

Stress Testing a Global Leadership Framework: Juxtaposing Alexander the Great against 21st Century Standards

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No single global leadership style works in all situations. Moreover, global leadership styles morph in deference to changing times. Perhaps a useful exercise entails the application of modern leadership principles to ancient figures. Such an endeavor has several practical benefits, including an argument about (i) why a leadership technique would not work in different global scenarios, and (ii) why a leadership technique withstands scrutiny in most venues. Accordingly, this essay will examine the tenure of Alexander the Great—not as an historical figure, but rather as a leadership subject for analysis. Alexander will be examined against a framework of global leadership competencies, literacies, dynamics, and problem solving.

Alexander and Leadership Framework Introduction

Alexander was a fourth century B.C.E. figure tutored by Aristotle, who was a pupil of Plato, who was a student of Socrates (Yenne, 2010). At age 20, Alexander succeeded his assassinated father, King Philip II of Macedon. Sustaining his inheritance relied, at least partially, on projecting power. Since neighbors had similar ambitions, the prevailing leadership climate was to conquer or be conquered. Alexander transcended regional ambitions. Upon his death in Babylon at age 33, Alexander's undefeated exploits included an empire that stretched clockwise from Macedonia (modern day Greece) eastward to Persia (Turkey and Iran), south to India and Babylon (Iraq), and west to Egypt. Alexander's military genius is commonly studied in war colleges. His shrewdness included battle strategy, tactical combat adjustments, formations, and flanking maneuvers, which regularly helped Alexander's Macedonian army outwit adversaries who outnumbered them in multiples.

Twelve descriptors within four leadership framework categories will be used to examine Alexander. The categories are competencies, literacies, dynamics, and problem solving. Alexander will receive twenty-first century perspective academic letter grades for every component of the category, followed by a rationale for the grades. Alexander might scoff at the notion of civilian inferiors critiquing his accomplishments. Fortunately however, modern scholars may indulge in such exercises without fear of reprisal.

Leadership Competencies

According to Merriam-Webster (n.d.), one is competent if he or she “has the requisite . . . abilities or qualities.” Leadership competencies are comprised of four elements: inquisitiveness, character, perspective, and savvy (Black, Morrison, & Gregersen, 1999).

Inquisitiveness

Sustained organizations nurture a lifelong learning environment (Senge, 1990). Global leaders within those organizations “enter [their competitive arenas] with an . . . assumption that [they] always have something to learn” (Black et al., 1999, p. 54). “Inquisitiveness helps global leaders maintain their edge in a world that moves faster and grows larger, not smaller, a world constantly shifting, changing both at home and abroad” (Black et al., p. 76). “Experience is the primary vehicle for developing global leadership skills” (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002, p. 5). “Global leaders not only embrace experience, they make sense of it” (Black et al., 1999, p. 61). “Global leaders are driven not so much by wealth or power; rather they share a burning desire to explore new frontiers” (Black et al., p. 68).

Character

“Character is always about consistently aligning words . . . and [daily] modeled actions” (Greer, 2002, p. 9). Character “has two sub-components: emotional connection and unwavering integrity” (Black et al., 1999, p. 29). Integrity is grounded in honesty, trustworthiness, and intent (Northouse, 2006; Covey, 2006). Character is integral to persuasion (Aristotle, Bartlett, & Collins, 2011.). “Leaders [who] exhibit the strength of character to ‘do the right thing’ seem to encourage or enable [followers] to look for similar behavior in their own ethical decision making” (Cotter & Greif, 2007, p. 58). Trust makes values-based leadership possible (Maxwell, 1998). “Honesty [is] the most frequently mentioned character trait . . . and may be essential to an ethical perception of others” (Cotter & Greif, 2007, p. 58). “Character is much [more easily] kept than recovered” (Paine, 1955, p. 352).

