

Women Leading Across Borders

By Mr. Tom Verghese

*“There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees
which are falsehoods on the other.”
(Geert Hofstede)*

As the world is increasingly networked into a global village, business leaders work across a myriad of borders, within many cultures and it has become a business as usual process. Learning to work within cultures other than our own is a constant everyday part of doing business in today’s flat world. There are many cultural facets of working across borders that are obvious and not so obvious. Differences in customs, values, language and gender are critical issues at the individual, team and organizational levels.

In this paper I would like to explore the concept of gender. This discussion paper will explore the cultural impact on gender that directly, although perhaps not so obviously, has on women leading across borders and cultures. We will explore the ways that culture and gendered stereotypes can openly influence the effectiveness and success of women leaders who work across borders.

Perspectives on gender vary across both time and cultures. Gender is just one aspect of culture. Gender refers to the social meaning of being a man or a woman. It is institutionalised, multi-dimensional and multi layered, encompassing a range of assumptions, expectations and obligations. Gender is fundamental to the way life and work is organised. For example, Sweden has low gender differentiation, meaning that culturally there are few distinctions between what a man and woman can and can’t do; compared to Japanese society that has a much higher degree of gender differentiation where the cultural expectations of what is and is not acceptable for men and women is more divided (Brislin; 85). Gender in the workplace does not just mirror prevailing social norms, but reinforces them and fashions wider social structures and practices.

Different cultural environments, cultural beliefs and attitudes significantly impact gender expectations and govern much of the interactions and interpretations that occur between men and women. Ultimately, gender role expectations can have some significant effects on business interactions, such as communication and negotiation styles. The ‘gendered glass ceiling’ appears to persist in both developed and developing societies.

There are significant gender differences when working in varying regions across the globe. A survey conducted by Mercer Consulting in 2006 of over 100 multinational companies with almost 17,000 employees working internationally, found a significant increase in the number of women being

sent to work in the Asian Pacific region. The companies surveyed indicated that the number of women on international assignments was 16 times greater than in 2001 (Mercer 2006). These and other papers suggest that more and more women are going to be working and leading across borders and consequently strategies need to be put in place to support this growth.

You may ask is it really that different for women rather than men when they are leading and working across borders? After all, we are all doing the same job, so aren't the challenges faced by women the same as those for men?

This question leads me to reflect on one I have been asked on many occasions – isn't it all the same no matter where you are working? Isn't working in Australia the same as working in India, after all we are all part of the same organizations and follow the same processes? My answer is this, clearly working in Australia is not the same as working in India. There are different values and belief systems, communication styles, hierarchical structures etc directly impacting on many of the processes, just as gender does. Managing in Korea or Pakistan as an African-American female will not be the same as a Chinese female manager may experience when managing in Japan.

There has been little research and discussion in regard to women leaders and the cultural implications. In a recent survey over half of the companies (55%) expect the number of female assignees to continue to increase steadily over the next five years, while 35% believe the number will remain the same. Just 4% believe it will decline. (Mercer 2006).

Extensive research has demonstrated that in fact women expatriate leaders are more likely to possess the characteristics that ensure success in an expatriate role, namely cultural empathy, a willingness to take risks, persuasive motivation and flexibility (Visser; 2005)(Caliper; 2005)(Sharpe; 2000). More women are being placed on international assignments than ever before. Women frequent business travellers are a rising population. For example, there are now entire hotel floors dedicated to female business travellers, they are increasingly being accommodated for within the airline and hotel industries.

Over a period of time now, I have had conversations with some of my female clients regarding the gender specific challenges that they have and continue to experience when leading across cultures. Usually when we think through some of the challenges of working and leading across borders we tend to think more at the macro level, i.e. communication, cultural norms etc. Of course all of these factors are important, but if we 'peel back the layers' and dare to delve a bit deeper we find that gender incorporates a range of unspoken and often unrecognised set of issues that are not being addressed; as evidenced by the little amount of research and information that has been produced.

Women make up a significant part of our current talent pool and need to be recognised as such. Arguably retention and talent development is at the

forefront of organizational strategies, particularly in today's current economic climate. If women are being overlooked for senior and expatriate roles because of cultural assumptions and expectations then an organization is potentially excluding a significant portion of its current talent pool.

CHALLENGES

Every culture has their own assumptions and expectations of what and where women (and men) should be and how they should perform and act in their gendered roles. These expectations have become a lot more confronting in recent years, due to factors such as globalisation and an increase in women in the workforce. One such result has been the rise of women in leadership roles and working across cultures.

Following are a couple of stories that have been shared with me over recent years by female clients, reinforcing that some of the challenges women can face when working across cultures is not a recent phenomenon.

