

# IN SEARCH OF GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The vast majority of top management teams of firms from all over the world would likely agree that they need more global leaders in their managerial cadres. Unfortunately, most firms struggle to develop their existing managers into global leaders. It turns out that developing global leadership competencies in managers does not occur with “one-size-fits-all” training programs or traditional management development courses. We contend that firms’ failures in their global leadership development efforts stem mainly from two “disconnects” – failing to understand what global leadership *is*, and failing to understand the core competencies needed for global leadership. Based on recent research, we provide a framework to assist top management to better understand the relationship between the “global” dimension of leadership and the strategic development of global leadership development programs that are effective, and how to decide which competencies should be included in their global leadership development programs and how to approach developing those competencies in their managers.

## IN SEARCH OF GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Few executives disagree with the notion that “we need more people — at all levels of the company — who have the ability to effectively operate in their roles from a global perspective.”

A recent study by the World Economic Forum that investigated the most urgent issues that leaders face, reported:

One theme that recurs more than any other is the need for clear, dynamic leadership in a fast changing world. Given ... that most of today’s leaders ... grew up in a vastly different world from today’s, it is perhaps no surprise that leadership remains the biggest challenge of all for 2013 and beyond.

Yet, by all accounts, the effectiveness of efforts to develop global leaders for most companies has been mixed at best, and in most cases disappointing. Why is that?

We, along with our colleagues, have been studying global leadership since it emerged as an important issue for companies in the late 1990s. While it is too early to say that we know all about global leadership and how to best develop it in managers, the research over the past fifteen years has yielded many important principles, processes, and practices that can aid firms in their quest to truly globalize their managerial cadres. The reason, in our view, that most companies have seen less than stellar results in their global leadership development initiatives stems mainly from disconnects between what the research tells us are critical factors for enhancing global leadership and many of the practices we find in companies.

In this special issue of *Organizational Dynamics* the authors of the articles will be addressing many of these disconnects. We begin this special issue by focusing on two key disconnects that we see time and again as we consult with companies, and which we feel are foundational in nature; in other words, we believe that if these two core issues are not correctly

addressed, it is highly likely that any subsequent global leadership development efforts will be disappointing at best.

### **Disconnect 1: Failing to Understand What Global Leadership *Is***

It is said that Einstein once mused that “if he had one hour to save the world he would spend fifty-five minutes defining the problem and only five minutes finding the solution.” Einstein’s dictum involves the following principle: “the quality of the solutions we come up with will be in direct proportion to the quality of the description of the problem we’re trying to solve.” Too often, we see companies conclude that they need more global leaders, but then quickly jump to conclusions about what effective global leaders should look like, hurriedly design a development program based on their assumptions, and then wonder what went wrong when the outcomes of the initiative are disappointing in nature. Most firms fail to adequately invest the time in understanding what exactly global leadership *is*, and thus run into problems. Fortunately, the research literature can be of assistance in bridging this disconnect.

### **Definition of Global Leadership**

Ralph Stogdill noted in 1974 that there are “almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who attempted to define the concept.” Things haven’t changed to the present day. Leadership as a concept is difficult to pin down; if it weren’t, there wouldn’t be so many books written about it. Generally speaking though, most experts on leadership would agree with Gary Yukl that leadership involves a process where intentional influence is exerted by a person to guide, structure, and facilitate activities and relationships in a group or organization. Most experts would also agree that leaders do this by using a compelling vision as the overarching medium from which effective strategy, tactics, and processes are derived. It is our experience

that most executives, managers, and management consultants would agree with this “bottom line” description of what constitutes leadership.

So far so good. But what happens when we place the concept “global” in front of the term, “leadership”? We have found that there are almost as many assumptions about what global *is* as there are managers! One would think that everyone knows what global is, but it turns out, this is not true. Some people think global is a descriptive term for the nature of work a manager is assigned to accomplish; others think it involves having to interact with clients or colleagues from other countries; still others see it as the business environment in which they work — that is, the business world is international in nature. For some, global means “globalization” — and people have many different definitions of what globalization entails.