Perspective

Global leaders should observe variation of attitudes and values when venturing beyond home turf into unfamiliar surroundings (Rosen, Digh, Singer, & Philips, 2000). This includes a healthy curiosity about worldviews (Black et al., 1999). There are four primary worldviews: religion, science, philosophy, and daily life (Hitt, 1996). Cultures influence how facts may be interpreted to develop truths as part of a worldview (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002; Metaxas, 2010). This reality affects how global leaders deal with the “two sets of opposing demands: seeking information or acting on it and localizing products/processes or globalizing them” (Black et al., 1999, p. 79).

“Perspective is all about how leaders look at the world. It has two sub-components: embracing uncertainty and balancing tensions” (Black et al., 1999, p. 28). The 80/20 principle is useful for embracing uncertainty, i.e., “a minority of causes, inputs, or efforts usually leads to a majority of the results, output, or rewards, [respectively]” (Koch, 1998, p. 4). Additional research does not materially improve decision outcomes. Consequently, satisficing is rational, i.e., pursuing options until a satisfactory option emerges (Nelson & Quick, 2006). A practical model for balancing tensions is: (i) disentangle people from the problem, (ii) focus on interests—not positions, (iii) invent options for mutual gain, and (iv) use objective evaluation criteria (Fisher & Ury, 1991).

Savvy

Competency is derived from capability and results (Covey, 2006). Capability is a function of latent and learned behaviors—mostly learned (Colvin, 2008). Results are rooted in deft execution of strategy (Bossidy & Charan, 2002). Global leaders with savvy, or street smarts, have “a clear sense of what needs to be done and know how to access the resources to make it happen” (Black et al., 1999, p. 29). “The pieces of the knowledge puzzle change continually. Two types of change are noteworthy: (i) changing paradigms, and (ii) changing conditions” (Black et al., 1999, p. 158). Paradigms, or worldviews, are more profound and may morph more slowly. Changing conditions may be more fluid and unpredictable.

Alexander’s Leadership Competency Scorecard

Inquisitiveness	Character	Perspective	Savvy
A	C	B	A

Alexander was classically educated and trained to be curious (McCarty, 2004). Military intelligence was core to Alexander’s success. Defensively, inquisitiveness discovered subterfuge. Offensively, inquisitiveness fed strategic thinking for military and political decisions. Alexander was selectively

honest relative to his objectives, i.e., situational ethics. Transparency was an alien concept. Perhaps Alexander's most redeeming demonstration of character occurred in the Gedrosian desert. Facing death from dehydration, Alexander's warriors presented him the last available water. However, Alexander poured it on the sand to demonstrate solidarity with the emaciated plight of his soldiers (Kurke, 2004). Perspective was a function of surveillance and analysis for warriors. Rivals understood the juxtapositions of adversarial worldviews. Alexander's mother, Olympias, nurtured his worldview by reinforcing his destiny for greatness (Green, 2007). Alexander amassed an empire; however, it could only be sustained with might. The very nature of savvy is exploiting opportunities. Alexander defeated the Persian navy of 200 ships with an army (Arranius, 2004)! Noticing that enemy ships could only provision two days of fresh water, Alexander directed his engineers to build a land bridge to subdue the island port city of Tyre and, thus, kept the enemy from reprovisioning.

Leadership Literacies

According to Merriam-Webster (n. d.), literacy requires education beyond a minimal standard of proficiency. There are four leadership literacies: personal, social, business, and cultural (Rosen et al., 2000).

Personal

The composition of personal literacy includes: self-awareness (understanding yourself); self-development (renewing yourself); and self-esteem (valuing yourself) (Rosen et al., 2000). Additionally, "personally literate leaders must master [the] key behaviors [of] aggressive insight, confident humility, authentic flexibility, reflective decisiveness, [and] realistic optimism" (Rosen et al., p. 61).

