Leadership in Cross-Cultural Contexts

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Leadership is solving problems. The day soldiers stop bringing you their problems is the day you have either lost confidence that you can help or concluded you do not care. Either case is a failure of leadership.

-Colin Powell

Successful leaders like General Eisenhower in the Battle of Normandy and General Schwarzkopf in the Persian Gulf War are evidence that talented leaders are an integral component to mission accomplishment. Leadership has implications for successful endeavors at every level including employees, teams, and the unit as a whole. Although the desirable outcomes of effective leadership are often stressed and relatively straightforward, understanding how to become an effective leader is more complex. Eisenhower and Schwarzkopf were two different leaders operating in two novel situations. Research suggests that successful leadership involves a perfect storm of situational characteristics and individual leadership styles. Despite the invariance of the situation, leader styles and competencies are malleable and can be trained. Once the competencies of a successful leader are identified, situational characteristics such as cross-cultural settings can complicate effective leadership. This article will define leadership, identify effective leader competencies, and demonstrate the utility they have in cross-cultural settings (e.g., how they relate to cross-cultural competencies).

Research has spent a considerable amount of time developing an understanding of what effective leadership is as well as how it can be developed. Although one area of research holds that effective leadership is a product of good leaders ("the great man theory"), there is a considerable amount of research that suggests that effective leadership is the result of the interaction between leader traits and situational demands. Because of this complex interaction, there are aspects of leadership that can be maximized. In particular, while situational constraints

may be fairly rigid, leaders can enhance dispositional abilities by developing leadership skills. Effort towards developing and acquiring leadership skills can be considered tools in a toolbox that may be used in a variety of unique situations. In a cross-cultural environment, the more leadership skills there are in a leader's tool box, the greater the opportunity to enhance mission effectiveness.

There are many competency models for effective leadership; however, most models involve elements of innovation and vision, self-management as well as managing and developing others through skills such as coaching, communication, and problem solving. This article will focus on a five competency model of leadership that includes *self-management*, *leading others*, *task management*, *innovation*, and *social responsibility* (Central Michigan University, 2004; See Figure 1). While possessing and developing these competencies will enhance leadership, they will also prove effective through cross-cultural interaction. Therefore, it is necessary to understand each competency as a component of the complex interaction between leader characteristics and situational characteristics (e.g., cross-cultural settings). For instance, the 3C model of cross-cultural competence shares similarities to this leadership model in that both the leadership competencies and cross-cultural competencies include a discussion of managing uncertain situations both internally (through stress management and emotion regulation) as well as externally (social flexibility and social responsibility).

The 3C model of cross-cultural competence provides a common language for understanding and developing regional and cultural capabilities (Johnston, Paris, McCoy, Severe, & Hughes, 2010). This model incorporates six core cross-cultural competencies that may be grouped by thinking competencies and connecting competencies (see Figure 2). In particular, the thinking competencies include applying cultural knowledge, organizational awareness, and

cultural perspective-taking. The connecting competencies consist of communication, interpersonal skills, and cultural adaptability. This model also provides a large set of core enablers that allow leaders and subordinates to assess their current competence and examine critical areas for development in order to be more effective in novel cultural environments. In discussing the leadership competency model, it will be useful to simultaneously consider the 3C model in order to develop a more complete understanding of effective leadership in cross-cultural contexts.

Self-management is a leadership competency that involves stress management, self-insight, learning, work habits, and work-attitudes. Before leading others, the ability to internally manage one's self is imperative. In a cross-cultural setting, the ability to manage stress and regulate emotions is key when a new environment is less predictable. Similarly, self-insight requires optimism, self-confidence, and suspending prejudices. These skills are invaluable to cross-cultural leadership where the position requires stability and leading by example in order to influence others and convey the importance of a mission. For instance, others who may have difficulty adapting to the culture change and being effective in a new setting will benefit from a leader with self-insight. This competency also involves skills related to learning. In order to develop others, there must be a personal interest and ability to learn. This involves inquisitiveness or intellectual curiosity, learning through observation, and seeking feedback. As a leader in a cross-cultural setting, a tremendous amount of learning will occur while encountering routine events in another culture. Possessing the aptitude to understand a new setting and experience another culture will inform management strategies that are subsequently adopted. Stress management, self-insight, and learning are components of self-management that are not only necessary for leadership, but also beneficial in a diverse range of settings.

