

Executive Summary

INTERCULTURAL LEADERSHIP SKILLS: CANADA-CHINA AGRI-FOOD EXPERIENCES

Background

Leadership competencies and behaviours are an essential component of successful organizations, projects and ventures. Today more than ever, leaders are operating in an intercultural environment. Understanding the linkage between leadership skills and intercultural effectiveness will become increasingly important with the continued emphasis on the global marketplace and community diversity (House *et al.*, 2004; Boyer, 2003; McMichael, 2004; Tabak *et al.*, 1998; Bass, 1990; Bond & Smith, 1996).

Business and diplomatic associations have been taking place between Canada and China for approximately 30 years. This trade and development relationship with China is anticipated to double by 2010 (People's Daily, 2004; Canadian Press, 2005; Canadian Government in China, 2005). Therefore, the purpose of this research was to identify the intercultural leadership skills needed by Canadian agri-food leaders in order to maximize the growing opportunities for trade and business with China. To achieve this goal, two research objectives were identified.

1. Determine the general set of intercultural leadership competencies and behaviours needed by leaders; and
2. Establish a specific list of leadership competencies and behaviours, which include perspectives on gender, necessary for effective intercultural agri-food ventures in the Shanghai and Beijing regions of China.

Methods

The population under study included mainly Canadian and Chinese counterparts, with some additional perspectives from agriculture leaders in the EU, who had recent experience in agri-food business ventures and development projects in Shanghai and Beijing regions of China. A modified grounded research approach was used. Highlights of the literature review included the research of Bass (1990), Northouse (2004), Chemers (2000), Daft (2005), Yukl (2002), Evers *et al.* (1998 & 2003), Avolio & Gardner (2005), Vulpe *et al.* (2001), Siu, (2001), Dahles & Wels (2002), Harris & Kumra (2000), Dodd (1998), Hofstede (1980), Stuttard (2000), and House *et al.* (2004). This literature informed the three data collection methods and the analysis was taken to the open coding stage (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Parry, 1998; Palys, 2003). Twenty-six semi-

structured interviews were conducted. A case study analysis of the Canada-China Integrated Dairy Cattle Breeding Project (CCIDCBP) was done and included three key informant interviews, six semi-structured interviews and the analysis of the final report document (The Semex Alliance, 2004; Yin, 2003). Two events were used for the participant observation method, which included a session at a trade mission involving over 300 individuals and an international agriculture study tour for 43 participants. Seventeen informal interviews and many more conversations took place during the participant observations. Basic gender audits were included in all of these methods to understand women's participation and representation, as well as to assess the status of gender equity in leadership positions within this area of the agri-food sector.

Findings

A general set of intercultural leadership skills was identified. This framework, shown in Table 1, contains eight sections with a number of attributes in each. These intercultural leadership skill areas include: Adaptation and Innovation; Understanding Cultural Dimensions, Values and Ethics; Knowledge of Host Country and Culture; Relationship Building Skills; Self-Knowledge; Intercultural Communication; Strategic and Organization Skills; and Personal and Professional Commitment.

Relationship building skills ranked at the top of the intercultural leadership skill framework in the Canada-China agri-food context. This includes skills such as being: inspirational and motivational; supportive; a mentor and coach; and team builder. Being able to develop trust and gain respect (*guanxi*); manage conflict and problem solve; listen effectively; possess good oral and written skills, including some local language skills; empower collective action; and negotiation skills (*saving face*) are also considered important in this area. Having competencies in coordinating and socialization are also key. Possessing positive moral perceptions regarding values, cognitive and emotional abilities, ethics and integrity are also critical behaviours as part of relationship building skills.

The research reveals that an under-representation of women in leadership positions exists in the Canadian-Chinese agri-food sector. This was also seen in the small snapshot of Canadian and Ontario agricultural organizations. Similarly, the participation of women in the Nuffield Study Tours was low. These results and the literature speak to the capacity of women to participate effectively in decision making processes in the agriculture and agri-food sector (Hershkovitz & McNeill, 2001; Hughes, 2000; Roppel *et al.*, 2006).

Table 1: A Set of General Intercultural Leadership Competencies and Behaviours as Emerged from the Literature and Research Findings

<u>Intercultural Leadership Skills Framework</u>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Adaptation & Innovation</u></p> <p>Cope, enjoy ongoing challenges, creativity, innovation, initiate change when needed, risk-taking, critical thinking, personal strength (positive attitude, function in stressful situations, work independently/self-reliant), positive moral perceptions, flexibility, tolerance.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Understanding Cultural Dimensions, Values & Ethics</u></p> <p>Positive moral perceptions (values, cognitive, emotion, ethics, integrity), ability to conceptualize, relationship of values & culture to people & societies, an attitude of modesty and respect, sensitivity to diversity, integrity, can take role of follower when necessary, accountable, humility.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Knowledge of Host Country & Culture</u></p> <p>Environmental and situational analysis, ability to conceptualize, cognitive skills, non-judgmental, positive moral perceptions specific to the culture and country (values, cognitive, emotion, ethics integrity), sensitive to diversity.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Relationship Building Skills</u></p> <p>Inspires and motivates others, supportive, mentor & coach, team builder, managing conflict, listening, oral & written communication, positive moral perceptions, problem solving, coordinating, socialization skills, local language skills, trust, negotiation skills, gain respect, empower collective action.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Self-Knowledge</u></p> <p>Personal strengths (high energy level, optimal level of performance, positive attitude, function in stressful situations, take constructive criticism, work independently), self-confidence, manage ambiguity, know own values & beliefs, self-regulation, strong sense of moral values (positive moral perceptions).</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Intercultural Communication</u></p> <p>Interpersonal communication, listening, sensitivity to diversity and positive moral perceptions, diplomatic conflict resolution, risk-taking, verbal & non-verbal communication (including some local language skills), display empathy, openness, communicate high expectations.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Strategic & Organization Skills</u></p> <p>Visioning, decision-making, planning & organizing, coordinating, supportive, information management, multi-tasker, balance between adaptation and maintaining own cultural identity, political astuteness, resourceful.</p>
<p style="text-align: center;"><u>Personal & Professional Commitment</u></p> <p>Learning, personal organization & time management, contribute to the local community, personal strengths, realistic awareness of own motivations and expectations of life abroad, analysis, technical and analytical &/or sector competence, fulfill potential.</p>

