

## Leading in an International Environment: An Adult Development Perspective

By [Dr. Michael H. Hoppe, PH.D.](#), in *Concepts, Challenges, and Realities of Leadership: An International Perspective. Selected Proceedings from the Salzburg Seminar on International Leadership*. Edited by James MacGregor Burns, Georgia Sorenson, and Lorraine Matusak

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### Introduction

[P1] To engage in a discussion of effective leadership in an international environment carries with it the potential for endless misunderstandings or criticism of disciplinary or cultural myopia. It runs the risk of being drowned out by today's cacophonies of the global leader and his or her many challenges and opportunities. For this reason, I state below the main focus and concomitant premises of the discussion to help surface their potential promise and limitations.

[P2] First and foremost, the discussion uses findings from the field of adult development as its guiding framework for identifying competencies that may be critical for effectively leading in the global arena. The adult development model by Robert Kegan (1994) is offered as a heuristic device to generate insights and questions as to the levels of understanding and openness to self and others that we may need to acquire in order to deal constructively with the complexities of the world around us.

[P3] The choice of adult development as a framework is informed by the observation that the majority of discussions about global leadership competencies and their development lack a conceptual foundation. Moreover, it is based on the premise that each of us, as part of our life-task of becoming fully human, is challenged (or invited) to grow toward higher and higher levels of consciousness and a widening inclusiveness of others who are different from ourselves. (Kegan, 1994; Palus & Drath, 1994; Smith, 1991).

[P4] This latter premise is closely connected to the ways in which leadership in this discussion is understood. Leadership is seen to be primarily concerned with change, growth, and transformation of self, others, and one's surroundings. (Burns, 1978; Drath & Palus, 1994; Heifetz, 1994). Thus, leadership, or more appropriately, the act of leading, is viewed as a process in which people collectively engage in a qualitative change.

[P5] Last, but not least, the discussion is based on the notion that today's significantly more interdependent world will bring us together more than ever before with men and women who are unlike ourselves in background and ways of life. This dynamic will increasingly call on us to come to grips with our own personal and cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs in order to facilitate mutually rewarding intercultural interactions (Hofstede, 1991; Rhinesmith, 1993; Triandis, 1994).

[P6] The discussion's intended audiences are those among us whose task it is to assist practicing leaders around the world who may find themselves disoriented, confused, or plainly at a loss

when working across national and/or cultural boundaries. It is hoped that by integrating the three areas of adult development, leadership development, and international management (as reflected in the above premises) fresh and conceptually sound insights into developmental activities will surface. These insights should assist men and women to prepare themselves for the complexities of global leadership. In the process, due to the emphasis on adult development, the discussion will limit itself to the personal, interpersonal, and cultural (as opposed to the technical or business-related) aspects of leadership.

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### **1. The Argument**

[P7] The numbers of lists of competencies, mindsets, or skills that global leaders ought to have are becoming legion. The lists typically exhort individuals working in an international environment to be psychologically mature, show great cognitive complexity, be emotionally stable and, of course, know their business. They are encouraged to become participant observers, so that they may learn as much as possible about the environment in which they work and, correspondingly, about themselves. And, the lists describe in some detail the greater complexities with which individuals in the international arena need to cope.

[P8] While these lists are useful on the descriptive level --- since they tend to highlight the mental, emotional, and behavioral prerequisites for success --- they fall short in three important aspects. First, the rationale that is given for developing these competencies is *reactive* in nature. Basically, it asserts that we ought to change because the world around us is changing. While this seems to make intuitive sense, it would raise some eyebrows if we were asked to change, let's say, from our current democratic ideals to a totalitarian mindset, because our society happened to have turned that way. In addition, it obscures the fact that (potentially or actually) we can be active partners and shapers of our lives and the world.

**"We are cognitively and emotionally mismatched to meet the mental demands of modern life and, as a result, experience the changes around us as turbulence, chaos, or as permanent white water." from Kegan (1994) and Vaills (1989)**

[P9] Second, these exhortations and their references to the demands of our changing environment tend to make us forget that there is another equally important call for change. Our very existence as man or woman invites us to stretch and grow toward higher levels of awareness and understanding, as captured in the wisdom of the world's major religions (*Smith, 1991*). Most of this wisdom of humankind encourages us to develop greater levels of openness and inclusiveness of others.

