THE RELATIONAL LEADER. A PRELIMINARY FRAMEWORK FOR CORPORATE INTERCULTURAL ACCOMMODATION

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Abstract. *The aim of the present study is to address the development of a theoretic framework able to integrate multiple facets of relational capital in intercultural leadership. Five primary dimensions are under scrutiny, namely Relational Condition, Relational Context, Relational Catalyst, Relational Concession and Relational Co-existence. These are deemed to be key dimensions of a new leadership prototype – the 5 Cs relational leader - who assumes a crucial position in coping with the present-day and future challenges in terms of capitalizing sustainable multivalent relationships. Interaction, communication and cooperation require interpersonal and inter-organizational adjustments which can be achieved through coherent strategic projects where a tenable relational capital-based vision is required. Facing "the others" (different from a national or organizational standpoint) involves a process of accommodation, of managing differences which is difficult to apply at a personal level, through an isolated effort. This is why this kind of endeavors should be addressed and carried out by leaders who have a pertinent intercultural perspective on the organizational mechanisms.*

Keywords: relational leader; intercultural accommodation; relational capital.

Introduction

The dynamics of international and intercultural relationships in the global arena pushes managers towards rethinking their projects and strategies. The main question is whether resorting to a multifaceted relational capital is liable to become a strong driver for sustainable international adjustments. The tiers of such an endeavor range from the contact initiation to the establishment of a relationship and consistently to the development of long-time collaborations.

Against this backdrop, a new approach on the intercultural leadership issue emerges. The starting point of the argumentation is the growing multiculturalism standard brought about by global corporations and by the imperative for collaboration in a varied environment. This context requires new acumen and savvy from the future leaders who have to face multiple socio-cultural challenges. Leaders are supposed to address cultural diversity and to manage human resources towards a common goal and the best way to do this relies on their relational skills. As a part of their current endeavors, leaders have to manage the background and unseen negotiations between different cultures, meanings and attitudes towards work and cohabitation.

The framework and the definition of the future leader came from learning, seeing and observing the emergent realities and challenges met by leaders in a globalized world where transnational corporations play a crucial social, political and economic role. Almost always, the functionality and

efficiency of these for-profit entities lie in the human relations system, in personal and interpersonal factors and social networks. The core of their driving force comprises people, cultures and interactions. Even as employees of a transnational corporation, people are what their culture prescribed them to be, or to become. Facing "the others" (different from a national or organizational standpoint) involves a process of accommodation, of managing differences which is difficult to apply at a personal level, through an isolated effort. This is why this kind of endeavors should be addressed and carried out by leaders who have a pertinent intercultural perspective on the organizational mechanisms.

Starting from these premises, the aim of the present study is to address the development of a theoretic framework able to integrate multiple facets of relational capital in intercultural leadership. Five primary dimensions are under scrutiny, namely *Relational Condition, Relational Context, Relational Catalyst, Relational Concession* and *Relational Co-existence*. These are deemed to be key dimensions of a new leadership prototype – the 5 Cs relational leader - who assumes a crucial position in coping with the present-day and future challenges in terms of capitalizing sustainable multivalent relationships. Interaction, communication and cooperation require interpersonal and inter-organizational adjustments which can be achieved through coherent strategic projects where a tenable relational capital-based vision is required.

In this front, the present paper is structured as follows: the first section briefly discusses the intellectual capital issue, laying emphasis on the relational component; the second section approaches the country image role in fostering international / intercultural accommodation; the third section addresses the opportunity of advancing an integrative framework when sounding out intercultural realms; the final section depicts the dimensions of the framework, stressing their position in the overall analysis.

Relational capital as an intellectual capital component

The research field of the intellectual capital has become prominent starting with the seminal works of Edvinsson and Malone (1997), Roos et al. (1997), Stewart (1997) and Sveiby (1997) (cited in Brătianu & Orzea, 2013, p.214). Despite the wide spectrum of definitions and conceptualizations of the intellectual capital, researchers and theorists have reached a consensus regarding its main components, namely human capital, relational capital and structural capital (Dean & Kretschmer, 2007).

The first dimension - the human capital - describes the individual knowledge stock of a certain organization which is represented by its employees (Bontis, 1998). In fact, the essence of human capital lies in the intelligence of the organization's members whereas its scope covers the knowledge entities (e.g., highly-skilled workforce). The human capital should be seen as an innovation and renewal source as it embodies the accumulated value of investments in the future and development of the employees, as important actors of the organizational system (Skandia, 1996). The second dimension – the structural capital - refers to "all the non-human storehouses of knowledge in organizations which include the databases, organizational charts, process manuals, strategies, routines and anything whose value to the company is higher than its material value" (Bontis, 1998, p.88). The relational capital - the third component - stands for the relationships with internal and external entities, like stakeholders, partners, customers, suppliers, etc.