Impacts for Leadership, International Trade and Development

In the struggle to transform the farmer's role in the food chain and for the continual advancement of the sector, it will be critical for the Canadian agri-food industry to understand and navigate this intercultural environment (Canadian Farm Business Management Council, 2006; Bonnett, 2004; Agricultural Odyssey Group, 2002). The framework of intercultural leadership skills developed through this research provides a foundation for leaders and leadership development programs to assess their skills and incorporate or update training components to include the eight general competency and behaviour areas.

In particular, the curriculum for Nuffield Canada and Nuffield Farming Scholarship Trust should use this inventory to modify the study tour programs so that more intentional intercultural leadership skill development is incorporated into the curriculum. Also, agricultural, agri-food or rural leadership development programs, such as Ontario's Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program or the George Morris Executive Development Program, should assess their training to be sure that intercultural leadership skill development is deliberately incorporated into the planning and curriculum (Nuffield Canada, 2006; The Centre for Rural Leadership, 2006; George Morris Centre, 2006).

International corporations, organizations and trade programs should also use this list of competencies and behaviours as an assessment tool in their orientation and business development programs. This would ensure business leaders are more prepared for their international assignment or trade mission involvement. Leaders currently in overseas projects or business opportunities could use this list to assess their own intercultural leadership competency and behaviour level in order to enhance their lifelong learning processes and ensure effective overseas projects or business ventures.

Canadian agri-food leaders involved in development projects or business ventures between Canada and China should be competent at a number of relationship building skills. This includes the ability to inspire and motivate others. Be able to be supportive and act as a mentor and coach to others in the initiative. Build effective teams and empower collective action by developing trust and gaining respect. Understand the concepts and practices of guanxi, saving face and other values such as modesty, honesty, integrity and ethics both in the culture and as part of the individual's self-knowledge. Possess good listening, speaking (including some Mandarin) and writing skills. With an understanding of the concept of saving face, be able to

manage conflict, problem solve and negotiate effectively. Having competencies in coordination and socialization will be valuable. Possessing good intercultural communication skills and access to good translation skills, adaptation and innovation skills, and understanding cultural dimensions values, ethics and knowledge of China and Chinese culture will also be an asset. Some strategic and organizational skill, as well as personal and professional commitment will also be required. This set of skills will help to ensure effective Canada-China ventures, especially in the Beijing and Shanghai areas of China.

Organizations involved in training leaders and others working or doing business in the Canada-China environment should focus their curriculum on the skills involved in relationship building. There should also be a balance of sector specific knowledge and technical information with intercultural leadership skills development.

The Canadian government and/or other institutions involved in international trade and development with China should ensure their leaders, staff, development personnel and entrepreneurs are equipped with a top notch set of relationship building skills. Their activities and events should also be designed to maximize the development of relationships.

Gender Perspectives

Canada-China agri-food organizations, projects or ventures must continue to feature gender equity initiatives. This should not only be a focus in the area of program goals and expected outcomes, but also reflected in the number of senior management positions held by women in the organization or project. Organizations should be leading by example. Targets for women's involvement in leadership should be set at 50%; for example at least 50% of the senior management positions should be filled by women. While this might not be achieved in the short term, perhaps it would increase the current levels. This would also mean that leadership programs like Nuffield Canada and Nuffield programs in the UK and Australia should actively recruit women to increase the percentage of female trainees. Leadership development programs should be showing leadership in gender equity and, as the transformational leadership approach endorses, this would then raise the level of motivation in both leaders and followers to make changes in gender balance in other spheres of the agri-food sector.

Future Research

With the emphasis today on the global marketplace and community diversity, this study provides a solid foundation in intercultural leadership theory and practice, and opens the door for additional research opportunities. Because of the small sample size of this study, the possibilities for further research to achieve more statistical significance and therefore greater reliability and validity include:

- Taking this data through the axial and selective coding procedures of the grounded theory method;
- Continued testing of the general intercultural leadership skills framework to provide more clarification between and within skill areas and its applicability cross-culturally; and
- Replication and/or expansion of this intercultural leadership research to more regional and larger Canada-China agri-food populations or other sectors.

From a gender perspective, more research is needed on the capacity and opportunity for women to participate effectively in decision making positions and leadership development in the agriculture and agri-food sector both in Canada and China. Regular monitoring of the status of gender equity in Canada-China development projects and ventures should be done to identify any changes over time.

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