Thus, simply placing the term, “global” in front of “leadership” on the surface makes sense given the existence of globalization (however one chooses to define it!); however, we find the term has a counterintuitive effect on global leadership development efforts — everyone thinks they know what they want to develop, but as time passes, nuances, paradoxes, confusion, and disagreements ensue. Researchers have been wrestling with what “global” means as it applies to leadership as well, and we feel the following framework can bring some clarity to the chaos.

In a recent article that appeared in the *Journal of World Business*, we and two other colleagues, Sebastian Reiche and Joyce Osland, reviewed all the definitions of global leadership in the research literature and, based upon our findings, presented a conceptual framework of what “global” in global leadership means. We have adapted that framework somewhat for this special issue while retaining the essence of all of its elements. The framework consists of two, core dimensions of the term, *global*: *Complexity* and *Boundary-Spanning*.

## **What is Global?**

The term “global” in global leadership reflects the context in which leadership operates: globalization. After studying various perspectives on globalization, we conclude that the model created by scholars from ION (International Organizations Network) in particular is highly useful and pragmatic in understanding its implications for leadership development. Rather than define globalization as the proportion of trade conducted across national borders, or by some other economic or social measure, this model defines it as a manifestation of complexity. The model contends that if you can "understand its complexity ... you will understand globalization. Understand the processes necessary to deal with complexity, and you will understand what is necessary to globalize an organization." So, when most people talk about globalization, what they are really concerned about is intense, extreme complexity. Globalization is simply the outward manifestation of an underlying phenomenon. Complexity involves the dynamic interplay between four drivers: *multiplicity*, *interdependence*, *ambiguity*, and *flux*. The nonlinear interplay of these drivers produce complex multiplier effects that, in turn, interact to produce even more heightened levels of complexity. This process never stops, thus making it feel like one is working at the intersection of multiple rivers of white-water rapids.

## **Multiplicity**

Abbott Laboratories must constantly address the needs and concerns of a wide range of global stakeholders, such as health care professionals, shareholders, suppliers, policymakers, regulators, scientists, governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs), the media, local communities, patients, and consumers. Every firm is in the same boat as Abbott Laboratories: If you misunderstand the needs and concerns of global stakeholders you will pay

the price – as firms ranging from Royal Dutch Shell to Nike have found out the hard way in the past.

Managers operating globally are required to face — and expertly relate to and deal with — more types of competitors, customers, governments, and stakeholders as compared to managers who work in domestic settings. But multiplicity is not just about having to deal with more people and more issues than domestic managers — it also involves dealing with people and issues that are culturally, economically, politically, and managerially more diverse. Thus, multiplicity involves “more *and* different,” not just “more.” The numbers of people and issues geometrically increase across the globe, and the sheer weight of the size, scope, and breadth of this expansion generally elicits feelings of frustration, bewilderment and demoralization. It causes reactions ranging from paralysis to exhaustion in managers who are unprepared for it. If this were the only challenge associated with managing globally, the problem for leadership development would be more straightforward; unfortunately, complexity is multidimensional in nature.

### **Interdependence**

We live in a world of increasing interdependence. Or as Jeff Barnes, Head of Global Leadership at General Electric, puts it: “There are no boundaries anymore.” With the rise over time of fast and easy movement of capital, information, and people, far-flung business units no longer operate in relative isolation; nor can they assume that their interactions with other units involve simple, bilateral relationships. Out of necessity, companies such as such as Yum! Brands, GM, IBM, Nokia, Bayer, and Sony have felt a substantial need to develop a broad array of relationships – mergers, joint ventures, strategic alliances, consortium-styled partnerships – to stay competitive. Interdependence, in this way, reflects both an influential feature of the external

environment *and* companies' responses and contributions to the environment. Interdependence refers to the mutual interplay and connection that all the actors of multiplicity have between them. Not only must managers comprehend and develop skills to manage relationships with more and different stakeholders, they must also be able to comprehend and manage the more extensive and interdependent relationships that exist between stakeholders and systems of stakeholders.

