A Comparison of Worldviews of Business Leaders from Disparate Geographic Cultures

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Abstract

Leadership functions within the context of multiple perspectives. Business leaders naturally possess a worldview that is influenced by today's global society and economy. Although interacting with business leaders of disparate worldviews can create challenges, the better these various worldviews are understood, the more positive the outcomes of leadership will be. Global business organizations require leadership that recognizes their own foundations, along with those of the leaders with whom they interact -- especially leaders emanating from other cultures and geographic locations. This paper explores the concept of *worldview* and its underlying core values and present the results of interviews of four business leaders from different countries with distinct philosophical perspectives, identifying, comparing, and contrasting each leader's understanding of leadership.

Introduction

Business leaders seldom take the time to reflect upon their worldview and therefore the origins of their philosophical foundations of leadership. Leadership studies have examined this phenomenon and observed how important culture is in the influence of leadership development. Globalization has encouraged intercultural leadership studies, but a gap exists comparing and contrasting the philosophical underpinnings of leadership as espoused by business leaders from different geographic cultures. Business leaders attempting to collaborate with varying definitions of reality or right versus wrong could result in less than desirable outcomes.

Leadership is highly contextualized and involves complex interactions among leaders, followers, and situations (Hollander & Julian, 1969). Leadership is a process of reality construction that takes place within a given context (Smircich & Morgan, 1982). Leadership is also culturally contingent (House, 2004). Leaders must give meaning to various situations to avoid vagueness and to encourage organizational members to act in ways that will lead to

desired outcomes. The leadership development process involves transferring organizational values and culture. A leader's philosophical foundation upon which his or her leadership practices are based is therefore a major factor of leadership effectiveness. Leadership development and its philosophical foundations are vitally important concepts to the understanding of leadership (Hamilton & Bean, 2005).

Everyone holds a worldview. Every day, we make perfunctory decisions based on our personal worldview. It takes a concerted effort to delve deeply into one's inner beliefs to flush out exactly what one's worldview truly is. Making decisions that are not aligned with one's worldview creates inner conflict. Aligning decisions with worldview provides inner harmony. As leaders, understanding worldview helps us achieve harmony within ourselves, our followers, and our organizations.

What is worldview? Its origin is a translation from the German term *Weltanschauung.* This term was used by Immanuel Kant and others as a way to denote a set of beliefs that underlie and shape all human thought and action (Heslam, 1998). Wilhelm Dilthey was one of the first to expound his own philosophy in terms of a worldview concept. According to Dilthey, the ultimate root of any worldview is life itself (Kluback & Weinbaum, 1957). Our worldview is ours: one that may be held in common with others, but only because they are like us. Friedrich Nietzsche viewed every worldview as a product of its time, place, and culture (Naugle, 2002), each rendering a significant distinction. Many other scholars have contributed to the evolution of a definition for worldview with each scholar's respective worldview influencing his or her own definition. Naugle provides a definition of worldview from a Christian perspective, implying the objective existence of the Trinitarian God whose essential character establishes the moral order of the universe and whose word, wisdom, and law define and govern all aspects of created existence.

Worldview incorporates our assumptions which may be true, partially true, or entirely false, to create our core values and what we believe about the world. Sometimes our beliefs are known to our conscience thought, or they may be archived in our subconscious. Sometimes we are consistent with our beliefs; at other times we are inconsistent. Regardless, these assumptions, core values, and beliefs create our perception of the world around us. In simple terms, our worldview is the way we address everyday issues of life. For leaders, worldview provides the philosophical foundations of leadership. Every person is unique, therefore, so is his/her perspective of life, reality, foundation, belief system, and life experiences. Individuals may be similar, but no two are exactly alike. Thus, the same holds true for worldviews. Sire (2004) reviews the evolvement of worldview as a concept and ultimately posits the following definition:

A worldview is a commitment, a fundamental orientation of the heart, that can be expressed as a story or in a set of presuppositions (assumptions which may be true, partially true or entirely false) which we hold (consciously or subconsciously, consistently or inconsistently) about the basic constitution of reality, and that provides the foundation on which we live and move and have our being (p. 122).

As leaders in a global society, it is inevitable that one will encounter individuals with diverse worldviews. While effective leaders comprehend their own worldview, awareness of other worldviews will foster effective communication and better understanding.

Interviews of Four Business Leaders

Four business leaders from different countries were interviewed over a period of time utilizing face-to-face interaction, telephone, and email. Participants were chosen based on the following criteria:

1. Willingness to participate.
2. Rapport of the participants with the author and the author with the participants.
3. Fluency in English.
4. Maximum variation.

