

INTERCULTURAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCIES FOR U.S. LEADERS
IN THE ERA OF GLOBALIZATION

Eileen Sheridan

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Purpose of the Study

The 2003 *RAND Report* proclaimed that increasing globalization has created greater complexity for those leading organizations (Treverton & Bikson, 2003). Ostensibly, while business opportunities are increasing with globalization, the changing business context requires new organizational capabilities, specifically new leadership competencies (Treverton & Bikson).

A review of the literature suggests that in order to remain competitive, U.S. business leaders require skills to adapt to diverse national, organizational, and professional cultures (Harris, Moran, and Moran 2004; Michaels, Handfield-Jones & Axelrod 2001). However, to acquire or develop new competencies, U.S. business leaders must first know what specific competencies to develop and how to acquire them.

Competency lists abound and to date, there appears to be a disagreement in the literature of which competencies leaders should possess. These lists overlap competencies, however they do not converge (Pedersen & Connerley 2005). In addition, each researcher offers different methodologies that are not easily comparable. Finally and most importantly, much of the available literature related to intercultural competence is prescriptive rather than resulting from research, or are drawn from a U.S. perspective.

The purpose of this qualitative, descriptive study was to identify vital intercultural competencies needed by U.S. business leaders working in global, intercultural situations. The study examined the authoritative feedback concerning the intercultural competencies within U.S. businesses by a diverse group of participating experts.

Method

This qualitative study examined the opinions of a diverse group of participating experts in the area of global leadership competencies. Data were collected through a Delphi methodology during which three rounds of questionnaires were administered to determine the necessary competencies. The Delphi method is an established research technique used for gathering expert feedback for distillation. In this case, the method served as the means to gather expert opinions on cultural and social phenomena (Linstone & Turoff, 1975). The results of a Delphi study are useful when reliable and valid starting points are necessary to improve program development (Weaver & Connolly, 1988). In some circumstances, this wide array of expert opinion generates a range of alternative solutions to issues and problems facing the researcher (Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

In this case, the researcher expected that a survey of global intercultural participating experts would lead to possible patterns of how culture influences global leadership practices. The Delphi method provided four required variables for this research study: anonymity, iteration, controlled feedback, and statistical aggregation of group response (Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

The study sought to answer the question: What intercultural leadership competencies are essential for U.S. leaders to develop in the era of globalization?

Intercultural experts fitting the intent of the study became selected participants. Each participant was a recognized and published expert in the intercultural communications field and possessed a minimum of 10 years of experience in either university-level academics or the consulting industry. These participants did not fall under the federal guidelines for vulnerable subjects. Internet access was necessary for

each participant to participate in this Internet delivered study. In addition, the participants were also required to possess written English fluency since the questionnaires were administered using U.S. English.

Questionnaires were devised using the SurveyMonkey.com Internet platform. The questionnaire posed research questions regarding the intercultural leadership competencies necessary for U.S. business leaders and asked how these leaders could develop such skills. Each prospective panelist received a separate electronic mail invitation and feedback to protect anonymity. They received notification that the study data gathered would remain confidential. They then had a specific period during which to respond to each questionnaire. An advantage of the Delphi process includes the logical progression of participating experts focusing on a selected topic, providing answers, and then viewing descriptive statistics from the group (Oakley, 2001).

The round-one questions were open-ended for full and free comment by the participating experts. In round two, the questions were structured as fixed-alternative options. However, the panelists were provided the opportunity to respond to an open-ended comments question. In round three, the panelists responded to fixed-alternative questions, and were provided one opportunity at the end of the questionnaire to voice comments.

Data analysis was an ongoing activity of obtaining and organizing emerging themes from the data collection process (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Using inductive analysis, repeated Delphi data emerged to discover developing themes and patterns (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Collective and individual data from each participant received analysis. Each response combined after its submission through the SurveyMonkey.com

Web site report and duplicate responses from the first round's feedback received elimination.

