
Going Beyond Twentieth Century Leadership: A CEO Develops His Company's Global Competitiveness

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“Anytime you have a fiercely competitive, change-oriented growth business where results count and merit matters, women will rise to the top.” —Carly Fiorina, CEO, Hewlett Packard (1998)

How prepared are CEOs to recognize that their global competitiveness depends on including the most talented people in the world on their executive teams, women as well as men? Based on history, many believe the answer to be *not very*. In the United States today, only two CEOs of *Fortune 500* companies are women (Catalyst, 2000). Among *Fortune 500* firms, women hold only 6.1% of the highest corporate titles and represent only 4.1% of the top earners; while simultaneously holding half of all managerial and professional positions at lower levels (Catalyst, 2000). Similarly in Europe, women hold less than two percent of all senior management positions (Dwyer, Johnson, and Miller, 1996).

Can companies—or countries—afford to continue their historic pattern of male-dominated leadership? As global competition intensifies, the opportunity cost of such traditional patterns escalates. Most leaders know that their companies can no longer afford to ignore potential talent “simply because it’s wearing a skirt,” even if such behavior was the norm in the twentieth century (Fisher, 1992). As echoed in the headlines of the *New York Times*, “Where G.E. Falls Short: Diversity at the Top. Can Only White Men Run a Model Company?” such venerated companies as General Electric are now questioning if their pattern of leadership by white men only can continue to produce success in the twenty-first century (Walsh, 2000). Other long-established companies have already begun to promote significant numbers of women, often for the first time, into executive positions. Three of General Motors’ six vehicle divisions, for example, are now headed by women. General Motors’ president for North American operations reflects, “There’s a saying: If you looked at GM in the past, it was run by 12 white guys from Cleveland. In today’s world, 12 white guys from Cleveland are not going to make a successful, globally diverse company” (Jones, 1999). Harvard Professor Rosabeth Moss Kanter agrees, emphasizing that, in a global economy, “Meritocracy—letting talent rise to the top regardless of where it is found and whether it is male or female—has become essential to business success” (Kanter, 1994).

Careful observation reveals a rapidly increasing number of countries and companies moving away from the historic men-only pattern of senior leadership. For example, of the 47 women who have served in their country's highest political leadership position—either as president or prime minister—over 60 percent have come into office in just the last decade, and all but seven are the first woman her country has ever selected for such a position.² Similarly, among the current women CEOs leading major companies, almost all are the first woman whom her particular company has ever selected.³ The question is no longer, “Is the pattern changing?” but rather, “Which companies are taking advantage of the trend and which are falling behind?” “Which strategies will prove most effective in moving the best people—women and men—into senior leadership positions?” Four years ago, led by IBM, a small number of global companies began major initiatives to move the most talented women from around the world into their company's previously all-male senior executive positions. This article describes one such company's experience in creating an organizational change process designed to increase its overall global competitiveness.

Global Competitiveness: Global Leadership at Bestfoods⁴

By the time Unilever bought Bestfoods in 2000, the company had become one of the most internationally oriented food companies.⁵ It was among the largest U.S.-branded food companies, with annual sales in 1999 of \$8.4 billion. Bestfoods' return on equity of 56 percent placed it in the top quartile of its peer group. The company earned 60 percent of its revenues from non-U.S. sources, operated in more than 60 countries, and marketed products in 110 countries.

Bestfoods' leadership was as global as the company's operations. Almost half of the 20 corporate officers came from outside of the United States, with eight nationalities represented among them. Similarly, on the board of directors, five passports were represented among the 14 members. Two of the CEOs sitting on Bestfoods' board were women. Of the company's 44,000 employees, two-thirds worked outside of the United States.

Similar to many industries, consumer foods was becoming increasingly competitive. Whereas many consumer foods companies used to be able to operate as loose confederations of fairly autonomous individual country operations, global competition was beginning to force all members of the industry, including Bestfoods, to more closely coordinate their operations worldwide to an extent previously found unnecessary.

To succeed in such an environment, companies need to attract and retain the best talent available worldwide, including both women and men from all nationalities. Bestfoods was no exception. Such global talent needs to operate effectively at both global and local levels. Moreover, with women making more than

80 percent of purchasing decisions for its products, Bestfoods knew that it would not survive if it failed to understand women's needs and priorities.

There is no question that Dick Shoemate, Bestfoods' chairman, chief executive officer, and president, fully understood this competitive necessity and its implications for his company's future.⁶ Shoemate had explicitly stated Bestfoods' commitment to actively attract, retain and develop the most highly talented women and men from all parts of the globe. Moreover, he recognized that words were not enough to institute the changes needed for twenty-first century success. By 1997, Shoemate had significantly increased the number of women in executive positions and had placed the first two women on Bestfoods' board of directors. Even though Bestfoods' numbers compared favorably with those of most global companies in the industry, the CEO considered them insufficient to support the future he envisioned for the company.

