

Integrating Implicit Leadership Theories and Fit Into the Development of Global Leaders: A 360-Degree Approach

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We agree with Holt and Seki (2012) that tools for assessing and developing leaders have not kept up with the paradoxical realities faced today by global leaders. One such reality is that coworkers from different parts of the world have different mental models of what effective leadership entails. The same leadership characteristic or behavior can be seen as effective in one context and ineffective in another. This is particularly salient in today's organizational context with global leaders working across cultures.

But what if assessments for global leaders could take this fact into account? This is what we have been exploring, an approach to assess and develop leaders that is grounded in information-categorization theories of leadership, such as implicit leadership theories (ILTs; Lord & Maher, 1991), and the organizational fit or congruence literature (e.g., Ostroff & Judge, 2007) from the domain of organizational behavior. Applying ILTs and fit to the practice of 360-degree feedback moves the field away from the traditional approaches of assessing leadership that assume one set of global skills or abilities exists and that a certain optimum level of competence is needed for effective leadership. We believe that such an optimum is not objective, not even inter-subjective, but that leadership is "in the eye of the beholder." This ILT approach

frees managers from the traditional "more is better" mindset of competency development and requires them to become sensitive and aware of the individual needs of those around them.

ILTs and Fit

ILTs propose that people are recognized and categorized as leaders depending on the degree to which they fit a person's prototype of what a leader should be (i.e., a person's ILT). Leadership categorization follows the process of comparing a target person to one's own individual leadership prototype, and depending on the match between the target person and the prototype, the target person will be categorized as a leader. From this perspective, a leader is effective (i.e., recognized as a good leader) if there is a congruence (i.e., fit) between what the perceived leadership behavior is of the target person and an individual's own leadership prototype in his or her mind.

Leadership prototypes are influenced by the context in which people work and live, and therefore vary among people and among groups. Working in modern organizations typified by diversity (Ernst & Chrobot-Mason, 2010; Yukl, 2006), leaders must understand that their own prototype or image of what a leader is may be much different than what others believe leaders should be. This is particularly relevant in multicultural settings, as culture is one of the main influencers for leadership prototypes (Chhokar, Brodbeck, & House, 2007; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). Thus, in multicultural

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settings, leaders will have to find a way to fit their behavior to multiple leadership prototypes of their coworkers. Sometimes those prototypes are similar, sometimes they may be contradictory.

Effective leadership therefore depends on a manager's ability to understand all those diverse leadership prototypes and assess how they could best match their leadership behavior to these prototypes. This includes leadership versatility (i.e., flexibly changing styles depending on needs and expectations of different people) as well as authenticity (i.e., ensuring that all these styles are still aligned with one's leadership; Munusamy, Ruderman, & Eckert, 2010).

How Multisource (360) Feedback Can Integrate ILTs and Fit to Help Global Leaders

It is at this point that 360-degree feedback can help managers understand how they are perceived in comparison to the leadership prototypes that people around them are carrying. Multisource or 360-degree feedback has been a hallmark of leadership development initiatives for more than 20 years, with a majority of *Fortune* 1000 firms using it (Atwater & Waldman, 1998). It is a great tool to enhance self-awareness, and it enables leaders to identify specific development needs (Bracken, Timmreck, & Church, 2001). Recent publications have touted ideas or best practices that 360-degree processes should implement or at least consider (Atwater, Brett, & Charles, 2007; Morgeson, Mumford, & Campion, 2005). But as we have noted before, such competency-based assessments implicitly assume that 360-degree feedback is based on competencies that require a certain optimum (usually, the more the better) of a competency that a leader should display. They do not test this assumption explicitly. Thus, the cultural appropriateness of such assessments are based on the condition that the measured competencies are valid predictors of leadership effectiveness in all cultures and are also seen in the same way by all members of these cultures.

