive, accessible, scalable, and affordable to people worldwide. LBB accomplishes this by creating low-cost leadership development programs, tools, and models that are used by international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), community organizations, government agencies, and educational institutions worldwide. By democratizing access to leadership training, LBB empowers people to forge a new social contract—one that honors personal well-being, appreciates diversity, respects non-Western thought patterns, and values social connectivity and contribution in addressing complex global issues.

A key challenge faced by the LBB team has been to design and deliver leadership development tools and activities, created primarily for leaders in a Western context, to use with leaders operating in non-Western contexts. In other words, how do we develop and adapt best practice leadership development techniques to serve diverse leaders? This white paper shares some of the lessons learned from the LBB initiative on how to effectively contextualize leadership development practices for those who lead in non-Western cultures.

In this paper, we elaborate on ways to contextualize leadership development tools and practices for an African audience, focusing specifically on a case study of LBB work with healthcare leaders working in remote areas of western Ethiopia. When leadership development reflects the local cultural dynamics, followers are more apt to recognize their leaders as credible. By reinforcing our knowledge of cross-cultural communication, CCL's Leadership Beyond Boundaries initiative will continue to reframe leadership to include the specific dynamics, behaviors, and cultural imperatives of African leadership.

## **Lesson 1**

### **Build Cross-Cultural Competence**

Using existing research on cultural differences, we demonstrate how to raise the awareness of those implementing leadership development trainings in non-Western cultures. We will share how having a broader understanding of cultural dimensions impacted CCL's work with Ethiopian leaders.

## **Lesson 2**

### **Understand the Local Context**

We describe how working with local partners, conducting focus groups, and creating prototypes aids in the process of contextualizing leadership development tools and approaches.

### **Examples from the Field**

Finally, we present how two leadership development tools and methods were “contextualized” to meet the needs of local leaders.

# Introduction

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As the need for leadership talent increases due to the economic growth of emerging, non-Western economies (for example the BRICS economies of Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), the need for leadership development solutions in these parts of the world has also increased. Inherent in this expansion of leadership development services has been the challenge of applying mostly Western views of leadership and leadership training to non-Western cultures. As a provider of leadership development solutions, CCL has experienced how **context** matters firsthand, both through our work with business, government, and non-government leaders as well as our Leadership Beyond Boundaries work with populations that have generally been underserved when it comes to leadership development training.

So what do we mean by context? Context refers to the fundamental differences that exist among people around the world. These differences influence leadership style, behavior, and understanding. As leadership development practitioners with our own set of cultural lenses, values, and beliefs, we must develop a localized understanding of how to teach interpersonal and organizational leadership development in cultures different from our own. We must focus not only on how the cultures we are training are different from our own, but on what those differences tell us about our approach to leadership development.

One of the central challenges facing leadership development professionals working in different cultures is how to contextualize leadership development tools. We must determine what cultural context tells us about what tools and methods to use, and how to use them.

CCL's Leadership Beyond Boundaries team has been contextualizing leadership development tools and teaching methods within the African cultural context in Ethiopia and across the continent since 2006. Through this work, we have recognized the importance of both teaching and training from the local perspective and the implications of either consciously or unconsciously imposing Western values of leadership. Ignoring these cultural differences in leadership styles, behaviors, and values is detrimental to developing African leaders. By understanding, acknowledging, embracing, and including the values inherent in Ethiopian and other African leadership styles (or more broadly as we work with women, children, NGO staff, ministry officials, and health officials), we increase the likelihood that leadership development will have a meaningful impact on these populations.

The lessons CCL has learned by contextualizing leadership development can aid the efforts of other practitioners looking to develop leaders in cultures and contexts very different from their own.