Moreover, relational capital relies on the idea that organizations are not isolated systems, but active and open systems which greatly depend on their connections with the environment (Hormiga et al., 2011). Martin de Castro et al. (2004) and Martínez García de Leaniz and Rodríguez del Bosque (2013) consider relational capital as the most important intangible resource of the organization as it plays a paramount function in linking and bridging different organizational entities or cultures.

Intercultural relations and the country image

An important factor which moderates the relationships between different cultures and nations is represented by the country image. The harmonization of organizational cultures within a corporate entity is liable to depend on the way individuals and groups perceive the alterity, starting from their country primacies.

The country image is considered to be a special type of mental representation which embodies the products, brands, companies and many other additional elements. It stems from the experiences with and opinions about a nation or a country or from the information received through multiple channels, such as: politics (national and foreign affairs), telecommunications, entertainment (e.g., movies), rumors, etc. Also, the country image includes national symbols, colors, building types, art objects, the specificity of the political regime, traditions, history, cultural legacy, etc. (Nicolescu et al., 2008; Jenes, 2005). Herein, Papadopoulos and Heslop (2002) posit that the country image are also influenced by culture, media, sport, economy and the social and political systems.

In fact, the country image is a product of the mind which has to process and select the essential information out of a huge data repository (Morgan et al., 2004, p.40). The raw material to be processed comes from its historical background, geographic location, cultural activity, political landscape, art, music, sport, lifestyle, etc. As any other mental representation, the country image is characterized by multidimensionality, researchers focusing on varied dimensions which are often overlapping (Roth & Diamantopoulos, 2009).

Baloglu and McCleary (1999) argue that, as a multidimensional construct, the country image relies on both cognitive assessments (beliefs and knowledge) and emotional assessments (feelings) while the overall image of a certain country is a result of the interplay between the two processes. At this level, Gallarza et al. (2002) insist on the relative nature of the concept due to its formation basis, that is, subjective individual perceptions and the evolution of people's standpoints in time according to environmental changes while Roth and Diamantopoulos (2008) posit that the country image embodies people's perceptions, knowledge, mental representations, impressions, beliefs and associations.

Pursuant to Zeugner-Roth and Diamantopoulos (2009), the image of a certain country influences the attitudes and conducts of other peoples towards country-related issues or entities. Similarly, Laroche et al. (2005) posit that the country image should consist of: a cognitive dimension (including people's beliefs about the country), an emotional dimension (referring to the emotional value attached to a country by other nations) and a conative dimension (referring to the people's intentions towards that country). In this front, (Heslop, Lu & Cry, 2008) urge that a suitable depiction of the country image should also consider a non-productive dimension, such as people. Furthermore, pertinent measurement scales should encompass all the aspects which may be valued by "foreign assessors".

Towards a relational leader framework

Main trends in the study of intercultural leadership for the near future

The global shift brought about by post-modernism, the changes in our working environment, the penetration of new media and technology in our natural ambiance, the multiculturalism as an inherent challenging, the unprecedented mobility stand for more than a future promise, they are nowadays realities. A rapid increasing number of transnational corporations surpass boundaries and defy the national border constraints, following their own logic and dynamics and bringing together people from all over the world (Crane, Matten & Moon, 2008; Tuca, 2013).

At this level, the current elaborations on the leadership topic are very much concentrated on the leader's position, role and functionality within an intercultural, multicultural or cross-cultural environment (Schein, 2009; Testa, 2009; Festing & Maletzky, 2011; Collins, 2011; Caligiuri &

Tarique, 2012). The patterns of a globalized economy and of worldwide connections have altered significantly the way corporations are led and, at the same time, have reconfigured the leadership practices.

The prevalence and evolution of corporations as an expanding organizational actor is liable to alter the interpretative perspectives on intercultural human interaction. By creating the organizational framework of communication between different nationalities, traditions and histories, rituals and values, norms and actions, etc., the corporation will become a symbolic domain where different cultures interact and interfere on a daily basis (Crane, Matten & Moon, 2008; Pulignano, 2009). Although it has been proven in time that similarity has a positive impact on social interaction and cooperation (Morry, 2007), the future opens its gates to diversity at all levels.