### **Ambiguity**

Jeffrey Immelt, General Electric CEO and Chairman, argues that 21st century leaders will need to be systems thinkers who are comfortable with ambiguity. Technological advances over the past thirty years have created the means for vast amounts of information to be generated, catalogued and stored instantly. Never before in the history of the world has so much information been so available to so many. The confluence of multiplicity and interdependence contribute heavily to the oceans of information that managers have at their fingertips. However, how to best understand and comprehend the meaning of the data and information that is so readily available to managers often eludes them. Take for example, the experience of Royal Dutch Shell and its Brent Spar debacle. The decision to dispose of its Brent Spar oil platform in the North Sea by destroying and sinking it made logical sense to Shell executives after they researched the problem, and came up with a plan that in their minds was the most environmentally safe way to dispose of the platform. They assumed their global stakeholder community would agree with them. However, Greenpeace and others interpreted the information the decision was based on in different ways, and opposed Shell's plan. The subsequent media attention to the issue galvanized environmentalists around the world to threaten a boycott of Shell, and in the end the plan was shelved. The lesson: The same information can be interpreted



in different ways by different global stakeholders or what seems logical to you, may not seem logical to others.

### **Flux**

Flux encompasses the rate and direction of change associated with evolving complexity. As multiplicity, interdependence and ambiguity evolve, the rate of change picks up and the direction of change becomes more difficult to anticipate or forecast. And that rate is not slow — it is fast, very fast. The entire global system of economic, social, cultural, business, and societal interrelationships is in constant motion, making navigation of complexity a seemingly impossible feat for any manager. The notion of control goes out the window, as do traditional approaches towards strategic planning or expectations of lengthy product life cycles. Managing and leading thus has transformed into a “just-in-time” affair that requires a vastly different set of skill repertoires than just ten or fifteen years ago. The past CEO of Google, Eric Schmidt speaks of it this way: “The harsh message is that everything will happen much faster. Every product cycle, every information cycle, every bubble, will happen faster, because of network effects, where everybody is connected and talking to each other.”

### **Boundary Spanning**

The second major dimension of “global” is boundary spanning. It involves the creation and navigation of linkages that integrate and coordinate across economic, functional, geographic, cultural, linguistic, religious, educational, political, and legal systems. The development of wide and diverse interpersonal networks is critical to boundary spanning. It is noteworthy that in the general leadership research little attention has been paid to boundary spanning as a core leadership competency; however, in the global leadership research literature, this dimension is

among the most frequently identified as a critical component of effective global leadership. In short, to perform well in the “complexity” dimension of global leadership — one must have the competencies associated with boundary spanning. Boundary spanning involves the necessary *processes* that must be undertaken in conditions of global complexity in order to successfully lead organizations. Boundary spanning consists of two components: *Flow* and *Presence*.

### **Flow**

Flow is the relational aspect of boundary spanning. Flow entails using human networks as a means to exchange information effectively so that environmental monitoring is effective and that operations run smoothly. Deploying one’s self as a conduit for this strategic and tactical information exchange through diverse types of channels is the *sine qua non* of global leadership. Amory and Jamie Houghton, both past CEOs of Corning, provide good examples of flow in their effort to establish the joint venture, Samsung Corning (See Box 1).

### **Insert Box 1 here**

Some roles and positions require higher levels of flow than others. One way to assess flow is by looking at the oscillations of necessary information flow for a given position. For example, if the job description requires frequent, high volume interaction with numerous individuals or stakeholders across various a wide variety of organizational, industrial, cultural or national frontiers, that job better have a talented boundary-spanner assigned to it.

### **Presence**

Presence refers to the degree managers must actually “geographically co-locate” to effectively perform in their role; in other words, how often must they physically move across geographical, cultural, and national boundaries vs. communicating through virtual means, such as Skype, GoToMeeting, email, or texting? Kevin Holgren, VP of Prudential Assurance in

Singapore, uses these virtual means to effectively communicate with his sales force in Hong Kong and Indonesia. That works for him, but virtual communication may sometimes be inadequate depending on the nature of a global leader's work situation. The issue then becomes the following: "To effectively span boundaries, how often must the manager actually travel in order to meet various stakeholders face-to-face and for what amounts of time?"