Social

Social literacy benefits from meta-experiences (Marcus, Dorn, Ashkenazi, Henderson, & McNulty, 2009). Thus, the leader who deliberately exposes himself or herself to diversified cultural experiences stands a better chance of capitalizing on opportunities through enhanced understanding and avoiding missteps rooted in ignorance. This is the essence of social literacy. Social literacy requires global leaders to "engage and challenge others" (Rosen et al., 2000, p. 29).

Business

Business literacy regards “focusing and mobilizing [the] organization” (Rosen et al., 2000, p. 29). Business leaders may choose from among five execution styles: (i) an integrating style that models a high concern for both oneself and others, (ii) a compromising style that models moderate concern for both oneself and others, (iii) a dominating style that models a high concern for oneself but not for others, (iv) an obliging style that models a low concern for oneself but a high concern for others, and (v) an avoiding style that models a low concern for both oneself and others (Gudykunst & Kim, 1995).

Cultural

Cultural literacy is the choreography of “valuing and leveraging cultural difference” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1995, p. 29). Culture is “a pattern of basic assumptions that are considered valid and that are taught to new members as the way to perceive, think, and feel in the organization” (Nelson & Quick, 2006, p. 530).

World culture is “shaped by four dynamic forces: knowledge, technology, change, and globalization—world culture influences us, regardless of our country, industry, or size of business” (Rosen et al., 2000, p. 35). Global leaders must develop a multicultural perspective, an international knowledge base, and a global imagination” (Rosen et al., p. 172). Moreover, global leaders should consider several cultural analytical variables: law, language, pace, perspective, change management, motivation, sociopolitical proclivities, commerce, behavior, cuisine, infrastructure, decision dynamics, leadership style, interpersonal orientation, timing, and authority (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002).

Alexander’s Leadership Literacy Scorecard

Personal	Social	Business	Cultural
C	B	A	B

Alexander first demonstrated mental toughness in childhood. He insisted on having a horse his father could not tame (Abbott, 2009). The animal, Bucephalus, carried Alexander as far as India. Alexander’s self-serving personal literacies were tainted by symptoms of narcissism, megalomania, and sociopathy. Alexander solved the Gordian knot by slicing it (Arrian, 1976; Kurke, 2004). Alexander’s tutelage accomplished multilingual skills, although not for all enemies to be encountered. Alexander’s social literacy was keen, but used for imperialism more than collaboration. The available historical records suggest that his ego drove him to understand himself in terms of how he might manipulate others. As a monarch, Alexander understood the affairs of royal courts. Indeed,

upon vanquishing his Indian foe Porus in the Battle of Hydaspes, Alexander allowed him to live and remain a satrap, or governor (Kurke, 2004).

While Alexander was born to a king, the system was not purely monarchical. The military elected the king (Kurke, 2004). Alexander earned succession by demonstrating leadership, e.g., protecting the homeland while his father, King Philip II, warred against Byzantium (Roisman, 1995). Alexander led his army from the front (Kurke, 2004). Despite nearly mortal battle wounds, he insisted that his soldiers receive first treatment (Kurke, 2004).

Alexander's cultural literacy served his pacification aspirations. He "judiciously" confiscated enemy foodstuffs to provision his troops, paid homage to the gods of his adversaries, and honored fallen enemy leaders with stately deference (Kurke, 2004). Moreover, Alexander encouraged intermarriage of his soldiers and the locals, arguably engineering progeny at least half loyal to the strategic objectives of the empire (Kurke, 2004). These actions were key to pacifying conquered territory. Even so, Alexander's intercultural decisions were punctuated with miscues. Alexander adopted Persian customs, including accepting prostrated salutation (Arrian, 1976). However, Alexander wisely changed course after his soldiers took offense to the appearance of deity.

Leadership Dynamics

There is "no one kind of global executive" (McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002, p. 21). A leader who presides over predictable status quo may be more of a caretaker than a leader. The probability of change is high, its speed may be swift, and its magnitude may be apocryphal. Global commerce only exacerbates inherent complexity. Two leadership dynamics frame the challenge: dispersion and duality (Black et al., 1999).