In 1998, Shoemate announced that Bestfoods would hold its first Women's Global Leadership Forum. Similar to other companies confronting such issues, Bestfoods had to make a difficult decision—to hold a women-only event or invite both men and women. There are advantages and disadvantages to both approaches. Women-only events theoretically allow women to discuss issues more openly in a group that understands the context of their remarks without needing much interpretation or explanatory background. The opportunity to discuss the unique aspects of their situation often allows women to form relationships that provide ongoing support. On the other hand, including both women and men provides an opportunity to hear different perspectives and to build a mutual agenda for change. Mixed groups often mitigate the possibility of a backlash. Given the goals of the Forum, Shoemate and Brody opted for a strategy that combined the best of both methods. It was a women-only event when they discussed developmental issues and the women's current situation; however, most key executives, male and female, were invited to and attended the opening and closing of the Forum and selected other sessions. In addition, to symbolically communicate the importance and urgency attached to the issues, Shoemate chose to convene the Forum in the same location used by the company for its most important meetings and leadership development programs.

As announced, the Forum was to be held for 4½ days under the direction of Laura Brody, Bestfoods' Director of Diversity and Development.⁷ The CEO planned to invite the company's most talented and senior women from each region of the world and every functional area. Because he did not want to isolate the women in a women-only event that could be perceived as tangential to the company's core business strategy, Shoemate also invited members of the Corporate Strategy Council,⁸ most corporate officers, and both women members of the board of directors to the opening of the Forum, selected sessions, and the participants presentations. Shoemate personally attended the Forum on three of the four days.

The primary purpose of the initiative was strategic—to increase Bestfoods' global competitiveness. The company's other explicitly stated goals were to:

- **Develop the global leadership skills** of Bestfoods' most highly talented and senior women;
- **Create an internal network** among Bestfoods' women leaders to facilitate their global effectiveness; and
- **Develop both global and local recommendations** for enhancing Bestfoods' ability to support the career advancement and success of an increasing number of highly talented and senior women.

The Forum is best understood as part of the larger process of organizational change and development in which it was embedded.⁹

The Process Leading Up to the Forum: Creating an Environment for Change

The organizational change process was not only a first for Bestfoods; it was one of the first in-company global leadership initiatives in the world to focus on women. Many, primarily American, companies offer women-in-management programs, but such programs are usually domestic in focus and rarely include women from around the world. Moreover, in most firms these domestically oriented programs target lower-level employees—often emphasizing entry-level personnel or managers rather than the company's most senior leaders (Adler, 1999a). Similarly, whereas many companies regularly hold global leadership programs for their senior executives, these programs rarely include many, if any, women.

The Initial Step: Identifying the Company's Most Talented Women

The initial step in the organizational change process focused on identifying the company's most talented women and providing visibility for them, both as potential invitees to the Forum and, more importantly, as part of the company's talent pool for current and future leadership positions. To identify such women, Brody solicited nominations from all division presidents and personally reviewed the company's lists of high potential and outstanding employees. The Corporate Strategy Council then ranked the nominees. Final selections maintained an equitable representation from each division and region of the world, with more than half of the invitees coming from outside the United States.¹⁰

During the selection process, some members of the Corporate Strategy Council expressed concern about potentially generating negative reactions to holding a global forum for women leaders. Contrary to their fears, the initial response to announcing the Forum was extremely favorable, with every division requesting additional spaces for women from their region. The mere process of identifying high-potential women had immediate, positive outcomes. One country

manager, for example, expressed how pleasantly surprised he was to discover many more high potential women working in his affiliate than he had imagined. In another division, the nominations review process led to one woman's immediate promotion.

Following the initial positive response, reactions among both the men and women varied. In the ensuing weeks, some men reacted very positively, believing that such a forum was long overdue, while others expressed skepticism. Still others responded negatively, believing that the very idea of a *women's* forum discriminated against men. The most negative men informally began referring to the upcoming Forum as "a coffee klatch" and "the girls' knitting club," and cautioned that the Forum would turn into "a bitch session."

Many women in the company responded very positively to the announcement that Bestfoods would be holding a Women's Global Leadership Forum. One senior woman sent a letter to the CEO expressing her amazement, "I never thought I would live to see the day that this company, or any company, would hold such a forum. ...Congratulations! I am 100 percent with you."

The women's reactions, similar to those of the men, also varied, with some more cautious or negative than the majority. Some women were apprehensive about a possible male backlash. Others expressed concern that, in singling them out as women, the company was not recognizing their business accomplishments. As one senior European executive commented, "I am happy to attend the Forum if I'm being invited because of my business acumen as one of the top 100 people in this company; not simply because I am 'a girl'."