The transformative action of individuals (nationally and culturally speaking) brings about the emergence of a specific reaction toward "the others", a cultural disposition of overprotecting our own identity – the fear of being absorbed by another cultural model acts as a restraining factor against the others (Tomlinson, 2002). In this respect, cultural diversity within an organization cannot be approached otherwise, but through leadership-driven intervention and relationship management (Schein, 2009). This is why intercultural relations firmly require an active leader who does not wait for positive outcomes to come naturally, but instead he totally assumes the corporate intercultural environment and he focuses his efforts on harmonizing the varied organizational cultures (Collins, 2011; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012).

These efforts must become a key point on every leader's agenda, starting from the moment when corporations make acquisitions, mergers or joint-ventures. All these facts involve different people who must integrate as well as possible in the new corporate social system as a condition for achieving their goals and the corporation's goals simultaneously. The future leader will set himself as a milestone and driving force of mobilizing the inner organizational cleavages toward an effective framework for fostering relational capital.

The premises of a new approach

The premises of a new approach rely on a whole new repertoire of intercultural issues which spring off in the varied kinds of long-term or *ad hoc* corporations that are increasingly being created in today's global environment (Crane, Matten & Moon, 2008). Organizations comprise members from varied national cultures who have a major problem of developing effective communication in spite of speaking the same language. In this vein, only by resorting to the intercultural relational capital is there a chance to overcome inevitable defensiveness and the illusion of similarity. After joint operations begin, a new culture is gradually built as the resulting organization faces new tasks and learns how to deal with them (Schein, 2009; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012).

The adjustment and accommodation processes are to be orchestrated by a new leader prototype who assumes a crucial position in coping with the present-day and near future challenges: the *5 Cs relational leader*. The 5 Cs leader stands for a proactive and farsighted frontman within a corporation who deeply understands facts, foresees tendencies and acts effectively in managing the intercultural climate and its inherent forces. He approaches intercultural relationships as a decisive factor for the emerging corporate culture and as a key point for the corporate well-being. This perspective on leadership is consistent with the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness Program (GLOBE) which focuses on leadership in an intercultural context (Festing & Maletzky, 2011).

As different organizational cultures interact within the corporation, the most important imperative for leadership is to assure the appropriate frameworks for interaction, communication and cooperation. These three processes require interpersonal and inter-group adjustments which can be achieved through suitable relational endeavors.

The Relational Condition – the first level of the 5 Cs relational leader

The first element in the framework - the *Relational Condition* – stresses out the basic leader's role as a relational actor between cultural parties within a multicultural corporation. The 5 Cs relational leader fully understands that as human beings in search of achieving our goals, of pursuing our dreams, of fulfilling our expectations, we are inclined to manage every aspect of our daily life for our own good, starting with our feelings, emotions, needs, desires and interests (Testa, 2009; Festing & Maletzky, 2011; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012). In a globalization paradigm, he assumes that everything is communication and the adage goes "everything becomes relational".

Cultures meet any time there is a merger of two companies, when one company acquires another, when two companies engage in a joint venture, or when a new group is created with members from several cultures (Schein, 2009; Cohen, 2010). Given the increase in globalization and diversity over the past decade, it is likely that leaders will deal with groups of employees which maintain very different cultural backgrounds, beliefs and attitudes than themselves. Thus, this may pose some difficulty to build and improve such relationships (Testa, 2009, p.78).

In the new group situation, the 5 Cs relational leader stands for the frontman who plans, organizes and coordinates how multiple cultures should work together without any one culture being the dominant one. He must facilitate the frameworks of the simultaneous meeting of national, occupational, and organizational cultures (Cohen, 2010). Moreover, he starts the relational endeavors by considering the fact that each culture is, from the point of view of its members, the correct way to perceive, feel about, and act on daily events, that each culture has opinions and biases about "the other", but by definition our own culture is always the one that is "right" (Schein, 2009). Also, as House and Javidan state, in an intercultural context, interpretations are dependent on the cultural background of the perceiver (House & Javidan, 2004 cited in Festing & Maletzky, 2011).

When several sets of cultures meet, the basic problem is that more than one culture must be aligned, reconciled, merged, or absorbed. Getting cross-cultural organizations, projects, joint ventures, and teams to work together therefore poses a much larger cultural challenge for effective intercultural leadership and, at this level, the 5 Cs leader possesses the art and science to embrace intercultural interrelation as the first step toward corporate culture development (Hutchinson & Quintas, 2008; Hampton & Rowell, 2010).

