

Perspectives on International Leadership

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As law firms cross borders, lawyers, managers and staff from different cultures must learn to appreciate traditional professional customs and values while remaining open to new leadership behaviors. This is not as easy as it sounds.

In the North America, as in other parts of the world, we experience and learn leadership and managerial techniques in school and through life experiences. The problem we encounter is that we North Americans assume those well honed leadership concepts we learned at university business schools, or as officers in the military services, or even running the local grocery store, don't necessarily work in Greece, Japan, or Morocco.

Warm and fuzzy, friendly, egalitarian ideas work well in Milwaukee or St. Louis but they may fail miserably in Piraeus, Kyoto, or Marrakech. The relationships between bosses and workers in most of the world (outside North America) are much more formal and structured. Both the executives and laborers in other countries are generally more comfortable with this rigid structure. When North American executives import their own style of leadership and management they often find that efficiency and morale decline. When the executive tries being a "buddy" of the shop foreman in Italy, he may be very surprised to find that his approach creates discomfort. By asking the foreman to call him by his first name will likely create great confusion in the relationship. The foreman is used to using formal titles when speaking with an executive. To be asked to use his first name may have several negative effects. The first effect will be confusion. Confusion in the structure of the workplace almost always lowers efficiency. Another very likely effect is to lower the respect the foreman has for the executive.

Other North American techniques have similar negative effects. We recall an incident in Italy in which the U.S.-educated CEO of a medium size firm was very particular about cleanliness and order in the work space. He made a habit out of walking the halls occasionally and personally picking up paper clips and bits of paper off the floor. Using his U.S. background, he thought that his actions would be an example for the employees and would encourage the employees likewise to keep the office clean. This may be sound thinking in his home working environment. The reaction of the Italian employees was exactly the opposite. In the eyes of the employees, he had stepped out of his august role as "the boss" and embraced the role of a lowly workman. In fact the Italian employees dubbed him *O Scoppatori* (the street sweeper) and laughed at him behind his back. The effect on the efficiency and morale in the office was profoundly negative.

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We must remember that our democratic ideals of equality do not always fit well in societies in which levels of social strata are accepted. In Italy and Germany titles are used in all but the most intimate relationships. In Italy, almost no one is simply *Signore*. If a man has a university degree, he is "*Dottore*;" if he is a lawyer, "*Avvocato*;" if a teacher, "*Professore*." Professional women receive similar deference. More importantly, these titles are used by colleagues, tradesman, even the barman. Only family and close friends use first names. Even England, with its similarities to the United States, still has aspects of a strict and accepted class system, still based in part on feudal blood lines. American egalitarian thought and actions can be misunderstood in such societies.

North American lawyers who work overseas must therefore understand and appreciate the culture in which they operate. It may be difficult for them to cultivate these more formal working relationships. However, assuming "good old American know how" is best for the human resources function of a foreign business is a formula for failure. In leadership and management, the well worn phrase "when in Rome, do as the Romans do" is an absolute. It is not an easy task to re-learn leadership behaviors, but to operate in the foreign environments it is often essential.

At the same time, people in an international business organization, such as a law firm, should try to understand and sometimes even make allowances for foreign managers and colleagues with leadership ideas that may be different from those of the traditional work environment. International business may need to adapt to the changing experiences and expectations of younger workers, such as law firm associates, many of whom have lived, studied, and worked in other cultures. For example, associates may be fluent in two or more languages unlike the partners with whom they practice. The associates may also expect greater involvement in planning and decision making than seniors did at the same age.

Clients, too, exert pressure on traditional leadership rituals, expectations and practices in international businesses. As the "rules of the game" shift, leaders need to learn new skills for getting things done with multi-national client teams. Although these teams may consist of culturally diverse individuals, as groups they have similar leadership requirements to become high performing teams.

Different expectations of leadership are challenging in any international business organization, and especially in law firms. What may appear to one culture as a meaningless business ritual – such as picking up paper clips or the use of formal titles – may have substantial symbolic meaning to the other, even when it appears to be unrelated to any modern business purpose. Respect for tradition and the willingness to embrace change must work together to produce effective leadership strategies in a dynamic international business or professional organization.



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