## Lesson 1

# Build Cross-Cultural Competence

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Fundamental to the challenge of contextualizing leadership development is **understanding culture at a societal level**. Like leadership, there are many definitions of culture. Scholars, anthropologists, sociologists, and psychologists have contributed more than 300 definitions, all highlighting different aspects of the concept. For the purposes of this white paper, consider this working definition of culture: a complex, multidimensional, shared reality that is transmitted over generations. These dynamic, collectively held attributes, behavioral patterns, values, traditions, communication rules, thinking and learning styles, and relationship types reveal how and why individuals think, act, and feel. Think of culture like the air we breathe. It is all around us, yet it is often invisible. We experience culture almost unconsciously. Herein lies the challenge for most Western leadership development practitioners. Those who design and deliver leadership development experiences frequently come from a very different culture than those who actually go through the experience. Training methods are often designed with an unconscious bias toward the practitioner's culture, not the culture of the leaders being developed. Thus, lesson one for contextualizing leadership development approaches is to build the cross-cultural competence of practitioners.

Cross-cultural competence refers to “the ability to effectively communicate and interact in other cultures. Cultural empathy, communication skills, the ability to form and maintain relationships, the ability to be patient, flexible, and adaptable to culturally diverse situations are among the most important competencies in determining cross-cultural effectiveness” (Tavanti, 2005). Cross-cultural competence is crucial in developing international leaders.

In the course of CCL's leadership development work with Ethiopian leaders, the Leadership Beyond Boundaries team built cross-cultural competence by examining the work of noted cultural scholars (Geert Hofstede and E. T. Hall) to understand how the Western US culture compares to the Ethiopian culture on three different cultural dimensions: Individualism vs. Collectivism, Low-Context vs. High-Context, and Power Distance. We describe each briefly and offer examples of how these cultural dimensions played out in CCL's work with Ethiopian leaders. [For more information on each cultural dimension, please see Appendix.](#)



## Individualism vs. Collectivism

The cultural dimension referred to as Individualism vs. Collectivism concerns whether leaders see themselves more as *individuals* or more as *group members*. Many African cultures, including that of Ethiopia, are highly collectivist. Collectivist cultures focus on relationships, group obligation, and interpersonal harmony. Many Western cultures, in particular the United States, are highly individualist. Individualist cultures focus on self-interest, self-expression, and the uniqueness of every person.

Individualist cultures often operate from beliefs and values where it is more natural to place the self before the team. Leadership development in these cultures tends to focus on what comes less naturally: the importance of teams and teamwork. However, since leaders in collectivist cultures operate from beliefs and values that tend toward groupthink and group before self, leadership development stresses what comes less naturally: original thought, problem solving, and critical thinking.

One way CCL was able to contextualize leadership development for a more collectivist culture like Ethiopia was to reframe experiential exercises around one of the most important collectives to Ethiopian leaders: the family.

A team-building activity often used in Western leadership development is the helium stick (See below: The Helium Stick Activity). This activity has a simple setup and usually does not require a back story or scenario as part of that setup. Because stories and connections to family and other relationships are important to collectivist cultures, we tested a number of stories in a series of focus groups that would relate to the local context. These focus groups all agreed on a contextualized story about a food and supply drop during a medical emergency in the Gambella Region that would save the affected communities from an outbreak of disease. In this story, the helium stick represented all the life-saving food and medical supplies that needed to reach the ground safely to help save the local population. When a facilitator used this storyline during a focus group, the situation became so real for the participants that an Ethiopian leader's very serious reaction within the activity was: "We have to do a better job! I don't want my family to be sick!"

This is one simple example of how cross-cultural competence can be used to contextualize a leadership development activity.



### The Helium Stick Activity

The rules are simple. Organize into small groups of eight to ten people. Take a very thin dowel rod or hoop (the thinner the better), and hold it horizontally about chest height. Ask the participants to hold the stick or hoop on top of their index fingers, and lower it to the ground as a team. Once the teams begin to touch the stick or hoop, the challenge will present itself quickly. The stick/hoop is so light that the up-force from each of the fingers trying to stay in contact is greater than the weight of the stick/hoop. The result? Immediately, the stick/hoop will begin to rise even though they are trying to lower it to the ground as a group (<http://www.leadersinstitute.com/team-building-game-helium-stick/>).

## Low-Context vs. High-Context Cultures

Edward T. Hall is best known for his work in developing the ideas of low- and high-context cultures. For leadership development practitioners, knowing whether you’re designing and delivering training in a low- or high-context culture has a significant impact on the ways in which leaders communicate. Leaders from the United States, which is a low-context culture, tend to be more direct, explicit, and structured in their communication, particularly in verbal messages. Leaders in high-context cultures, such as Ethiopia, tend to communicate more implicitly, using more nonverbal communication and expressing more vague verbal messages (at least from the viewpoint of a low-context culture).