The Second Step: Going Beyond What Was Known in the Twentieth Century

When trying to understand women, power, and leadership, myths abound confounding most companies' ability to distinguish reality from perception (Adler, 1999b; 1994). To move beyond twentieth century myths and anchor the overall organizational change process in reality, Bestfoods designed a survey to differentiate people's perceptions from actual competitive advantages and actual obstacles women and men encounter in exercising leadership and achieving career success in global companies.¹¹

The survey constituted the second major initiative in the company's organizational change process. As such, it was used to more deeply involve Bestfoods' most senior men and women in the competitive challenges facing the company, and, thus to build their support for implementing the recommendations that the Forum would generate. The confidential survey was sent to 200 men and women, including all corporate officers, the most senior executives, and all women invited to attend the Forum.

While identifying some similarities among women's and men's perceptions and their respective recommendations for change, the comprehensive 150-question survey revealed many highly significant differences.¹² Most identified issues were in no way unique to Bestfoods but rather echoed general patterns that are well documented in recent organizational research (Ragins, Townsend, and Mattis, 1998).

Given the marked differences—both between perception and experience, and between women's and men's points-of-view—the next step in the organizational change effort was to assist both women and men to better understand each other's reality. As in other companies, the problem was neither singularly women's behavior nor men's attitudes or vice versa; rather it was for both to learn to see organizational reality more clearly and to begin to work together in new ways. The survey results thus reinforced the need for the Forum as a place where women and senior male executives could better understand each other's reality, and where the women could generate reality-based, rather than myth-based, recommendations to guide Bestfoods' future.

The Third Step: Creating a Catalyst for Change—The Women's Global Leadership Forum

The third major initiative in the organizational change process was the 4½-day Women's Global Leadership Forum. Fifty-five participants came from 25 countries and represented every function within the company.¹³ The typical woman participating in the Forum was 41 years old, married, and had at least one teen-aged child. The diversity among the women, however, was significant. There was a 29-year gap between the oldest and the youngest participant, with families ranging from those with grown-up children to toddlers, to single women without any children. The average participant had at least 15 years of professional experience and 10 years working at Bestfoods. The women were highly educated. Most held a bachelor's degree, with almost half having earned a master's or doctorate degree. The typical participant spoke at least two languages, with some Europeans fluently speaking as many as five. Most Americans were monolingual. A quarter of the women had global work experience, with some having lived and worked in as many as five countries. Fewer participants from the United States than elsewhere had benefited from such global experience.

As described previously, the Forum had four major objectives: enhancing the company's strategic business capability; enhancing participants' global leadership skills; creating a network of women leaders within the company; and producing both globally and locally applicable recommendations. The series of activities planned for the Forum was designed to further all four objectives, with some ac-

tivities more focused at the individual level, some at the organizational level, and some at the team or network level.

Developing the Individual: Enhancing global leadership skills.

Global leadership is not the same as domestic leadership (Adler, 1997b; Bartlett and Ghoshal 1989; Dorfman, 1996). Harvard leadership scholar Howard Gardner notes that global leadership had been "...the most important, but rarest and most elusive, variety of leadership" (Gardner, 1995). As CEO Shoemate appreciated, the "rarest leadership" of yesteryear has become today's competitive necessity. One of his goals for the Forum, therefore, was to develop the global leadership competencies of Bestfoods' most highly talented and senior women. As CEO, he recognized that the company's current and future senior leaders needed to replace their previously effective domestic and multi-domestic approaches with globally-integrated, cross-culturally interactive competencies that would allow them to lead in the twenty-first century, including (Adler, 1997b; Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1989; Gregerson, Morrison, and Black, 1998; Black, Morrison, and Gregerson, 1999; Mendenhall, 2001; Osland and Taylor, 2001; Levy, Beechler, Taylor, and Boyacigiller, 1999; and Yeung and Ready, 1999):

Personal Traits and Competencies, including commitment, a cosmopolitan outlook, courage, curiosity, an entrepreneurial spirit, maturity, thinking agility (or cognitive complexity), and the ability both to improvise and to create and maintain a vision.

Interpersonal Competencies, including the ability to communicate across cultures, to establish close personal relationships with people from around the world, to motivate colleagues from a wide range of cultures, to manage cross-cultural conflict, to negotiate internationally, to work in multicultural teams, and to build geographically-dispersed communities.

Global Business Competencies, including the ability to: demonstrate global business savvy, balance both global and local tensions, simultaneously meet the demands for current performance and continual innovation and learning, and act in environments defined by increasingly high levels of ambiguity and complexity.