Leading others is another important leadership competency. Leading others involves communicating, interpersonal awareness, motivating others, developing others, and influencing. Although all five components of leading others are important leadership skills, two of these skills are of particular interest to cross-cultural leadership. Specifically, communicating is both a powerful leadership skill as well as imperative to success across cultures. Good communicators communicate with coworkers, practice active listening, facilitate discussion, are skilled public speakers, develop external contacts, and can communicate outside of the organization. This skill set includes the ability to communicate across cultural barriers. Effective leadership across cultures requires the ability to communicate with subordinates as well as those local to the culture and to facilitate communication between all parties. The second relevant aspect to leading others is interpersonal awareness. In cross-cultural settings, effective leadership involves having psychological knowledge, a social orientation, social perceptiveness, service orientation, and the tendency to nurture relationships. Concern and attention towards others will foster relationship building in new settings. In general, leading others within the context of a cross-cultural setting requires attention to dynamics between people.

Additionally, effective leaders are skilled at task management. Task management involves executing tasks, solving problems, managing information and material resources, managing human resources, and enhancing performance. These general principles of management are particularly useful when the environment is less stable (e.g., when operating within a different culture). Specifically, a leader with strong organizational skills who is effective at coordinating information, resources, and human capital may make better use of novel information in an unfamiliar setting and better apply this information in managing resources and providing direction and structure for subordinates. Problem solving is also necessary while

leading in a new culture, as novel situations will reveal novel problems. Effective problem solvers may also be adept at utilizing and applying cultural knowledge and may partake in cultural perspective-taking. Additionally, task management across cultures may require cultural adaptability.

Innovation is the fourth leadership competency. Innovation involves creativity, enterprising, integrating perspectives, forecasting, and managing change. Innovation becomes of great importance when leadership occurs within a new culture. Leaders who are sensitive to new situations and can manage a future of uncertainty will have greater success across cultures. Additionally, problem solving also factors into innovation in that leaders who can identify problems, gather information, and critically and creatively consider solutions may be more adept at managing within the uncertainty that a new culture brings. Innovation may also involve a tolerance for ambiguity or a level of flexibility in order to provide creative solutions to novel problems. A key component to innovation is the idea that the leader must not only work effectively within the novel setting, but must also be able to manage others in times of uncertainty, drawing on unique solutions and reinforcing the mission's goals.

Finally, leadership requires a level of social responsibility that requires social knowledge, ethical processes, leading others, acting with integrity, and civic responsibility. As the face of the U.S. military, it is necessary to conduct oneself in a dignified manner in public and particularly overseas. An effective leader models this behavior at all times. This behavior is enhanced when the leader maintains not only organizational awareness, but acquires cultural knowledge regarding history, language, philosophy/theology, justice, and legal regulations. However, knowledge is only one piece of social responsibility. Effective leaders must also display integrity and ethical behavior through honesty and accountability as well as fairness in

decision making. Finally, social responsibility requires activity within the local community. As a global leader operating within new cultures, it is not enough to merely understand one's own culture. Instead, effective leaders are competent in operating within multiple cultures.

This review on effective leadership across cultures highlights a model that comprises of five key competencies—self-management, leading others, task management, innovation, and social responsibility. Although these competencies are generally useful and necessary for effective leadership, considering these competencies within cross-cultural environments reveal the utility of understanding areas for development. Rarely, can a leader select the perfect environment for their particular leadership style. Instead, adaptable leaders with many tools and strong leadership competencies will be best suited for the uncertain and possibly volatile environment that a new culture may provide. Developing these five leadership competencies as well as being aware of cross-cultural competencies (e.g., applying cultural knowledge, organizational awareness, cultural perspective-taking, communication, interpersonal skills, and cultural adaptability) will help provide the perfect blend for effective leadership.