A few relevant examples of differences in communication between low- and high-context cultures are found in Table 1.

**Table 1: Descriptions of Low- and High-Context Cultures**

Low-Context	High-Context
Value direct verbal interaction and are less able to read nonverbal expressions; focus on words.	Value indirect verbal interaction and are more able to read nonverbal expressions; focus on behavior.
Speaker-oriented style.	Listener-oriented style.
Saying “no” is completely acceptable and appreciated.	Impolite to say “no” to a request.
Rely on precise facts, statistics, and supporting details.	Often rely on intuition or trust rather than facts.

Table 1: An Africa-specific adaptation of the table in *Foundations of Intercultural Communication*, Chen & Starosta (2005).

When one of the authors went with an Ethiopian colleague to the Gambella Region to help launch the USAID World Learning program grant to develop the leadership skills of the healthcare workforce, the innate differences in low- versus high-context cultures became apparent. In meetings with regional government officials, the author tended to want a definitive “yes” to all requests for help, compliance, and support. (Remember that the US is a **low-context culture**.) The Ethiopians in the region would say “ok” or “maybe” in response to requests, but they rarely if ever said “yes” or “definitely.” After a week of meetings with seemingly unanswered questions the author began to understand that the Ethiopians’ ambiguity towards answering requests definitively was not a lack of commitment to the

program. Instead, the behavior displayed by the Ethiopian officials meant that harmony in their lives was so valued that they were not willing to let CCL down by promising something they could not guarantee. (Remember that Ethiopia is a **high-context culture**.) In reality the Ethiopian government officials did everything that was requested of them and more; they just would not officially say “yes” to these requests.

Leadership development practitioners from low-context cultures should understand and appreciate how their communication style differs in high-context cultures. **Western ideals and lessons about open communication and being direct may not apply or resonate with leaders from high-context cultures.**

## Power Distance

The term *power distance* refers to the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). Said another way from a leadership perspective, cultures differ on what is acceptable interpersonal behavior between subordinates and superiors when it comes to influencing, communicating, and challenging authority. A high power-distance culture accepts inequalities of power and status, while lower power-distance cultures tend to stress equality in decision-making and opportunity regardless of status. This cultural dimension is often thought of as a continuum from hierarchy (high power distance) to equality (low power distance).

**Table 2: Descriptions of Low and High Power-Distance Cultures**

Low Power Distance	High Power Distance
Subordinates expect to be consulted.	Subordinates expect to be told what to do.
Privileges and status symbols are frowned upon.	Privileges and status symbols expected.
Teachers expect class participation and individual achievement.	Teachers are expected to teach and not call on students.
Inequalities between people should be minimized.	Inequalities between people are expected.

Table 2: Power-distance culture descriptions by Hofstede, Hofstede & Minkov (2010).

An example from CCL's work in Ethiopia (Ethiopia is a high power-distance culture.) is that employees rarely feel comfortable asking questions of their superiors. If a superior tells an employee what tasks to complete, that employee is expected to do them. The employee would rather do it wrong than ask for clarification from his or her boss because asking for clarification can be seen as insubordination. The cultural dimension of power distance may also explain why many Ethiopians feel uncomfortable when mixing with employees of a different status and why promoting bright, young, independent employees is problematic. Employees are expected to fall in line, not to share their ideas, and not to seek advancement. Employees accept rather than challenge the ideas of their more powerful superiors.

When using an experiential activity in leadership development training, facilitators commonly encourage leaders to openly share their ideas and to influence others toward a desired direction.

While promoting the expression of individual ideas may prove to be an important learning point in a training activity, leadership development practitioners should be aware how that same behavior back at work could be detrimental to the leader and may increase the risk of the leader being labeled a troublemaker. **The real value of an experiential exercise is helping leaders recognize the significance of a concept and how to apply it back at work.** Therefore, when training leaders about the value of individual thinking, influencing, and problem-solving, leadership development practitioners should facilitate conversations about how these lessons can be applied safely and appropriately back in the work environment.

