Leadership emergence in multicultural teams: The power of global characteristics

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A R T I C L E   I N F O

A B S T R A C T

Building on theories of person-environment fit and on the pattern approach, we hypothesized that emergent leaders in multicultural teams score higher than non-leaders in terms of the three global characteristics, of cultural intelligence, global identity and openness to cultural diversity. We tested this hypothesis on a sample of 317 MBA students who worked on a four-week joint project in virtual multicultural teams. Employing logistic regression analysis, the results revealed that individuals who scored high on the above three global characteristics were significantly more likely to emerge as leaders than were other team members.

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1. Introduction

Global organizations face the twin challenges of creating synergy among their culturally diverse and geographically dispersed subsidiaries and coordinating their activities to maximize efficiency in their missions (Ely, 2004; Jehn & Bezrukova, 2004). There is wide agreement that one key for global success is the ability of global organizations to select, develop and place effective global leaders at all organizational levels (Butler, Zander, Mockaitis, & Sutton, 2012; Tung & Varma, 2008). These global leaders are "influencing the thinking, attitudes, and behaviors of a global community to work together synergistically toward a common vision and common goals" (Osland & Bird, 2006, p. 123), and accordingly, they contribute significantly to the success of global units in accomplishing their organizational goals (Zander, Mockaitis, & Butler, 2012).

Nonetheless, there are only a limited number of empirical studies on global leadership (Osland, Taylor, & Mendenhall, 2009) and almost no empirical studies on leadership in multicultural teams (see Kearney & Gebert, 2009, as an exception). Most of the research on leadership and culture has assumed a cross-cultural perspective to examine differences and similarities in leadership characteristics across cultures (e.g., Atwater, Wang, Smither, & Fleenor, 2009; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Wendt, Euwema, & Van Emmerik, 2009). This approach may not work in multicultural teams, however, where leaders must simultaneously manage a culturally diverse workforce. Hence, global leadership research in general and multicultural team leadership in particular should attempt to identify the personal characteristics and behaviors of leaders that enable them to effectively lead followers who are culturally diverse and often located in different geographical zones (Osland, 2013). Furthermore, global leadership scholars search for global characteristics, which are defined as context-dependent characteristics that facilitate adaptation to the global work context (e.g., Bird, Mendenhall, Stevens, & Oddou, 2010; Bird & Osland, 2004).

Multicultural teams are defined as teams consisting of "individuals from different cultures working together on activities that span national borders "(Snell, Snow, Davidson, & Hambrick, 1998, p. 147). Two important aspects of global multicultural teams are that they are culturally diverse and geographically dispersed, and their members typically communicate virtually with each other (Stanko & Gibson, 2009). Therefore, the global multicultural team environment differs in many aspects from that of co-located culturally homogeneous teams and thus represents a complex and dynamic environment (Gibson & Gibbs, 2006).

A plethora of research on emergent leadership has studied the general characteristics of emergent leaders in teams, such as general intelligence (e.g., Ilies, Gerhardt, & Le, 2004; Kickul & Neuman, 2000), personality traits (e.g., Taggar, Hackett, & Saha, 1999) and emotional responses (e.g., Côté, Lopes, Salovey, & Miners, 2010; Kellett, Humphrey, & Sleeth, 2006). However, most

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of these studies on emergent leaders were conducted in local (culturally homogeneous), co-located teams, not in multicultural, virtual teams. Hence, to the best of our knowledge, there is no published research on emergent leaders of multicultural teams.

In this paper, we build upon the person-environment (P-E) fit model (Kristof-Brown, Zimmerman, & Johnson, 2005) to study leadership emergence in multicultural teams. The P-E fit model suggest that a fit between specific personal characteristics and specific contexts influences who will assume leadership positions over time (Schneider, Smith, Taylor, & Fleenor, 1998). Thus, we propose that emergent global leaders should possess context-dependent characteristics that enable them to successfully adapt to and operate in the multicultural team context as possessing these characteristics will increase their likelihood of being identified by other team members as emergent global leaders.

Specifically, we examined the following three global characteristics that may contribute to the likelihood of a multicultural team member being identified by other team members as an emergent leader: *Cultural Intelligence*, which is defined as an individual's capability to deal effectively in culturally diverse settings (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Earley & Ang, 2003); *Global Identity*, which conveys a sense of belongingness to the global work context (Erez & Gati, 2004; Shokef & Erez, 2006); and *openness to cultural diversity*, which is "the degree of receptivity to perceived dissimilarity" (Härtel, 2004, p. 190).