[P10] Third, and most salient for this discussion, the numerous lists of competencies pay little attention to the fact that many, even the most highly-trained among us, are ill-equipped to grasp the complexities of our own culture, let alone those of the French, Chinese, or Mexican with which we may interact. We are *In Over Our Heads*, as Kegan (1994) puts it in the title of his new book. We are cognitively and emotionally mismatched to meet the mental demands of modern life and, as a result, experience the changes around us as turbulence, chaos, or in Vaill's (1989) terminology, as permanent whitewater.

[P11] Stated differently, our culture's curriculum has not helped us develop the mental capacities or frames that would allow us to match complexity of thought, values, and actions with the evolving complexities around us. "[Our] current cultural design requires of adults a qualitative transformation of mind every bit as fundamental as the transformation from magical thinking to concrete thinking required of the school-aged child or the transformation from concrete to abstract thinking required of the adolescent" (*Kegan, 1994, p. 11*). In short, Arthur Conan Doyle's best-known character, Sherlock Holmes, might have admonished his companion, "It's developmental, my dear Watson!"

[P12] So, what do those of us leading in an international environment need to enhance our

likelihood of success? We need a developmental framework that (a) progressively maps various adult levels of understanding, (b) helps to picture these different ways of knowing and grasp the opportunities and limitations of each, and (c) offers insights into the developmental activities necessary to help us become less beholden to our own personal and cultural identity and more inclusive to others who may be very different from ourselves. In short, it is a framework that helps us construct more complex and inclusive ways of understanding our relationship to the world around us, and will allow us to identify the corresponding values, beliefs, and behaviors that are necessary to succeed on the global stage. This is the premise of R. Kegan's adult development model.

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#### **2. The Model**

[P13] As with any other model or theory, whether in economics, leadership, or psychology, Kegan's model of adult development is a particular perspective on the world, in this case, on human development and interaction. Until rigorous cross-cultural research has been conducted, it can't claim universality or comprehensiveness, even though it connects conceptually with many other models of adult development in the U.S. research community. It's a lens through which we view and try to understand our mental development as adults. It is offered here as a heuristic tool to better understand the struggle and success, frustration, and exhilaration that may be experienced by those who lead in an international arena. It's an invitation to explore, not to judge or discount.

[P14] Kegan proposes five levels of consciousness that describe our evolving ways of knowing (*See Table 1 for an overview*). They are differentiated by degree of complexity of thought and degree of openness to self and others. The model's major premise sees us develop along these lines as we actively interact with the mental and emotional demands of our lives, whether at home, at school, at work, or in our communities. Thus, the levels are not seen as an expression of an evolving biological order, but rather as a reflection of our learning as we engage with our surroundings. It is for this latter characteristic that Kegan's model seems to be particularly relevant to the global leadership discussion.

[P15] The levels of primary interest here are levels three through five, since they concern themselves with adult years. In particular, levels three and four capture most of the adults that Kegan and others found in their studies, even though level five appears to describe the embodiment of a global leader. Yet, as we will see, each level carries with it some unique assets and potential liabilities in an international arena. At this point, a simple example may best illustrate what mental frames individuals at each level tend to use and what types of interactions and attributions may follow from them.

[P16] *Level Three:* Let's say "Terry," a successful manager at corporation XYZ, located in Perth, Australia, has been assigned to help out for three months with an important project at her employer's subsidiary near Maastricht, The Netherlands. She has been with the company for 15 years and loves Perth and her surroundings. Her parents and friends live nearby and she has enjoyed fishing and sailing in the Indian Ocean ever since she can remember. She has been on brief but pleasant vacation trips to Singapore and Thailand, and she is looking forward to her first time in Europe.

[P17] The work with her Dutch colleagues proceeds very well. There is good camaraderie, everybody is competent, and the completion of the task is on schedule. Yet there are a few things that gnaw at her. These things make her question her co-workers' commitment to the project and to the company as a whole. In a number of instances, when she suggests working through the evening or on the weekend because of the project's requirements, her colleagues bail out, citing plans they have made with friends or family. On other occasions, she clearly feels that they spend too much time on making a decision. It seems that everybody wants a say and that the

Dutch project leader is just not assertive enough to make them accept his ideas. In short, she is pretty certain that her Dutch co-workers could move quickly up the organizational ladder if they were just more committed to the task at hand, showed stronger career drives, and were a bit more willing to defer to their managers' ideas.

[P18] In Kegan's model, Terry illustrates a level-three organizing frame for operating in the world. She knows what people who want to succeed in an organization *ought* to do. It has helped *her* reach the position of success with which this company has entrusted her. And, she also knows that managers *ought* to be assertive when charged with an important project.

