Leading a Library Restructure in a Cross Cultural Organisation: A Vietnam University Library Case Study

Implication for practice

- Although cultural differences may exist similarities in effective leadership and management are key to implementation success of a restructure
- Global library leaders require the ability to tolerate a high level of unknowns
- Cross cultural communication and training is a very important area in all international organisations

1. Introduction

Recognised effective leadership traits that are culturally universal include being inspiring, compassionate, respectful and supporting. As Dorfman et al., (1997, p.264) state: “The universality of leader supportiveness and contingent reward behaviour are not surprising when one considers the specific content….A leader who demonstrates supportive kindness and concern for followers is clearly valued and impactful in all the cultures…”. This behaviour is often demonstrated by providing praise and recognition for good performance. In addition, good leadership builds confidence, inspires and sets clear expectations as defined by Harms and Credé’s (2010) notion of transformational leadership. On the other hand, poor leadership traits are found universally where a leader is negative and demonstrates punitive behaviour (Dorfman, et al., 1997). For example, a leader voicing displeasure, criticising or punishing poor performance.

This case study illustrates examples of good cross cultural leadership traits that occurred during a period of major change. These traits were displayed by both the Vietnamese and Australian cultures within a library team. In this case study, a cross cultural library staff restructure that was successfully implemented strengthened the ability of the library to deliver university-wide strategic outcomes and expectations of library service provision.

1.1 Leadership in Asian and western cultures

The Vietnamese library staff in this case study had a history of exposure to autocratic
leadership styles and had developed expectations of close supervision and direction. In this historical context, they valued work predictability and were cautious about change. To some extent, this reflects a traditional Eastern cultural organisational perspective, although it is also typical in many organisations, both Eastern and Western, where a command and control management style can feature prominently (Wildman & Griffith, 2015).

Asia’s history has been often written with great-man charismatic and authoritative leadership stories from country to country (Hajari, 1999). Notable examples of great-man leadership could include Emperor Genghis Khan of Mongolia, Emperor Qin Shi Huang of China in the time of feudalism, Ho Chi Minh in post-war Vietnam, Park Chung Hee of South Korea, and Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore in more recent times.

In the business world, the greatest industry leaders of Asia have also been recognised for their closely directing, hierarchical and family business affiliation (Mills, 2005; Studwell, 2010). This is where the leader commands respect and is thought to be linked to strong Confucian cultural traditions of patriarchy (Javidan, Dorfman, De Luque, & House, 2006). Among the better-known figures are the Samsung and Hyundai families of South Korea and Li Kai Shing of Hong Kong, as well as many other diaspora Chinese-origin business magnates over Southeast Asia (Gomez, 1999; Studwell, 2010)

Western literature on leadership has a recurrent theme about finding out what defines good leadership and transformational leadership is one of the most widely researched and predictive of a leader’s success (Harms & Credé, 2010). Leadership success is measured by various indicators of performance effectiveness. The evidence for transformational leadership effectiveness has a strong focus on empowering, mentoring, rewarding and inspiring (Harms & Credé, 2010), as well as providing a clear vision, setting goals and future directions. The transformational leader fosters a climate of trust and acts as a strong role model.

Singh (2012, p. 3) suggested that “East is East and West is West, and yet both are the same”. This observation was reinforced by Cox, Hannif, and Rowley (2014) who found compassionate, empathetic and respectful leader traits across both Confucian collective and Western individual leadership styles.
There are a number of cross cultural leadership comparisons (for example, see GLOBE in Javidan, et al., 2006), and an illustrative comparison example is provided in Table 1, where the description of what is called Vietnamese leadership style is thought to fall within the Confucian Asia cluster (Javidan et al., 2006; Truong, 2013) and was based on a qualitative analysis of interview data (Cox et al., 2014). The western transformational leadership traits that are listed in Table 1 are based on a metanalysis of 62 studies comprising 7,145 participants (Harms & Credé, 2010) that used various leadership and emotional intelligence questionnaires.
Table 1: Summary example of cross cultural leadership comparisons