Global Organizational Competencies, including global organizational savvy, a stakeholder orientation, and the ability to: successfully bring about organizational change, manage uncertainty, create learning systems, and manage cross-cultural ethical issues.

Although the full set of global competencies could not be addressed during such a short meeting, the Forum wove together a series of lectures, discussions, exercises, and team meetings designed to enhance a number of the participants'

global leadership competencies, including, for example, their ability to use a full range of power and influence skills.

A full range of power and influence skills.

In the past, well-run companies were described as those having a unitary command structure. Today, as global organizations flatten into geographically dispersed and flattened networks and project teams, the relevant metaphor has shifted from single-leader models to the *leader-full* organization—from leadership as *power over* increasingly to leadership as *power with*. In a global context, being able to work closely with people from different nationalities in situations only minimally defined by hierarchy has become a necessary competence for success. Forum activities focused on enhancing each woman's skills at communicating, mentoring, negotiating, and working in teams with colleagues from around the world. A session was held the last day, for example, in which each woman received cross-cultural feedback on her overall effectiveness at the Forum from her Asian, European, Middle Eastern and North and South American colleagues.

To enhance the women's skills at creating a globally encompassing vision—and thus at enhancing their *power to* skills—the women presented vision statements in the form of news documentaries. During the session, each woman received feedback on the content and delivery of her vision statement from multiple perspectives. Would the message be meaningful to Latin Americans? Would it inspire Europeans? Would it motivate Asians? Would North Americans consider it worthwhile? Would Middle Easterners find it respectful?

With globalization comes rapidly increasing levels of ambiguity, complexity, and uncertainty. *Power within* skills become particularly important in anchoring executives working in such environments. *Power within* derives from leaders' most profound understanding of themselves and their most deeply held personal and spiritual values, commitments, and beliefs. Leaders foster *power within* skills by setting aside daily time for reflection (Gardner, 1995). At the Forum, daily time set aside for journal writing encouraged participants to reflect on the relationship among the world's and industry's global challenges, their career aspirations and leadership approaches, and their most deeply held values, beliefs and commitments. In another reflective session, participants clarified their leadership role models by identifying women whom they wished to emulate or whose leadership had influenced them. This *Herstory* session allowed participants to examine more closely the ways in which women worldwide exercise power and influence.

Developing the Organization: Enhancing the company's strategic business capability.

Numerous aspects of the Forum focused on developing the overall organization. For example, Laura Brody presented the survey results the first day, followed im-

mediately by global team meetings to begin developing recommendations for increasing the company's opportunities for success in the twenty-first century.

Following a presentation the second morning on *Competitive Frontiers* outlining the experiences companies face in sending women abroad on global assignments, the women identified the conditions Bestfoods needed to create to successfully send both single and married women—either with or without children—abroad (Adler, 1994, 2000). This discussion was particularly important, since most companies still design their expatriate philosophies, policies and benefits packages primarily for married men with stay-at-home wives, rather than for the women represented at the Forum (Adler, 2002; Osland, 1995).

Continuing the organizational theme on the third morning, a lecture on *Global Leadership: A Dialogue with Future History* was planned highlighting the increasing number of women leading global companies and countries and their unique contributions, commitments, and paths to power (Adler, 1997a). The discussion was designed to give participants access to a wide range of role models of successful women from around the world who have become global leaders—women whose career paths rarely replicate those of the men who have traditionally led most major companies.¹⁴

Developing a network of women leaders.

Bringing together 55 of the company's most senior and highest potential women was the first step in creating a network to facilitate both the company's and the women's global effectiveness. Most Forum activities were designed to strengthen the network, initially by allowing the women to meet and to learn about each other's unique individual and cultural backgrounds. In the opening *Who Are We?* session, for example, the women introduced themselves by describing one way in which being a woman had helped in achieving company goals. Such stories allowed participants to more fully appreciate the professional impact of being a woman—including, contrary to the popular mythology, that being a woman is often a competitive advantage. Participants also began to understand the ways in which their positive professional experiences both varied and were similar worldwide.

Among other network-building activities, a session on *How well do you know your global colleagues?* paired women from various parts of the world in coaching sessions about themselves, their countries, and their leadership styles. Beyond increasing understanding of each other's countries, the session encouraged the women to identify opportunities for creating cultural synergy—for combining their unique cultural perspectives for the benefit of the company, society, the network, and each individual.¹⁵

The teambuilding and networking aspects of the design resulted in numerous business and idea-sharing discussions. During the Forum, the women for-

mally created a *Global Women's Network* and committed to staying in touch electronically and in person. Following the Forum, they quickly began using the *Network* for coaching, professional support, and notifying each other of career and business opportunities and strategies.