[P19] What she doesn't know is that she expresses deeply embedded values and expectations that she most likely acquired over her lifetime back in Australia. She judges her Dutch co-workers' behavior based on her own personal and cultural experiences. In fact, she may not have the faintest idea why her Dutch colleagues, in turn, may think of her as a workaholic or as too deferential to the project leader. Given the values of their society, they know that work and career are not everything in life. Making time for friends and family are equally or more important. They also know that decisions are better made with everyone's active participation, independent of each other's formal roles. In a nutshell, neither she nor her Dutch co-workers realize that what both parties "know" is not a description of factual behavior of others. Their ways of "knowing" have been unknowingly acquired over a lifetime.

[P20] As a result, individuals at the third level of consciousness tend to take their own identities as a given or as automatic measuring sticks against which others are compared. If the assumptions, values, beliefs, and practices on which their identities are based are directly or indirectly questioned, they withdraw, get irritated or resentful, or fight to maintain their points of view. We could say that they are *unknowingly* owned by their identities and their resulting viewpoints, emotions, and actions; that they largely *live others' explicit or implicit expectations*.

[P21] It is easy to see that a level-three way of knowing invites plenty of misunderstandings, frustrations, or outright conflicts, both domestically and internationally. The world of international diplomacy, intercultural communications, and international management, is particularly full of such examples. Individuals (or organizations) working across national boundaries are especially vulnerable to having their culturally colored worldviews and ways of life challenged.

[P22] *Level Four*: If Terry had been operating from the cognitive and emotional frame of level four, she might have been aware of the cultural assumptions, values, and beliefs that she was bringing with her to Maastricht. She probably would have had the experiences during her lifetime to give her the opportunity to reflect on the implicit societal norms that had contributed to how she saw herself and others, and what she considered important in life. This, in turn, might have allowed her to see her interpretations of her Dutch co-workers' behavior more in light of her own cultural values and beliefs, rather than as expressions of her colleagues' shortcomings.

[P23] Similarly, it might have prepared her to concern herself not so much with what her Dutch team members did *not* do, but rather with what they *did* do and, thereby, opened the door to exploring the reasons for their actions. This could have helped her better understand *their* values and beliefs, for example, why they seemed to attach priority to spending time with their friends and family.

[P24] Most important, individuals at level four increasingly look at themselves. They become eager to better understand the early authorities in their lives and the additional influences at school, college, or work that shaped their thinking, values, and behavioral patterns. They want to go beyond unknowingly living out others' expectations, e.g., the implicit norms of their parents, spouses, managers, communities, and societies. They want to begin to live on their own. They are intent on shaping their own identities. They aspire to lead lives as *self-regulated, autonomous, self-aware individuals*.

[P25] As a result, they are not owned by what others, at home or abroad do, or do not do, to them. They feel responsible for their own actions and reactions. They know that nobody can *make* them feel resentful or angry; that it is their choice to react that way. They are, in the truest sense, self-regulated in their thoughts, actions and reactions. They also invite and encourage others to be the same.

[P26] As Kegan and others found in their studies of adults, even among those in leadership roles, fewer than 50 percent showed consistent level-four behaviors. Stated differently, intelligence, technical expertise, and even age are not sufficient pre-conditions for this level of consciousness. It requires life experiences or planned developmental activities on or off the job to help individuals to learn the complexity of thought and openness to self (and others) described for this level.

[P27] *Level Five*: Returning once more to our example, Terry might have realized that the assignment in The Netherlands afforded her a unique opportunity to grow beyond her ways of knowing. At level five, she might have actively explored her Dutch colleagues' ideas, values, and assumptions *to question and/or enrich her own*. She might have stepped back from her intermittent irritations, befuddlement, or critical assessment of them and asked herself, "Why do I feel that way? What (personal, professional, or cultural) assumptions am I making here? Why do I feel so strongly that the Dutch project manager ought to be more assertive?" Or, "What can I learn from this for my own work and family life back home?"

**To lead in a multicultural environment we need a framework of cognitive complexity and openness to others.**

[P28] In fact, she might have recognized before she left that she was incomplete (as she realized in retrospect, that she had always been incomplete as a natural part of becoming a fully-functioning adult); that she wanted to become more open and inclusive, even to concepts, events, and practices that were contradictory or in strong conflict with her own. Indeed, that she needed those different viewpoints and approaches to work and family in order to "discover the other *me* in herself."