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vietnamese Leadership Style - Confucian Legacy (adapted from Cox, et al., 2014)</th>
<th>West - Transformational Leadership Traits (adapted from Harms &amp; Credé, 2010)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collective values and paternalistic regime - leader is protective of subordinates</td>
<td>Confident and committed to a clear vision for future direction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Actions based on protecting a group’s ‘face’ or reputation - leader is compassionate and honourable</td>
<td>Role models actions based on individual values, beliefs or ideals</td>
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<td>Hierarchical structure, high power distance and limited employee involvement.</td>
<td>Provides mentoring and frequent contact to individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hierarchy order determined by age, title and status</td>
<td>Empowers individuals to make decisions and act</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collectivist nature …. Means individuals may shy away from decision making</td>
<td>Inspires by setting challenging goals to individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tendency to downplay self in order to maintain harmonious relationships</td>
<td>Subordinates are encouraged to contribute ideas, be assertive and problem solve</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subordinates are submissive, respectful, loyal and obedient to superiors</td>
<td>Sets out clear goals, expectations for individuals and the organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rating criteria are unclear and include dynamics such as political attitude and personal relationships especially with the manager</td>
<td>Rewards individual with positive feedback for reaching goals</td>
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<tr>
<td>Rewards are restrained often pay based on length of service</td>
<td>Engages in behaviour that cause followers to challenge their assumptions and to individually think creatively to improve</td>
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<tr>
<td>Place greater value on control than performance</td>
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</tbody>
</table>
2. Case Study

2.1 Case context - Overview of the library major change drivers

The university in this case study was, until recently, the only fully foreign owned university in Vietnam and is a satellite of an Australian based university. Established in 2000, the University offers programs including business, design, and engineering, from undergraduate to postgraduate levels (RMIT Vietnam, 2017). The university is a multicultural organisation with over 600 employees, of which 60% are Vietnamese, and 40% are from 28 different countries (RMIT Vietnam, 2017). The university provides an English-based Australian university experience delivered locally in Vietnam through two campuses, one in Ho Chi Minh City (Saigon), Vietnam’s largest city located in the south of Vietnam, and the other in the capital Hanoi, the second largest city, which is over 1,000 kilometres in the north.

Vietnam, with a population over 90 million of a comparatively youthful median age, is seeing a transformation of the higher education sector into a more privatised and competitive market. From 2001 to 2011, eight new universities and 12 colleges were established each year on average, reaching a total of 163 universities and 223 colleges by 2011. Most of these are private institutions with narrowly focused curricula (ICEF Monitor, 2015). In addition, more foreign owned universities are establishing their campuses in Vietnam (e.g., AmCham Vietnam, 2013; Harvard Kennedy School, 2015; Vietnamnet.vn, 2016). Consequently, a major driver for adaption to change is this evolving tertiary education sector in Vietnam.

The changing environment means that RMIT is no longer the only fully foreign owned university in Vietnam. The variety of programs offered, as well as modes of learning, are also all major considerations in the changing context. Also, the Vietnamese tertiary education sector is undergoing a number of changes, including easier access to higher education. A major change was the elimination of the national university entrance exam requirement. Prior to 2015, RMIT had been the only university in Vietnam that accepted students without requiring a national entrance exam score. From 2015, all universities can now choose to accept students with or without an entrance exam score.
Furthermore, new RMIT University global strategic directions were issued, with a focus on equipping students with readiness for both work and life (RMIT Melbourne, 2017). Internally, the library needed to align and contribute to these new strategic directions. Internal change priorities included the need to strengthen library strategic leadership, match staff capability profile to the directions, library services improvement and changes to collection development.

The university library in Vietnam provides access to a large collection of around 70,000 English print book titles as well as a shared access to more than 300,000 e-books, scholarly journals, and streaming videos. As well as collection development activities, it provides information literacy training, liaison services, and research support for students, staff, and researchers.