Building cross-cultural competence through an understanding of power distance in a culture will help leadership development practitioners make better connections between the training and the back-at-home experience of the leader.

## The Bottom Line for Lesson 1: Build Cross-Cultural Competence

There is a wealth of research available to leadership development practitioners to help them have a greater understanding of how cultures may differ and operate under fundamentally different core beliefs and values. Having a broader understanding of cultural dimensions was an important lesson for contextualizing Western leadership development tools for a non-Western culture.

## Lesson 2

# Understand the Local Context

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If Lesson 1 (build cross-cultural competence) is important for a macro-understanding of cultural uniqueness, Lesson 2 takes contextualization of leadership development to the micro (or local) level. For CCL's work in and around east Africa, an analysis of differences in local contexts and cultures was critical in contextualizing leadership development for local leaders. In order to understand the local context in Ethiopia, CCL partnered with local stakeholders and conducted focus groups with local leaders, facilitators, and practitioners.

After applying for and receiving a USAID-funded World Learning program grant (for 2011-2012) to develop the leadership capacity of the healthcare workforce in a marginalized region in westernmost Ethiopia, CCL's Leadership Beyond Boundaries team took the initiative to conduct a series of focus groups to further facilitate our understanding of Ethiopian leadership styles and patterns. Two focus groups, which included approximately 23 local participants, were conducted over five days. (Most participants were males [87%], students [83%], and with an average age of 21.5 years.) The focus groups were part of an overall effort to create an innovative *Team-In-A-Box Toolkit* to help remote, newly trained facilitators teach leadership skills through experiential learning activities.

A tremendous amount of effort went into understanding the local context on the ground in Ethiopia to understand Ethiopian views on leadership. In addition to the focus groups, CCL tested a number of leadership development activities that required teamwork, communication, physical closeness, and problem solving. Facilitators led discussions on choice, employee-employer interactions, and desire for systemic change. Through these learner-focused interactions, CCL was able to analyze and interpret leadership perspectives and beliefs in Ethiopia. This deeper understanding of the local culture supported CCL's process to contextualize leadership development tools.

## Examples from the Field

Through increased cross-cultural competence and understanding of the local culture, a number of leadership development tools and activities were contextualized for the Ethiopian culture. We present two examples of contextualizing leadership development activities: The Bubblegum Machine activity and the Social Identity Map.

### The Bubblegum Machine

In a team-building task known as the “bubblegum machine,” participants each receive a marble and a piece of plastic half-pipe approximately one foot long. The introductory narrative often goes something like this:

*“Each of you now has a piece of the bubblegum machine. You have been craving a piece of bubble gum for the past few days, and you’ve finally come across one of those giant bubblegum machines where the piece of bubble gum rolls down the spiral from the top to the outlet at the bottom of the machine. You must get the bubble gum (the marble) from the top of the bubblegum machine (the plastic half pipes) to the bottom (a bucket).”*

*The only rules for this activity are:*

- *The marble cannot be dropped.*
- *The marble cannot be touched by any participant’s body part.*
- *The marble cannot stop moving.*
- *No one is allowed to walk with their piece of the bubblegum machine (the half pipes) while the marble is in it.*
- *The marble can only move forward.*



Participants are not told, but can often see, that the distance between the top of the bubblegum machine (point A) and the bottom (point B) is much farther than every piece of the half pipe put together. This means they must use communication, teamwork, and planning to have at least the first few people whose piece of the machine the marble goes through at the start, run to the end of the line so the marble can continue on its way to the bucket that represents the end point.

Without prior understanding of a bubblegum machine, many rural Africans will not relate to or grasp this Westernized concept. The Leadership Beyond Boundaries team worked with focus group participants to come up with a more sensible and contextualized version of the story that goes along with this activity.

