



## Selected Proceedings from the 2001 annual conference of the International Leadership Association, November 1-4, Miami, Florida USA

Preparing for Leadership in a Multicultural Context  
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### **Introduction**

Many people are seeking spiritual synchronicity in all parts of their lives. Business leaders and workers are increasingly interested in spirituality. They want to bring their whole selves to their work, including the physical, mental, social, emotional, and spiritual. Among the reasons for this desire is our search for meaning in our lives, particularly through our work. In addition, there is increasing evidence that firms with a non-financial primary goal are often more successful than those with a financial primary goal. A prospective manager needs to be prepared to consider issues of reasonable accommodation, religious holidays, display of religious objects, religious practices at the workplace, and so forth. Students may also benefit from consideration of their own spiritual practices. These factors necessitate that the business curriculum prepare future managers and leaders to deal with these concerns. This paper (a) describes the evidence for spirituality at work, (b) defines spiritual synchronicity and the implications for work, and (c) describes the integration of these factors into a business leadership course at a public university.

### **Course Development**

A grant from the Ball Brothers Foundation Venture Fund enabled the Leadership Program at Franklin College to bring together, in June 2000, nine scholars from different cultural backgrounds. These scholars shared knowledge of their own cultures' expectations of leaders and also served as a mini-case study in working together across cultural differences. The scholars involved were

- Allen Berger, then-Dean of Franklin College
- Oystein Dalland, Telemark University, Norway
- Yeong-kuang Ger, National Taiwan University, Taiwan

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- Alexander Karpenko, University of St. Petersburg, Russia
- Darryl Peterkin, Dillard College, Louisiana
- Bonnie Pribush, Franklin College
- Ginger Seubert, Franklin College
- Victor Vallee, California State Polytechnic University, California
- Charles White Buffalo, Ogalala Lakota College, South Dakota

During the two-week seminar, course content, necessary leadership skills and cross-cultural and multi-cultural cases studies were discussed and designed. In an effort to make this expertise directly available to the students through technology and to explore more innovative pedagogical approaches, Ameritech provided a grant.

**Course Content**

The course developed in a 4 by 4 by 4 framework. First, the content was divided into four components:

Cultural Framework	Leadership Framework
Personal Skills	Cultural Applications

The dangers of stereotyping and over-simplification are always present when attempting to capture something so complex as leadership or culture in a few dimensions. Nonetheless, there was general agreement among the participating scholars that beginning students need some structure to initiate their study of these ideas. Great care was taken to emphasize the value as well as the dangers of this approach. National characteristics represent "average" people based on statistical analysis but cannot possibly capture the uniqueness of each individual.

Within each of the areas four specific topics were chosen:

<p><b>Cultural Framework</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Individual/Collective</li> <li>2. Power Distance</li> <li>3. Uncertainty Avoidance</li> <li>4. Masculine/Feminine</li> </ol>	<p><b>Leadership Framework</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Vision</li> <li>2. Power</li> <li>3. Decision Making</li> <li>4. Conflict Resolution</li> </ol>
<p><b>Personal Skills</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Listen for the intended purpose</li> <li>2. Take another's perspective</li> <li>3. Suspend Judgment</li> <li>4. Take a balcony perspective/ self-monitor</li> </ol>	<p><b>Cultural Applications</b></p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Taiwanese</li> <li>2. Norwegian</li> <li>3. Russian</li> <li>4. Native American</li> </ol>

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### **Cultural Framework**

The cultural framework used in the class is the one developed by Geert Hofstede in his pioneering work, *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. Although other frameworks developed by Tompenaars & Turner (*Riding the Waves of Culture*) and Wilson, Hoppes & Sayles (*Managing Across Cultures: A Learning Framework*) were mentioned, Hofstede's was judged to capture crucial aspects related to leadership and to be concise enough to cover in the time allotted.

The individual/collective dimension examines the source of identity for people, the value placed on the person as opposed to the group. "Individualism pertains to societies in which the ties between individuals are loose: everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family. Collectivism pertains to societies in which people from birth onwards are integrated into strong, cohesive in-groups, which throughout people's lifetime continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty." (Hofstede, 51) There are clear connections for leaders between this dimension and how they make decisions, motivate their followers and define a meaningful vision.

The second dimension of the cultural framework concerns the "orientation to authority" (Wilson, Hoppe, Sayles, 12) in a society. In societies with a large power distance, everyone accepts that there is inequality in the world and there will be status differences between people. Hence, rulers are entitled to special privileges and in return they provide security for the people. By contrast, societies with a small power distance, believe in the equality of all people. Leaders must understand their follower's orientation to power to motivate them and fulfill the expected role.

Uncertainty avoidance refers to a society's "response to ambiguity." (Wilson, Hoppe, Sayles, 15) It can "be defined as the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by uncertain or unknown situations." (Hofstede, 113) In societies with strong uncertainty avoidance people prefer structure and rules to govern their organizations and relationships. Change is causes anxiety and is not considered desirable.