Prior to the restructure that is the focus of this case study, the library was facing some key issues. First, despite providing a wide range of services to academics and students, library staff had a low profile. Second, despite increasing demand for e-textbooks as well as additional online resources, the library had not adapted to these changes in demand. Instead, the library’s annual budget was primarily dedicated to developing the physical book collection, despite the widespread availability of affordable modern broadband internet infrastructure both in Vietnam and at the university.

As the university was developing new strategic directions, a number of departments and units, including the library, underwent a review in 2014. Reporting to the President (a Vice Chancellor equivalent role), the university engaged an Australian management consultancy to conduct the review. The review noted that the library service priorities needed to be better aligned with organisational objectives. The consultant also recommended significant changes to the current library service offerings and that a new Head of Library Services role be created to drive the strategic realignment of library services. A priority in the recommendations was for the library to transition from hard copy collections to a greater use of digital resources. An urgent need for changes in library marketing strategies, as well as digital collection development were also identified in the review.

2.2 Expatriate Australian Head of Library Services experience
To give effect to the review recommendations and following an international recruitment process, the first author (an Australian expatriate) arrived in Vietnam to take up the newly created Head of Library Services role in early 2015. The role’s first task was to gain an understanding of the library issues and barriers to strategic realignment of the library services.

Apart from introductory Vietnamese common phrases language classes and some simple written guidance’s, there was no formal inter-cultural transition support either before leaving Australia or after arriving in Vietnam. Each day was a new cultural learning experience. For example, understanding to walk on the right hand side of stairs instead of the left as in Australia, navigating a daily commute, understanding accommodation processes, and directing a taxi, ordering food, and other daily living processes, to name but a few.

The library team had never had a foreign expatriate manager or foreign co-staff members and had been always been exclusively staffed by Vietnamese librarians. This was quite unusual as the majority of departments within the university were staffed by a mix of foreigners and Vietnamese staff.

A first cross cultural issue was the ability to communicate fluently in English. There was insufficient time to attain proficiency in the Vietnamese language before leaving Australia and adapting to Vietnamese names was a daily challenge. Initially, to a native English speaker, Vietnamese names are not straightforward and it is locally expected that foreigners should learn to say Vietnamese staff names correctly within a reasonable time. In Australia, many Vietnamese Australians have anglicised their name order, however, in Vietnam names are proudly given to be remembered. As building trust and respect are important, it became clear that it was critical to learn staff names and pronounce them correctly.

Reflecting the cross-cultural literature (e.g., Truong, 2013), within a short time, it became clear that strong bonds of collective collegiality existed amongst Vietnamese staff. With the new Head and several library managers, working together on a first library presentation was effortless as great respect for each other's ideas was shown, together with high levels of engagement in group-based work collaboration. Library staff went out of their way to assist the new Head to feel comfortable and at home.
For example, there were daily invitations to lunch, assistance to navigate a new country and lots of good food with stories to share. The first priorities of the new Head were to reveal strengths, weaknesses and opportunities of the library and to reset the vision. A priority was to assess the library’s organisational climate, build trust and engage with all 24 library staff across the two campuses in Hanoi and Saigon. The first stage of this process was to speak with each staff member individually and to seek their answers to the following questions:

- What do you think works well in the library?
- What do you think could be improved?
- Where do you see your role?
- Is there anything you would like to see more of in your role?

In addition, informal discussions with key stakeholders commenced, including senior management of the university to fully understand their academic expectations of the library and academic Heads of Schools.

In summary, the findings from these discussions were:

- **Strengths** - Intelligent, enthusiastic, empathetic staff with substantial untapped potential;
- **Weaknesses** - Low profile in the University, fractured strategic relationships and modest level of English fluency amongst library staff; and,
- **Opportunities** - World class digital content to be marketed to clients especially as this university library is one of the best in the country.

