



Defining the “global” in global leadership

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ABSTRACT

While scholars have begun to develop the conceptual foundations of global leadership, few attempts have been made to unify the plethora of existing definitions. We argue that the lack of a precise, rigorous and commonly accepted definition of global leadership limits the field's conceptual and empirical progress. Building on recommended practice for construct definitions, we first review and critique existing definitions of global leadership. Second, we specifically focus on explicating the *global* construct encompassed by the global leadership phenomenon and propose three dimensions along which this sub-construct can be analyzed: complexity, flow, and presence. Finally, we offer a revised construct definition and conclude with implications for research and practice.

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1. Introduction

As organizations conduct a growing share of operations outside their home countries, their ability to attract and develop people that not only effectively perform global tasks and activities but also actively influence and motivate people at a global level provides a key source of competitive advantage (Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009; Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2001; Mendenhall, Osland, Bird, Oddou, & Maznevski, 2008). Over the past two decades scholars have therefore begun examining the necessary capabilities, skills and characteristics of people who take on global leadership responsibilities. Specifically, research has sought to identify the scope of global leadership tasks (Caligiuri, 2006), define a set of global leadership competencies and skills (Beechler & Javidan, 2007; Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens, & Oddou, 2010; Jokinen, 2005; Osland, 2008), develop assessment instruments (Spreitzer, McCall, & Mahoney, 1997) and training programs for global leaders (Pless, Maak, & Stahl, 2011; Suutari, 2002), separate the concept of global leadership from global management (Bartlett & Ghoshal, 1992; Jokinen, 2005) and distinguish between global leadership and

domestic leadership (Osland, Bird, & Oddou, in press). The publication of two related recent special issues of *Advances in International Management* (2007) and *Journal of Managerial Psychology* (2010) as well as the *Advances in Global Leadership* series, which is already in its 7th volume, further highlight the scholarly interest in the domain of global leadership.

Despite the contributions noted above, global leadership remains a nascent field, and there is much that still remains to be understood about global leadership processes. Importantly, the field continues to lack a specific, rigorous and widely accepted definition of the construct (Pless et al., 2011). Recent reviews of the global leadership literature (e.g., Mendenhall et al., 2008; Osland, Bird, Osland, & Mendenhall, in press) have identified a plethora of definitions. So widely varied are the definitions that it is difficult to unify them. With a view towards advancing our understanding of the global leadership construct we believe that it is vital to review its evolution and map the construct domain in greater detail. As scholars have argued elsewhere (e.g., Wacker, 2004), formal conceptual definitions are a necessary condition to enable robust theory-building and empirical research. Without clear and commonly accepted definitions, there is a risk that research domains become increasingly fragmented and lose their ability to unify a common body of knowledge and make sense of potentially conclusive empirical results. Indeed, examples from related disciplines such as expatriation, which has seen an increase in the different forms of international assignees being studied (Collings, Scullion, & Morley, 2007), and cross-cultural research, in which different values and measures of culture have proliferated in

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recent years (Tsui, Nifadkar, & Ou, 2007), show that a lack of common construct definitions makes it more difficult to interpret research findings and discern how they relate to and expand upon each other.

Our intent in this paper is to fill this gap in the field's understanding of the global leadership construct. Specifically, we review and critique existing definitions of global leadership. At the outset, we acknowledge that the construct of leadership itself is ambiguous and lacks unifying theory (Barker, 2001; Yukl, 1989). In this paper our primary focus will be on explicating the construct of *global* in the global leadership construct. By developing a conceptual model of *global*, we help to focus future research efforts in the field in such a way as to prevent conceptual pitfalls that have slowed the progression of other, similar sub-fields of international management.

2. A review of definitions of the global leadership construct

The field of global leadership has emerged over the past two decades as a response to the need of internationally operating firms to develop global strategies, expand into international markets and compete in the global marketplace (Black, Morrison, & Gregersen, 1999; Mendenhall et al., 2008). The increased intensity and growth in 'global work', defined as situations in which workers collaborate across national boundaries, is unprecedented (Hinds, Liu, & Lyon, 2011). As a result, scholars have begun to conceptualize and develop models that can help global firms to develop global management and leadership talent. While existing efforts have contributed to a better understanding of some of the capabilities and competencies that global leaders ought to have, and how these can be effectively developed (e.g., Bird et al., 2010; Bückler & Poutsma, 2010; Suutari, 2002), the conceptual definitions underlying this stream of research are often idiosyncratic in nature, not explicitly spelled out, or insufficiently specific. In the next section, we review and evaluate existing definitions of global leadership.

