

Accountable Leadership in a Cross-Cultural Context

How a mixed culture company embraces change

By Marjon Margés & Sonja Wekema, 3 March 2022



Where different people from various country and company cultures come together to drive change, a new way of leadership is required. This is not always easy with sub-cultures varying from consensual to top-down decision making and from task- to relation-based styles. How accountable leadership can nevertheless be encouraged in a mixed culture company with both Japanese and European roots is being demonstrated in the Leadership Essentials programme, developed by The Other Perspective for Kubota Holdings Europe, the European entity of Japan's agrotech multinational.

*At the same time, the **COVID-pandemic** created a novum in every day working life for everybody: distant working, issues of effective communication internally and externally and changing stakeholders. How do leaders deal with changing situations? Is the intent still the same and what choices do people make? Do they feel themselves victims or do they act responsibly? What does it do to physical and mental health of leaders and does it influence the relationship with stakeholders? What skills are required today and in the near future?*

In other words: where does change affect a leader's accountability? It all comes down to awareness.

We posed the question how leaders in such a traditional, cross-cultural context solve the dilemma of remote working, digitization, change of organisational structure and addressing tough business targets. The Kubota leadership programme aimed to provide the answers, **awakening the leaders' skills** and enabling a few common conventions across the leadership cadre to create step-by-step cross-cultural confidence and collaboration between the Japanese and the European leadership.

Format

We initially developed a leadership programme anticipating F2F workshops and personal encounter. The entire European team of Kubota leaders and future leaders, including senior management (180 participants), attended two-day meetings in 2018 and 2019. The international measures during the COVID-period required a transformation towards online workshops. Fifty 3,5 hour online workshops, four per group in a period of two weeks in the January-July 2021 timeframe, covered the chosen agenda. A questionnaire sent prior to all individual workshops, addressing expectations, self-reflection questions and factual data, provided input for the interactive workshops, which utilised digital tools for an 'all senses' experience. We also invited internal and external guest speakers.



Context

The European entity is the result of different company mergers and now consists of five independent business units (BUs), four cross BU functional disciplines, a European HQ which facilitates pan-European marketing, reporting and communication and a coordinating leadership team. Kubota is ambitious, innovative and focused on its mid-term vision, mission and strategy. During the COVID-period participants attended the workshops from their home offices, factory locations, holiday homes and traditional offices, giving extra insight into local company conditions. This resulted in a **source of social interactivity** and **closer acquaintance** as colleagues.

The approach of using a mix of theory and case studies with plenary & breakout discussions was a hit: efficient, fast, diverse inputs, sometimes leading to quick business solutions with cross business unit insights. Colleagues quickly developed a network of soulmates and insight due to the intensity of the sessions and the follow-up within the same groups of approx. 15 people.

Content of the Leadership programme

Developed as a continuous journey, our leadership programmes have the intent to create a **common language**, a mutual understanding of values and leadership principles and recognisable cultural aspects of an organisation, independent of individual, BU-, functional or geographical differences and cultural traits.

We developed this programme around five topics, all intertwined and key for creating a pan-European business culture:

- Understanding self and the other and the context
- Managing in the matrix
- Stakeholder management
- Leadership Accountability
- Leadership in Action

Committing in a cross-cultural context

Where individuals from different backgrounds, disciplines and with different styles show differences in their behaviour as a leader, the group dynamics developed quickly leading to mutual understanding of how to communicate efficiently, with live examples, and how to solve dilemmas as a group, team or as pairs. Expressing thoughts and defending ideas in a smaller group, facilitated by peer coaching, open questions techniques and understanding the drivers of the opposite side of the virtual table, provided a tangible set of handy tools and techniques for a common internal language.

We trained the concept of stakeholder management - including **stakeholder mapping** - and made the participants aware of their own very role as a stakeholder, the number of stakeholders and the time they spend with stakeholders. These were eye-opening exercises. The personal accountability session provided an insight into victim behaviour contrary to ownership and ways to manage time and commitment.

However, the overarching connection between all elements - solid and continuous communication – is the key prerequisite and skill for leadership in action. Helping the participants to formulate their personal commitments in the light of context, culture and personal development turned out to be another key insight and **lever for cultural change and psychological safety**.



