

Leadership across cultures in times of change



By Torrey Orton (EB '06)

Almost every non-fiction writer in English assumes that in our times change is especially volatile, turbulent and unpredictable. This includes writers on leadership. Cultural turbulence is one of the key variables requiring a leadership response. While diversity is particularly useful when new thinking and acting are needed, it is also most difficult to handle in these times.

MY OBJECTIVE IS TO PORTRAY LEADING ACROSS CULTURES

as a desirable (and unavoidable) challenge for Australian organisations. My challenge is to say something true, clear and useful in 1200 words when there are shelves of books and articles on each of the three words – leadership, culture and change.

Do leadership and culture exist? Yes. Is there a correct, complete and final definition of each? No. So, that's the truth part, which suggests that it may be hard to be clear and useful.

What is culture, then? It is the ways we think, feel and act which we share with others. It is expressed in relationships (family, workplace, community, etc.), and artefacts (tools, buildings, records, artworks of all kinds, etc.). They are underpinned by often invisible beliefs and values. Culture is not inherited like body type, hair colour or personality; it is learned.

I'm reminded of the reality of culture(s) each time I work in China with English speaking leaders of non-Anglo European multi-nationals. Their local counterparts deal with each other in Chinese. And then there are organisational cultures, too. For example, engineering businesses tend to have different styles from retail, IT or fashion design ones, and attract different types of people.

- A friend, originally from a village in Africa and 20 years resident here, told of feeling disrespected by his work colleagues here because they did not recognise his undisputable seniority – a seniority of age, professional experience, qualifications, organisational longevity and cultural diversity. They did not even know they were doing so, but that did not change his feeling.
- A company reported to me that it had decided not to continue with a possible joint venture because “we did not think we understood their business practices well enough.”
- On a larger stage, we can see a “clash of civilisations” perhaps in the on-going Tibet commentary ... Surely, each side being unable to see how and why others see things as they do can only keep its fire alive.

Three dilemmas...

There are three striking dilemmas about culture(s) – first, cultures are all the same and all different, and second, people are all the same and all different. The reason for these two dilemmas is that we are all human and have different personal, family and society solutions to making life work. Third, we tend to believe that our life solutions (both personal and cultural) are good and right, while others are ‘bad’ or wrong. These three dilemmas are the sources of much misery and growth! The challenge for leaders is to stretch their minds and behaviours across such dilemmas, because failing to leaves us conflicted about who is ‘right’ and / or has power.

Also, cultures change all the time.

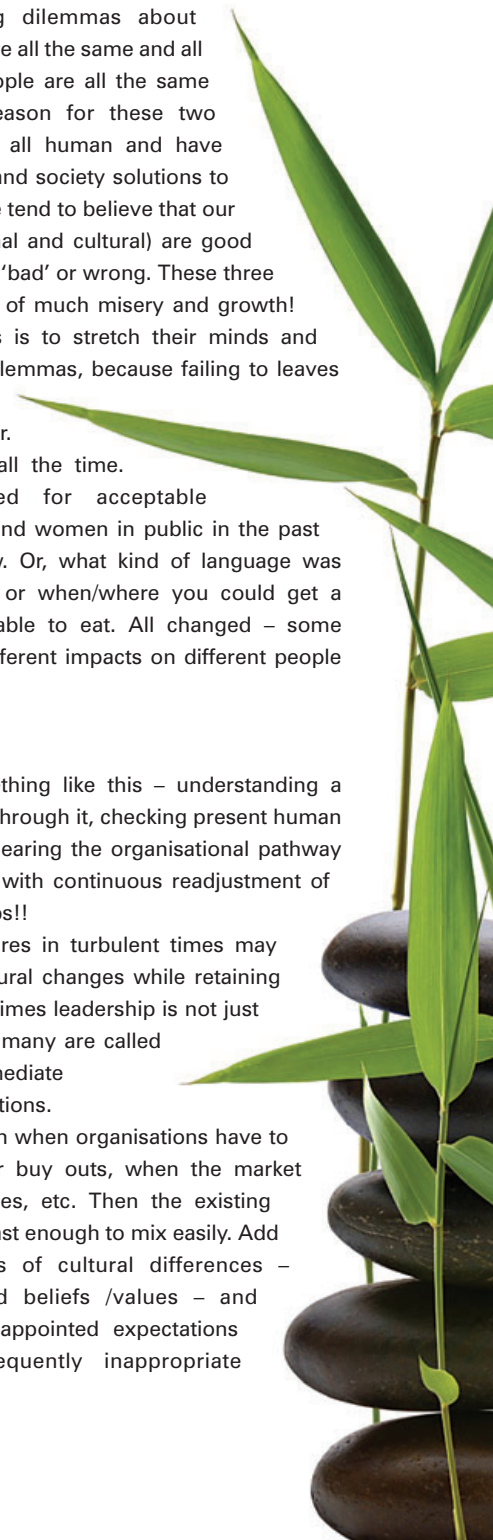
Remember what passed for acceptable behaviour between men and women in public in the past and think what's OK now. Or, what kind of language was publicly acceptable then, or when/where you could get a drink, or what was available to eat. All changed – some massively so, and with different impacts on different people within our culture(s).