A Likert-type scale of 1 to 5 made it possible to score the final list of specific second round rankings. A total score for each response ranking emerged from the statistical analysis performed. The SurveyMonkey.com Web site report actually listed the responses and their occurrence percentage (SurveyMonkey, 2004). Since the data may not have been continuous, the median emerged as a statistical indicator. Only those responses receiving a median score of 4 or higher remained for the third round (Linstone & Turoff, 1975).

Third-round rankings emerged in order of importance; numerically from 1 to n . N was equal to the total number of responses to that particular question. Round 3 data analysis concentrated on the total score received for each response. The response to the original research question receiving the lowest score ranked as the most important intercultural competency of a U.S. business leader. The qualitative data lay in the descriptive statistics generated by this study. Descriptive statistics, defined as "mathematical techniques for organizing, summarizing, and displaying data" (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996, p. 757), appeared as the numerical data analysis in this study.

For this study, consensus occurred when an interquartile range score of less than 1.2 existed (Zeliff & Heldenbrand, 1993). This process of analysis provided a rationale for strong similarities among the participants (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). A second component of analysis evaluated the perceived importance of each item. To accomplish this, the 5-point scale divided into different levels of importance or relevance. These items received categorization based on an analysis of feedback combined with

importance (Zeliff & Heldenbrand). The 5-point scale provided an equal interval between high, medium, and low importance of the items as scored by the participants (Leedy & Ormrod). NVivo software (QSR International, 2005) provided further analytical analysis of the data results.

In summary, the object of round 1 was to identify the salient issues pertaining to each research question. A thematic analysis of the round 1 data yielded clusters of interest for each question. The objective in round 2 was to identify the level of importance panelists ascribed to each item, individually. Finally, the objective of round 3 was to rank-order the importance of the items among the clusters related to each research question.

Study Results

Twenty-six (of 27) panelists participated in Round 3 of the study by completing the 18-item questionnaire through Internet delivery. All 26 panelists completed the fixed-alternative questionnaire portion, and 15 completed the open-ended feedback question at the end. Eleven women and 15 men completed the final round questionnaire. Sixteen identified themselves as U.S. born, 10 identified themselves as non-U.S. born (two from the United Kingdom, two from France, two from India, one from Germany, one from Senegal, one from the Netherlands, and one from South Africa). All 26 identified their current professional activities as including aspects of intercultural specialization.

What Intercultural Competencies Can U.S. Business Leaders Develop to Compete Globally?

Three clusters, or categories, of competencies emerged from the thematic analysis performed on the data from round 1, intrapersonal, interpersonal and social (or cultural).

Seven dimensions—identified in Round 1, then rated important in Round 2 and rank-ordered in Round 3—in the intrapersonal competency area then appeared in order of importance. The top-ranked competency in the intrapersonal dimension judged by the panel was *self-awareness*, which received a relative ranking of 2.15. The second-highest ranked competency, receiving a score of 3.04, was *flexibility/adaptability*. The third-ranked competency dimension, *curiosity*, received a score of 3.58. The fourth and the fifth dimensions, *patience* and *ambiguity tolerance*, received 4.04 and 4.35, respectively. Rounding out the intrapersonal dimension ranked at sixth and seventh was *mindfulness* at 5.31 and *imagination* at 5.54.

Above all other competencies in intrapersonal dimension, panelists reported that a U.S. business leader's ability to be self-aware of his or her culture, as well as that of others, should be of primary importance. This finding reinforces Sanchez et al.'s (2000) assertion that a leader arrives in a new cultural situation as ignorant, but then moves into the novice round of awareness. Paige (1993) also opined that competency remains the encompassing knowledge of a target culture combined with self-awareness. Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (2000) also determined that competency occurs when an individual recognizes cultural differences and ultimately reconciles them by transforming conflicting values into complementary values (Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 2000). Sue et al. (1992) further agreed that the first level of intercultural skilled leaders is an awareness of the culturally learned starting points in the leader's thinking. This intercultural awareness becomes the foundation of the leader's decision-making ability, through which the leader interprets knowledge and utilizes skills.

Pedersen and Connerley (2005) believed that the need for intercultural awareness seldom appears in the basic training of leaders.