### **Implications of Complexity and Boundary Spanning for Companies**

Most managers and executives we have worked with initially seem to view global leadership as an "either/or" proposition, something that simply is either necessary or not necessary. They also think of people as being either global leaders or domestic leaders. The question they are generally most interested in asking is, "Can these domestic leaders be developed into global leaders?" The framework we have portrayed of global leadership is one of degree — to what degree does one need to deploy competencies necessary for global leadership based on the nature of the role the company has asked — or will ask them in the future — to fulfill?

Managers currently work — or in the future will work — in jobs where they will experience varying levels of complexity and varying levels of need for boundary spanning. Yet, in many global leadership development efforts the assumption is made that everyone should be trained for the same set of global leadership skills and at the same level. For instance, training may range from everyone receiving "basic training," to everyone receiving in-depth training. Firms such as Novartis, PriceWaterhouseCoopers (PwC), GE, Hollister, and IBM are on the forefront of tackling this challenge of global leadership development. The reality is that in any cohort of executives and managers some will require more training given the high levels of complexity and boundary spanning inherent in their jobs, while others will have jobs where

complexity and boundary spanning are relatively low. In our experience, many companies approach global leadership development from a “one-size-fits-all” approach due to their assumption about the nature of global leadership.

**Insert Figure 1 about here**

In Figure 1 we propose a framework that we believe would be helpful for firms to apply when considering global leadership development initiatives. On the vertical axis is complexity, and boundary spanning is on the horizontal axis. Whenever boundary spanning requirements are low, global leadership competencies are less critical to productivity. Global leadership needs are also moderated based on variations in complexity. Complex operating environments require leadership skills as opposed to managerial or administrative skills. Where complexity is low to average, even in situations requiring boundary spanning, the focus is more management-related than leadership-related. High levels of global leadership competencies are required when both complexity and boundary spanning are constants in the work setting. IBM took just such an approach in conceptualizing how to approach global leadership development throughout the company.

**The Case of IBM**

In 2008, then CEO of IBM, Sam Palmisano, launched an initiative designed to make IBM a true globally integrated enterprise (GIE). Part of that plan involved the vision that, in order to actually be a GIE, all IBM employees needed to have global competencies. The goal was to “embed cultural intelligence and adaptability throughout IBM.” Planners at IBM did not assume that all employees required the same amount and degree of global leadership competencies. Their management development initiative was based upon global leadership skill by position instead of a “one-size-fits-all” training focus.

Their approach was to establish a basic level of cross-cultural awareness, interaction skills and access to resources and knowledge about global issues. For employees who supported managers in client-facing roles with global dimensions, along with the basic package, more rigorous training would increase levels of cultural intelligence. A third group, leaders at IBM who were not currently in globally-oriented roles, received training that would enable them to lead and perform effectively across cultures in the future. Managers who were in current client-facing roles with a global impact were assigned to development tracks that focused on skills and knowledge to collaborate effectively with, and sell and deliver products and services to customers from other cultures. Finally, leaders in client-facing roles with global impact focused on developing skills and knowledge necessary to inspire and manage employees across cultures, and to collaborate effectively with, and sell and deliver products and services to customers from other cultures. We superimpose IBM's internally developed approach onto our global leadership model in Figure 2.

**Insert Figure 2 about here**

IBM is good example of avoiding another trap that we see many firms fall into; namely, the tendency to only focus global leadership training on high potential managers while excluding everyone else from its benefits. For employees in the “low complexity/low boundary spanning” quadrant, IBM did not assume that training was unnecessary. Rather, they decided that if they were really going to be a GIE, all of their employees needed to have at least rudimentary cross-cultural competencies. The model we've presented allows for even more targeted training by providing a rubric for specific roles and positions. It also helps companies prepare employees for future positions by identifying what leadership competencies are needed to succeed in those positions. In essence, the model provides a way for companies to strategize how to pinpoint their

training in the most effective way possible to meet the developmental needs of all types of managers.