Norhati was a client who I worked with a couple of years ago. She was a Malaysian woman with a PHD in chemical engineering. She was working for a large multinational organization working in the area of research. Norhati was an extremely competent and capable woman who was very successful in her role. She was also a Muslim woman who wore the traditional head dress. Norhati often commented on the difficulties that she faced when working with her American counterparts, particularly in the early days when she was trying to establish a relationship with them. She felt as though there was an unspoken assumption that because of her dress and some stereotyped attitudes regarding Muslim women that she was passive and could be easily dominated. She felt as though her ideas and capabilities were often overlooked. After a period of executive coaching, she learned to become more forthright with her comments and input.

Tracey was a western woman who was working in the IT industry and regularly travelling to Japan. One of the challenges that she faced was that a lot of the 'business' occurred outside of the office in the evenings at the Karaoke bar over drinks. It didn't take her long to realise that as a woman this was not actually a place where she felt that she was genuinely welcome, nor did she feel comfortable. Tracey's dilemma laid in how could she build relationships and be privy to some of the issues and information that was discussed if she wasn't attending the evening activities.

These are just two stories, (I have many more) that serve to illustrate that working or leading across cultures for men and women can differ enormously. The challenges would have been different for Norhati if she had been a French woman working in the US or if Tracey had have been working in the Middle East. Neither Tracey nor Norhati felt as though they were privy to the informal networks of communication and that it was effecting their business

relationships and the ability to establish a satisfactory level of trust. These aspects had the potential to directly impact their business outcomes.

This also leads me to ask would the situation have been different if they had both been men? Given the cultural norms, attitudes and traditions of these societies, coupled with my familiarity with both of these women, I would strongly suggest it would have been a different scenario if they had been men. There may have had some of the initial issues, but it would have been easier to overcome them.

Negotiating and resolving conflicts for women working with cultures significantly different to their own can be challenging.

A degree of cultural specific knowledge can avert what could be potentially damaging issues into blips. Awareness of cultural differences, mindfulness and skilfulness can make all the difference. Here is an example: I had a female client who was managing in Brazil and was experiencing a sense of exclusion from her team. Her team, who consisted entirely of men, were often quietly seeking advice and directions from her male peers. After some discussions we decided that being a highly relationship based culture, she would demonstrate more interest in their personal lives and families and actively build a relationship with these men. Her tactic was also to be mindful of considering the perspectives of her male subordinates, reflecting on the gender difficulties that they may also be experiencing in particular situations. Over time her relationships improved with her team and she felt as though there was greater respect and acceptance of her and better performance from the team.

While the number of female expatriates is low when compared to their male counterparts, the numbers are steadily increasing. Foreign assignments are still considered to be an important stage in career development for senior leaders. As women move up the ranks, we are hopefully going to see more female expatriates and as such need to support cultural gendered awareness through improved skills, knowledge and strategies.

An important aspect to keep in mind is that whilst a female leader may be having issues around some cultural 'road blocks', so may her male counterpart. He may also be experiencing some confronting issues in communicating and working alongside a female or perhaps reporting to a female boss. A degree of mindfulness is required on both sides of the fence.

STRATEGIES

Here are a few strategies and a few suggestions. Keeping in mind that the issues at hand can be culture specific, what may be challenging in one culture may not be in another.

- Increase your awareness. Learn about the cultural stereotypes, it can help you anticipate obstacles before they become problems and help you to understand where your colleagues or subordinates are 'coming from'.
- Acknowledge that there may be differences and that some situations may make you feel uncomfortable, sometimes preparedness can help you with comments or situations that you may find unpleasant.
- If possible, invite key colleagues/subordinates to your home country where they can see first hand your position and authority.
- Demonstrate and emulate assertiveness and confidence by the behaviour that you observe.
- Develop some strategies and culturally appropriate ways of settling conflict.
- You may need to be more sensitive to the informal gestures and cues when you are negotiating/dealing with men of different cultures.
- Build a network within the culture that you are working/living in. Seek other women and men who can explain the tacit aspects of the culture.
- Get some cultural coaching and mentoring. In my experience one of the most effective ways of developing and supporting leaders, both male and female is executive coaching. The benefits of Executive Cultural Coaching for female leaders who work across borders is invaluable.

WAY FORWARD

Although the number of women in management roles across the globe continues to remain disproportionately low when compared to their male counterparts, you don't need to look far to see that they are increasingly becoming a significant part of the global talent pool.

We cannot realistically expect to walk into centuries-old cultures and change them. We need to be flexible and adaptable, even when things go against our values. We need to create strategies that can assist in the navigation around some of the gendered differences and ensure that they are aligned to the culture and organizational boundaries we may find ourselves in.

All evidence points to the growing success and increase in the numbers of women leading and working across cultures. As such, organizations need to put strategies in place that recognise, support and develop these leaders. Given the current global economic climate it is imperative for organizations to capitalize on their entire workforce.

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