Putting Theory Into Practice

Along with Marian Ruderman, Felix Brodbeck, and Phillip Braddy, we have developed and piloted an ILT approach to 360-degree feedback (Ruderman, Brodbeck, Eckert, Gentry, & Braddy, 2011). Based on the GLOBE research (Chhokar et al., 2007; House et al., 2004), this tool uses a dual-rating scale assessment of expectations and perceptions of leadership. Specifically, the tool evaluates leadership expectations (i.e., how the rater believes certain leadership qualities and characteristics contribute or inhibit leadership in general, in his or her own mind) and leadership perceptions (i.e., actual ratings of their target leader on those same leadership qualities and characteristics) and looks at the fit between the two.

Managers and their raters complete the assessment using 29 leadership characteristics, summarized on 6 dimensions that correspond closely to GLOBE (hierarchical, autonomous, charismatic, humane-oriented, participative, and team-oriented). These dimensions have been confirmed in a global validation study as applicable on an individual level (Ruderman et al., 2011). First, the tool measures leadership prototypes (the expectations of leaders) by asking the respondent to think of the qualities and skills of effective leaders they know and, while holding this image in their mind, to rate the 29 characteristics on a 7-point scale from 1 = *greatly inhibits outstanding leadership*, 4 = *has no impact on outstanding leadership*, to 7 = *contributes greatly to outstanding leadership*. After rating their leadership prototype (i.e., expectations), raters are then asked to rate the extent to which the target leader demonstrates or displays those same leadership characteristics (i.e., perceptions), again using a 7-point rating scale, but with different anchors: 1 = *not at all* to 7 = *to a very great extent*. In the feedback to managers, expectations are placed on the Y-axis and are paired with the accompanying perceptions scores on the X-axis. This display helps

managers see whether they “live up” to the leadership expectations of their raters.

The feedback and developmental process with an ILT-based 360-tool differs from more traditional approaches. In an ILT-based instrument, perceptions per se are seen as neutral; they are given meaning only by putting them into the context of leadership prototypes. This is crucial for practitioners and for feedback-receiving managers to understand. A high perception score does not automatically mean good or bad. Rather, the evaluation depends on the accompanying leadership prototypes of raters. In practice, ILT-based feedback centers on the identification of alignment and misalignment between expectations and perceptions. Leaders need to see where both scores “match” or “fit” to indicate they are doing something right. In addition, leaders need help to see where there is a mismatch and consider various options on how to deal with this mismatch. Often, match and mismatch differs across rater groups, making “one-size-fits-all” suggestions for behavior change useless or even harmful. Through such a tool, managers understand that global leadership is complex and highly context dependent. Based on this insight, ILT-based instruments can increase a manager’s leadership versatility. The most valuable feedback may happen “on the fringes,” for example when a leadership characteristic is seen as only slightly negative, yet the leader is engaging in it to a very high extent. This mismatch can be detrimental for leadership effectiveness overall, even if the leader is “spot on” on other characteristics that are seen as highly positive. Thus, ILT-based 360-degree feedback demands a holistic perspective, integrating cultural communalities, individual uniqueness, and the specific context of a manager’s work environment, into the feedback and development process.

Limitations and Conclusions

There are certain limitations to an ILT approach to 360s. For instance, a person’s expectations of what leadership is may

shift over time. In addition, prototypes or expectations of leaders may also differ depending on context. For example, what leaders are expected to be at work may be different than expectations of leaders in government, religion, family, or community. Further, interpreting ILT-based 360 data should not lead to an oversimplification that culture is portrayed as the “one and only” influence on ILTs. Other influences, such as individual differences in socialization or industry-specific leadership prototypes (House et al., 2004) should not be downplayed too much.

Furthermore, with the amount of people global managers work with, if each takes part in an ILT-based 360-degree process, the amount of information of expectations and perceptions from each person may overload the feedback-receiving leader with information. Care must be taken in interpreting the feedback, both from the perspective of the leader and the coach or practitioner that is facilitating the feedback.

Using a 360-degree process can aid in the development of leaders, particularly those working in a context of global leadership. Although 360s have been around for decades, they have fallen short in methodologies that accurately portray contemporary thinking around global leadership. We believe that incorporating the domains of ILTs and fit into 360s can move the field forward in assessing and developing leaders in today’s modern global work context.

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