### **Insert Box 2 here**

#### **Disconnect 2: Failing to Understand the Core Competencies of Global Leadership**

As organizations increased their focus on *global* leadership development, many articulated sets of competencies that were an extension of their existing leadership competency models. Typically they would add a dimension such as global mindset, but made few changes in the overall set, nor in the relative emphasis on specific items within the set. Such an approach ignored the qualitative difference between domestic and global leadership environments. Given the reality of complexity and boundary spanning in global work, what competencies and skills are most effective to use as selection criteria for managers and for development criteria in developing managers to work more effectively in a global environment? Extreme complexity and boundary spanning demands, however, also require recognition that not all competencies are the same. Some competencies are more critical than others.

In our review of twenty years of research on global leadership competencies, we found more than 150 different competencies that researchers had identified as being influential for global leadership success. Taking into account overlapping definitions and slight semantic differences, we were able to winnow this lengthy list down to 15 dimensions and group them into six broad categories. Those competency categories are traits and attitudes, cognitive orientations, intercultural relationships, global business expertise, global organizing expertise, and visioning. These six categories, in turn, can be grouped into two broad classes that we label technical and social competencies.

### **Technical Competencies**

Technical competencies include global business expertise, global organizing expertise and visioning. We call these *technical* competencies because they are predicated primarily on knowledge and the application of concepts, models, and techniques that can be learned and applied. For example, global business expertise involves deep domain knowledge of competitors worldwide, industry characteristics and dynamics across the globe, the competitive contexts of geographically disperse markets and varying regulatory requirements as well as the ability to apply frameworks and principles drawn from the various disciplines of finance, accounting, marketing and so forth to make appropriate decisions and take effective action. Because application of these competencies is often linked directly to business outcomes, organizations find it easier to measure their impact. And, indeed, most managers advance in their careers on the strength of their technical competencies.

### **Social Competencies**

By contrast, social competencies tend to be less measurable in nature, but nevertheless can have profound impact on business performance. Competencies related to traits and attitudes, cognitive orientations, and intercultural relationships entail capabilities that are more difficult to teach and to measure and are centered more on human interaction. For example, inquisitiveness, a dispositional competency, is not generally evaluated in performance appraisal assessments, nor is it the focus of attention in leadership development programs. But inquisitiveness consistently turns up as a critical competency in studies of effective global leaders. The same is true for intercultural relationship competencies. Boundary spanning requires a system-level focus, entailing as it does an understanding of relationship networks and strategic linkages. At its core, however, boundary spanning relies on interpersonal skills of communication and the creation and

maintenance of trust across multiple relationships. In a global setting these interpersonal competencies must be profoundly intercultural, incorporating distinctive dispositions and meta-cognitions that facilitate awareness and sensitivity to working across cultures.

In their global leader selection and development practices, corporations have consistently emphasized technical competencies over social competencies. Yet research on global leadership failure points to deficiencies in social competencies as the primary cause. In short, there is a disconnect between what corporations need to develop and what they have focused on developing.

Besides recognizing that some competencies are more critical than others, organizations must also acknowledge that some competencies are more foundational than others. By this we mean that some competencies provide a platform on which other competencies are predicated. Perhaps the best demonstration of this perspective is found in Bird and Osland's *Global Manager Pyramid* (see Figure 3). Lower-level competencies are foundational to higher-level competencies. For example, the interpersonal competency of *mindful communication* is predicated on attitudes and orientations of global mindfulness, *cognitive complexity* and *cosmopolitanism*. These attitudes and orientations, in turn, are made more effective when based on dispositional qualities of *inquisitiveness* and *humility*.

**Insert Figure 3 about here**

The implications for global leadership development are straightforward. It is difficult to develop or enhance higher-level competencies if those competencies are not already resting on a strong foundation. Organizations need to consider the foundational competencies first. As these competencies are more difficult to develop, it suggests that organizations need to focus greater



attention on assessment and selection for these competencies in their executive and managerial cadres.

### **Final Thoughts**

Perhaps the most important implication of our framework for firms is the following truth: At its core, global leadership development is an individual affair. In our consulting experience, and from what is known so far in the research literature about global leadership development, clearly individuals develop *individually*. That is, the global leadership development of executives and managers is based on the following three factors:

1. The unique existing competency configuration of the manager.
2. The fit between the unique existing competency configuration of the manager and the positional demands for competency deployment in their current job.
3. The degree of personal motivation the manager exerts in working to develop weaker competencies and in figuring out how to better strategically leverage stronger competencies at work.