With approximately one famine a decade since 1800, Ethiopia is familiar with famine and drought. To make the story and activity more reasonable to locals in their environment, we contextualized the story:

*“I am sad to inform you that this year we are experiencing another serious drought. If your village’s newly planted crops do not receive water soon, your crops surely will fail. Water must be brought to your farm by hand, using only these pipes to reach your crops. This marble is the water, and we must pipe it directly from the river to your farm without dropping it or your family will have no viable crops to harvest.”*

The desired outcomes of the bubblegum machine activity are valuable for leaders in Ethiopia: communication, teamwork, planning, and alignment; however, those outcomes are less likely to be achieved if the participants cannot relate to the setup. The change in story dynamics is a straightforward example of contextualization for other cultures. The activity resonated with the local leaders by simply reframing the setup to match a scenario familiar to the local context.



**Leaders in Ethiopia participating in the bubblegum machine activity.**

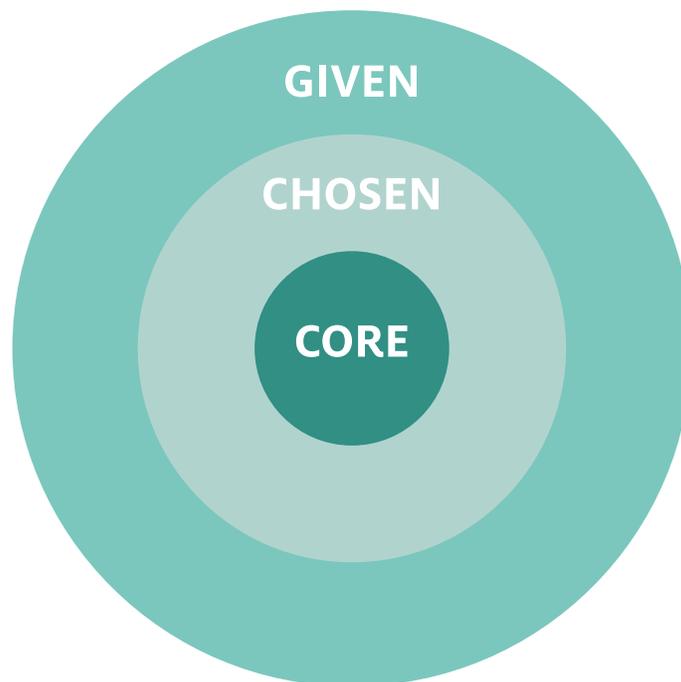
## The Social Identity Map

A Social Identity Map is often used as an opener in leadership development workshops delivered in all parts of the world. It is an activity meant to help participants understand themselves both as individuals and as leaders. The Social Identity Map is often an easy-to-understand and successful activity in Western cultures (Hannum, 2007).

Here is how the activity is set up:

Participants are asked to draw three circles. Participants are first asked to write in the outside circle those things in their life that are given to them. Participants write ideas such as gender, number of siblings, parents, neighborhood, etc. In the next circle, participants are asked to write those things in their life that are chosen. Most Americans, for example, write items such as school degree, friends, hobbies, and activities. Finally, in the last circle participants are asked to write who they are at their core, the values and beliefs that define them as an individual. Examples would include honest, just, or a hard worker.

### Social Identity Map Version 1: Western Model



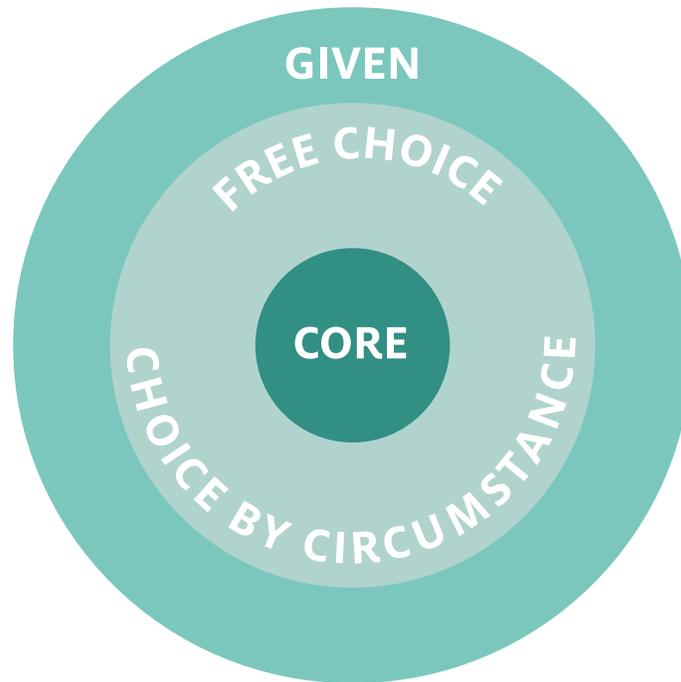
After using this tool on a number of different occasions with African leaders from various sectors, it became clear to the Leadership Beyond Boundaries team that the Social Identity Map was not being fully grasped by the participants. Every time the Social Identity Map was used, participants expressed confusion; they often wrote down only the examples given by the facilitator. The activity needed to be contextualized.