At the culmination of Round 2, two competency areas were rated for importance and in Round 3, they were ranked in order of importance related to the interpersonal dimension. The two competencies, *perspective taking* and *nonjudgmental*, were rated 1.38 and 1.62, respectively.

On the interpersonal level, the U.S. business leader's ability to take a certain perspective and remain nonjudgmental appeared important to the panelists. Bennett (1993) asserted that as a developmental model, intercultural competence focused on striving toward "the successful acquisition of the international perspective" (p. 24). Boyacigiller and Adler (1997) held that management and leadership theories previously focused on U.S. firms and U.S. perspectives. This ethnocentric approach to business has been the dominant view of U.S. business leaders while operating abroad. Pedersen and Connerley (2005) related that this perspective meant U.S. business leaders tended to consider language, values, and behaviors as standardized and homogenized throughout the world. However, Chomsky (as cited in Schutz, n.d.) asserted that dealing with language "involves an interaction between the text on the one hand, and the culturally-based world knowledge and experientially-based learning of the receiver on the other" (para. 6). The panelists recommended U.S. business leaders keep issues within the relevant cultural perspective.

In the social dimension, five competencies were rated and then ranked for importance. The top-ranked competency according to the panel was *effective communication* at 2.35, followed by *sensitivity/appreciation of difference* at 2.38 and by

local-global perspective at the third position at 3.23. The fourth and fifth positions were *understanding of how leadership is conceptualized in other cultures* at 3.27 and *multilingual* at 3.77.

This study found that on the social level, effective communication remained the top competency for U.S. business leaders. Adler (2002) concurred that the ability to communicate clearly is paramount for a globally competent leader. Moro Bueno and Tubbs (2003) held that exemplary intercultural leaders are able to communicate and motivate others. Simons and Berardo (2004) further determined that these leaders are knowledgeable about communications style differences. Effective communication remain crucial as the forces of globalization are pulling all cultures into a virtual and time-independent business zone (Checkland & Scholes, 1999).

How Can U.S. Business Leaders Recognize the Concept of Culture?

Relative to how U.S. business leaders can recognize the concept of culture in conducting business, the expert panel ranked *cultural immersion* as the top means with a score of 1.58. At the second spot, with a score of 2.04, was using the services of *consultants and mentors*. The third-ranked means was judged *formal training or education* with a score of 3.04, and coming in fourth was *self-education* with a score of 3.35.

Despite the extensive literature review conducted for this study, sparse evidence was found that indicated cultural immersion was a recommended way by past researchers for U.S. business leaders to become more aware of the culture variable. The panelists held that a particular depth of preparation was necessary for U.S. business leaders to become culturally aware prior to intercultural assignments. Becoming immersed in the

culture firsthand was considered important by the intercultural experts, although not by past researchers. As cultural differences are one of the most significant and troublesome variables for multinational companies (Harris et al., 2004), promoting cultural immersion for U.S. business leaders requires future consideration.

How Can U.S. Business Leaders Utilize This Concept of Culture in Understanding Their Own Cultural Background and Bias?

The panel determined that there are three ways that U.S. business leaders can understand their own cultural bias. The first way of understanding was *engagement* with a ranked score of 1.69, narrowly ranked second was *recognition* with a score of 2.15, and at third position was *intentionality* with a ranked score of 2.15.

The panelists reached consensus that U.S. business leaders needed to engage with individuals from other cultures to understand the leaders' own personal cultural background and bias. Past research indicated that culturally skilled leaders moved from being culturally unaware to being aware and sensitive to their own cultural heritage and to valuing and respecting differences (Sue et al., 1992). These leaders were aware of how their own cultural backgrounds, experiences, and attitudes, values, and biases influenced interactions with others. Further, Wren (1995) posited that leadership is central to the human condition, while Shafritz and Ott (2001) opined that the follower is a social animal. The panelists concurred that through engaging with diverse cultures, a leader becomes more aware of a personal cultural framework.

How Can U.S. Business Leaders Analyze and Evaluate Intercultural Situations?