Organizational Change: It Doesn't Have to Take That Long

On the final morning of the Forum, Shoemate asked the participants to be very honest in their feedback to him and to senior management. The women recommended that the company make changes in three major areas: work/life balance—enabling women to perform to their highest level; diversity—increasing women's representation in senior and high level positions; and career development—enhancing career opportunities. To craft an immediate response, the CEO separated the recommendations into three response categories:

- **Current company initiatives.** Activities already underway whose progress the company needed to accelerate and to better communicate
- **New corporate-wide initiatives** with potentially high impact
- **New “local” initiatives** best addressed within specific countries, regions or divisions

While still at the Forum, the CEO committed to accelerating the company's efforts in the first category.

New corporate-wide initiatives

Before the Forum ended, Shoemate also agreed to place the entire second category of recommendations focusing on new corporate-wide initiatives on the agenda for the next Corporate Strategy Council (CSC) meeting. The new initiatives included:

- **Establishing senior management accountability** for retaining and developing high-performing women;
- **Increasing women's participation** in high-visibility assignments and taskforces—especially those with a global focus;
- **Creating flexible global assignments** of shorter duration as an alternative to traditional expatriate assignments;
- **Defining the “work-day” and “work-place” more flexibly** to avoid the “all or nothing” (“work or stay home”) choice managers currently face when attempting to balance professional with private-life and commitments; and

Expanding global membership on the Diversity Advisory Council

Less than two months after the Forum, the Corporate Strategy Council approved all the women's corporate-wide recommendations. In addition, the Corporate Strategy Council agreed to take responsibility for oversight of the company's global diversity strategy, thus inextricably linking the company's business and diversity strategies. To more effectively address the many regional and country-level issues, the Corporate Strategy Council members, as division presidents, committed to replicating the corporate diversity council architecture in each of their respective businesses. The Corporate Strategy Council also initiated a company-wide strategy for communicating the results of the Forum throughout the company. One month after the Corporate Strategy Council meeting, at the WorldTeam Meeting (the biannual meeting of the company's 145 most senior executives), the survey results, Forum recommendations, and the new company commitments were formally announced.

New "local" initiatives

The newly created division councils formulated their own local initiatives, with many Forum participants helping to guide their division's strategy. In Latin America, for example, not only did Argentina, Brazil, Colombia and Mexico form country-level councils, but each country also started benchmarking itself against the diversity initiatives of other multinationals operating in the region.

Just three months after the Forum, Argentina mirrored the corporate model and conducted an Argentine Women's Forum for their highest-potential and most senior women. Mexico soon followed. Asia, Europe, and corporate headquarters similarly began to more actively use their executive programs and senior-level positions to improve the retention and development of high-performing women.

Global Success: Global Challenges

As the Forum ended, everyone agreed that it had been a success. The CEO stated that the Forum had exceeded his expectations and that he believed it would make a difference in the company's future. The women participants echoed the same positive sentiments, with one woman exclaiming, "I had no idea that there were so many talented and outstanding women in this company!" Another woman, who leads a \$400 million business, addressed the CEO at the closing session, saying,

"At first I was hesitant about coming to a company forum just for women. Yet this has been a wonderful experience. Mr. Shoemate, this is a group of outstanding business colleagues, each of whom just happens to be a woman."

The women's surprise at the breadth and depth of talented women within the company may reflect the historical invisibility of talented women in most companies, or the extent to which some women, including at Bestfoods, have assimilated the values and perspectives of the dominant male organizational culture. However, the increasing visibility of talented people—both male and female—also probably reflects the shift from a domestic to a global mindset. In domestic companies, it is less necessary to recognize talented people working outside one's own country; in global companies, it is imperative.

The First Major Challenge: Who's to Blame?

Looking beneath the success, an analysis of the Forum reveals the unique challenges of bringing together women from 25 nationalities to address strategic business issues while simultaneously focusing on enhancing individuals' global leadership capabilities. That global leadership requires simultaneous organizational and individual transformation is widely accepted.¹⁶ At the Forum, however, the dual organization- and individual-level agenda inadvertently raised the question of who was primarily to blame for the under-representation of women leaders within the company. Was it the company—thus implying that the organizational change initiatives should take precedence—or was it some perceived deficiency in the women themselves—thus implying that the leadership development initiatives should take precedence?¹⁷ Given their appreciation of the systemic issues, many women's first priority was to recommend ways in which the organizational culture could be changed. Some women consequently viewed the personal development aspects of the agenda as secondary, and, at times, as taking them away from their primary goal of changing the organization. Perhaps the lesson to be learned regarding first meetings of this sort is that participants—especially those as sophisticated in understanding organizational dynamics as the women attending the Forum—may initially view sessions aimed at individual leadership development as superfluous or even as counterproductive. Designers must take care to ensure that organizational change and individual leadership development goals complement, rather than compete, with each other. As companies shift from multi-domestic to global strategies, this balance becomes particularly important, because all managers, whether male or female and whether from Asia, Africa, Europe or the Americas, need to upgrade their global leadership skills.