CCL contracted work to another local NGO (Desert Rose—[www.drcethiopia.net](http://www.drcethiopia.net)), in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia that had worked with leaders in different East African communities. Through focus groups, interviews, and intensive consultations, the local NGO found the source of the confusion: Ethiopians do not believe that much of anything in their life is a choice. For example, scores on secondary school exams determine to which university a person will go and in which profession they may enter. Religion is passed down from parents with very little

opportunity for change. Social circles are limited by parental guidance, and activities are confined to those people can afford. At first the Leadership Beyond Boundaries team questioned the validity of this concern: Can't everyone choose friends? Can't everyone choose what they like? Can't everyone make some decisions in their own lives? Through further explanation and guidance, the team came to understand that central to the Ethiopian culture is that citizens do not believe they have much choice in their lives. Without the concept of choice, the Social Identity Map did not make sense.

Interestingly, Ethiopians resonated with the concept of social identity when the chosen portion was separated into two distinct ideas: *free choice* and *choice by circumstance*. These two separate concepts of choice are not available in the English language because Western cultures tend to only see free choice. Ethiopians have two separate words for choice in Amharic, the official language of Ethiopia.

## Social Identity Map Version 2: Ethiopian Model



Through multiple iterations of contextualization, the Social Identity Map circles were eventually replaced by a storyboard. This method produced an even clearer notion of how to encourage participants to explore their own identity while building on the rich tradition of stories, proverbs, and relationships central to many African cultures.

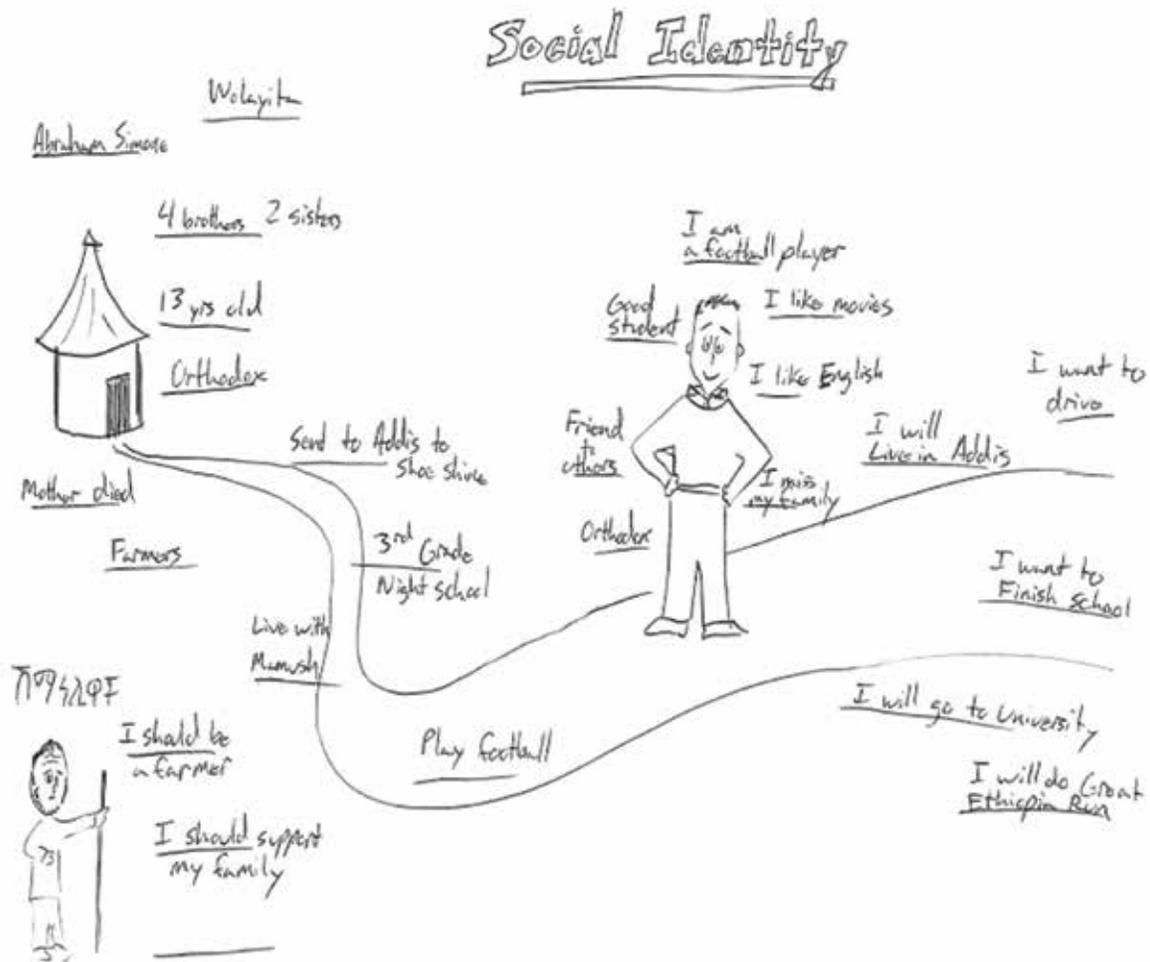
By creating a storyboard where participants can describe in English or Amharic (or through drawings) that which is most important to them, the Leadership Beyond Boundaries team tapped into the participants' cultural notion of understanding themselves as leaders.

