CO-LOCATED AND VIRTUAL TEAMS COMPETENCE IN INTERNATIONAL MANAGEMENT EDUCATION: PREPARING MANAGERS FOR A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

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Abstract

The fabric of the workforce is becoming increasingly multicultural and more structurally complex. Though managers are now called upon to work with a multicultural workforce, either in co-located face-to-face contexts or in geographically dispersed virtual teams, we know very little about the best practices for these types of work structures. Indeed, training for multicultural management remains limited to mostly two types of information, namely culture-specific knowledge, which no longer does justice to the complexity of the cultural fabric, or conceptual models that say very little about the competent behaviours that managers should possess in their toolbox. This article argues for the need to integrate competency modeling in research on multiculturalism for management education purposes. Given their fit with organizational structures, competencies are likely to serve as a solid springboard for the creation of programs in multicultural management education.

Keywords: International Education, Co-Located and Virtual Teams, Multicultural Competencies.

1 INTRODUCTION

On the one hand, as they recruit the best talent from the global pool, managers get to work with people of various cultural backgrounds in face-to-face contexts, often on their home turf. On the other hand, they are increasingly asked to travel abroad, often simultaneously managing people from multiple cultures mainly via the use of technology. However, empirical behavioural guidelines to train managers for these types of international management assignments are scant, resulting in a lack of content for international education programs.

Indeed, a review of the literature confirms that many universities are grappling with unanswered questions regarding what should be taught within international management programs [1] [2] [3] [4] [5] [6]. More specifically, it is observed that issues related to the content of such programs, now of primary concern, remain unclear. Currently, there appears to be an over-emphasis on analysis, on technique, and on hard data, along with a lack of teachings on soft skills [7] [8] [9] [10]. Ultimately, there is an increasing need for business education providers to differentiate themselves by teaching communication, interpersonal, multicultural, and leadership skills both for co-located and for virtual team settings. However, in practice, we remain unsure as to what this educational goal means in terms of designing cutting-edge international management programs.

At the present time, most programs focus on culture-specific information aimed at decreasing uncertainty for managers working in foreign cultures. However, such knowledge is likely insufficient as it fails to prepare managers to adapt to novel multicultural situations [11] [12]. Moreover, conceptual models that nicely integrate the notion of cultural adaptation are light in outlining concrete behaviours- or transfereable skills- required for managers to display competence in multicultural settings.

Part of the reason for this gap is that management research has catered mostly to the expatriate's cross-cultural experience, usually looking at the interface and compatibility levels between specific cultures. Clearly, studies fall short when it comes to identifying the skills required for simultaneously working with people of multiple cultures, or with those who subscribe to a combination of cultural norms, either at home or abroad [13]. Furthermore, despite the reality that a major enabling factor of internationalization has been information technology, data on skills required to manage at a distance via the use of technology in virtual team settings is limited at best. In sum, issues of management education, culture, and information technology need to be further investigated within a multicultural management context in order to prepare managers for success in a global world.

Accordingly, this article outlines the need to integrate competency modeling in research on multiculturalism for management education purposes. Indeed, in an effort to update the content of

programs in international management, further empirical knowledge on competencies for managing a multicultural workforce is required, both for use at home and abroad, in person and via technology.

Given that competencies are closely linked to business goals and strategies, they exhibit a great organizational fit and are likely to serve as a solid platform for skill training and development [14]. Ultimately, the goal will be to create a repertoire that is comprehensive of multicultural management competencies for those working with co-located and virtual teams.

2 PREPARING MANAGERS FOR A MULTICULTURAL WORLD

Let's begin with some of the main criticisms regarding management education. Following their large-scale study with over 60 academic institutions and 50 companies, Porter and McKibbin (1988) raised some flags. They discovered that when it comes to education, weaknesses surface regarding a lack, among others, of soft-skill development. Indeed, it is argued that business education providers should further focus on skills such as communication, interpersonal, multicultural, negotiations, leadership, and change [7]. If management is in fact fundamentally soft and relies on experience, intuition, judgment, as well as on wisdom [8], a lack of soft skill development thus appears paradoxical. In sum, skills for global adaptability extend beyond traditional functional areas.

2.1 Internationalizing the Curriculum

Looking at multicultural education, questions as to what skills should be taught resurface. Though many universities acknowledge the necessity to update their programs by internationalizing their curriculum, there remain many unknowns regarding program content [1].

2.1.1 In Search of Training Objectives

One way to update programs could be to go back to the objectives sought by program administrators. One credible entity in terms of university program accreditation is the *The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business* (AACSB), one that has long emphasized internationalization as a prime accreditation factor. Indeed, the AACSB's current standards explicitly state that an accredited business curriculum must include coverage of global issues [7]. However, upon reviewing AACSB guidelines, we find that there is no specific content to be included in an international business curriculum beyond general categories such as cultural self-awareness, cultural consciousness, and multicultural leadership [3] [10].