Furthermore, instead of studying these three global characteristics independent of one another, we follow the pattern approach that suggests that the pattern of the relationships among the characteristics should be perceived as complementary to the variable approach in explaining the dynamics and processes related to leadership emergence (Foti & Hauenstein, 2007; Smith & Foti, 1998). We assert that these global characteristics have a synergetic power. That is, multicultural team members who are culturally intelligent, who perceive themselves as members of the global work context and who accept their team members' diversity, are more likely to emerge as leaders of these teams than other members.

Accordingly, our study contributes to the understanding of leadership emergence in multicultural teams by identifying the global characteristics of emergent leaders that dovetail with the global work context and by examining the pattern of the combination of these three global characteristics in emerging global leaders over their independent effects.

2. Theory and hypotheses

2.1. Contextual influence on the leadership emergence process

The research literature distinguishes between appointed and emergent leaders. An appointed (or assigned) leader is a member who is designated by a superior authority to a leadership position. The emergent leader is a team member who is perceived by her peers as a leader or is elected to become the leader through an interactive process (Hollander, 1974; Hollander, Fallon, & Edwards, 1977). Therefore, unlike other leadership phenomena (such as leadership effectiveness) which is measured by between-group comparisons, leadership emergence is a within-group phenomenon, and the emergent leader is an individual perceived by other team members as a potential leader who has the ability to exert more influence than other members of the same group (Côté et al., 2010).

Although the existing leadership emergence literature makes an important contribution to our understanding of this phenomenon (e.g., Druskat & Pescosolido, 2006; Reichard et al., 2011), these studies do not consider the context in which the team is operating as a factor in their model, and there is no discussion of possible

relations between context-dependent individual characteristics and leadership emergence.

A main research direction that can assist in answering this possible relation between context-dependent individual characteristics and leadership emergence is the person-environment fit approach (P-E fit). In the last decades, P-E fit has been the main research concept as it emphasizes the influential effect of contextual factors on organizational behavior processes (Edwards, 2008). According to Kristof-Brown (2000), individual characteristics (e.g., personality traits, values, knowledge, skills and abilities), which are in congruence with the organization environment, lead to positive organizational outcomes, such as commitment, satisfaction and tenure.

Consistent with the P-E fit perspective, Schneider's (1983, 1987) Attraction-Selection-Attrition (ASA) model proposes that attraction to an organization occurs "as a function of their (people) implicit judgments of the congruence between those organizations' goals (and structures, processes, and culture as manifestations of those goals) and their own personalities" (Schneider, Goldstein, & Smith, 1995, p. 749). Selection occurs when these individuals have the "attributes the organization desires" (Schneider et al., 1995, p. 749), as exhibited in hiring decisions (Cable & Judge, 1997). Attrition occurs when an individual's characteristics do not fit well with the organization (Chatman, 1991). Hence, due to the attrition processes, "over time, the environment will become more homogeneous because similar people will stay in the organization and dissimilar ones will leave" (Schneider et al., 1995; p. 756).

An interesting assumption of the ASA model is that organizational founders, and later on, top management team members, tend to work with others who are similar in their values and perceptions and who fit within the organizational culture. This will result in a relatively homogeneous group of top-level managers in the organization (Schneider et al., 1998). Strong empirical support was found for this assumption. Organizationally shared prototypes of effective leadership were shared by organizational members and varied between different types of organizations (Dickson, Resick, & Hanges, 2006). Top management team members were found to have high levels of homogeneity with respect to personal characteristics, demographic characteristics and values. Additionally, newcomers to top management teams who were promoted from middle management lines tended to be more homogeneous with existing members of that team, compared to external newcomers (Boone, van Olffen, van Witteloostuijn, & de Brabander, 2004; Jackson et al., 1991; Nielsen, 2009). Studies of large samples of managers at all organizational levels revealed a significant effect for organizational and sectorial membership on the homogeneity of personality characteristics (Schneider et al., 1998) and found that the greater the congruence of values of managers with their organization, the more likely it is that they will remain with the organization (Posner, Kouzes, & Schmidt, 1985). Hence, the above studies suggest that individuals who fit with their organizations tend to have longer tenure in these organizations and are likely to be promoted to management positions over time.

Although this assumption was not studied at the team level, the P-E fit model at the organizational level can also be applied to the team level (Person-Team (P-T fit), which is defined as the compatibility between individuals and their work groups (Kristof, 1996).

Person-Team fit models focus on the interpersonal characteristics necessary for effective cooperation and communication with other group members, as such characteristics are likely to impact organizational effectiveness by promoting group cooperation and synergy (Werbel & Gilliland, 1999).

Recent studies of person-team fit found that both personality characteristics (e.g., extraversion) and values that fit with the