Dispersion

"The dynamics of dispersion revolve around the degree to which organizational resources, particularly people, are dispersed in a worldwide organization" (Black et al., 1999, p. 24). Leaders who have already crossed the global threshold are veterans of dispersion. The odyssey confronts unfamiliar cultures and the need to address conflict resolution in productive, often face-saving ways.

Duality

The dynamic of duality “revolves around the dual pressures for global integration and local adaptation” (Gudykunst & Kim, 1995, p. 430), i.e., “glocalization” (Galbraith, 2000, p. 3). People may be hardwired for conflict because we communicate based on the culture, language, rules and norms in which we were raised (Kotter, 1996). Duality may occur within a country for something as seemingly innocuous as dialects.

Alexander’s Leadership Dynamic Scorecard

Dispersion	Duality
A	A

Alexander experimented in the laboratory of survival. City-states, tribes, language variation, and cultures were chronic challenges. However, Alexander exhibited cunning in managing duality. No greater testament of Alexander’s dispersion and duality prowess is required than that of the vastness of his domain amassed under primitive standards. Alexander tested the limits of dispersion—especially for his era. Only early twentieth-century Britain’s sprawl comparatively rivaled Alexander’s collective abilities for maintaining control; yet, even Britain did not accomplish its empire with comparatively contiguous territory.

Problem-Solving

Great leaders recognize the certainty of threats as opportunistic mechanisms for rallying the team against a common enemy. Creative, expeditious problem-solving may result in a competitive edge and new markets. There are two types of problem-solving: technical and adaptive (Marquardt & Berger, 2000).

Technical

Technical problem-solving relates to both strategy and tactics. Strategy regards competitive differentiation, whereas tactics entail implementing the strategy better than rivals (de Kluyver & Pearce II, 2009). Tactics, then, are the “daily execution” of strategy (Murphy, 2005). “Technical problems are those in which the necessary knowledge to solve the problem already exists in a legitimized form or set of procedures” (Marquardt & Berger, 2000, p. 176).

Adaptive

“Adaptive problems are problems for which no satisfactory response has yet been developed and no technical expertise is fully adequate” (Marquardt & Berger, 2000, p. 176). Examples abound,

including the polio vaccine, spacecraft, Lasik surgery, and the Internet. Nobel prizes annually reward creativity in several categories, including physics, chemistry, medicine, and economics (Nobel Prizes, n.d.).

Alexander's Leadership Problem Solving Scorecard

Technical	Adaptive
A	A

Among the most profound examples of Alexander's technical and adaptive prowess is his defeat of Indian King Porus at the Battle of the Hydaspes River (Kurke, 2004). The Macedonians decimated the Indian war elephant cavalry whose riders were matched and trained from birth. To counteract a horse's inbred fear of pachyderms, Alexander desensitized newborn foals with straw raked from elephant stalls. Additionally, he instructed his cavalry archers to aim for both the elephants' mounts and the elephants' eyes. By disassociating an elephant from its lifelong companion and blinding them, he transformed (upwards of) nine ton objects from threats into allies.

Conclusion

"Global leaders are born, then made" (Black et al., 1999, p xiii). In some cases, global leaders choose to develop and deliberately prepare via scholarship and experiences. In other cases, leaders are picked and developed as protégés of mentors. Alexander was some of both. Alexander modeled five proficiencies of global leadership: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, and team learning (Senge, 1990).

Warrior barbarity, historical paradigms, and cultural relativity make difficult the evaluation of Alexander's leadership by modern standards absent a degree of bias. Moreover, the diffusion of technology would imbue modern states with the means to thwart at least some of Alexander's episodic strategic edge. Even so, by the modern framework, Alexander's global leadership skills remain distinguished. Consequently, this essay at least partially vindicates the utility and universality of the modern leadership framework.

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