Firms ignore these factors at their peril. If managers do not have self-awareness about global leadership competencies in which they are strong or weak, they cannot effectively focus on strengthening and better deploying them. If the firm is not aware of the link between specific competencies and the positional demands of the jobs the managers are currently in or will be in, effective development strategies cannot be provided for managers.

Global leadership development is hard work. Even when the first two factors are known to both managers and their companies, we have found that if managers have no real incentives to develop themselves, they won't. Global leadership development must be incentivized as part of

the implicit and explicit reward systems of the firm; if it is not, managers will tend to not choose to engage in the personal sacrifices that are necessary to develop global leadership competencies.

Until firms address the reality that one-size-fits-all training or traditional executive education-type development programs are not sufficient in and of themselves to develop global leadership competencies in managers, the global leadership vacuums in their firms will continue to exist.

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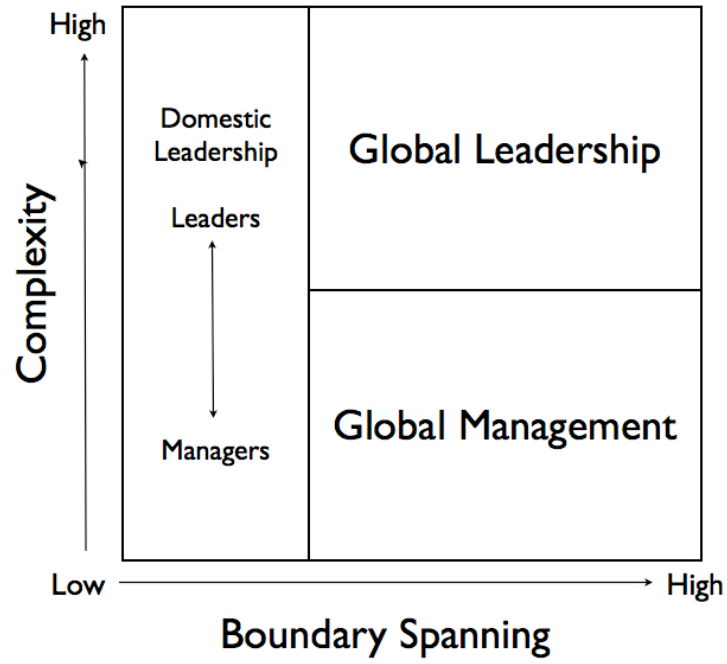
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Figure 1  
Dimensions of “Global”