The final cultural dimension considered relates to attitudes towards achievement. This is referred to by Hofstede as masculine/feminine orientation and by Wilson, Hoppe & Sayles as tough/tender. "Tough" cultures value competition, achievement, challenge and recognition whereas, "tender" cultures are more concerned with relationships and achieving a balance in life.

Other cultural aspects that are also interesting to students include orientation to time, relationship with nature, means of knowledge acquisition, and emotional expressiveness. However, given the amount of material and the limited time in the course, it was decided that Hofstede's framework provided the dimensions most relevant to the study of leadership.

### **Leadership Framework**

At the same time that this course was being created, the Franklin College faculty developed and adopted a framework for leadership-themed courses for freshmen as a graduation requirement. The four aspects of leadership, which the faculty chose to emphasize were vision, power, decision making, and conflict resolution. (In addition the freshmen courses include the history of leadership theory and the connection between leadership and the liberal arts.)

In studying the role of vision in leadership, the development of the vision, the content of the vision, and the articulation of the vision are important. Power is a central feature of leadership. The sources of power, the uses of power, the extent to which power is shared

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determine the success of a leader. One key role of leaders in all societies is to make decisions for the group. Studying the process of decision making include who is included in the process, the collection of data, the generation and examination of alternatives, the role of values, and the role of logic and intuition. Finally, leaders must often resolve conflicts, both within their group and between their group and other entities. The attitudes toward conflict, the preferred responses to conflict and the techniques for resolution vary from society to society.

**Personal Skills**

As part of the seminar convened to design this course, participants were asked to constantly reflect on their own experience in this multicultural group and attempt to identify specific tactics as well as general skills that helped the group work well together. A number of techniques were identified and endorsed. For example, encouraging people to share personal stories of their experience related to the topic at hand early in the encounter being sensitive to the level of self-revelation comfortable to each individual. But given the time and the other quantity of material, it was decided to focus on four important skills.

First, students must learn to listen to others with empathy to hear on many levels what the individual is attempting to communicate. This is especially important when working across cultures because words, expressions, and gestures may convey different meanings. Students must also be willing to suspend judgment. As Claude Levi-Strauss has said, "... one culture has no absolute criteria for judging the activities of another culture as 'low' or 'noble.' However, every culture can and should apply such judgment to its own activities..." (Hofstede, 7) One of the primary, underlying goals of this class is to help students identify their own assumptions that lead them to judge others too quickly. Students must understand their own culture and then, the next step, is to step out of their culture and take the perspective of another. An essential skill, not easily mastered. Finally, in his book *Leadership Without Easy Answers* Ron Heifetz (1994) uses the analogy of a dance floor, where the leader is both engaged in the dance and observing from the balcony simultaneously. Leaders in a multicultural setting must be capable of taking this perspective and monitoring their own behavior in response to their observations.

**Cultural Applications**

Enrollment in the class was limited to sixteen students. These students self-organized into four groups of four and, in the process, chose four of the cultures represented in the original planning group to research. These group projects used the leadership and cultural frameworks and were presented orally and in writing to the entire class. This class chose the Taiwanese, Norwegian, Russian and Native American cultures for their projects.

**Pedagogical Approach**

Four distinctly different pedagogical tools were used throughout the course.

	Lecture & Discussion	
Experiential Activities		Projects & Videoconferencing
	Virtual World Simulation	

**Lecture and Discussion**

Information about the cultural framework and leadership framework was presented primarily through lecture and discussion of the readings. Information delivery is still most efficiently done through lecture and the stories and illustrations in the references captured the students' interest and helped them retain the material.

**Experiential Activities**

Experiential activities were used to illustrate content from the frameworks and especially to

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provide opportunities to practice the personal skills. Well-known simulations such as Bafa Bafa and Barnega were used as well as culture assimilators. Other activities were specially designed to help students practice the identified skill set. For example, early in the class students were randomly assigned one other student to observe. Each then told the class about a time in their life when they had felt "different" from the people with whom they were associating. The observing student wrote down what they had heard, observed and sensed and then the student who had been observed provided feedback on the accuracy of the comments. Students also had the opportunity to play the role of someone from a different culture and interact with each other in these roles.