Here is how the Social Identity Map was contextualized into a Social Identity Storyboard.

Starting with a simple drawing of a traditional house, participants are asked that which is given to them. With ease, Ethiopian participants wrote their name, religion, siblings, parents, neighborhood, and parents' occupations. Then they were asked to think

chronologically about what happened to them in their lives either by choice or by circumstance, which would be the chosen section in the original Social Identity Map. In the bottom left of the picture, there is an Amharic word that does not easily translate into English. It roughly translates to choice by situation. These choices are what society is pushing these individuals to do, or what they should do. This was an extremely important aspect of the Ethiopian culture, and one central to participants' understanding of themselves that was not represented in the original Social Identity Map. Underneath this Amharic word, participants were asked to list what they should do. Eventually on the road, they will reach the image of a person who is meant to depict who they are today. This area of the storyboard involved the participants writing down what makes them who they are or what is at their core. Finally, the participants were asked to think about the future and to add goals to the unending road of their life journey.

## Social Identity Map Version 3: Social Identity Storyboard



Created by Aaron White of the CCL Leadership Beyond Boundaries team.

The Social Identity Storyboard was a contextualized version of the Social Identity Map, achieving the same intended outcomes by modifying the activity to reflect the local context.

### The Bottom Line for Lesson 2: Understand the Local Context

Look for partners familiar with the local culture to help you learn, test, and cocreate leadership development content and activities. Those who understand the culture best will help you navigate and understand the local context. Use focus groups, interviews, surveys, participant observation, or other similar techniques for testing the impact of your contextualized leadership development solutions.

## Conclusion

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The purpose of this paper is to share with leadership development practitioners the importance of contextualizing leadership development solutions. By presenting CCL's work in Ethiopia as a case study, we hope to share how the lessons learned by the Leadership Beyond Boundaries team can be applied by others as a process for doing leadership development work in different cultural contexts.

Leadership needs differ based on cultural context, and leadership development tools need to reflect a specific context in order to have a lasting and positive impact. CCL's work in Ethiopia to develop African leaders remains a process of continuous innovation and frequent adaptation. Leadership is a powerful lever for human development and social change. Applying the lessons of building cross-cultural competence and understanding the local context are two ways leadership development practitioners can increase their ability to have meaningful leadership impact across cultures.