2.1.2 Culture Specificity

Currently, most international programs emphasize culture-specific information, such as Hofstede's cultural dimensions, in an effort to decrease uncertainty for managers working in foreign cultures. Though essential, knowledge of such culture-specific topics is now deemed insufficient because it does not offer managers the tools to adapt to multiple novel multicultural situations. By emphasizing knowledge that focuses on dyadic interactions, conventional traning methods fail to do justice to the complexity of multinational work environments [3] [11]. Furthermore, there are situations where this type of knowledge might even be inaccurate because it over-simplifies complex national-level cultural dimensions in order to predict individual-level behavior [3].

2.1.3 Emphasis on Expatriates

Overall, behavioural training in international management tends to emphasize the expatriate experience, with little concern for the domestic and international managers or for those who manage their workforce at a distance using technology. A review of the literature confirms the existence of a good deal of training tools meant to prepare managers for expatriate settings [15] [16] [17]. However, other multicultural contexts have been ignored, such as managers working with people of various cultural backgrounds on their home turf, those who travel to multiple destinations around the world to get work done, and finally managers who mainly use technology to interact with members of their workforce [13] [18].

2.1.4 Skills for Cultural Adaptation

More cutting-edge models such as cultural intelligence (CQ) have emerged from this need to do justice to adaptation within a variety of multicultural experiences. CQ focuses on the need for adaptation by emphasizing not only cognitive knowledge about culture, but also on the need to learn from the multicultural experience itself [11]. Moreover, it highlights the need for displaying the

motivation to adapt in multicultural contexts and for possessing the corresponding behavioural skills. Still, CQ offers little information regarding the actual behaviours that are required.

In the next section, we will explain how identifying a repertoire of such behaviours based on empirical data according to competence modeling is the driving force behind this article.

2.2 Lack of Empirical Data for Co-located and Virtual Teams

Given that the talent pool is now global, it is somewhat surprising to find a lack of empirical data on multicultural competence. For one thing, we know that managers now select the best candidates from all over the world, in some cases for working in teams at the head office. In other words, they require multicultural skills on their home turf. As well, countless numbers of managers have to travel to multiple foreign destinations to get projects accomplished, dealing with geographically dispersed team members along the way. Finally, because information technology (IT) is now omnipresent in the global movement, managers are increasingly called upon to work with a multicultural workforce via IT tools. Clearly there is a need to develop competencies enabling managers to be success in all of these challenging contexts.

2.2.1 Multicultural Teams

We find increasing numbers of studies related to work within virtual teams (VTs). The problem is that most studies related to multicultural issues in virtual teams, including communication, trust, group structure, the impact of technology, and leadership, remain conceptual in nature. Currently, information available for training tends to be normative in nature and is mostly grounded in theoretical or anecdotal information [13]. In other words, we have little empirical data about the best practices, either for co-located multicultural teams or for virtual ones that tend to be multicultural by design.

All the same, some believe that multicultural teams, either co-located or virtual, offer an opportunity to embrace cultural diversity via competent communication. Indeed, multicultural competence might better enable group members to profit from the many different cultural qualities that characterize these types of work structure. Since it is argued that well-managed cultural diversity in teams can be a definite competitive advantage, it appears warranted to discover related multicultural transferable competencies.

3 COMPETENCE MODELING

In this section we argue for the integration of competency modeling for research on multicultural competencies. Given their fit with organizational structures, it is believed that competencies are likely to be particularly well suited for education purposes in multicultural management. Indeed, it is believed that competencies serve as better predictors of superior performance [4] [19]. These could nicely fill the gap we outlined above.

3.1 Choosing an Angle

Questions related to the internationalization of university programs in management might come down to choosing the most relevant angle from which to tackle the problem. Accordingly, international management curriculum has been classified in three broad categories, namely a) global awareness, b) global understanding, and c) global competence [4].

Initially, global awareness can be emphasized through the infusion of international content into existing courses as well as by increasing awareness of one's own culture along with how it relates to other cultures [2] [17]. Awareness thus sounds like a key foundation to education.

Subsequently, by seeking to foster more in-depth knowledge, a focus on global understanding goes beyond awareness and calls for a significantly higher order of learning [4]. This goal might warrant the creation of new courses on multiculturalism in order to highlight key cultural differences and show the panoply of different values and beliefs.

Finally, global competence points to yet another level, where possessing the required competencies can enable managers to function in foreign environments. By identifying a set of competencies that transfer to managing co-located and multicultural teams on the domestic and international fronts, as well as doing so via the use of IT, then we could develop programs that specifically train managers to tackle these challenges.