Study participants were:

- Mr. Yo Sakata, CEO (now retired), AMCO, Tokyo, Japan.
- Mr. Ranjit Mathew, Owner, Merit Global, Mumbai, India.
- Mr. Britain (participant preferred anonymity) General Manager of a medical device company in the United Kingdom.
- Bill Auxier (Author), who at the time of this study was the CEO of Thompson Surgical Instruments, Traverse City, MI, USA.

The interviews were centered on the following questions.

- What is your definition of leadership?
- What are your core values that most affect your leadership philosophy?
- In what ways have your life experiences helped shape those core values?
- What impact, if any, does religion play in the shaping of your core values?
- How do you determine right from wrong?

Each interview will be summarized, compared, and contrasted.

Mr. Britain is the General Manager of a medical device distributor in the United Kingdom. Mr. Britain became the General Manager quite by accident. Educated as an electrical engineer, Mr. Britain was quick to answer questions with short, factual answers. When asked to share his philosophical foundations of leadership and how they evolved, Mr. Britain was eager to respond. He admitted to having difficulty participating in this process because he had never taken the time to reflect upon the development of his values which, in turn, affected his leadership philosophy. He found the questions extremely difficult to answer, and he apologized for his concise responses.

Mr. Britain credited his solid family upbringing for providing him with moral guidance. His father was a strong influence who taught him the importance of adopting an effective work/life balance. Both his mother and father instilled within him core life principles regarding honesty, fairness, and "playing by the rules." Mr. Britain even admitted to deciphering between right and wrong by sometimes considering his family's opinions of his actions. In his youth, he played team sports, cricket, and football (soccer) mostly. He learned at an early age that it was more fulfilling to win than to lose, which helped him foster a spirit of healthy competition.

Mr. Britain was reluctant to give credence to religion as having an influence on his core values. Describing himself as "not a church goer," he contradicted himself when he stated, "I guess they (his core values) are based on fundamental Christian principles." Family, team

sports, education, and religion provided life experiences that helped shape his core values. He identified the following core values:

- Honesty
- Integrity
- Fair Play
- Competitiveness
- Ambition
- Diligence/attention to detail
- Balance
- Decisiveness

Mr. Britain was very uncomfortable looking inward at his philosophical foundations of leadership. Upon reflection, he realized that family, team sports, education, and religion all play a major role in developing his core value beliefs and the foundation for his leadership philosophy.

Mr. Sakata was both president and CEO (he has since retired) of AMCO, a medical device company in Japan, where he was very focused on the type of leadership he provided to his company. Mr. Sakata identified three core values that most affect his leadership philosophy. The first one he mentioned was the spirit to carry out tasks. "Spirit to carry out tasks" refers to the sense of urgency to get things done. Another way of explaining this is the possession of self-motivation to complete a task without anyone putting pressure on you to get the job done. The second core value is self-control or patience with employees. The third core value is stubbornness but willingness to understand others which is carried over from self-control and patience. When an employee presents an idea, Mr. Sakata feels it vitally important to listen, understand, and be receptive.

During his college years, Mr. Sakata was a member of the college rowing club. All the members trained daily with strenuous workouts to gain strength – approximately 300 days each year. They also lived together, with the entire crew sharing the same boarding house. From this experience, Mr. Sakata learned the importance of self-control, friendship, and a spirit of perseverance.

Concerning religion, Mr. Sakata describes himself as a lukewarm Buddhist. He does not think religion has played a role in the formation of his core values. Upon further questioning about this, he admitted that while executing his daily tasks, he always tries to pay respect to his employees – elderly employees in particular – which is one of the foundational teachings in Buddhism. In determining right from wrong, Mr. Sakata's principles are outlined in a simple phrase: *Whatever is good for the company is right, and whatever is bad for the company is wrong*. Other concepts of leadership Mr. Sakata identified as being important include listening to others, fairness in decision-making (particularly in personnel matters), and avoiding personal likes or dislikes in the decision-making process.

Mr. Mathew is the owner of Merit Global, a medical device distributor in Mumbai, India. Mr. Mathew majored in engineering in college, and like all his classmates, had the opportunity to come to the United States to earn a graduate degree. Instead, he was one of the few to stay in India, primarily to care for his parents. After working for a medical device company, he decided to branch out on his own and start his own distribution company. Unlike the other participants who found the process of examining their philosophical foundations of

leadership difficult, Mr. Mathew embraced and enjoyed the process. He took the least amount of time to complete and return the questionnaire and was the most willing to engage in discussion.