An implementation goal arising from the library review was to build strong relationships both internal and external to the university. Internal relationships included academic schools, student support, learning and teaching support services and research. External relationships included publishers and other university libraries. Also, a new direction was to enrich the library experience for students, academics and staff. By realigning roles to the university strategy, staff potential could be realised and new opportunities created and harnessed.

Developed within existing resources and in a very short period of time, a library
changes business case was presented to the University. Some new roles were created including a Research Librarian, Learning and Teaching Librarian, and Senior Campus Librarian roles. These newly created roles comprised responsibilities to action the new university student focussed, research outcome and transformational strategic objectives. The case for change was endorsed by the governing Executive of the university, which comprised President, Vice-President, Heads of Schools and Directors. The process steps for the staff restructure included the development of a new organisation structure, new position descriptions and a staff communications plan.

The key influencers and experienced librarians were briefed before the announcement of the restructure. The restructure was designed to maximise promotional opportunities for staff. Library staff who were not successful in the recruitment stage or who chose not to apply for the new positions, had the option of a redundancy package.

After the announcement late in 2015 of the library restructure, and supported by library management, staff began preparation for their new role interviews with determination and supporting each other. In contrast to previous restructures experienced in Australia, this was a comparatively very harmonious experience. The staff demonstrated a calm focus, resilience and determination to be successful in potential promotion opportunities. After about three months and over 40 interviews all the roles were filled in the new library structure by the end of January 2016. The majority of the existing library staff were promoted into the new roles.

RMIT Vietnam library management in implemented the restructure process with each step that required approval provided by the governing Executive in line with their initial endorsement of the case for change. In the year following the changes, all the operational goals of the restructure were achieved, with significant progress on indicators such as a 14% increase in student satisfaction with library staff services within 6 months, and major increases in availability, placement and take-up of digital resources.

In summary, the restructure steps were not dissimilar to what might be experienced elsewhere, where drivers are identified, a review is undertaken, a case for change is
made, implementation plans developed, endorsed and actioned. Transformational leadership practices and cultural sensitivity were thought to be important, and good communication and consultation were extensively used. What was different was the cohesive and harmonious culture of this staff group who knew the benefits of the changes and supported the implementation.

2.3 Vietnamese librarians restructure experience

Prior to the library review, about half the library staff were working at RMIT Vietnam as either their first or second workplace, and had little or no experience of organisational restructures. The library review therefore created mixed feelings among staff, comprising both an optimistic outlook for the future combined with some apprehension.

Overall, the majority were expecting changes for resolving the issues facing the library. Through informal conversations, staff expressed hope for changes in strategy, service, and resource development priorities. In particular, it had long been desired by most staff that the library management team could improve the marketing and communication with academics and other relevant units in the university, as there had been historically little effort made to address this need.

Above all, most library staff were optimistic towards opportunities for developing better services for students and academics. The Vietnamese staff’s positiveness towards the change might be explained by studies of the characteristics of the Vietnamese people. One of these is a high level of resilience in the face of disadvantage, referred to by Maclay (2005, para. 6) with: ‘the Vietnamese deserve credit for incredible resilience, despite the possibility of being trapped in poverty and devastation, they get credit for bouncing back’.

After an academic restructure in late 2014, library staff were aware of the possibility for a similar library restructure to follow. Nevertheless very few foresaw it would take place or were preparing for it. There was a sense of surprise that the draft restructure plan included proposed promotion opportunities for most roles when it was shared for consultation with staff by the Head of Library Services.

Interviews for all positions took place within one month of announcement while the entire restructure process took three months. The completion of the restructure within
a short period of time was thought to be important to its success. Through conversations, the successful library staff widely expressed their satisfaction with the process, not least of all that most staff now held a higher position with better recognition and remuneration. For the minority of unsuccessful and non-participatory staff members, the generous redundancy package provided support for their transition in pursuing new career opportunities.