The Second Major Challenge: Going Beyond the Myth that All Women Are the Same

The second major challenge emerged from the implicit expectation that the women attending the Forum would have had similar experiences and therefore would share similar perspectives on most important professional issues, simply because they are women. Given that many women's experiences and opinions are not identical to those of men—as the survey results had clearly documented—it is understandable that some women arrived at the Forum expecting, consciously or

otherwise, that they would finally be among a community of professionals who saw the world as they did. Yet, exactly as is true among men, women come from diverse backgrounds and career experiences. As the Forum progressed, the company and the participants learned—not without a certain degree of frustration—to accept that differences in the women’s cultural background, age, tenure, rank and personal experience meant that the group could not, and should not, come to a consensus on a uniform “women’s” perspective or position. The women expressed markedly divergent opinions, for example, on the existence, or lack thereof, of a *glass ceiling*. Some of the most senior women, a disproportionate number of whom had begun their professional lives as trailblazers in a very different social climate than that of the late 1990s, now saw their careers as having plateaued, albeit at a very senior level, below a very real *glass ceiling*. These senior women held attitudes and objectives that differed markedly from those of many younger women whom the company had only recently identified as fast trackers, and for whom the *glass ceiling* held no personal meaning. Moreover, so as not to discourage their younger colleagues, the most senior women chose not to describe their most negative experiences to their junior colleagues. This choice made it easy for some younger women to blame their senior colleagues for not having progressed further and faster, rather than appreciating the systemic barriers these trail-blazing women had faced. Just as one would not expect all male executives to have had identical experiences or to hold identical opinions, a uniform “women’s point of view” seldom exists, and neither companies nor women should expect one.

As highlighted in the Forum, helping people appreciate different realities—not just between women and men, but among the women themselves—is a crucial step in allowing them to move beyond the need to reach consensus on either “the state of women” or explanations about why women do or do not make it to the top of major companies. A lack of consensus, however, neither indicates that such companies have no systemic issues nor that there is no need for corporate action. Developing an understanding of the range of experiences and explanations makes it more likely that companies can achieve real change.

The Third Major Challenge: Recognizing that Cultural Differences Do Make a Difference

The third set of challenges involved the impact of cross-cultural differences on Forum dialogue and interaction. The dynamics of global meetings differ from those of domestic meetings for both women and men. At the Forum, communication and behavioral styles varied across cultures and significantly influenced the group’s dynamics and learning climate. The cross-cultural differences among participants were often larger and frequently became more important to the success of the meeting than many of the differences usually attributed to gender. Erroneously assuming a level of homogeneity among the women that simply did not exist caused problems in both conducting and interpreting the Forum.

Key cultural differences were evident in problem-solving approaches, agenda preferences, and communication styles. The interaction of various cultural dimensions, described below, help to explain the role culture played in the Forum.¹⁸

Problem-solving: Inductive versus deductive approaches.

Following the typical cultural pattern of people from the United States and Canada, for example, many North American participants preferred to use a more inductive approach to resolving issues and formulating recommendations. They wanted to start with the specifics of their own and other's personal experience and later arrive at generalizations. Women from many other regions—for example, many Europeans, and especially those from France—preferred to take the opposite, more deductive approach (Samovar, Porter, and Stefani, 1998; Hall, 1990). They chose to begin with a general understanding and broad concepts and then work down toward the specifics of their own and others' lives. Both approaches ultimately arrive at an integration of general patterns and specifics. The processes for arriving at integration, however, are culturally defined, opposite, and, if not made explicit, often difficult to bridge. Global leaders need to be able to use the strengths of both inductive and deductive approaches, rather than merely negating one in favor of the other.

Power Distance: The influence of status and hierarchy.

Cultures also vary in their relationship to power and in what cross-cultural management scholars refer to as power distance—the extent to which individual cultures accept the fact that power in society and organizations is distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede and Bond, 1988). Power distance impacts the degree of respect given to authority, position, and hierarchical status. At the end of the second day, a group of primarily American women assertively requested a change in the agenda for the following day to allow participants more time to work in their teams on organizational development issues—a change that they believed would allow them to make best use of their time. It is not uncommon for participants from the United States attending domestic U.S. workshops to “take over” the agenda—a behavior that is viewed as a positive sign by some American organizational development consultants. When the Forum organizers announced the schedule changes, some Asian and Latin American women—who come from higher power-distance countries—expressed surprise that participants would attempt to change the agenda. Their reactions are a strong reminder that people from different cultures vary in their perceptions, needs, and reactions, and that it is often difficult to fulfill all needs simultaneously.