While some argue that the assumptions related to competency models are problematic and have negative consequences, including a perception of the "great person" view of leadership instead of an emphasis on "great results", others believe that the use of competency models is not only justified, but that it has benefited individuals and organizations alike [20]. We agree with the latter view, In fact, we take the position that for education purposes, it is not a matter of creating the "perfect" manager, who would excel at all the skills, as much as it is about polishing and fine-tuning competencies that one already possesses in addition to developing new ones. In the end, the goal is to aim for a solid repertoire of multicultural competencies in order to build a manager's toolbox.

3.2   Identifying Competence

The use of competence modeling (CM) is gaining acceptance as a viable research tool due to its capacity to offer a scientifically sound framework for research. As organizational structures become flatter and more fluid, it is believed that they will further revolve around individuals instead of focusing on rigid job descriptions. Competencies will therefore become a more appropriate unit of analysis in the workplace [14].

It is important to note that despite the recent popularity of the competency movement, there remains a lack of a uniform definition for the concept of competency [21]. Accordingly, there appears to be no single right way to answer the question as to what is a competency. What matters is that the chosen definition makes sense, meets the organization's needs, and is used consistently in human resources and training applications.

Despite a focus on many personality related aspects, some conclude that organizations tend to select on the basis of characteristics that are best secured through training. "Competencies such as interpersonal and political skills distinguish top performers from the rest" [19]. Consequently, given its ultimate applicability for education, a focus on competencies seems to be the best option here.

3.2.1   Areas of Competence

Though the literature illustrates a widespread focus on person-centered competencies by industrial and organizational psychologists [19], within management applications, competencies are instead related to more general areas of competence. Resulting from knowledge generated by assessment centers- where it is assumed that a great deal of similarity exists in management functions and across organizations and levels of management- this general approach has become the norm for many management studies. Instead of being focused on person-related characteristics, the resulting categories are broad and generic and reflect clusters of attributes, characteristics, and qualities critical to managerial activities. These should translate well into the creation of university curriculum.

3.2.2   A Balance Between Specific and General Competencies

We observe a generality-specificity debate in the management competence literature where it is argued that competencies have to be both specific to the position and generic to a wide ensemble of managers [22]. Indeed, given the complexity of a manager's role, more detail is required in order to outline managerial competencies. As such, a good deal of emphasis should be placed on specificity when using competence modeling. There are many situations where the distinctions between similar managerial behaviors can be obscured with a generalist approach. Despite the fact that specificity takes longer to complete, is costlier, and doesn't allow for the same generalization of results, understanding unique and specific features of managerial behavior should serve to further training objectives.

All the same, emphasizing specificity does not diminish the importance of using general constructs. Accordingly, the generalist approach possesses the following strengths, 1) it provides a convenient frame of reference as they serve to organize disparate constructs, 2) it makes the study of behavior seem easy as general constructs are fewer in numbers, 3) it proves important to construct validation and can lead to identification of clusters [22].

Some of the critics against competency typologies centered on general areas of competence claim that this approach results in operational definitions that are too broad and generic. Moreover, the assessment center movement has resulted in a some confusion associated to distinguishing between "areas of competence' and "person-related competencies'. However, Shippmann *et al.* (2000) argue that the study of areas of competence is "portent of things to come in the realm of competency modeling" (p. 709). The challenge with the study of multicultural competence is therefore to insure that results highlight general areas of competence while offering enough specificity to be useful for education purposes.

4   CONCLUSION

Key questions remain unanswered regarding what subjects should be taught to improve managers' global skills as they apply to working at home and abroad, both in face-to-face team settings as well as for vitrual team contexts. Accordingly, because we don't know have much empirical evidence as to the nature of these tools, it is difficult to provide managers with a toolbox combining guidelines as to what works best in multicultural settings. As a result of this challenge, courses in business schools having internationalized their curriculum are still not producing high-quality global managers, thus falling short of expectations. In order to update the content of programs in international management, we need empirical knowledge on competencies required for managing a multicultural workforce.

Despite extant literature dealing with expatriate issues, little empirical data points to specific areas of competence in multicultural team settings, both at home and abroad, in face-to-face settings as well as with the use of technology. Indeed, most of the literature dealing with multicultural issues has focused on cultural differences thereby offering in-depth knowledge about specific patterns found in various countries. This enlightens our understanding of several key cultural dimensions and enhances our ability to interact with people from specific areas of the world. However, little data is available regarding transferable competencies enabling managers to simultaneously interact with people from many cultures at once, a current exigency in this age of globalization.

This article argues for the use of competence modeling for multicultural management research. In terms of the relevance, it is said that competence modeling is more closely linked to business goals and strategies and thus nicely uncovers core competencies. In short, they exhibit greater organizational fit and are more likely to serve as a platform for training and development [14].

We claim that there is a need for the identification of empirical knowledge on managerial competence that would be comprehensive of current multicultural team contexts, namely at home or abroad, in face-to-face contexts or by means of technology. More specifically, we believe that given the complex nature of international business, this knowledge will provide valuable insights regarding the creation of international management programs.

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