Mr. Mathew's definition of leadership involves the adoption of change for the greater good of society. Leadership, affecting change simply for materialistic or self-serving goals, is wrong. Genuine leadership is effecting change to make the world a better place for all living entities. As a fourth-generation Christian, Mr. Mathew also noted that an omnipotent, omnipresent God is the best example of a leader. Mr. Mathew identified several core values, the first being that a leader needs to bring a positive outlook to a negative situation. He called it, "bringing in positivity where there is negativity in order to effectively solve problems." Another core value is adopting views that will long stand the test of time. Honesty is another core value Mr. Mathew identified as strong ethics and aiming to work for the betterment of others. Life experiences that helped shape his core values include family, his upbringing by his parents, and a social responsibility for the greater good. For Mr. Mathew, whether you are a believer or an atheist, religion is the underlying principle of one's core values.

At the time of this study, I was the CEO of Thompson Surgical Instruments, a surgical device manufacturing company based in the United States. Becoming the CEO was a dream come true for me after twenty years of successful experience in sales, marketing, management, and other leadership roles for a variety of organizations including a Fortune 500 medical device company. I grew up in a rural area of the Midwest with humble beginnings, which taught me all about hard work and making due with one's situation. My father was bi-vocational, working six days a week for an oil company and on Sundays he was a Baptist minister. My mother was a homemaker.

I, too, found it difficult to reflect upon the underlying life experiences of which my worldview had evolved, and, therefore, my philosophical foundations of leadership. For me, leadership involves the following: the utilization of effective communication to understand culture, the willingness to implement change, the ability make more good judgments than bad ones, the foresight to perceive and understand followers, the knowledge to understand the situation, and the commitment to surpass the expectations of others. This definition evolved as the result of reading ample leadership literature on various leadership concepts and theories and attempting to understand and evaluate situations -- a combination of intellectual knowledge of leadership and real-world application.

It was difficult for me to separate the teachings of my parents and my Christian upbringing, as they were so intertwined. Honesty, ethics, contributing to mankind, playing by the rules, and establishing a solid work ethic were core values learned from my parents and their Christian influence. Conflict resolution, being a team player, and proactive behavior were learned elsewhere, namely through team sports that I played in my youth. I learned that to be on the team, everyone needed to contribute one hundred percent, one hundred percent of the time. These lessons have stayed with me in the business world.

Coaching team sports, terminating employees, working my way through college, and growing up in modest economic conditions impacted my core values. I believe that human beings choose right and wrong based on what they have learned through life experiences and communicating those experiences with God, oneself, and others.

Discussion

Definitions of leadership were provided by everyone except Mr. Britain and are summarized in Table 1. Each definition shares two common themes: implementing change and influencing for a good or better state. Mr. Sakata's definition refers to "maintain and develop the company" — which was interpreted as dealing with changes within the environment to "maintain" the company — and changing the organization as needed to "develop" the company. Mr. Mathew and I refer to change in our definitions by including the words "affecting change" and "implement change" respectively. Change is a common theme in all the definitions.

Examining the core values of the participants reveals diversity. Table 2 provides a summary of the core values. Honesty and ethical behavior are common themes regardless of geographic culture. Communication, decision-making, goodness, and work ethic also emerge. It is interesting to look at the terms each person utilized. For Mr. Britain and I, English is our first language. Is this the reason our stated core values use less words? For both Mr. Sakata and Mr. Mathew, English is a second language. Is that why they identify core values with more words? For example, they identify core values such as the "spirit to carry out tasks" and "views that will stand the test of time." Or is this a message they are truly trying to convey? In the discussions with Mr. Sakata and Mr. Mathew, it was determined that "spirit to carry out tasks" equates to strong work ethic and "views that will stand the test of time" equates to good judgment and good decision-making. One might question whether I forced these clarifications into words that made sense to me and that perhaps there is more to these words than elaborated here.

Table 1
Definitions of Leadership

PERSON	DEFINITION OF LEADERSHIP
MR. SAKATA	*Leadership is the power to maintain and develop the company for employees and their families, and my own family.*
MR. MATHEW	*Leadership is affecting change for the greater good of society.*
AUTHOR	*Leadership is serving first by utilizing effective communication to understand culture, implement change, make more good judgments than bad, to perceive and understand followers, to understand the situation, and influencing myself and constituents to not only achieve but surpass expectations.*

Mr. Britain notes competitiveness and ambition in his core values. These relate to work ethic. Some competitiveness is good, but some might question the possibility that at times, there is too much competition in the business world. Mr. Britain's academic training as an engineer is reflected in his core value of "diligence to detail." It is interesting that Mr. Britain was the only one to mention balance.

Mr. Sakata provides an interesting perspective on core values when he provides the statement, "spirit to carry out tasks." There is something about using the word "spirit" that gives this core value a deeper meaning that perhaps exemplifies the Japanese work ethic. Of the four business leaders, Mr. Sakata has been in his position the longest amount of time and he is also the oldest. This may be why he was the only one to identify the core values of

self-control and patience. Another interesting contribution from Mr. Sakata was his simply stated core value of "never give up."