[P29] So, to paraphrase Lao Tsu, she might have been ready to learn something new every day, and every day let go of something (of her pre-conceptions, stereotypes, or cherished beliefs) to achieve greater understanding or wisdom. She might have felt unrestricted by her own personal, professional, and cultural boundaries. In Kegan's terminology, she might have approached the assignment as if her own self at the time was an "object" to be explored and/or transformed. Her primary interest might have been to help the project succeed *and* use the assignment as a whole to continue her own developmental journey.

[P30] To lead in a multicultural environment from this kind of mental and emotional framework is probably the exception. Yet, it seems to incorporate all the critical capacities that global leadership studies require, such as cognitive complexity, openness to others, emotional energy, psychological maturity, or tolerance for ambiguity and change. What the studies rarely explore, however, is how the individual, organization, and society as a whole can help develop these capacities in our leaders in deliberate ways (*Center for Creative Leadership, 1995*).

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#### **3. One Best Way?**

[P31] Before we explore some of these developmental activities, it may be helpful to briefly remind ourselves that all three levels of adult ways of knowing and acting in the world carry with them strengths and potential liabilities when working in an international environment. There is no one best way.

[P32] Since leadership, at its core, deals with people interacting around some challenge or opportunity, the characteristics of the task and people (as well as their cultural context) will determine which approach offers the greatest advantages. In other words, *it depends* (*Hoppe, 1990*).

[P33] Notwithstanding this caution, Table Two provides examples of typical assets or liabilities that each level of consciousness may experience when applied in the international arena. Like most comparisons, the differences among the levels are somewhat overstated to highlight the *potential* strengths or pitfalls of each.

**Table 2: Adult Development Levels: One Best Way?**

<i>Potential Assets in the International Environment</i>	<i>Potential Liabilities in the International Environment</i>
Level III	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• dependable</li> <li>• loyal to home org</li> <li>• trouble shooter (short-term)</li> <li>• (culturally) predictable</li> <li>• follows chain of command</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• needs back-home guidance</li> <li>• overly competitive</li> <li>• lacks insight in impact on others</li> <li>• (culturally) judgmental</li> <li>• stressed</li> </ul>
Level IV	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• willing to excel</li> <li>• respectful of others</li> <li>• able to act independently</li> <li>• willing to negotiate</li> <li>• disembedded from culture</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• vulnerable to sense of failure</li> <li>• lacks closeness to others</li> <li>• acts as "outpost"</li> <li>• overly demanding</li> <li>• "goes native"</li> </ul>
Level V	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• actively listens <i>for</i> other voices</li> <li>• loyal to the greater good</li> <li>• collaborative</li> <li>• open to own and others' imperfections</li> <li>• empowers self and others</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "over people's head"</li> <li>• lacks loyalty to home org</li> <li>• out-of-touch with "reality"</li> <li>• difficult to predict</li> <li>• overly idealistic and trusting</li> </ul>

[P34] It is apparent from these examples that most of the potential pitfalls reflect the perceived demands of the home organization (such as Terry's in our fictional example). They could be seen, therefore, as more of an expression of the organization's developmental level than that of the individual. However, there is justification to conclude that the potential strengths of levels four and five are prerequisites for the *long-term* effectiveness of any global or domestic leader. So, the question remains: How can these strengths be developed in less haphazard ways?

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**4. Developmental Activities**

[P35] Given the previous discussions, helping men and women become effective across national boundaries would greatly benefit from an adult development perspective. It would (1) allow for a more targeted approach to leadership development, (2) encourage proactive interventions, and

(3) provide a better match between developmental activity and the individual's level of development. The latter, in particular, would protect persons on international assignments from receiving the implicit message that it is solely their fault when they are not up to complexities of working in a culturally different environment.

[P36] It is not surprising to learn from global leadership and expatriate studies that many of the more successful individuals happened to have had experiences earlier in their lives that helped them learn "the lessons of difference and ...

**Leadership at its core deals with people interacting around some challenge or opportunity**

accommodation" (*Wilson & Dalton, 1996, p. 5*). For example, they may have grown up with immigrant parents, gone to school abroad, lived in an ethnically diverse community, or been relocated from one part of the country to another. While it is obvious that their experiences cannot be routinely replicated for the vast majority of internationally savvy leaders needed today, they can be approximated in *the classroom, on the job, and off the job*.

[P37] If we were to use an adult developmental framework as guidance, what kind of developmental experiences – shy of sending individuals off to foreign soils for long periods of time --would we be looking for? Table Three illustrates a suggested matrix of activities that could help develop the capacities Kegan's model calls for *before* people are given major international responsibilities. Their overarching objectives would be to expand the individual's complexity of thought and openness to self and others.