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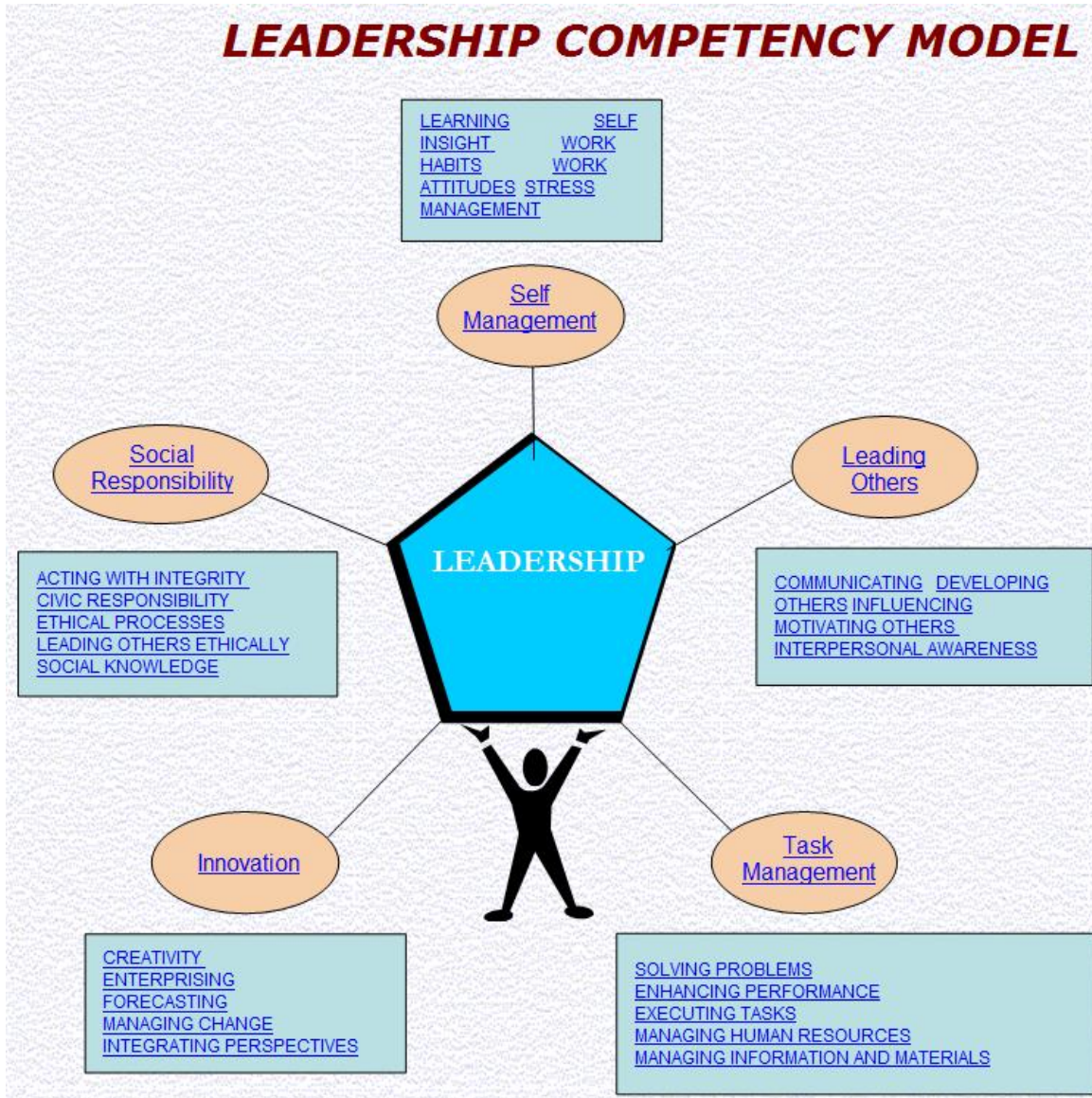
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Appendix