Everyone can lead...

Leadership may be something like this – understanding a situation, showing way(s) through it, checking present human and technical capability, clearing the organisational pathway and monitoring progress, with continuous readjustment of the previously chosen steps!!

Leadership across cultures in turbulent times may often mean engaging cultural changes while retaining cultural integrity. In these times leadership is not just for nominated leaders, as many are called to lead because the immediate situations require many actions.

Turbulent times are often when organisations have to change fast – mergers or buy outs, when the market turns, the weather changes, etc. Then the existing culture(s) cannot change fast enough to mix easily. Add the major characteristics of cultural differences – language, behaviour and beliefs /values – and prospects of conflict, disappointed expectations and hopes, and consequently inappropriate ‘solutions’ are high.



A Cross-cultural matrix

Adapted from Dr. J. Frankenstein, 1993 (based on E.T. Hall)

	CHINESE	WESTERN
Locus of Personal Control is:	• In the hands of others	• In own hands
Primary Focus in all Life Activities on:	• Relationships • Consensus building • Conflict not O.K.	• Task completion • Problem solving • Conflict O.K.
Personal Identity from:	• Group membership	• Individual achievement
Action Time Frame is:	• Long-term	• Short-term
Interpersonal Commitment is:	• Familial • Unlimited • Relationship based	• Task-specific • Limited • Arms-length
Responsibility and Authority:	• Rises to the top • General	• Settles to the bottom • Specific
Decision Style is:	• Bureaucratic	• Immediate
Overall Orientation is to:	• The Big Picture	• The Specific, the Contracted, the Itemised

'Same bed, different dreams...'

One challenging cultural difference in work life is often what we think an organisation is – a team of individuals or a family. I want to focus on one culture – greater China – which prominently reflects the family view of organisational life. The following chart presents one approach to understanding this difference. Two aspects are highlighted because they emphasize the impact of the family approach – really quite opposite to Western (especially Anglo) cultures.

A brief look reveals a knowable number of likely subjects of inter-cultural conflict. There are other analytic schemes like this. They all offer ways of guessing what conflict may arise and its subject(s), but not how it will arise (the precipitating action) or why (the other situational stressors). So, they can suggest where and when to pre-empt potential conflict.

We can imagine a stressful workplace event drawing out our most culturally preferred approaches – the Westerner will be talking about the problem and the Chinese about who it affects and how. Each may see the other's focus as irrelevant and be irritated by it. This pattern is a well-known one in business relations between the cultures. For either to lead in such circumstances requires work to interrupt the natural reactions to different approaches.

The useful part...

Successful leadership across cultures in times of change requires at least three things – knowledge of real cultural differences (acknowledging the reality of the

differences, not universalising them out of existence), respect for the fact they exist (which does not mean accepting or approving of all differences), and courage to appropriately engage differences when they interrupt relationships. Respect is the most important. Without it, neither relevant knowledge can be found nor courage appropriately employed. Perceived disrespect is felt as attack.

What could it look like to engage a Chinese party about an emerging problem (the blue "primary focus" bar in the chart above)? Something like this: (1) Acknowledge that you are likely to have a problem which will push each of you back to your preferred approaches – relationships vs. problem-solving. (2) Propose that you try a new way this time – which ensures equal time to both perspectives. (3) Invite other to talk about how / why their concern for relationships works in this situation (not to justify but to inform). And, (4) ask the other to develop an ordered process for working on the relationship(s) and the problem task.

The steps may not occur in that order but probably if you cover the various aspects you will get to a new place in the shared work, and if you do this you will open doors to new ways of leading and following. Travel well.

The opinions expressed in this piece are the responsibility of the author and do not reflect those of Leadership Victoria (LV) or others he works with in LV. I thank Ken, Deb, Jinny, Hamid, Halakhe, Shanping, and Jane for suggestions and observations which improved the chance of this making sense and being useful. **LV**

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