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## About the Authors

**Cheri Baker** was the Center for Creative Leadership's (CCL®) first summer fellow in Ethiopia during the summer of 2011. She is a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer who served for two and a half years as health/water and sanitation volunteer in northern Ghana. One of her main leadership development projects was creating and implementing two-week-long leadership development workshops for one hundred junior high school girls with ten trained high school female facilitators. She has also conducted extensive research on south Sudan's new leadership paradigms for Project Education South Sudan, a Denver-based NGO. In March 2012, she published a paper entitled "South Sudan's Enduring Secession Issues: Is Peace Possible?" in the peer-reviewed journal *Applied Anthropologist*. Cheri received her MA in international development in 2012 with concentrations in deeply divided societies and capacity development. She is currently working as a subject matter expert on human rights and civil-military operations for the US State Department's African Contingency Operations Training and Assistance (ACOTA) Program. Cheri can be contacted at [cheri.lynn.baker@gmail.com](mailto:cheri.lynn.baker@gmail.com).

**Michael Campbell** is a faculty member at CCL serving as a facilitator, trainer, and researcher. Starting in 2010, he has been coleading CCL's global research initiative to understand senior leader development in emerging economies. As part of that initiative, he coauthored the research report *Developing Top Leaders for a Globalised Asia*, and he has been working with organizations in India to understand the Indian approach to senior leader development. He is also supporting the replication of these research projects in China and Peru. Michael can be contacted at [campbellm@ccl.org](mailto:campbellm@ccl.org) and found on Twitter [@M2Campbell](https://twitter.com/M2Campbell).

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# Appendix

The description of cultural dimensions and the following summaries on Individualism/Collectivism and Power Distance are based on the work of Geert Hofstede as described in the book *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind, 3rd Edition*.

## **What are Cultural Dimensions?**

Culture is the collective patterns of thinking, feeling, and behaving of individuals within a society. These patterns are often learned starting in childhood and developed through experience over a lifetime. Countries and regions will exhibit certain collective patterns of thinking, feeling and behaving, and those patterns can be measured to identify similarities and differences across countries and regions. The patterns that are measured are referred to as cultural dimensions. These cultural dimensions provide a language for understanding these similarities and differences.

## **Individualism vs. Collectivism**

“Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after him or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism as its opposite pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which through people’s lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty” (page 92).

National cultures are measured on a continuum of high Individualism to low Individualism (or Collectivism). Collectivist societies have a culture where the power of the group is greater than the power of the individual. Children in collectivist societies grow up learning that they are part of a distinct group. Individualist societies have a culture where the power of the individual is greater than the power of the group. Children grow up in smaller nuclear families and are taught to think of themselves as a unique I.

## **Power Distance**

“Power Distance is the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organizations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally. Institutions are the basic elements of society, such as the family, the school, and the community; organizations are the places where people work” (page 61).

National cultures are measured on a continuum of high power distance to low power distance. In a low power-distance society, employees are less dependent on their superiors. Employees expect to be consulted on decisions and to be able to express their opinions regardless of organizational hierarchy. In a high power-distance society, employees are more dependent on their superiors. Power is usually centralized to a small few at the top of the hierarchy, and employees may expect to be told what to do.

### **Low- and High-Context Cultures**

The idea of low- and high-context cultures originated with anthropologist Edward T. Hall in his 1976 book *Beyond Culture*. High-context cultures are prevalent in most of Africa, while low-context cultures are prevalent in most of North America and Western Europe.

High-context cultures focus on collectivism and relationship-building. High-context communication is more indirect and more formal. Trust is the core of every relationship. Decisions are based more on intuition and feeling rather than fact. Words and word choice become very important in higher-context communication since a few words can communicate a complex message very effectively to an in-group (a group where people feel a sense of shared community and solidarity). People in high-context cultures often maintain only a few extremely close relationships in their lives.

Low-context cultures focus on individualism and linear logic. Low-context communication centers on logic, facts, and directness. More direct and informal in interactions, decisions are based on fact rather than intuition. Communicators expect to be straightforward, concise, and efficient in telling what action is expected. People in low-context cultures strive to use precise words and intend them to be taken literally. They also tend to have many relationships but few intimate ones.



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