**Table 3: Matrix of Developmental Activities**

*A. Assumption Exploring? Dis-Embedding/Going-Against-the Grain:*

<b>Training</b>	<b>On-the-Job</b>	<b>Off-the-Job</b>
Cross-Cultural Simulations	Working with Foreign Nationals	Interdisciplinary Studies
Diversity/Cultural Training	Short-Term Expatriate Assignments	Semester Abroad
Keeping a Journal	Functional Rotation	Learning New Skill

*B. Relationship-Building/Learning from Others/Diversity:*

<b>Training</b>	<b>On-the-Job</b>	<b>Off-the-Job</b>
Outward Bound	Establishing Peer Networks	Intercultural Studies
How to Give and Receive Feedback	Mentoring (mentor or mentee)	Tutoring Non-Native Speakers
Learning to Dialogue/ Art of Questioning	Work-Site-Change Partnerships	Volunteering at Nursing Home or Hospice

*C. System-Thinking/Dialectical Thinking/Boundary-Integrating:*

<b>Training</b>	<b>On-the-Job</b>	<b>Off-the-Job</b>
Case Studies	Headquarters Apprenticeship	Political Science Studies

Organizational Learning	Start-Up Assignments	Volunteering in Community Governance/ Boards
Exercises in 'Right Brain' Thinking	Strategic Planning Taskforce	Debate Club

*D. Collaborative/Networking/Negotiating:*

<b>Training</b>	<b>On-the-Job</b>	<b>Off-the-Job</b>
Experiential Exercises	Join Company Sports Team	Getting Trained as Mediator
Process Consultation and Facilitation	Seeking Fix-it Assignments	Holding Office in Professional Association
Negotiation Techniques	Joining Cross-Functional Product Team	Volunteering for United Way

[P38] It is apparent that many of the examples have a U.S. flavor. Thus, to provide meaningful expressions somewhere else, activities would have to be chosen to reflect the resources and opportunities of the organization or society in which people live. Equally, many of the examples overlap, which is unavoidable and in fact, desirable since our thinking and acting tend to develop towards greater integration as we grow as adults (*Kolb, 1984*).

[P39] However, the key point is that we must be more targeted, proactive, and sensitive to the developmental and learning levels of individuals, and we need to go beyond exhortations in our preparation and support of global leaders.

[P40] Last, but not least, those of us who have chosen domestic and/or international education, training, or consultancy as our field, hold a weighty responsibility toward the men and women who entrust themselves or are entrusted to us. Identities at any level of adult development took pains and joys to develop. They are not to be toyed with, whether knowingly or unknowingly. People need to feel safe with us. They need to know that we understand where they are in their development and where they might be going. They need to be encouraged and enabled to stretch, but not to over stretch, take risks but not to be reckless, take themselves seriously, but not overly so. They need a learning environment that is characterized by a genuine caring for their growth. A deeper understanding of adult development will go far toward that end.

**Concluding Remarks and an Invitation**

[P41] The main premise of this discussion has been that the challenges and opportunities of leading an international environment find most of us "in over our heads". The complexity of our thoughts, viewpoints, and capacities to interact with others who are different is often greatly overmatched by the world around us. As a result, we experience work and life in general as chaotic, turbulent, and disorienting.

[P42] Given this premise, R. Kegan's model of adult development was introduced to provide a framework for exploring the complexity of thought and degree of openness to self and others that might be needed to function effectively in the international arena. It was offered as a developmental map that could help those preparing global leaders to go beyond largely descriptive lists of global competencies. Moreover, it was used to illustrate developmental activities that individuals and organizations could undertake throughout adult life to enhance the major capacities that appear to be most helpful for dealing with the complexities of leadership anywhere!

[P43] Throughout the discussion, the adult development perspective was presented as an

invitation to explore its implications for the development of leaders working across national and/or cultural boundaries. This same spirit informs the following three questions. It is hoped that they'll stimulate further exploration among us.

1. Which particular levels of consciousness are called for in *your* personal and/or leadership situation?
2. What particular struggles, discomforts, or even pain do you experience in your intercultural work that may be indicative of some growing or stretching that you may need to do?
3. What can you do to help yourself and others develop a better cognitive, emotional, and behavioral grasp of the challenges or opportunities facing you?

Have a successful journey! Bon Voyage! Gute Reise!

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