

Leader Development Across Cultures

By Allan David Walker

Imagine you are in a training room and the distinguished professor standing in the front, flown in especially from the United States, tells you unequivocally that schools can only improve when leaders distribute power more equitably among teachers, encourage open debate, and reward individual risk-taking. Now imagine you are leading a school in a place where teachers expect the principal to make the decisions, where it is unacceptable to openly disagree with others, especially the 'boss', and where the success of the organization easily trumps that of the individual.

Too many school leader development products currently doing the rounds in East Asia are grounded in a set of cultural assumptions about what leadership means according to Anglo-American English speaking ideals. When such perspectives and programs are used presumptuously with leaders from other cultures, whose values may be quite different, their impact on understanding and practice can range from minimal to confounding.

Leadership is constructed within a social milieu comprised of multiple, overlapping, and constantly shifting contextual factors. The meaning of the word leader across different societies therefore carries different historical, economic, cultural, and political connotations that influence both what leaders do and how they do it. For example, successful leadership in the vertically aligned cultural systems typifying many East Asian societies can be far removed from descriptions of leadership observed in many Western settings. This (what leaders do) has obvious connection to the form and substance of leader development programs - the two are inseparable.

Like their cousins elsewhere, principals in East Asia do influence the effectiveness of their organizations but these effects are mediated, at least partly, by the values within which they are socialized. They influence school outcomes through channels similar to those employed by their Western counterparts, but what they do within school differs according to the organizational and cultural context. More specifically, their leadership is mediated by important cultural norms of high power, distance, a collectivist orientation, and hierarchical compliance. There is often a discontinuity between these norms and assumptions and those

that characterize many of the leader development products used in the region; particularly those colorfully packaged for easy use. An example is in order.

Leader programs aligned with Western norms increasingly promote participation across the school community. This calls for a culture that values open and sometimes critical dialogue throughout the school; one that is underpinned by ongoing professional talk, experimentation, and in many cases, shared leadership. Promoting such collaborative forms requires principals even within congruent cultural platforms to challenge their own and existing organizational value structures about what comprises an educative community, what learning means, and how we relate to each other in schools. This challenge is magnified when cultural notions are even further removed from the source. This does not mean that the ideals promoted are 'wrong', within themselves or they are difficult to argue with, but when applied within cultures that continue to place a premium on collectivism and group harmony, and are more accepting of societal and organizational power inequities, unadulterated, they have little chance of making successful change. In simple terms, participation happens in East Asian cultures but is usually bound by formal and informal hierarchical relationships, demands for at least surface harmony and a strong collectivist orientation. Thus participation and even dissent *are* valued across cultures, but they take very different, often more subtle, forms.

So in terms of leader development, what might this mean? At least four interrelated implications can be drawn.

The first is that the transportation of leader development across cultures move beyond surface concepts and their too-neatly attached content and focus more on the processes that place these in context and, thereby, respect deeply embedded cultural norms. For example, emerging understandings that leader development is most successfully instituted through diverse, work-related, and practitioner supported developmental experiences is likely to travel across boundaries. Such a focus is predicated on a belief that learning happens best when leaders are stretched beyond their current levels of knowledge, skills, thought, and expertise - but that this is done in context.

A second implication is captured by the well known phrase 'don't throw out the baby with the bath water'. In any leader development activity, cross-fertilization is obviously desirable, but what is happening now is not cross-fertilization, rather, it is largely a one-way flow that sometimes holds insufficient respect for local traditions. Interestingly, this

phenomenon is often mirrored within multi-ethnic and multi-cultural societies themselves and is played out in leader development activities, which gloss over the values orientation of different racial, ethnic or gender-related cultures. For leader development programs this suggests the importance of an emphasis on values, particularly in terms of their formulation and intentionality, regardless of their cultural base.

A third related implication is if programs travel across cultural boundaries, that their associated knowledge is not seen or intended as a hegemonic device or a desire to impose 'one best way'. In terms of leader development, the purpose of sharing ideas and thoughts between societies is to increase understanding and tolerance and to challenge existing conceptions in order to make schools better places for students. The purpose of challenge is to create cognitive tension that forces us to move beyond our comfort zones and look for 'new and different' ways to do things – to provoke our curiosity. It is fine to challenge cultural norms - this is a good thing for leadership learning, but is very different from the culturally-restricted or biased cookie-cutter approaches, which too often slip across borders.

Fourth, we cannot study leader development without studying leaders – the two agendas should be twinned. In terms of my comments here, we can't work out how to support leaders' learning across cultures unless we know more about the cultures themselves and how these influence what leaders do. In current parlance, leader development across cultures should focus on the development of individual leaders, as compared to leadership development.

In conclusion, when discussing anything to do with culture we must avoid the raw dichotomization of cultures and societies and we should not overlook the powerful effect of personality and other contextual variables. While respecting these, however, they should not become shields that block recognition of the powerful role, which different cultural values play in shaping what leaders do and how schools operate. We must recognize that key values and beliefs position leaders in a *cultural space*. Leader development agendas must look carefully within the substance and exercise of what leaders do within this space.

Allan Walker is Professor and Chair, Educational Administration and Policy, The Chinese University of Hong Kong, Hong Kong SAY, China.