2.1. Existing definitions of global leadership

Table 1 provides a representative sample of definitions of global leadership that have been applied by scholars in the field. They include one or more of these component categories: vision; purpose (e.g., goal achievement); behaviors (e.g., influencing, motivating, change agency, building community and trust, boundary spanning, intercultural competence); MNC job responsibilities (e.g., global integration, strategy, architecting); target audiences (e.g., individuals, groups, organizations, global community); global components (e.g., global work, international job); performance measures (e.g., effectiveness, competitive advantage, world class performance, improved quality of life, positive change); and descriptions of the global context (e.g., cultural, political, institutional, geographical differences, multiple authorities, complexity, ambiguity). Although they differ in their scope, as a group, they bring together a set of elements that help to better delineate global leadership. For example, scholars appear to agree that global leadership is significantly different from domestic leadership due to the salience of the context – characteristics of the global context appear to exert greater influence than is the case for domestic contexts.

Specifically, global leadership scholars describe the global context as characterized by a greater range of diversity (e.g., Gregersen, Morrison, & Black, 1998), more frequent and far-reaching boundary crossing activities (e.g., Beechler & Javidan, 2007; McCall & Hollenbeck, 2002), a greater number of stakeholders that need to be considered when making decisions (e.g., Beechler & Javidan, 2007; Mendenhall et al., 2008; Osland, 2010; Osland, Bird, Osland, & Oddou, 2007), greater competitive

pressures (e.g., Brake, 1997; Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009), greater volatility and hence pressures for continuous change efforts (e.g., Brake, 1997; Osland, 2008), greater levels of ambiguities that influence decision-making (e.g., Caligiuri, 2006; Osland et al., 2007), greater complexity (IBM, 2010) which leads to demands for increased cognitive complexity (Levy, Beechler, Taylor, & Boyacigiller, 2007), social acuity and behavioral flexibility (Osland, Bird, & Oddou, in press), and greater needs for integration (e.g., Caligiuri & Tarique, 2009; Osland et al., 2007; Suutari, 2002).

One dimension along which existing definitions vary concerns the differentiation between leadership as a state (Quinn, 2005) or a process (Yukl, 2006). Some definitions conceptualize global leadership as a state that is characterized by specific tasks, activities, job scope, roles and responsibilities that global leaders take on. Specifying these characteristics is beneficial as it enables the identification and development of competencies and skill sets that are necessary to fulfill these roles and tasks and limits sample selection. For example, some definitions and studies assume that anyone who holds the title of global manager is a global leader; others specify that global leaders must be change agents, in keeping with Kotter's (1999) distinction between domestic managers and leaders. This contrast between role and function leads to another category of definitions that focuses on the process element of global leadership. In these definitions global leadership does not simply entail extending a domestic leader's attributes and activities to a wider context. Instead, global leadership is conceptualized to be a process that reflects *how* an individual engages in and fulfills global roles and responsibilities, and includes sense-making, the nature and quality of relationships that the leader holds with the people around them in a global context, and the mechanisms through which a leader exerts influence. This definitional approach has also received considerable attention in the literatures on leader–member exchange (Sparrowe & Liden, 1997) and relational leadership theory (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

Finally, some definitions combine the understanding of global leadership as a state and as a process, an integration that has several advantages. First, the two categories of state and process are not mutually exclusive. Implicit to the former view is the question of *how* individuals ought to fulfill the different tasks, roles and responsibilities that constitute a global leadership context. For example, performing global integration responsibilities does not occur in a vacuum but requires the involvement and support of other people, which necessarily entails a procedural element. Similarly, the process of global leadership cannot be assessed without taking into account the specific role requirements and task characteristics of the person spearheading that process. Adler (1997, p. 174) seems to acknowledge this when arguing that "global leaders are those people who most strongly influence the process of global leadership." Second, the distinction between state and process is largely a matter of unit of analysis: The process of global leadership reaches beyond the individual occupying global roles and attending to global responsibilities and acknowledges how it is embedded in the wider collectivity within which global leaders operate to achieve their objectives. From that perspective, integrating the categories of state and process also provides a link between the two overlapping constructs of *global leader* and *global leadership*.

2.2. Limitations of existing definitions of global leadership

Despite their merit, the existing definitions of global leadership listed in Table 1 also entail a range of problems. While these problems are certainly not unusual for a young field, we argue that they impede the field from progressing. A major concern involves the lack of rigor, precision and similarity in scope in most global leadership definitions. Wacker (2004, p. 630) argues that "imprecise formal conceptual definitions ... lead to ambiguous or vague

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