Globally competent corporate leaders are critical for the corporate ability to compete and succeed internationally. In line with the increasing demand for globally competent leaders "who can operate successfully in today's global environment and improve organizational performance across all geographic markets, 62% of firms around the world report having a global leadership development program of some form (American Management Association 2010 cited Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012, p.612).

The Relational Context – the second level of the 5 Cs relational leader

The second element - the *Relational Context* – refers to the fact that the 5 Cs relational leader deals with the fact that intercultural relationships can only take place within a well-defined context, characterized by different sets of available alternatives. The transnational structuring of activities tends to bring different people into frequent contact with one another, and thereby a new relational and multicultural pressure determines the imperative of adjusting. The *foci of activity* as Feld (1981, p.1016) defined the context, organize the constraints and choices of individuals and stands for "social, psychological, legal or physical objects around which joint activities are organized". Additionally, in the opinion of Festing and Maletzky, "social structures enable and restrict interaction at the same time. Rules guide the agents' behavior within the social system and provide insights into what is right and what is wrong. They give meaning (signification) to the interaction and provide certain information on what is legitimate in a certain social system (legitimation)" (2011, p.191). Therefore,

in intercultural settlements, new interaction patterns must be designed with a view to overcome differences and guarantee the coordination of the social system (Mattelart, 2007).

In cross-cultural settings, one reason we exaggerate the degree of mutual understanding is to avoid the pain of being "unknown" (Schein, 2009; Collins, 2011). If we are asked to work with someone from another organization and he or she has never worked with us, it is painful to realize that we have to establish our identity from scratch. It is less painful to assume that we are probably basically alike and proceed from there. Only later might we suddenly discover great differences in how we operate or that words we were using meant different things to each other. The cultural issue is fundamentally different in most of these situations because the work group itself is already multicultural, both in terms of nationality and occupational background (Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede, 2002; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012)

The Relational Catalyst - the third level of the 5 Cs relational leader

The third component - the *Relational Catalyst* – reveals the 5 Cs relational leader as a milestone in intercultural relationships, as managerial intervention through coherent programs: trainings, team-buildings, informal meetings and so on must be consistently encouraged and supported. The role of the leader is to catalyze the meeting of different cultures, the discovery of their features, their affinities and divergences, the communication and management of their future approaches and the establishment of a common strategy for achieving the same goal (Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede, 2002; Schein, 2009).

An outward - bound type of program that forces joint interaction in a non-work setting would be helpful. Such programs would surely improve informal communication, but it is not clear whether or not the stereotypes would be overcome once back at work. The multicultural problem, then, is how to create a group situation that enables sufficient task - relevant communication to occur so that the group can perform its essential function (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2012).

Research has been done on how countries and their cultures differ, especially by Hofstede in his massive multicultural survey of all the units of IBM (Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede, 2002). This approach suggests that *knowledge* of other cultures would ameliorate communication breakdowns and ineffective collaborations. It is important to know what kind of things will be offensive in other cultures, but that will not be enough to build good working relationships (Cohen, 2010; Testa, 2009).

Leadership of the multicultural unit is crucial along two dimensions: (1) the leader must stimulate open communication around the tasks to be performed and (2) the leader must create a climate in which his or her authority is not a barrier to communication. The most successful groups were created by leaders who acknowledged the interdependency, reduced status differences by joining the rest of the team in joint training, and encouraged *mutual* coaching as different members of the team observed ways that some of their behavior could be made more effective (Schein, 2009).

The Relational Concession - the fourth level of the 5 Cs leader

The fourth component - the *Relational Concession* – is focused on the approach of the 5 Cs relational leader as a realistic figure who strives for winning the war, but at the same time, accepts minor defeats. He advocates that all the cultures involved in a process of cross-cultural interaction should assume the fact that concessions are necessary in order to benefit from successful common results (Hofstede, Pedersen & Hofstede, 2002; Testa, 2009). The process of intercultural negotiation may generate win-lose facts at the beginning, but in time, the real outcome will be a win-win achievement.

For example, we are always determined and have the need to justify our own way of doing things. Our way seems to make complete sense and we cannot figure out why the "other" wants to do things differently. We are likely to go into a persuasion mode and to stereotype others as not making sense if they don't agree with us. This gives way to a trap in cross-cultural communication: our disagreement

and our stereotypes are themselves undiscussable. We have no way of backing off and examining our assumptions without risking offending the other person or demeaning ourselves. Instead, we maintain a pretence of understanding each other and make compromises on effectiveness (Schein, 2009; Testa, 2009).

