

**Becoming a global leader by  
acknowledging cultural differences  
and developing emotional intelligence**

*A personal learning reflection on global leadership*

STUDENT AB

**CEMS Exclusive Course**

9005-1-GL: CEMS Global Leadership

Business Article

Kanina Blanchard

Ivey Business School

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The one thing that I was sure about myself was that I could never be a leader, let alone a global leader. Over the past years I have been trying to understand myself, finding my strengths and navigating my directions for future career development. To me, it's not an easy journey. Seeking the balance between personal strengths and passion while pursuing financial goals can be very challenging. Fortunately, I had the opportunity to participate in the CEMS Global Leadership course, which was an eye-opening experience, helping me understand that one can learn to be a leader, and leadership skills are not totally genetic assets. In this article, I will describe my learnings from the course in terms of global leadership and cultural differences as well as my reflection on personal development regarding leadership skills acknowledgment and emotional intelligence advancement, facilitated by personal experience, course content and interviews with global leaders.

### **Leading with cultural differences**

J was an intern for the Chinese subsidiary of a Japanese multinational company. On his first day at work, he was asked by the general manager: "You are the new intern here, you should make coffee for everyone". Being a Chinese Canadian, he was well-aware of the corporate culture of Asian companies. Therefore, it didn't come as a surprise to him when later on he was also expected to wipe the desks and order lunch for the team on a daily basis, beside his main professional tasks of the intern role.

J is now the CEO of a fintech company based in Canada, and he shared the story without any judgment. "When another intern came to the company, he took over the chores" - J laughed. Now J is managing teams of 10+ people with different cultural backgrounds. "I do not expect my subordinates to do chores at work. I can make my own coffee. But I learned a lot about Asian corporate culture during the internship in China, which I'm grateful for as I'm working with many stakeholders in Asia."

Coming from a similar cultural background, I also had a similar experience as J. Even when I'm lucky enough to be working in the Western world where the hierarchy is extremely lower than that of Asian countries, I would still abide by the cultural rule if I get to work in Asia again with conservative managers. Being a global leader, J also chooses to respect other leaders' way of working and leadership mindset, as long as the company's goal is met, which is growth and revenue. The lesson here is that global leaders tend to adapt and respect cultural differences in order to achieve the ultimate goals, rather than going against it or trying to change people's mindsets.

Having the ability to work with diverse groups of people is expected out of a global leader. This explains why the topic of cultural differences is always mentioned in every conversation regarding global leadership. I used to think that grouping people by their culture is somewhat too collectivistic and over-generalizing, yet even leaders from very individualistic countries tend to categorize people and their ways of working based on cultural backgrounds. Throughout class discussions and case studies of the Global Leadership course, we were supposed to criticize and analyze management issues defined mostly based on cultural barriers, rather than individuals. From a practical perspective, it makes sense for us to study leadership and people management by studying the culture and applying Hofstede's

framework, as geolocation categorization (e.g Eastern versus Western culture) or cultural dimensions (e.g: collectivism versus individualism) helps simplify the problem identification process and generalize solutions.

As a person who lived and worked both in the Eastern and Western part of the world, I have met many Asian leaders who are open-minded as well as conservative European leaders, thus I believe that cultural dimension framework should only be regarded as the foundation for cultural understanding, rather than used as a guide for leadership and management. Not only individual personalities can largely define one's leadership style, but globalization also plays a role in lessening the outdated leadership stereotypes. Regarding the case above, J also shared that he and his partner (also an Asian leader) had totally different mindsets in terms of leadership, yet they still managed to collaborate successfully with each other as they share the same goal and core values. Therefore, it is the values, rather than culture, that define the people.

### **Emotional Intelligence and personal development**

CEMS Global Leadership is the first and only leadership education I have ever had. Only when I was exposed to the course did I realize how ignorant I had been, and that one can never become accomplished in managing positions without leadership skills.

I used to avoid working in diverse teams, struggle to get along with teammates, and the idea of leading a diverse team freaked me out. During my first year of study in COUNTRY Y, school projects were very challenging as I got into many fights with my team members, since our work and communication styles were completely opposite. Therefore, we found ourselves in totally homogeneous teams (or we described these as teams of best friends) whenever we had the chance to choose our own teammates. It is ideal to work with people we like, as we can be in the comfort-zone and enjoy the predictable, friendly dynamics among our friends.

Not to my surprise, I witnessed the same situation during my internship in COUNTRY Y. People would grab any chance to work with those that share the same work and communication styles as theirs. My first manager was a wonderful Chinese woman, and we got on really well. She was also the only one who offered me the internship, as I was rejected by every Western manager, saying that they found better matches even though they were impressed by my profile.

