

Cultural and Network Intelligences: The Twin Pillars in Leadership Development for the 21st Century Era of Global Business and Institutional Networks

by Prof. Ang Soon and Asst Prof. Ng Kok Yee

The SAF is at an exciting juncture of transforming itself to a cutting-edge, 3G military force. As the SAF charges towards this vision, an imperative for the organisation is to equip its people with the requisite leadership capacities. Leadership development (LD) – the theme of this monograph, is therefore a critical process that will propel SAF towards its goals. Through the vivid and insightful reflection of the SAF's journey to-date, the authors of this monograph have depicted how LD efforts in the SAF have evolved over the years as a result of the changing environment. More importantly, the authors have challenged the readers to think about that "certain kind of leadership" that is needed in today's environment – "one that is highly adaptive, innovative and able to cope well with uncertainty and change." (para 1, p. 2).

In this commentary, we would like to expound further on what it takes for leaders to be effective in today's environment – marked by accelerated pace of change, increasing inter-connectivity and interdependence, as well as growing diversity amongst stakeholders. Against this backdrop, what are the hallmark qualities of an effective leader who can manage such complexities? Our research on leadership in the management domain has pointed to two key competencies for successful leadership in this environment – network intelligence and cultural intelligence.

In response to the opportunities of the global market, businesses worldwide are forming strategic alliances with rivals, suppliers and customers from different parts of the world. Similarly, in response to the global threat of terrorism since Sept 11th, there is an urge for military forces and relevant agencies across the world to work together to fight this war. Despite the fundamental difference in the motivation to network, the implications for leadership are the same. Leaders operating in this context need to possess network intelligence, which refers to the ability to detect and work with the structure of existing networks to form and sustain coalitional teams. Networks can be formed internally within the organisation, such as networks of individuals or departmental units, or externally with other organisations.

Network intelligence requires the leader to have a good mental map of existing networks, their configurations, goals, and resources. Without being cognizant of existing networks and their characteristics, the leader will not be able to strategically position him or herself in the network to contribute to, or leverage on the complementarities of the parties involved. Besides the knowledge component, the leader with network intelligence also needs to possess exceptional relational skills to manage the relationships in the network. Promoting trust and safety in the relationships is a key factor to ensuring timely access to accurate, high quality information. Without trust in the network, there is less honest and forthcoming information exchange amongst parties, leading to less knowledge sharing and creation, and thus, restricting the potential benefits offered by networks.

Going hand in hand with network intelligence is another form of capability – cultural intelligence. Cultural intelligence refers to the ability of the individual to adapt effectively to the culture of different nations, organisations, and professions. Given that networks can consist of parties from other units from the organisation, or even other organisations from other countries, the ability to lead effectively in a setting comprising diverse and unfamiliar cultural values is important. Understanding and adapting to a different cultural context, be it national, organisational or professional, can be a challenge because we are guided by our own set of values to think and behave in a certain way. To embrace another person's way of thinking or behaving requires us to step out of the familiarity and safety of our comfort zone. As a result, many cross-cultural interactions fail as a result of a failure to understand, and to adapt to cultural differences.

Cultural intelligence consists of four components: knowledge, strategy, behavior, and motivation. Culturally intelligent leaders possess knowledge about how cultures differ in their values, and how such differences impact behavior. Having an accurate understanding removes wrong judgments often placed on people from a different cultural context, and enables the leader to foster a global and open mindset to learn from people of various cultures. However, since there is a limit to how much cultural knowledge one can learn, another important component of cultural intelligence is strategy – the ability to perceive, interpret and develop plans in an unfamiliar environment. Having such strategies allow the leader to size up the situation and discern the often subtle, yet important dynamics in the situation, followed by appropriate plans of actions to manage the situation.

In executing one's plans of actions, the culturally intelligent leaders need to have a range of behavioral skills which they can choose from and exhibit, as the situation calls for it. This is particularly important for managing interpersonal relations, where norms for interaction and leadership may be quite different. Finally, throughout the entire process, the leader must possess motivation - the desire and confidence to adapt to the different cultural context. Without motivation, the leader is likely to give up easily when faced with problems, or avoid cross-cultural situations in the future. Conversely, the motivated leader is more resilient to setbacks and challenges, and as a result, more likely to learn from the experiences to hone in his/her cross-cultural leadership skills.

In striving to become a 3G military force that is agile and adaptive, SAF must cultivate in its leaders the capacity to network (both internally and externally) and to manage complex relationships arising from diverse cultural contexts. The development of network and cultural intelligence requires the long-term commitment and resolve of both the organisation and its people. As LTC Chan and his colleagues aptly pointed out, both system and spirit are essential to LD in SAF. Any LD system implemented without the 'Spirit' will not sustain; conversely, LD with the 'Spirit' but not anchored on sound principles and rigorous research will be limited in its impact. For the SAF, this means investing in the research, development, and implementation of LD programs that will systematically and effectively hone in leaders' required competencies. For the leaders, this means cultivating an open mindset that is both forward- and outward-looking, a hunger for learning, and an adventurous spirit to experiment with new things.

In conclusion, we have enjoyed and benefited greatly from this monograph on the LD efforts in the SAF, and we applaud the SAF's goal and commitment to develop its leaders for today's global environment. We wish the SAF continued success in its journey toward a highly effective and reputed military force.



Reflections On Leadership

by COL Tan Chuan-Jin

My ideas and views on leadership are certainly not as comprehensive and well articulated as that laid out in the SAF Leadership Framework. Nonetheless, I hope, in this short note, to share my views on leadership and to draw on my personal experiences in my various command appointments.