Development

Leaders are responsible for their **personal development** and "need to take their own destiny in their own hands", according to David Hart, Managing Director Kubota UK. Today's reality is that leadership styles and behaviour should cope with newly onboarded staff, remote working and less interpersonal contact.

"Leaders need to take their destiny in their own hands."

Agile working has become the standard in IT and is capturing the entire chain of product development, marketing and sales. It requires foundational skills like facilitation and servant leadership in order to add value beyond what can be done by automated systems and intelligent machines, to operate in a digital environment and to continually adapt to new ways of working.

Facilitating the learning

So, how to **keep the learnings alive** and the investment in leadership development relevant and necessary? Awakening the leaders' skills and enabling the chosen conventions is the role we took as the facilitators. By shedding light on stakeholder mapping to help leaders think about their different stakeholders and how to manage them. In addition to project management, where stakeholder mapping is the first step towards stakeholder management, an invaluable part of any project, stakeholder mapping & management is also vital to the success of senior executives.

Guest speaker Dr Gary Hays articulated his experience as leader and executive consultant in multinational businesses: "The higher in the hierarchy, the more essential stakeholder relationships become the leader's success. For new executives, creating and establishing effective stakeholder relationships can be one of the most difficult challenges (and even more so in matrix organisations). Success will be dependent on the support of others, rather than their resistance or blocking."

Analysis by stakeholder mapping allowed the Kubota leaders to determine which stakeholders are critical, to enlist the help of key organisational players, to know what significant stakeholders want (and more importantly what they do not want), to gain early alignment on goals and plans and to address conflicts and potential issues early on. Dr Hays clarified how to deal with dilemma handling and 'being a free man or woman' in the matrix when leading without authority.

Personal Accountability

The stakeholder map will provide guidance where and how to spend management time. The Accountability Loop is a simple but **highly effective** instrument to guide behaviour towards the common intent. It is based on any situation and clearly posing the choice to take responsibility or to end up in the victim loop.

Common understanding of the implicit option to choose for ownership and a learning curve will drive a positive and powerful common language of getting things done and reminding each other of the collective intent. That is the spirit and anchor to move forward, without the need for escalation, especially relevant in the Japanese management culture. Accountability at all levels in the organisation will encourage speed of decision making and leading without authority. Feedback is a trusted mechanism for shown behaviours; feed forward is the mechanism to help understand the future requirements.

Regular refreshment of the above concepts of managing in the matrix, stakeholder management and leadership accountability will develop a solid and common leadership routine in any organisation.



Leaders recognise behaviours with their peers and seniors and can role model this behaviour for their co-workers. This is where organisational culture is born and grows over time.

But again, how to keep it alive in such a way that change can be embraced? Our recommendation is to work with the organisation's own dilemmas, real business cases, and use them – just like Kubota - as cases for the leadership development programmes, with an active input from participants, including preparation and follow-up. And with facilitators who are focused to support the process. We believe not only in self-management of individuals, but also of teams and organisations, supported by facilitators who truly understand the organisation's business.

The Other Perspective developed subsequently the Leadership Essentials Follow Up programme in order to keep the learnings alive and to stimulate the awakening of inherent skills. At the same time new leaders are being guided in the essentials of the programme. Kubota Learning & Development is keen on keeping the leadership team up to date on the common language and conventions, actively sponsored by their European CEO. This way cross-cultural confidence and collaboration becomes a sustainable and proven way of working as well as an experience beyond the traditional perceptions of Japanese or European cross-cultural leadership.

Online leadership development is cost-efficient and extremely powerful when people have enjoyed a common experience in previously meeting each other face to face. The online reconnect is instantaneous and ultimately the proof of belonging to the same organisation and cultural setting, the essentials of leadership. The ecosystem will keep moving. The physical and mental fitness of leaders helps their organisations to respond and grow.



The authors



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The organisations



Kubota (www.kubota.com)

Kubota (1890) is a Japanese organisation, active in agriculture, water and environment, manufacturing agricultural machinery, construction equipment, engines and water treatment facilities with a clear growth objective of becoming a serious market player with a strong sustainability agenda.



The Other Perspective (www.theotherperspective.com)

The Other Perspective (2017) is an international network of professional management consultants and coaches, working in leadership development and cultural transformation programmes. We believe that setting the world in motion begins with exploring the self.

