

# Chapter 4

## Online Leadership and Communication Across Cultures: Developing an Interdisciplinary Approach

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### ABSTRACT

*Cross-cultural management is challenging. However, online leadership across cultures demands even more intercultural competence, as the actors involved neither share physical space nor everyday experiences. This chapter offers a new interdisciplinary perspective on global collaboration, which addresses the complexity in online cross-cultural leadership. The perspective is formed as a post-cultural prism comprising practice theory, positioning theory, and postcolonial theory. It is argued that this interdisciplinary approach is capable of filling the gap in the field of intercultural competence, as it offers tools for reflection on online interactions in everyday situations. The aim of this chapter is to contribute to a conceptualization in cross-cultural leadership and to introduce basic intercultural practices for practitioners.*

### INTRODUCTION

Online leadership across cultures requires theoretical and practical rethinking, as digital technologies and globalization has changed former practices in cross-cultural management. Hence, the situation today is complex; on the one hand, employees have qualified cultural presuppositions of each other across cultures (Tange & Jensen, 2012), created through mass media, social media, and experiences from everyday life in multicultural societies. On the other hand, global leadership today (and especially online global leadership) is carried out in relation to employees who do not share a physical environment in their everyday practices. Furthermore, unlike previous global management, only the most dedicated employee went abroad or worked internationally 10 years ago. Today more staff members are involved

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internationally, and expatriates are abroad for shorter periods (Gertsen et al., 2012). It is argued that this kind of complexity calls for theories that are capable of conceptualizing how culture is part of specific practices in cultural encounters. How does culture, for example, influence performance among employees from Germany, India, and USA during a meeting? What is at stake, apart from language and time zones? While former theories in cross-cultural management have been devoted to studies of individual adaption, the complexity of the situation today asks for an organizational approach that envisions the workplace as creating space for intercultural encounters in organizations.

## **Will a Postcultural Perspective be Productive?**

In order to contribute to an organizational approach, this chapter explores whether online leadership across cultures will benefit from an interdisciplinary postcultural perspective. The postcultural perspective is developed by the author and is comprised of three theoretical perspectives adapted to a global frame: *practice theory*, by which it is argued that culture can be seen as a series of practices, which are shared among members across cultures. Hence, the task for the global leader is to get access to knowledge about the degree to which the employees share understandings of relevant practices at the workplace; *positioning theory*, by which it is argued that cross-cultural online leadership ought to be built on an awareness and sensitivity of which positions the employees are offered in the company; *postcolonial theory*, by which it is argued that European identity was developed in the colonial era, which must be considered when cross-cultural managing crosses the lines between the center and the periphery. Postcolonial theory offers important perspectives on why conflicts in cross-cultural management sometimes escalate rapidly and why arguments often draw on racial or ethnic differences rather than on individual or political differences. Hence, the aim of this article is to discuss whether this postcultural approach is beneficial for developing an organizational approach to cross-cultural online leadership.

The article is structured in four parts. The first part introduces the three fields that cross-cultural management draws on. The second part presents the theoretical perspective of the article and an introduction and discussion of the postcultural perspective. The third part is the analysis conducted from two vignettes. The last part presents a discussion of the findings, future research, and the conclusion.

## **BACKGROUND**

Online leadership and communication across cultures are related to at least three research fields: cross-cultural management (Hofstede, 1980; Gertsen et al., 2012), intercultural competence (Deardorff, 2006; Martin, 2015; Chen & Starosta, 2008; Byram, 1997; 2000; Arasaranam, 2013), and intercultural communication (Hall, 1976; Collier, 1998; Jensen, 2006a, 2006b; Dahl, 2016; Dervin, 2011; Halualani, 2009; Hall, 1996).

### **The Field of Cross-Cultural Management**

The most dominant research in the field of cross-cultural management is still the work of Geert Hofstede (1980), who pointed out six cultural dimensions. Hofstede's cultural dimensions have established themselves as a benchmark that all researchers are forced to reflect upon. Quantitative methods dominate this field. However, some authors, such as Gertsen, Sørderberg, and Zølner (2012), have argued for the

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