The source of truth: Experts versus experience.

Another cross-cultural difference that global teams frequently experience relates to what anthropologists refer to as the source of truth—how a group seeks the

“right” answer, or in the case of the Forum, the “right” recommendations. Is truth believed to come primarily from scientific research, legal precedent, the opinion of experts, tradition, personal experience, or trial-and-error experimentation (Phillips and Boyacigiller, 1998)? Participants’ varied reactions to changing the Forum agenda, described above, reflects this cultural difference regarding the source of truth. Beyond expressing surprise, some Asian and Latin American women were also disappointed because the new agenda left less time for the originally scheduled presentations by experts. Hearing the opinions of experts was more salient for these women than for many of their North American colleagues, which is not surprising given their more deductive and higher power-distance approaches.

Whereas Americans also value expert opinion, they are much more likely to question authority than are most other cultures. Influenced by their more inductive approach and greater acceptance of change, most Americans at the Forum welcomed the agenda change, believing it would give them more time to develop recommendations based on their own personal experience. Typical of lower power-distance cultures, the Americans were placing less importance on expert input and hierarchical status than many of their colleagues from other countries. Which approach is correct? Neither—they simply differ. Global leadership involves bridging and integrating diverse approaches, not labeling one culture’s approach as superior to that of other cultures.

Communication styles: Direct versus indirect.

The most obvious communication differences were rooted in culturally based preferences for direct versus indirect communication (Gudykunst and Ting-Toomey, 1988). The formality and reserved nature of many women from outside the United States contrasted dramatically with the more direct communication style used by the highly verbal Americans. Indirect communicators—most commonly from outside of the United States—were sometimes shocked by the bluntness and greater willingness to confront senior management on the part of their colleagues who were more direct communicators. These indirect communicators felt that many of their North American colleagues expressed themselves too bluntly and directly—taking charge and attempting to solve problems too quickly and without sufficient consultation or reflection. By contrast, some of the direct communicators misinterpreted the more formal respect and deference of participants from indirect cultures as being too accepting of the status quo. The strong emphasis that many indirect-communicator cultures place on relationship building and on putting the needs of the group ahead of one’s own opinion or needs, contrasted dramatically with the behavior of their more direct and individualistic colleagues. The difference is not so much in the level of respect each culture shows, but rather in the ways in which respect is communicated. As is usually true in such situations, a number of cross-cultural influences were operating simultaneously, and, for the most part, below the level of conscious awareness of most of the people involved. At the Forum, as in most global meetings, participants differed in their

culturally-based orientations toward direct versus indirect communication, group versus individual problem-solving, faster- versus slower-paced decision making, and the proclivity to accept situations versus attempting to change them.

Alerting participants to potential cross-cultural differences increases their ability to manage the impact of culture and benefit from its presence. At a pre-Forum session for team leaders and during the Forum itself, facilitators briefed the women on communication style differences and effective approaches to communicating across cultures, including with non-native English speakers. In retrospect, more cross-cultural training could have been included in the Forum itself. Such presentations do not, however, mitigate cultural differences. When differences are made explicit, however, the inevitable discovery of differing cultural and value-based norms regarding appropriate behavior and communication styles can, if well managed, become a source of potential synergy, rather than merely a source of frustration, misleading interpretations, and inappropriate evaluations.

The Meaning of Success

In convening the Women's Global Leadership Forum, the CEO invited the most senior and highest-potential women in the company to contribute in ways that had been absent in the past. The organizational change process, the Forum itself, and the outcomes that cascaded throughout the worldwide organization are proving that neither the company nor the women themselves knew the extent to which they could, should or would collectively contribute. As is true in all highly competitive industries, future success depends on the leadership of both women and men from around the world. The Women's Global Leadership Forum was an experiment in enhancing a company's global leadership capacity by amplifying women's voices. Not only the success of companies in this industry, but the success of twenty-first century society, depends on the voices of such leaders being amplified and heard.

“To...[lead] is not always to succeed, but it is always to learn.
It is to move forward despite the obstacles.”