LEADERSHIP COMPETENCY MODEL

LEARNING   SELF
INSIGHT   WORK
HABITS   WORK
ATTITUDES STRESS
MANAGEMENT

Self
Management

Social
Responsibility

Leading
Others

LEADERSHIP

ACTING WITH INTEGRITY
CIVIC RESPONSIBILITY
ETHICAL PROCESSES
LEADING OTHERS ETHICALLY
SOCIAL KNOWLEDGE

COMMUNICATING   DEVELOPING
OTHERS INFLUENCING
MOTIVATING OTHERS
INTERPERSONAL AWARENESS

Innovation

Task
Management

CREATIVITY
ENTERPRISING
FORECASTING
MANAGING CHANGE
INTEGRATING PERSPECTIVES

SOLVING PROBLEMS
ENHANCING PERFORMANCE
EXECUTING TASKS
MANAGING HUMAN RESOURCES
MANAGING INFORMATION AND MATERIALS

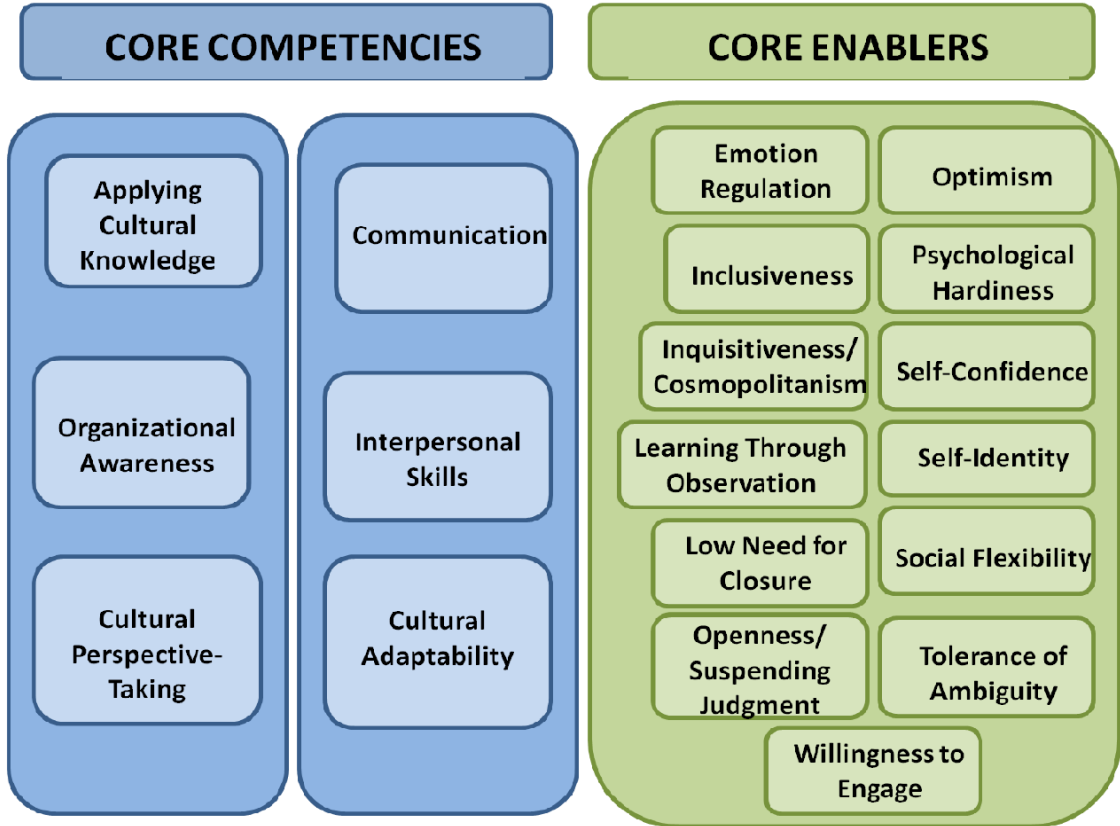*Figure 1*. Leadership Competency Model (Central Michigan University, 2004)

Figure 2. Cross-Cultural Competence Model (3C) (Johnston et al., 2010)