Relative to analysis and evaluation, the 26 panelists first identified, and then in Round 3 ranked, two tools, or paradigms that U.S. business leaders can use to analyze and evaluate intercultural situations. The two tools, *use of intercultural assessments* and *use of intercultural models*, were ranked equally in terms of importance, with a score of 1.50.

The use of tools emerged as the best way U.S. business leaders could analyze and evaluate intercultural situations. Although no one specific tool or paradigm emerged prominently, several experts mentioned the cross-cultural research of Dr. Geert Hofstede within the additional feedback section of the Round 2 survey. Hofstede (2001) stated that ideas about leadership reflect the dominant culture of a country. Hofstede further defined culture as mental software, including the “collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others” (p. 4). A global mindset remains a requirement for future leaders in guiding institutions, organizations, and nations (Harris et al., 2004) through intercultural interactions.

How Can U.S. Business Leaders Negotiate and Make Decisions within Intercultural Situations?

The panelists chose three paradigms through the early rounds related to negotiation and decision making: values-based, context-based, and ambiguity-tolerant perspectives. The context-based perspective garnered the top ranking with a score of 1.73; values-based was second at 2.12 and the ambiguity-tolerant perspective was third with a score of 2.15.

When negotiating and making decisions in intercultural situations, the panelists recommended that U.S. business leaders take a context-based perspective. This finding aligns with the idea that the interculturally competent leader overcomes ethnocentrism (Fennes & Hapgood, 1997) while communicating and analyzing the cultural context and selecting the appropriate behavior (Samovar & Porter, 2001). In terms of cultural studies, Bass (1990) posited that leadership appears situational, while Velde and Svensson (1996) concurred that competence was “relational, interpretative, holistic, and contextual” (p. 7). Pedersen and Connerley (2005) further agreed with the panelists that leaders needed to understand each culturally learned behavior in the context of where that behavior originates and appears.

How Can U.S. Business Leaders Motivate and Lead in Intercultural Situations?

The study panelists ranked *building intercultural understanding* as the top priority related to leading and motivating with a score of 2.23. The second priority appeared as *engaging the culture and its people*, which had a score of 2.77. The third priority perceived by the panel was *integrating culture with business processes and practices*, which received a rank of 2.92. The fourth and fifth priorities were having a *self-other appreciation* and having a *global perspective* with scores of 3.12 and 3.96, respectively.

The panelists reached consensus that building intercultural understanding was the top priority for U.S. business leaders to lead and motivate others. The more leaders know about cultural influences, the better able they are to direct the organization by understanding the behaviors of both their own employees and others outside the organization (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Moro Bueno and Tubbs (2003) posited that effective intercultural leaders are able to communicate and motivate others. These

competencies occur when the leader retains an open mind and respects others. Leadership also results when an individual can influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness of an organization (Javidan & House, 2001).

How Can U.S. Business Leaders Develop Intercultural Teams?

The panelists determined that *selection of team members with intercultural savvy* is the top priority in developing intercultural teams, ranking it with a score of 1.81. In second position was *preparation prior to assignment* with a score of 2.42. Ranked third at 2.69 was *using culturally appropriate business models and processes*. *Shared or joint leadership* ranked fourth.

In developing global teams, the panelists agreed that selecting team members with intercultural savvy was the key priority. By selecting such team members, the experts agreed that intercultural teams would be more effective. The literature reviewed did not discuss “interculturally” savvy team members. However, Javidan and House (2001) asserted that globalization presented unique organizational and leadership challenges, particularly regarding cultural diversity of employees worldwide. Matlay and Westhead (2005) define virtual teams as groups of geographically distributed individuals who interact through interdependent tasks to reach common goals. Gundling (2003) asserted that individuals with “global people skills” (p. 36) were able to facilitate building global teamwork. Geared specifically for the workplace, this model stressed relationship building and global leadership. Gundling also provided a definition of global citizenship that involved “having the will and the ability to work together effectively with other people anywhere in the world” (p. 331). This ability also included such values as trust, respect, social justice, environmental sustainability, and mutual learning.