In line with Schein, Festing and Maletzky underline:

"The process of structuration and adjustment is embedded in structures of meaning. It takes place on the basis of intercultural communication and is influenced by interpretative schemes. The decision to change depends on the signification and interpretation of the situation, the personalities of the leader or follower, the self-concepts of both as well as the interpretation of the other; they may also depend on interpretations of the situation of cultural overlap in general, drawing upon stereotypes, etc." (2011, p.193).

To get past this situation, the 5 Cs relational leader need to create settings in which new communication norms can be developed so that discussing misunderstanding does not become a threat to each other's face. Such new norms can only be built with efforts at concession negotiation through *dialogue* (Gudykunst, 2005). The key to initiating dialogic conversation is to create a setting in which participants feel secure enough to suspend their need to win arguments, clarify everything they say, and challenge each other every time they disagree (Giles, Coupland & Coupland, 1991; Gudykunst, 2005).

The Relational Co-existence - the fifth level of the 5 Cs relational leader

The fifth and the last component - the *Relational Co-existence* – refers to the leader's role to encourage organic intercultural relationships based on frequent interactions and communication between cultures. He prescribes the co-existence of cultures as a process of continuous adjustments and consistent harmonization (Mattelart, 2007). Consequently, he builds his strategies on the human being nature of seeking order, understanding and partnership in dealing with common goals.

Self-assessment and assessment of the other culture is not an automatic solution to cross-cultural effectiveness. Learning each other's languages or adopting a common language is certainly essential, but beyond that it may well be that the essential cross-cultural learning is accomplished best in the work setting, where common work problems can guide the learning process. Once again, the point is that cultural analysis works best in the context of a shared problem. Pursuant to Schein's (2009) example: the Russian manager of HR in the joint venture of British Petroleum and its Russian counterpart responded when asked how she could help these two very different organizations come together: "Forced interaction".

At this point, Black et al. (cited in Festing & Maletzky, 2011) proposed a conceptualisation of adjustment as a multifaceted phenomenon focusing on three adjustment outcomes: adjustment to work (work adjustment), adjustment to the general environment (general adjustment) and adjustment to interacting with host country nationals (interaction adjustment). In other words, to speed up cultural learning, we should create such joint tasks early in the life of the new group. Such norms of openness do not require members to get into personal or interpersonal issues, but leaders must emphasize that information relevant to task performance, must travel freely across hierarchical and cultural boundaries if multicultural groups are to be effective (Testa, 2009).

Consistent with social learning theory, cross-cultural experiences with greater cross-cultural interaction or contact are related to greater cross-cultural adjustment and self-reported global leadership success (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2011). This approach supports the fact that the more peer-level interaction individuals have with others from a certain cultural group, the more positive their attitudes will be toward the people from that cultural group.According to the perspective presented by Pettigrew and Tropp (2006), contact theory reveals that these experiences provide meaningful peer-

level interactions and stimulate opportunities to work together toward a common goal, and an environment that supports the interactions.

Conclusions and work limits

On the path of becoming the leaders of the future, the candidates will have to face cross-cultural experiences, to build relationships, to create and extract value, to listen and observe, to manage others etc., in order to build global leadership abilities and to be able to survive and succeed the turbulent environments.

As such endeavors meet ups and downs, the coordination of human resources being a high mountain to climb, the presence of appropriate relational strategies must be assumed. Through coherent endeavors and strategies, the 5 Cs relational leader prescribes the co-existence of cultures as a process of continuous adjustments and consistent harmonization. He plays the role of a creator, building his initiatives on the human being nature of seeking order, understanding and partnership in dealing with common goals.

Interrelations should be seen as a dynamic and catalyzing process for the formation of a new integrated culture, defining interpersonal, inter-group and organizational levels at the same time and should be assisted by leadership.Nowadays, many managers and leaders still hold the illusion that this kind of phenomena may occur naturally in time, but such suppositions may afflict severely the well-being and future of the corporation.

All in all, it is very important to mention that the current leader approach in an intercultural framework does not exclude the relevance of other components as the informational, interpersonal and decisional functions of the leader, but these aspects are not related to the core of the present investigation. The approach has its own logic and follows the main coordinates which encompass the facades of intercultural relationships adjustments, being independent of the formal processes of accommodation which are developed in official settings, driven by rules and principles and organized on an authoritarian basis.

A more elaborate version of the advanced outlook and leader prototype would be more than recommended for the future research.

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