

Alchimie Group

INTERNATIONAL LEADERSHIP:
A GLOBAL MINDSET

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*“You will either step forward
into growth or you will
step back into safety.”*

Abraham Maslow

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“Leadership consists not in degrees of technique but in traits of character.”

Lewis H. Lapham

As the complexity of global business increases through widening cultural diversity, the demand for international leadership has become significantly more important. In this article we will be exploring what exactly is required to have a global mindset to leadership. Does one need to have lived in more than one country; travelled the world; speak several languages; managed an international project? Is there also a specific point where an individual has achieved and experienced enough to be classified as having a truly global approach to leadership?

Although our head office is based in the UK, 90% of our clients and projects are based across Europe, North America and Asia. We have observed that the considered key attributes of international leadership can alter from company to company and from country to country, depending on the values and culture of an organisation. Therefore, it is important to establish what we mean by the term ‘international leadership’ and ‘global mindset.’

According to Rhinesmith, a global mindset is:

A way of being rather than a set of skills. It is an orientation of the world that allows one to see certain things that others do not. A global mindset means the ability to scan the world from a broad perspective, always looking for unexpected trends and opportunities that may constitute a threat

or an opportunity to achieve personal, professional or organizational objectives.¹



Rhinesmith’s definition is helpful, as it does not depend on specific core skills but rather considers the need for an individual or organisation to develop unique competencies in its approach towards leadership. A global mindset can be seen as a journey of discovery built upon recognition and reflection from experiences that expand an individual’s

¹ S. H. Rhinesmith, *Open Door To A Global Mindset, Training & Development*, 1995

perspectives. Circumstances can assist this journey, for example children born into bi-cultural families or raised internationally might have an innate understanding, but still need to mature towards internationalism.

As executive recruiters, operating internationally, it is essential to understand the key characteristics of a global mindset, as well as the unique capabilities valued by an organisation. Many research papers have tried to rank the important indicators for international leadership, which are summarised by these 5 points:

1. Thinking Globally
2. Appreciating Cultural Diversity
3. Technological Understanding
4. Building Partnerships and Alliances
5. Sharing Leadership ²

² Goldsmith Research, 2003

It is therefore important to understand the competencies that underpin these attributes. For example, thinking globally is underpinned by the ability to think laterally, to effectively manage and interpret strategic and complex situations. Sharing leadership is underpinned by the ability to engage, understand, learn and collaborate towards shared goals.



A global mindset is sometimes assumed to refer to international experience. We have researched some of the biggest UK firms to analyse the geographical

backgrounds of their boardrooms. Companies such as BP, Vodafone and Shell have all appointed a broad range of nationalities from both the UK and across Europe – and in the case of BP to include North America – perhaps reflecting where these companies fiscal interests lie. Interestingly companies such as Tesco and Rolls Royce continue to have a UK dominated boardroom.

We similarly researched some of our advocate companies, who operate internationally, and observed the nationality of their boardrooms. Borg Warner, a US owned automotive manufacturer, for instance has a diverse range of leaders from Europe, UK and the USA. Interestingly companies such as Valeo, a French owned automotive supplier, are very much dominated by leaders from their country of origin; and

similarly Honeywell's leadership team is largely dominated by a US boardroom.

This range of nationality in the boardroom is not a reflection on how good or bad a company or their leadership style is – because all of these companies would be considered international (ie. 20% of their revenue and staffing comes from outside of their headquartered country). Rather it demonstrates the point that international leadership is not based on nationality but character and understanding.

The attributes of global leadership go beyond geographical placement and even experience, and are instead rooted in the relationship between an individual's instincts, knowledge and behaviour. This is not to say experience is not relevant, because of course, a successful international assignment or an in-depth knowledge of a particular market can be

extremely valuable. Moreover, experience is an opportunity for learning and development. When we, as a company, engage with future leaders we not only recognise their career route and progression, but connect with how their instincts, knowledge and behaviour patterns enable them to optimise the opportunities they encounter. We believe career future is as important as career history, and that leadership always has a future perspective. This is definitely true for international leadership as globalisation continues.

There are common desirable competencies for an international leader to possess, such as: good communication, business knowledge, technological savvy, personality, etc. These are all valuable qualities, and yet there are some individuals who possess these talents but do not transcend their industries or

cultures and develop a truly global perspective.

Although core competencies for leadership are essential for every international company, we have identified among the very best companies a greater level of global mindset running throughout the organisation, from boardroom to shop floor. We attribute these competencies as Universal Characteristics of Leadership.

EMPATHY

Universal characteristics are capabilities that reach beyond geography, function or industry. These characteristics are built on core principles; a good example is 'empathy'. It is our experience that the leaders who have most understood their organisations and the mission they are engaged in, have strong empathetic orientations. For example, a few years ago

we worked with a General Manager at a Hungarian Plant. We observed that as a non-Hungarian national he had an ability to empathise and connect with those around him. Instead of expecting to be understood his first priority was to understand. Upon his leaving, he was equally appreciated by the cleaners, porters and senior leaders alike.



TRUST

Another universal characteristic that we look for is 'trust'. Several years ago our MD, Peter Smith, met with the leadership team of one of the leading automotive suppliers in Europe to discuss their leadership strategy. They commented that the greatest quality they valued was 'trust'. Their argument was that the most common cause for poor performance and their most destructive issue in creating cross cultural teams was mistrust. It can be a problem both on a local level, in how various departments interact, but obviously becomes accentuated over geographical distance. It sounds so obvious, but in reality trust is rarely mentioned as a key attribute to international leadership.

CURIOSITY

There can also be a misconception that one day a leader finally arrives and justifies the term 'global perspective'. However the journey to international leadership is never complete. What distinguishes an exceptional leader from a good one is the desire and commitment to continue learning. Although experience and history are of course important signposts to an individual's international pedigree, they do not alone guarantee effective leadership. To have a global perspective is to understand the point of difference within and between the different parts of an organisation and to learn ways to overcome these boundaries. Therefore we always look for 'curious' leaders who are continually hungry to uncover more; understanding there is never a fixed point of arrival where a leader has done enough.

Many recruiters will 'thin slice' an individual by attempting to tick a certain range of boxes, satisfying the recruitment checklist. There are no singular accomplishments that define an international leader, rather it is more a process of becoming and overcoming. A global mindset should not be defined by external achievements alone, but should rather be viewed through the lens of an individual's character and values. Therefore international leadership is defined not by nationality or history but by an individual's global mindset.

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About Alchimie Group:

Alchimie Group is a global talent management firm working with leading organizations across diverse sectors and regions, who all share values that promote the universal characteristics of leadership.

For further information please feel free to contact us at info@alchimiegroup.com