As you can see, I have always stayed in my comfort zone, worked with people I like, and only focused on my strengths. This explains why I got terrible scores in the Competency Assessment of Responsible Leadership (CARL).

<i>Degree of mastery (columns)</i> Competency dimensions (rows)	<b>Knowing (Knowledge)</b>	<b>Doing (Skills)</b>	<b>Being (Attitudes)</b>	% of max
<b>Stakeholder relations</b>	3	2	1	46
<b>Ethics and values</b>	2	3	3	69
<b>Self-awareness</b>	2	3	4	79
<b>Systems understanding</b>	3	2	2	56
<b>Change and innovation</b>	4	3	3	81
% of max	70	65	65	

**CARL score: 66**

*Image 1. Personal Responsible Leadership Assessment*

Thanks to the test, I got to reflect upon my previous decision-making and the way I carried myself in diverse project teams, and I realized that I cannot always pick the easy battles, especially in the business world where stakeholder management is a crucial value. I then decided to start observing how successful leaders carry themselves and trying to find out the qualities/characteristics expected out of the leaders. Throughout class discussions, case studies and interviews, I figured out some qualities desired by the majority of people that I need to obtain to improve myself as a future leader:

*Maintaining emotional stability:*

If I have to choose the hardest thing to learn, it's keeping calm in difficult situations. I grew up in a neighborhood where domestic violence was deemed common, and there were times when I witnessed physical violence in my own family and at school, on a daily basis. What's worse, physical violence was considered acceptable by COUNTRY X society and adopted prominently in parenting as well as elementary/secondary education. I believe this has somewhat influenced my characteristic development, as everyone who knew me would describe me as a very impatient, short-tempered person. As I refused to work on improving these negative traits, they kept dragging me down. I failed at being a teacher as I had to yell at my students everyday, draining me mentally and physically. I also struggled with collaborating in teams and couldn't accept critical feedback, which led to me failing at becoming a leader due to low self-esteem and a lack of emotional intelligence.

To me, improving emotional stability is a long journey, and in the CEMS Global Leadership course I was fortunate to experiment dealing with difficult communication situations, where I realized that many others also have the same struggles as I do. This motivates me to work on my negative temperance even more as it majorly defines whether or not one can handle the leadership position. K - a CEMS Alumni, said :” Use your failures as an asset, they build up your experience and you become more understanding towards people who are experiencing what you used to do, which makes them trust you and consider you as a

mentor to some extent.” What she said really empowered me and inspired me to reflect on myself instead of avoiding it, which is important as self-trust and self-esteem is the core of emotional stability.

*Being a good listener:*

R - an HR consultant at Deloitte Canada, said: “ Listening to people and understanding what they need is the key to retaining good talents”. This is an important point that firms should take into account, as the current VUCA world makes it easy for people to lose trust in their leaders and companies, demonstrated by massive laid-offs and quiet quitting. During my interview with R, she shared with me how Deloitte made an effort to listen to their current employees, those who left companies, as well as those who returned, to find out how Deloitte can support their employees and increase retention rate. The insights from focus groups allowed them to create the 4 value propositions of Deloitte Careers, including purposeful work, flexibility, leadership development, career empowerment, along with in-depth programs that facilitate the integration of these 4 values throughout the whole company.

This is a great example of active listening and initiating changes, which I find really inspiring as a future global leader. There are many companies and HR managers that try their best to seek for people whose values and working styles match those of the firms, which I believe is an inefficient way of recruitment. We have witnessed many changes in work styles, employment expectations and means of communication during and after the pandemic. Leaders should acknowledge their role as change makers and the change process should be based on the understanding of people’s needs. Expecting employees to stick with a fixed set of values is unrealistic, as adaptation is crucial to stay competent in business.

## **Conclusion & future outlook**

CEMS Global Leadership was an inspiring experience from which I got the chance to dive into theories of global leadership and take part in meaningful discussions based on practical case studies. The topic of cultural barriers and leadership capability relate the most to my personal experience, which are also my biggest take-aways from the course. Understanding the challenges posed by cultures and personal characteristics opens up a clear direction for me to improve myself and expand my opportunity of success as a future leader.

This article also benefits those who aspire to study the subject of global leadership or pursue a career that involves working cross-culturally, as it encourages external acknowledgement and analysis (cultures) as well as internal reflection and development (emotional intelligence). The article also touches upon the need for leaders and corporations to be flexible and aware of the ever-changing nature of the business world and their responsibility of initiating changes to better adapt with the needs of employees and society as a whole.