Study Implications

The study findings indicate that moving a U.S. business leader to a place of cultural competence is a several-tier process. The panelists agreed that a certain amount of effort, energy, and time were required to achieve such intercultural competence. The implication for U.S. leaders and organizations is that the process of internalization of the various components of intercultural competency requires a multifaceted approach. However, Hofstede (2004) asserted that the United States reflected a more short-term orientation in its business environment. Such short-term orientation appears antithetical to the longer-term personal investment required of a U.S. business leader.

Interestingly, the panelists were not in consensus over the concepts of leading and motivating. For the four choices available regarding how U.S. business could lead and motivate in intercultural situations, there was a statistical difference of only 2.23 and 3.96. This suggested that there existed variability in the conceptualization of *leading* and *motivating*. They were also not in consensus in ranking the choices for the cultural dimension of competency, with the statistics ranging from 2.35 to 3.77 for five choices. This data perhaps reflect variability in what it really means to be culturally competent.

Fascinatingly, the panelists appeared to negate *conventional wisdom* and ranked *global perspective* as the bottom choice by a substantial margin of 54%. With consistent responses related to intentionality, sensitivity, and appreciation of difference, the participant's open-ended responses appeared to have a pessimistic tone. Although intercultural competence appeared as *nice*, several panelists suggested that U.S. business leaders rather demonstrate that the leaders actually cared. This concept of care existed in the leaders finding value beyond economic indicators, meeting objectives, and spreading

the *American way*. Rather, caring about the individuals in another culture and understanding how they view leadership emerged as important points.

Significance of Research

This study is the first Delphi research study on intercultural leadership competencies conducted using the Internet. This indicates that the Delphi technique does not necessarily require participants to interact in face-to-face communications, which made the method useful in conducting surveys with qualified participants in a global arena (Gould, 2003). In addition, past research emphasized specific competency variables without detailed explanations and input from intercultural participating experts. This study presented such intercultural feedback. Pedersen and Connerley (2005) determined that most leadership literature focused on data obtained from study participants and researchers from the U. S., whereas this study encompassed feedback from intercultural researchers from Africa, the Americas, Asia, Europe, and the Middle East.

Leadership emerged as a universal concept occurring in all contexts, yet cultures appear to maintain unique perspectives of culture (Ciulla, 2003). The study also highlights that the concept of culture remains one of the most misunderstood constructs within organizations (Pedersen & Connerley, 2005). Data also indicated global leaders must balance commercial and cultural concerns (Harris et al., 2004). In terms of leading others, the data showed that those leaders who paid attention to the concerns of employees and looked at problems in new ways were more effective in their intercultural business dealings (Bass & Avolio, 1990).

The study revealed that U.S. business leaders might concentrate on cultural immersion as a way to learn more about other nations. In addition, the study

demonstrated that selecting culturally savvy team members promotes the effective formation of intercultural teams. Moreover, it is important for leaders to remember that leading and motivating occur within the relevant cultural context. The ways in which leaders behave in the U. S. might not be the most efficient way to lead others, particularly from a distance. Simply showing that they care for their foreign counterparts beyond the bottom line will influence how followers accept a culturally diverse leader.

Recommendations

Data indicated U.S. business leaders acknowledge the growing demands to develop a global mindset, world knowledge, and intercultural skills. The work of the GLOBE (Javidan & House, 201) project helped determine universal and culture-specific leadership behaviors. However, these behaviors are not mutually exclusive, but coexist in a single culture simultaneously. A global mindset prevails when a leader from “one part of the world is able to be comfortable in another because of knowledge and skills that are based on understanding and awareness” (Kedia & Mukherji, 1999, p. 249). Developing such a global mindset remains integral to leaders in this era of globalization. Figure 1 (below) illustrates the seven variables of intercultural leadership competence gleaned from the study data.

Applications of Findings

This study began with both academic and practical interests. On the academic level, the purpose, as expressed above, was to fill a gap in the body of knowledge related to intercultural leadership. In particular, this study sought to conduct research, which included the perspectives of diverse cultures, and to derive leadership competencies based on research rather than from prescriptions. On the practitioner level, the purpose

was to derive a testable and usable model for the preparation of leaders. To this end, the following model (Figure 1), referred to as the Seven “Cs” Intercultural Leadership Model (ILM) appears for consideration, use, and examination.

