



## **Modeling Transcultural Leadership: Lifting as We Climb**

**Barbara J. Ford**

Mortenson Center for International Library Programs  
University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA  
IFLA Governing Board

**Meeting:**

**99. Women, Information and Libraries Discussion Group**

**Simultaneous Interpretation:**

Not available

---

*WORLD LIBRARY AND INFORMATION CONGRESS: 74TH IFLA GENERAL CONFERENCE AND COUNCIL*

10-14 August 2008, Québec, Canada

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla74/index.htm>

---

“Lifting as We Climb” is a phrase that emphasizes that as we advance we must help others do the same. This must be one of the core values of effective transcultural leadership in a constantly changing global library and information environment.

Today all of us must learn to communicate and lead across distances, cultures, and geographies. Skilled leaders will leverage cultural differences for positive purposes while avoiding cultural misunderstandings.

Coaching and mentoring are ideal ways to help leaders and potential leaders develop cross-cultural competencies. Mentoring tailored to individual needs and experiences, relevant to library workplaces, delivered over extended periods of time, and taking into account the individual’s stage of development can be very valuable. Discussions can help leaders and potential leaders see how their behavior influences those they work with. We know that the best way to learn is to arrive at your own conclusions so working together to explore options with a mentor can be very helpful. Strong leaders surround themselves with talented people and bring out the best in them.

The lessons of experience can be as effective as book learning and theories. In the transcultural context one needs background and experience. For example, the Japanese say “Yes” to signify they are listening, not necessarily that they agree with what has been said. In Malaysia relationship building and deciding whether someone is a good person to work with may take precedence over business discussions.

There are a number of important factors for effective transcultural leadership.

- Vision, which establishes a general tone and direction, sets the stage for effective leadership. Leaders need a broad view and sense of perspective for the past and the future. The ability to develop and share a vision that extends beyond immediate concerns is needed for transcultural leadership. A global view or vision includes thinking beyond national and cultural boundaries.
- Effective management including setting specific goals and focusing resources on achieving them is another important factor. This is different than leadership and needed in organizations as well.
- Empowerment including selecting and developing staff committed to organizational goals is essential for effective leaders.
- Diplomacy is essential for transcultural leaders. This includes the ability to forge coalitions with peers, supervisors, subordinates, potential organizational allies, and important outside decision makers.
- Communication and feedback including observing and listening to clients, employees, team members and sharing information that is beneficial and needed leads to learning and improvement in transcultural settings. Leaders must both give and receive feedback effectively and at times must manage conflict. Communicating, negotiating, and clarifying are important competencies to develop as is the ability to build strong support for issues that affect our work.
- Risk taking and entrepreneurialism including finding future opportunities through new projects or programs is essential for leaders today. An understanding of how to create and initiate change is needed. Being globally innovative and entrepreneurial is essential to enjoy the challenge of creating new programs and projects that go beyond cultural and national boundaries.

The personal components and characteristics of transcultural leaders must not be overlooked.

- Personal style is how each of us uses and expresses our leadership. Leaders lead by personal example and by setting an overall organizational tone of competence, optimism, integrity, and inspiration. Personal qualities such as presence, charisma, and magnetism are often displayed by leaders. How these are displayed may vary in different cultures. A personal style that provides an effective global leadership image across cultural categories and national borders can be developed through mentoring and continuous learning.
- Curiosity and interest in a wide range of topics helps leaders see the broad view and how their vision and work fits into the broader global picture.

- A sense of professional ethics and social responsibility are needed. Leaders take the global view and become actively engaged in long term planning for the betterment of libraries and society.
- Personal energy is essential to handle the demands of transcultural leadership. A lifestyle that provides energy and durability to handle demands of leadership is essential. Leaders must be resilient and learn to cope with occasional disappointment and failure and turn these into learning opportunities. Being internationally resilient with energy for comfort in crossing time zones, eating unfamiliar foods, dealing with new customs, and generally adapting to other cultures is essential.
- Multicultural awareness and cultural sensitivity including being experienced and comfortable working with individuals and managing organizations across different geographic, demographic, and cultural borders is a key trait for transcultural leadership. Being culturally sensitive and diplomatic to develop teamwork among individuals of different cultures, races, religions, and nations is essential.
- Continuous learning is an essential trait of effective transcultural leaders. We must know ourselves and recognize our leadership strengths. As we move into new environments and meet new people we are always learning and growing. As we grow we expand our personal vision and adjust our personal styles.

With the increasing cultural diversity found in most contemporary organizations and the concurrent expansion of many organizational activities across international borders, leaders at all levels need to be more knowledgeable and sensitive about cross-cultural concerns. Multicultural awareness including being experienced and comfortable working with individuals and managing organizations across different geographic, demographic, and cultural borders is essential.

So how does one develop transcultural leadership abilities and develop multicultural awareness?

- Seek activities that bring you into contact with individuals from different cultures or from other countries. Look for opportunities to interact with exchange students, foreign business people, visiting faculty, or other international guests. Attend ceremonies or celebrations held in various ethnic communities.
- Leave home. Actively seek opportunities to travel, study, attend conferences, and work in other countries. When you are traveling internationally think of yourself as an ambassador for libraries.
- Increase your global awareness. Study another language, listen to music from other countries, and learn to recognize foreign symbols, such as flags, national anthems, or well-known landmarks of other countries. Study the history, culture,

or literature of other countries. Learn more about the social, economic, political, health, and environmental issues affecting the world.

- Learn more about global information issues such as copyright. Connect with libraries in other countries through activities such as a Sister City or Rotary program. Seek opportunities to share best practices and learn from others.

Transcultural leaders model for others and “lift as they climb.” We learn from one another and grow together.

August 2008