#### Virtual World Simulation

After the cultural and leadership frameworks had been introduced, students were introduced to a virtual world on the computer. Dr. Tim Garner, Associate Dean of Franklin College made available his "world" in the Active Worlds Educational Universe (AWEDU). By using virtual worlds, the hope was that students would more easily take on different persona and play roles without the inhibitions or distractions sometimes observed in classroom role plays. AWEDU uses Active Worlds technology to host three-dimensionally rendered online, multi-participant, synchronous, virtual reality environments for qualifying educational institutions. The AWEDU world (known as "Virtual Franklin") enabled students to engage in a variety of online activities with some of the more salient features listed below:

- 3D graphical representations (commonly referred to as "avatars") of each student in a shared virtual environment
- Text-based synchronous chat with the capability to log chats
- Telegrams and file transfers to other online class members
- Drag and drop editor for building objects
- Capacity for 20 simultaneous users

After an introduction to the basic functions in the virtual world, students were placed in groups and asked to "build" a world that would reflect a specific set of cultural assumptions that they were given. The creativity of the class was amazing. Once the world was designed and built, each group of four students took the rest of the class on a tour of their world. Through their behaviors and interactions, they modeled their cultural assumptions and leadership behaviors. After each tour, the "tourists" in the world were asked to identify as many characteristics of the culture as they could. This exercise required the students to understand the practice as well as the theory of leadership in different cultures.

The final exercise, which was planned, was to create a group with one student from each of the cultures in the virtual world and then provide them with a problem to jointly solve. The challenge here would be to stay in character and yet practice the behaviors that facilitate multicultural group problem solving. Unfortunately, it turned out that the plans for the class were much too ambitious. As often happens, the time required to familiarize sixteen students with the virtual world software was underestimated by about half. Also, because of the major research project that all students were engaged in as well as the day to day reflection papers required, the time allocated to this segment of the course was used up before all of the planned assignments could be made.

Nonetheless, the use of the virtual world added a very positive experience for the students. They enjoyed the opportunity to be creative. They enjoyed the novelty. And after using the virtual world, the class was asked to look back on the experience as an example of cultural immersion. There are fascinating analogies between adapting to a virtual world and moving to a different culture. Modes of communication differ. Logical assumptions of how to do things (build, move across water) are disrupted by the practices of this world. Students were asked to reflect on how well they responded to these challenges. Were they in fact open to learning?

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Did they adapt and adjust or did they complain about the world and ask to have features changed? Did they take the opportunity to visit other worlds in the universe and learn the customs? This "meta-level" of experience required students to fully explore the analogies with cultural immersion and consider their responses.

### **Projects & Videoconferencing**

Finally, the class was able to interact with six different resource people from around the world during the class. Early in the course, videoconferences were arranged for the entire class with Dr. Geert Hofstede in the Netherlands and with Dr. William Lincoln in Seattle to answer questions on the cultural framework and on multicultural conflict resolution.

Each group was also given a resource person from the culture that they were researching. The following professors were "resource people":

*Sigrid Bo : Norwegian Culture*

*Yeong-kuang Ger and Yu-Long Ling : Taiwanese Culture*

*Alexander Karpenko : Russian Culture*

*Charles White Buffalo : Native American Culture*

In exchange for a stipend funded through the Ameritech grant, these professors agreed to respond to e-mail questions from the students and to be available for two video-conferences, the first with only the four-person research team and the second with the entire class of sixteen students. Students were encouraged to practice the skills taught in class and also to be particularly attentive to the behaviors and attitudes of their resource people as well as the information that they provided. The goal was for students to actually see how the cultural assumptions played out in normal interactions.

There were several challenges, which were not anticipated. The first technological challenge was getting all of the equipment to work. Then a death in Dr. Ger's family and a promotion required him to withdraw from the project and he was replaced by a Franklin College professor. Consequently, there was quite a variety of resources available to the students: books, live interviews, e-mail, teleconferences, and video-conferences. The challenges of working across technological differences and differing time zones, as well as different cultures provided a rich learning opportunity for the students. Although students were surveyed concerning their opinions of the value and cost-effectiveness of these different methods of learning, the statistics are not especially meaningful for several reasons including: the size of the class, different resource people had available different resource media and so the personality and helpfulness of the resource person may have affected the students' evaluations. Given these caveats, it is still interesting to note that when asked to rank information sources (video-conferences, tele-conferences, e-mail, books, personal interviews), they ranked video-conferences as most useful and most cost effective.

Each project team had three hours of class time to present their cultures and they were also required to submit a written paper. The students provided historical and geographical context for their cultures but spent most of the time analyzing the cultures in the frameworks and citing illustrations of the impact of the cultural assumptions on the leaders and managers in that culture.

### **Conclusion**

The students, the professor, and the resource people all reported very much enjoying the opportunity to participate in the class. The course will be offered again in January 2002. Based on the experience and student recommendations several changes in activities and schedules will be instituted but the model presented here will be used again and further refined.

Of course, the real measure of success will be whether the students have improved their

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ability to live and lead in a multicultural context. To date there is only one real data point to report. At the end of class, a senior who had been on the Taiwan project team made the decision to move to Japan to teach English. In the fall of 2001, he sent an unsolicited postcard to the instructor stating:

"My experience in Japan so far has been incredible. I seem remarkably well adjusted and experienced minimum culture shock. I credit this mainly to the knowledge I gained in the Multicultural Leadership Class. Thank you."

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