The Seven “Cs” Model exists as a multi-level framework meant as a tool to build a basic level of understanding of the requirements of interculturally competent leadership, as a framework to build training programs upon, and for testing.

At the level of application, the model prepares leaders to acquire the attitudes and beliefs, skills and experience, and behaviors necessary to lead with competence in intercultural endeavors. In the section following, each of the seven areas, care, connection, consciousness, context, contrasts, cultural immersion, and capability, receive description.

Care. One impressive perspective highlighted by this study’s panelist was that U.S. business leaders should hold and maintain equal concern for the bottom line and for stakeholder groups. This appeared in the qualitative data, in particular. This related to how U.S. business leaders lead and motivate in intercultural situations and again related to decision-making.

Connection. Arguably, the most significant finding of this study was that in order for U. S. business leaders to lead effectively in intercultural situations, such leaders necessarily must engage and interact with those cultures in whose countries they work, if not with many cultures. This seems particularly important in the preparation of U. S. business leaders prior and during a foreign assignment, as well as in terms of their effectiveness in the actual execution of their role.

Consciousness. Most current leadership and managerial models (academic and popular) recommend that a person filling the role of leader and manager needs to develop self-awareness. It is not difficult to imagine that a leader's awareness must be expandable as contexts shift around them, such that the leader becomes clear of a personal cultural background and bias relative to that of other people.

Context. Related to the leader's level and field of awareness (consciousness) is their ability to perceive, discern, and adapt to the situations within which they work, and to suspend judgment. Here, the model's author differentiates between discernment, (meaning to distinguish and be sensitive to) and judgmental (being disapproving and condemnatory). This recommendation derives from the qualitative data related to several areas including the leader's overall competency, their ability to lead and motivate people, and their ability to negotiate and make decisions. In other words, leaders must have the ability to contextualize all of their experiences.

Contrasts. Again, related to consciousness and to context, leaders must be able to work comfortably and effectively with ambiguity. Developing a tolerance for working with contrasting perspectives, methods, and with differing value systems is a critical component in sustaining enduring relationships. This was a recurring theme in the qualitative data and emerged related to leading and motivating followers, negotiating and making decisions, and in analyzing situations. Ambiguity tolerance was a specific competency identified by the panelists.

Cultural Immersion. The most intriguing finding from the study was that the panelists identified an area, which had previously received little or no attention in the literature. This finding was relative to how to prepare (U.S.) leaders for intercultural

assignments, namely, preparation through cultural immersion. The majority of the panelists recommended direct exposure to and experience with other cultures, including living within the culture, learning the language, and engaging the local people.

Capability. The greater meaning and implication drawn from the study's findings were that in order for a U.S. leader to be effective in intercultural situations, it meant the development of sufficient personal and organization capability. On the personal level, it means development of the competencies detailed in all the discussions above. On an organizational level, it means developing these competencies in all people who in some way encounter other cultures.

Future Research

Recommendations for future research include exploring how cultural immersion and the American way of conducting business can effectively coexist. In addition, a study highlighting how leaders understand the concept of caring for their global employees would further global leadership topics. Another proposed research study could include a larger intercultural participant group would provide a wider viewpoint on intercultural issues in other countries. Relative to this idea, a study that examines the concept of leadership (to lead) in other cultures would prove valuable in determining situational leadership strategies. Determining intercultural leadership competencies remains a situational endeavor, as gleaned from the study data.