**Figure 2**  
**IBM's GIE Initiative**

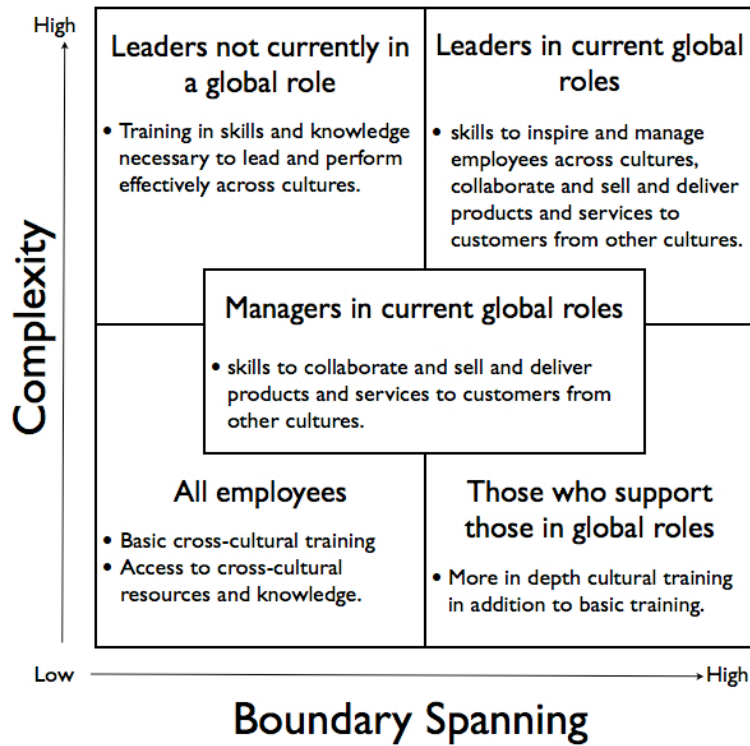
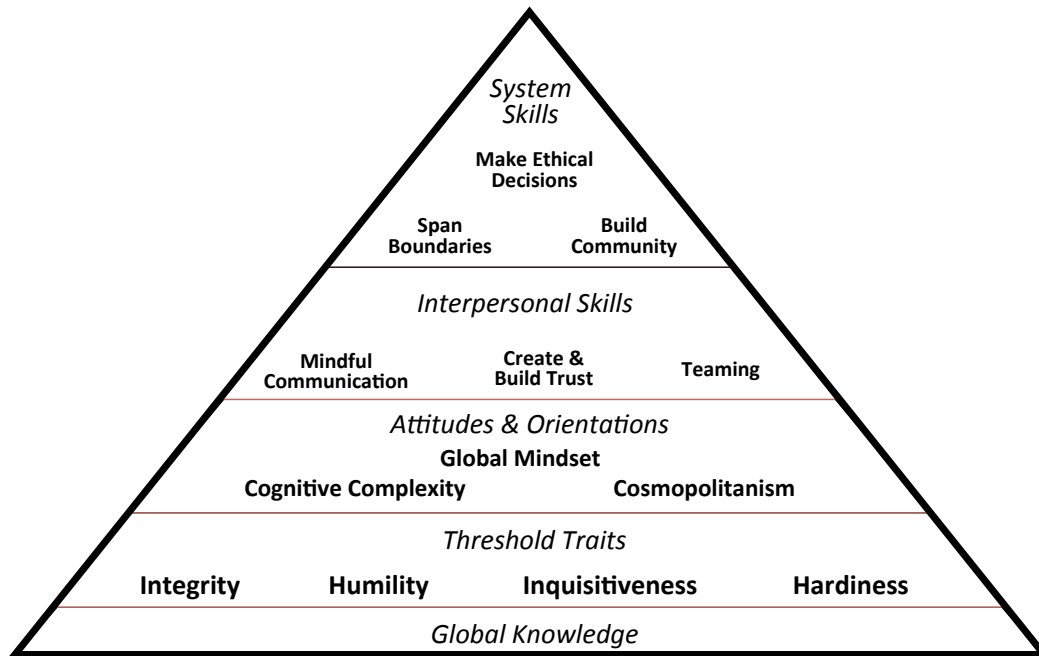


Figure 3

Bird & Osland's Global Manager Pyramid



## Box 1

**Boundary Spanning = Relationship Building:** The alliance with the South Korean company is the result of the effort made by former Corning chairman Amory Houghton and his brother and successor, Jamie, to nurture a personal relationship with the late Samsung chairman, Lee Byung-Chull. Both went out of their way to show respect and affection for Lee. Amory Houghton was the speaker at Boston College when Lee received his honorary degree there; Jamie Houghton attended the ground-breaking ceremony (an auspicious event in Asian culture) for a Samsung Corning plant in Korea, then returned a year later for the official opening. Rituals such as these are important to Asians, and personal appearances such as Jamie Houghton made, give the host "face." When Lee died, Jamie Houghton cancelled a packed US schedule to fly to Korea for the funeral,



## Box 2

**The Only Constant is Change:** We recognize that flux (the rate and direction of change associated with complexity) is a critical element that organizations must frequently monitor to try to gauge the myriad of shifting demands produced by complexity and to assess newly emerging boundary spanning needs. This in turn tends to cause positions and roles to shift in response to these pressures. For example, one company we've worked with restructured itself three times within the space of five years. In the midst of implementing the most recent restructuring, they realized that their "new normal" was "ongoing restructuring." This, in turn, led to a reconsideration of their leader development programs to incorporate greater emphasis on embracing ambiguity and coping with impermanence as important competencies for global leaders to possess in their company.