

Global Business Leadership By E.S. Wibbeke

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Reviewed by Satu Kreula

Marshall Goldsmith is quoted as saying: “The leaders of the future cannot just work in their countries; they must work in the world. Dr. Wibbeke shows us how.” I was attracted by this statement, as I was about the notion of an interculturalist writing a book on ‘global leadership’. I have to admit that there was an initial disappointment when I realised that this book (as many other books in both the intercultural and leadership fields) was written for the US business leader in mind. Nonetheless, it is one of the better books on the topic that I have come across.

The book essentially takes you through what Dr Wibbeke calls the Geoleadership model, which consists of seven principles, and which she put together based on her research on what intercultural competencies were vital for US business leaders to develop in the era of globalisation. Her findings are based on interviews with 26 recognised and published interculturalists spanning the globe.

The aim of the book is to give context to her model and cover the principles in a way that will help, especially US, business leaders to work more effectively in the globalised (or globalising) economy. She splits the book into two introduction chapters and then seven chapters outlining the various components of the Geoleadership model. The first chapter looks at challenges in the era of globalisation that most of leaders are facing. The reader’s attention is captured by an italicised statement on the first page: ‘the conservative estimate is that fully 70% of global business ventures worldwide fail due to the mismanagement of intercultural differences’. She builds her case well, and uses good practical examples to sell the idea that this is serious AND it can be dealt with.

The second chapter aims to look at leadership and how it relates to culture. She claims to do it in a thorough way, but I personally found it not integrated enough. She first looks at culture and goes over some of the ways to look at culture, including Hofstede’s 5-D model and the GLOBE value study. She subsequently goes over various leadership theories through both an essentialist (i.e. that specific properties possessed by a group or entity are universal and not dependent on context) and a contextualist perspective. These two areas still feel disjointed though, and I feel that there could have been more of an attempt to look at leadership from other perspectives than just the traditional ‘business school’ concepts, which tend to be very Western (and often American) in their viewpoint.

The following seven chapters cover the various areas of the Geoleadership model, which include:

- 1) The principle of ‘care’ – how you balance interest and value in stakeholders and profit
- 2) The principle of ‘communication’ – how to engage and interact in the cultures you do business in and have a true curiosity and desire to understand varying worldviews

- 3) The principle of 'consciousness' – how to develop increased self-awareness and how this relates to your relationship with yourself and your relationship with others
- 4) The principle of 'contrasts' – how to live with ambiguity and doubt, and how to handle contrasting perspectives
- 5) The principle of 'context' – how to understand the various frames of reference and the surrounding circumstances and conditions in which reality (or various realities) unfold(s)
- 6) The principle of 'change' – how to be flexible and keep developing your ability to adapt to ever-changing cultural environments
- 7) The principle of 'capability' – how to make sure that both you and your organisation keep learning and developing your capabilities

Each chapter looks at the concept, attempts to define it, then gives some examples and also a case study of what she deems to be 'good practice' around this area. Some chapters are substantially longer than others, and I feel that you can get a better sense of what she's trying to say the longer the chapter is. Whilst I enjoyed the case studies, and especially that they were a good length, as far as I can tell, all of them were from Anglo-Saxon sources, thus leaving the reader with a one-sided perspective on what this principle could look like or how their practices might be perceived by others (the exception of this would be the eBay expansion to Japan case study under the 'Principle of Care' chapter). The quality of the case studies was also varied with some really demonstrating the core and analysed well by the author, and some not seeming to be related to the topic and only brushed over in subsequent analysis.

I welcome the attempt of integrating various management and leadership theories to intercultural ones, and the opportunity to look at real life cases through all these lenses. Trying to stand in a practitioner's (i.e. a global business person's) shoes, I think this book might whet my appetite and get me thinking, but it won't necessarily help me to figure out so what is it that I should actually do. Standing in my own (i.e. an intercultural management consultant's) shoes, I found the myriad of references intriguing and welcomed a grounded researched approach as opposed to an 'opinion' book on global leadership of which there are plenty on the market.

Dr Wibbeke has spent 20 years in business leadership roles for Fortune 500 firms. She has an MBA from the American Graduate School of International Management at Thunderbird and a Doctorate in Management and Organizational Leadership. In addition to heading up the Geoleadership Group as an international consultant, she is also a professor on leadership and management, and teaches in amongst other places, the University of Liverpool.