Chapter 4

The Role of Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta in Shaping Workplace Leadership and Culture: A Conceptual Framework

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ABSTRACT

Social networks are taking center stage in organizations for the ways they shape and inform workplace leadership. Hofstede’s cultural dimensions and social capital provide a framework for enabling better cross-cultural discussion about leadership in general and understanding how leaders in globalized workplace settings tap onto existing cultural practices and values vis-à-vis social networks. In China, Kenya, and Lebanon, these cultural practices and values include Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta, respectively. Responding to calls for more studies comparing social network and on cross-cultural leadership, this chapter seeks to examine how Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta shape workplace leadership and culture in the three respective countries. It discusses leadership styles, reviews the way Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta informs workplace leadership respectively and their intersections, generates a conceptual framework, offers recommendations, suggests future research possibilities, and provides implications for human resource development.

INTRODUCTION

Whether one approaches the cultural practices of Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta as forms of social capital and social network formation or as forces influencing leadership, this necessarily involves dichotomies of both modernity versus tradition and nationalism versus internationalism. The advent of globalization has brought about an era where understanding inter-cultural differences becomes mandatory for organi-

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The role of Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta in shaping workplace leadership and culture; not having inter-cultural competence, in other words, risks losing any competitive advantage (al-Suwaidi, 2008). Understanding the effects of Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta on international leadership styles lays a foundation for such inter-cultural competence for HRD professionals working in international contexts.

The relationship of leadership and culture both inside and outside of organizations is well documented (House, Wright, & Aditya, 1997; Kuchinke, 1999; Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2002), but further research that includes cross-cultural experiences is required (Ardichvili & Kuchinke, 2002). This chapter is anchored on existing dialogues about cross-cultural studies, network formation, and leadership styles in different cultures. For example, inasmuch as leadership styles are informed by the culture of the leaders (GLOBE, 2016), an emphasis on procedural, status-conscious, and “face-saving” behaviors under the self-protective (or group-protective) style both reflects and shapes a leader’s habit of focusing on the safety and security of the individual and the group.

The purpose of this chapter is to examine the ways that Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta influence workplace leadership and culture in China, Kenya, and Lebanon and provide a tool for working with and within these cultures. Adapting Van De Valk’s research (2008) on the relationship between leadership development and social capital, the authors pose the following questions:

1. How is Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta practiced in various workplace settings in China, Kenya and Lebanon?
2. What intersections emerge among Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta?
3. What are the merits and drawbacks of achieving and sustaining leadership through Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta respectively?

To address these questions, the chapter is structured as follows. Firstly, there is an introduction that provides the definitions of the terms used and leadership views. Second, a theoretical framework anchored on the notion of cultural dimensions and social capital is provided to guide the analysis of Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta in shaping workplace leadership and their intersection. Third, an understanding of Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta that sheds light on merits and demerits of the three practices is included. Fourth, intersections of these three forms of social networks are discussed. Fifth, a conceptual framework that demonstrates the elements of Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta and the mechanism they result in particular outcomes in leadership formation is proposed. Sixth, solutions and recommendations for resolving the problems involved in perceiving Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta in leadership practices are provided. Seventh, implications for research, theory, and practice in human resource development (HRD) is provided. Lastly, the chapter is concluded.

BACKGROUND

On the one hand, Guanxi, Ubuntu, and Wasta have been defined and discussed throughout literature. Acknowledging the arguably dubious proposition of accurate translation in the first place (Zgusta, 2006), broadly speaking, Guanxi means “relationships” or “connections”, Ubuntu translates as “I am because others/you are,” and Wasta means “who you know.” A commonality between these three worldviews is not simply that they implicate other people but also that they are embedded within a (culturally specific) set of social obligations vis-à-vis the other. For example, Yum (2007) observed how Confucianism offers