Table 2
Core Values

MR. BRITAIN	MR. SAKATA	MR. MATHEW	AUTHOR
Honesty	Spirit to Carry Out Tasks	Honesty	Honesty
Integrity	Self-Control	Positive Outlook	Ethics
Fair Play	Patience	Views that Will Stand the Test of Time	Contribute to Mankind
Competitiveness	Stubbornness	Optimism	Play Within the Rules
Ambition	Understanding Others	Ethics	Conflict Resolution
Diligence to Detail	Listening	Betterment of Others	Strong Work Ethic
Balance	Fairness	Problem Solving	Team Player
Decisiveness	Communication	Problem Solving	"Whatever It Takes" Attitude
	Never Give Up		Proactive

Mr. Mathew's core values are interwoven with a substantial commitment to social responsibility. As mentioned previously, his explanations were interwoven with examples of nature. It would appear that of all the study participants, Mr. Mathew's worldview was the most strongly influenced by geographic culture.

In what ways have your life experiences helped shape your core values (Table 3)? Family and religion were mentioned by every participant. Family was easily mentioned by all, but both Mr. Britain and Mr. Sakata begrudgingly acknowledged religion helped shape their core values. Team sports — both playing and coaching team sports — was mentioned by three of the four leaders. Mr. Sakata's theme of serving his employees and their families comes through very strongly with his core values. Mr. Mathew included traveling and meeting people from different cultures as helping shape his core values. Understanding culture is an important element of leadership, and this is a very interesting life experience for Mr. Mathew.

Table 3
Life Experiences That Have Shaped Core Values

MR. BRITAIN	MR. SAKATA	MR. MATHEW	AUTHOR
Family	Family	Family	Parents
Religion	Religion	Spirituality	Religion
Playing Team Sports	Playing Team Sports	Personal search for Infinity	Playing Team Sports
Education	Coaching Team Sports		Coaching Team Sports
	Employees	Traveling, Meeting People from Different Cultures	Terminating Employees
	Families	Cultures	Working Way Through College

How do you determine right from wrong? Mr. Britain and I both mention that family values help us determine right from wrong and both of us also admit that these family values are influenced by Christian values. Mr. Sakata is more oriented to his organization when he states that if it is good for the company it is right; if it is bad for the company, it is wrong. Here again, Mr. Sakata's theme of servant leadership comes through. Mr. Mathew is more elaborative as he lists several questions that must be answered to determine right from wrong. Those questions are: Is it ethical? Is it selfish? Does it help others? Does it include a social view that is good for society? If the answer to these questions is "yes," it is right. If the answer to any of these questions is "no," it is wrong.

Conclusions

The majority of business leaders participating in this study, regardless of culture, had difficulty reflecting upon life experiences to understand the core values that provide the foundation for their worldviews and, therefore, their philosophical foundations of leadership. Each definition shares two common themes: implementing change and influencing others for a positive outcome. Mr. Sakata's definition refers to the development or maintenance of a company which could be defined as accommodating changes within the environment to maintain the company and modifying the organization as needed for development and growth. Mr. Mathew and I referred to change in our definitions by including the terms, "affecting change" and "implementing change," respectively. Honesty and ethical behavior are common themes regardless of geographic culture. The common themes of communication, solid decision-making, integrity, and work ethic also emerge. Family and religion were mentioned by every participant regardless of personal opinions on these subjects. Playing a team sport or coaching a team sport was a significant factor of influence with three of the four business leaders. Through the data presented in this article, it can be deduced that, despite cultural differences, each leader upholds similar values that help contribute to the development of effective business leadership.

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Bill Auxier is a best-selling, award-winning author, speaker, consultant, 30-year veteran of the healthcare industry, and founder of the Dynamic Leadership Academy™. Bill works with leaders in the healthcare industry to help them become more effective for greater personal and organizational success. He does this by utilizing what he has learned about leadership in the real world combined with what he has learned about leadership in the academic world. Utilizing a unique process, Bill helps healthcare leaders grow and evolve through his SCILD™ Process, a stakeholder-centered, individual leadership development process.

In the real world, Bill has spent over 30 years in the healthcare industry, where he worked his way up from the bottom to become the CEO of a medical device manufacturer with global distribution. In the academic world, he earned a Bachelor's degree in Business, a Master's degree in Communication, and a Doctorate in Leadership.

After raising their family in Traverse City, Michigan, Bill and his wife, Elise, are empty-nesters enjoying the sunshine and warmth of Florida. To access free content Bill has developed on leadership, please visit his website: www.billauxier.com.