–David Krieger (1998)

Footnotes

1. Nancy J. Adler is professor of international management at McGill University in Montreal, Canada and was the primary external consultant for the organizational change process described in this article. At the time of the Forum, Laura Brody was the Director of Diversity at Bestfoods in New Jersey, USA. Joyce Osland is a professor of organizational behavior at the University of Oregon in Portland, Oregon and helped to design and facilitate the Forum described in the article.
2. For a more in-depth discussion of women political leaders, see Adler (1996; 1997a, 1998a and 1998b).
3. For a more in-depth discussion of global women business leaders, see Adler (1997a; 1997b; 1999a; 1999b; and 1999c).
4. For a detailed description of Bestfoods, the process leading up to the Global Women Leaders' Forum, and the design of the Forum itself, see Adler, Brody, and Osland (2000).
5. As a part of the industry-wide consolidation, Bestfoods, formerly CPC International Inc., was bought by Unilever immediately after the events described in this article. Bestfoods ceased to exist as an independent company on October 3rd, 2000.
6. Shoemate joined the company in 1962 and held positions in manufacturing, finance, and business management in the consumer foods and corn refining businesses.
7. See Osland, and Adler (2001) for an in-depth discussion of the major role Laura Brody played in managing the organizational change effort and in leading the Women's Global Leadership Forum.
8. Bestfoods' Corporate Strategy Council was composed of the six most senior corporate officers, all of whom were men, who were responsible for the four geographic divisions, the baking business, and the corporate staff.
9. For a more detailed discussion of the Bestfoods' organizational change effort, including the initial outcomes and global concerns, see Adler, Brody, and Osland (2000; 2001, in press) and Osland and Adler (2001).
10. Research based on a wide range of U.S.-based companies suggests that they tend to select the most masculine women for promotion and potential leadership positions, see Wajcman, (1998). It is possible that such a bias was operating at Bestfoods and that, therefore, other competent women were neither considered nor selected because they had not played the male game.

11. The survey was loosely based on Catalyst's report, "Women in Corporate Leadership: Progress & Prospects" (1996).

12. For an indepth discussion of the survey results, see Adler, Brody, and Osland (2000).

13. Whereas the CEO invited 60 women, only 55 were able to attend on the dates set for the Forum.

14. Although planned, this session never occurred as a number of participants wanted more time to work in their teams on recommendations for the CEO. See the discussion under the third challenge for an analysis of the cross-cultural implications of this decision to alter the preplanned and pre-announced Forum schedule.

15. See Adler (2002) chapter 4 on cultural synergy.

16. According to Noel Tichy, "Development in the new era must be seen simultaneously as individual and organisational transformation" in Pucik, Tichy, and Barnett (eds.) (1993).

17. For a discussion of the history of attributions on why there are so few women in management worldwide, see Izraeli and Adler (1994).

18. Human behavior is always difficult to interpret, especially across cultures. With the help of years of anthropological and cross-cultural management research, we can make educated guesses as to the cultural dynamics operating in any given situation. However, in the process of cross-cultural interpretation, we must guard against stereotyping individuals—in this case, stereotyping particular women attending the Forum.

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Table 1				
The Women's Global Leadership Forum				
Forum Activities		Organizational Development	Team & Network Building	Individual Leadership Development
Pre-Forum				
	Cross-cultural Facilitator Training			X
Daily:	Daily time for personal reflection, leadership role models, and networking:			
DAY 1	Pre-Forum Activities	X	X	
	Reception & Opening Dinner, with board members, CEO and corporate directors	X	X	
DAY 2 a.m.	Global Introductions: Who are we? CEO Opening keynote address Retaining Global Talent Leadership and Power	X X	X X	 X
Lunch				
p.m.	How Well Do You Know Your Global Colleagues? Building Global Teams: The Perfect Square Leadership & Vision Perceiving a Global Reality Is It True?: Reality & Perception (survey feedback)	 X X	 X X X	 X X X
DAY 3 a.m.	Workforce Inclusion: Talent as a Competitive Asset Competitive Frontiers: Women Managers in a Global Economy	 X	 X	 X
Lunch	Ethnic lunch		X	X
p.m.	<i>Herstory</i> : The Roots of Women's Global Leadership Assessing Leadership Excellence The Bottom Line: Women and Business Opportunities	 X	 X	 X
DAY 4 a.m.	Global Leaders: A Dialogue with Future History Our Best Wisdom: * Men Mentoring Women * Women Mentoring Men	X X X		X X X
Lunch	Cross Cultural Coaching		X	
p.m.	Cross-cultural Negotiating and Coaching Organizational Change and Development Preparation for team presentations to CEO	 X X		 X X X

Table 1				
The Women's Global Leadership Forum				
Forum Activities		Organizational Development	Team & Network Building	Individual Leadership Development
Pre-Forum				
DAY 5 a.m.	The Future: Global Women's Leadership Network Acts			X
	Recommendations presented to CEO & senior executives	X		
	Closing reflection & feedback in global teams	X	X	X
	Response from CEO & senior executives	X		
Lunch	Closing lunch celebration with CEO & executives		X	