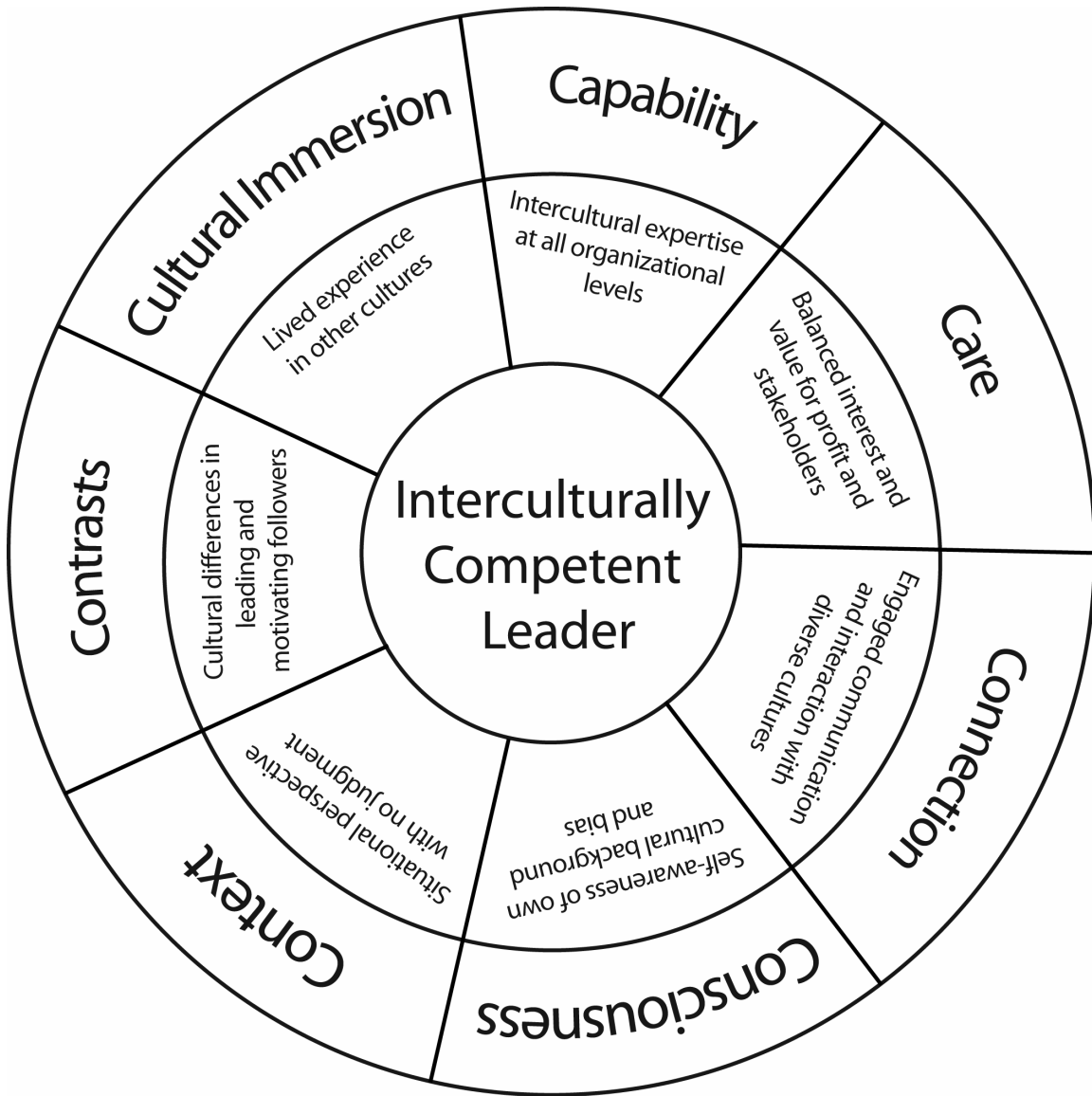


Figure 1. The Seven “Cs” of Intercultural Leadership Competence (Intercultural Leadership Model; aka ILM)

1. Care –Balanced interest and value for profit and stakeholders
2. Connection – Engaged communication and interaction with diverse cultures
3. Consciousness – Self-awareness of own cultural background and bias
4. Context – Situational perspective with no judgment
5. Contrasts – Cultural differences in leading and motivating followers
6. Cultural Immersion – Lived experience in other cultures
7. Capability – Intercultural expertise at all organizational levels

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