

# Leading Across Global Cultures through Servant Leadership

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by Sonny Mathew

Cultural contexts impact the exercise of global leadership, and one of the foremost leadership challenges that face global leaders across cultures is communication. This challenge is not just the language barrier, but it is also in understanding the local cultural mindset. Globalization has extended the general overview and study of global cultures in the world. However, it is essential for the global leader to relate to and connect with the local cultural mindset and to think of the world as one global society. Thus, the primary challenge before the global leader is how to relate to and connect with the local cultural mindset.

Recently, I was listening to a news report on National Public Radio (NPR) regarding Defense Secretary Robert Gates' visit to Islamabad. It was interesting to hear Gates' conversation with reporters on his way to Pakistan where he disclosed his message to Pakistan's generals: "Go after all the militant groups lurking within your borders or risk the stability of the entire country" (Kelly, 2010, p.1). I cringed listening to Mr. Gates' words which sounded like a threat to me. The two questions that ran through my mind were: Did Gates mean to risk the stability of the entire country because the United States is going to take over Pakistan? Or did Gates mean that the militant groups within Pakistan will cause instability within the country? The lesson to learn from this is that global leaders will have to know their audience first before carefully crafting the words of the message. The focus should not only be the content of the message, but also its perception. "In the west, people are more concerned with the content or meaning of the model than they are with how it is put together, is organized, or performs, and the purpose it is supposed to fulfill" (Hall, 1976, p. 14).

Perception is the precursor, the experiential level of an individual's activity. Thus, for a global leader, when it comes to relating with people who are different, perception makes all the difference.

Perception is a two-way street, influencing the communication and the reception of the message.

The communication approach will determine if the content of the message was perceived accurately by the intended recipients of the message. The societies to which we belong affect our judgment and approach in a big way. The global leader should break away from his cultural biases to a place of cultural neutrality where the global leader's outlook is humble and respectful toward the peoples of other cultures, and does not have any preconceived expectations. Global leaders with cultural neutrality are open and able to learn from the foreign cultures, values and activities that are different from their own. For global leaders to ascend to a place of cultural neutrality, they should increase their CQ (Cultural Intelligence). Although information about global societies worldwide is easily available, there is lack of personal development in cultural intelligence. To develop cultural intelligence, the global leader will have to learn the historical facts about the culture, including what lies below the surface. "First, the overt, obvious culture—which it is possible to bridge with patience and good will—but second and more important, unconscious culture—which is much more difficult to transcend" (Hall, 1976, p. 162). Overall cultural intelligence is the skill to read and relate effectively with new cultures without mental blocks and communication barriers. The "...ability to interpret someone's unfamiliar and ambiguous gestures in just the way that person's compatriots and colleagues would...we call that cultural intelligence or CQ" (Earley & Mosakowski, 2004, p. 1).

My suspicion regarding Gates' comments on NPR was confirmed when reports came in later that day about the Pakistani generals' response to Gates' visit to Pakistan. "Army spokesman Maj. Gen. Athar Abbas clearly indicates Pakistan will not be pressured in the near term to expand its fight beyond militants waging war against the Pakistani state" (The Associated Press, 2010, p. 1). Gates subsequently wrote an exclusive op-ed piece in one of Pakistan's largest English newspapers titled "Our commitment to Pakistan," in which he made efforts to strengthen the bonds of trust between the two nations and erase any negative perceptions.

Trust is an essential factor in positive relationships between people or nations and is an attribute of servant leadership. Trust is considered to be the foundation between leader-follower relationships, and it is essential for the global leader to establish trust before any attempt is made in communication. In order to establish trust, global leaders will have to deal with all of their negative perceptions. For global leaders, cultural intelligence will bring a keen awareness of all negative perceptions toward them and help them establish trust. "We've found that servant leaders know the power of trust...trust bonds people together,...reduces inhibitions...The servant leaders...have the gift of making others feel comfortable...create open, participative environments..." (Patterson & Stone,

2003). The servant global leader's genuine appreciation of all foreign cultures is to be established as a precursor to the increase of trust relationship cross-culturally. The French philosopher Blaise Pascal once wrote, "There are truths on this side of the Pyrenees that are falsehoods on the other" (Daum, 2001). The ethnocentric superiority of one's own group is poison for the global leader.

Humility, another attribute in servant leadership, is a valuable trait for effective leadership across global cultures. Humility is an attitude of the mind. The global leader should have a humble posture to learn about and from foreign cultures. The Scottish essayist, Robert Louis Stevenson said, "There are no foreign lands; only the traveler is foreign." The global leader/traveler will make every effort to familiarize themselves with new global cultures dismantling negative stereotypes and psychological predispositions to exercise leadership. "The mindset factor should...help cut down the damage caused by misperception" (Fisher, 1997, p. 5). The humble mindset factor is a two-way nature of inquiry, which is fundamental, involving perceptions and reactions of two or more parties. The mindset of the global leader should be one of a deep respect for the diverse cultures of the world as a participant member of the global family.

Although English is considered a global language, the global leaders' ability to learn the foreign language of the culture with which they are relating is beneficial. Globalization has opened communication between global societies; however, trust and respect for all global cultures is in deficit. "The human family struggles with two contrary forces—globalization and diversity in an Information Age versus increasing racism, ethnic hatreds, and immigrant bashing" (Moran, 2004, p. xiii). Communication is a dynamic process, which goes beyond verbal communication to the non-verbal communication that occurs within cultural contexts. "In the classical anthropological sense, culture refers to the cumulative deposit of knowledge, beliefs, values, religion, customs, and mores acquired by a group of people and passed on from generation to generation" (Moran, 2004, p. 43). There are 192 countries recognized by the United Nations as UN member states. Each country has its own borders, languages and cultures. The boundaries of a nation are drawn for the purpose of its identification, sovereignty and governance. As a member of the global family, the global leader should have no mental boundaries and, therefore, should relate to all global cultures with dignity and should respect the sovereignty and laws of each nation. Besides the culture of a nation, there are different sub-cultures within it expressing their unique identities, and it is important to avoid generalizing the larger culture of the nation to every group within the nation. These cultural complexities are what make this world a very colorful and interesting journey for the global leader. Biblical literature depicts the cultural uniqueness and the beauty of the nations of this earth to be

brought into the new heavens, “...the nations...and the kings of the earth shall bring their glory into it, (heaven) and ...they shall bring into it the glory and the honor of the nations” (Rev. 21:24-26 Revised Standard Version).

In conclusion, the global leader is called to exhibit heavenly appreciation on earth by honoring every nation and every culture’s unique, glorious, distinctive beauty. Exceptional global leaders will stand out from all of their cultural backgrounds and presumptions. Global leadership begins from the place of cultural neutrality, free from all mental clutter. The global mindset is achieved through cultural intelligence. The servant leadership attribute of humility in cultural intelligence is a prominent key toward a global mindset. “In almost all traditional cultures in the world...humility is highly valued” (Hodges, 2000, p.126). The display of humility builds trust between two parties. This is the relational quality for effective communication in all cultural contexts, enabling the exercise of global leadership through servant leadership.

### About the Author

Sonny Mathew is originally from India. He came to the United States in 1990 and is currently a candidate for the Ph.D. in Organizational Leadership with a major in Global Leadership at Regent University, Virginia Beach, Va.

Email: [sonnmat@regent.edu](mailto:sonnmat@regent.edu)

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