Overall, the restructure brought a refreshed atmosphere for the library amid a critical period of time within the university. From their previous experiences, staff might have expected a prescribed, top-down authoritarian approach to the restructure. In contrast, they experienced open discussion, consultations, and meetings to gather ideas and encourage feedback. This effort was paid off by staff having clear information about the next steps. Guidance and advice for preparing for the interview process were also given through consultations and workshops by human resources staff and the new Head of Library Services.

Through frequent communication, there was expressed a clear intent to help all staff to succeed in their applications for roles within the new structure. This approach clearly contributed to the success of the restructure. Under this style of leadership, a clear understanding of how library staff could contribute meaningfully to the university’s new priorities in learning, teaching, and research was communicated.

Prior to the changes described above, lack of strategic leadership had been a key barrier to change. The library management had been focussed on routine operations and appeared complacent about the future. Most effort was focussed on command and control of physical collection operations to the exclusion of relationship building with academic and other programs, and electronic collection access promotion. These factors hindered staff initiated efforts to improve library services.

Before the restructure, there was only one liaison librarian and one reference librarian who were entitled to work closely with academics. With over one hundred academics teaching different academic courses and several academic centres in the university, there was clearly a lack of liaison librarians. To meet demand for liaison support, the librarians often worked without recognition as liaison librarians, taking on extra tasks and responsibilities over and above that required by their position descriptions.
However, this limited them from expanding their networks and actively contacting academics to develop new collaborations. For many librarians, the low volume of contact with academics added to a lack of confidence in communicating with international staff in English, in a context where RMIT Vietnam seeks to promote English language skills as part of the offering to students.

2.4 Results of the restructure.

The Head of Library Services introduced a cross cultural, transformational approach to leadership and management. During the restructure period, there was a wide range of supportive leadership actions. For example, keeping conversations going and listening to staff questions and feedback, a genuine will was expressed to enable staff advancement. This practice of cross cultural leadership comprising western transformational characteristics mirroring Confucian compassion, harmony and collectivism (see Table 1), was not only key to the restructure success, it was also a great motivation and inspiration for all staff to contribute to a new library team with passion, new development initiatives, creativity and innovation.

The new library structure saw the advancement of some former librarians to Liaison Librarians, some former Service Coordinators to Senior Campus Librarians, a former Liaison Librarian to a Research Librarian, and former Reference Librarians to Learning and Teaching Librarians. This marked a significant change that benefits the staff and the students and academics they serve. Through meetings with heads of academic centres and academic program managers, and presentations to academics, the liaison librarians were empowered to represent the library. This was by offering services to the academics and students that previously either had low levels of awareness or were not offered at all.

Liaison librarians were promoted as the main contact for their respective academic school. They have considerably expanded their connections, raising awareness of library services, supporting their academics in the university’s digital transition, and offering more tailored information literacy training to students. Liaison librarians now express greater confidence in working with academics, program managers, and heads of centres. Overall, the liaison librarian are satisfied with their current work and are committed to working together on new business projects and initiatives.
The restructure brought dramatically improved library services for students. The main benefits are better access to e-textbooks and course materials in the form of digital content, and an increase in library workshops and engagement events. Before the restructure, students had to borrow and use physical textbooks from the library. At peak times, long queues at the loans desk were common and students then had to carry these heavy textbooks to their study locations. Both students and staff had requested the library introduce e-textbooks. However, a procedure for buying e-textbooks from the book vendors in Vietnam had not been established. Only one academic course had trialled an e-textbook on an impromptu basis. After the restructure, the Library had a number of meetings with book vendors to discuss e-textbook solutions. Formal procedures and agreements between the library, the academic centres and the book vendors are now in place. As a result, the library has supported more courses through purchasing e-textbooks for their students.

In addition to e-textbooks, there was other extensively under-utilised digital content already available on the library’s databases as alternatives to e-textbooks. This option allowed lecturers more freedom and flexibility in designing their courses. It also helped the courses follow the university strategy in recommending transition materials to digital content. After the restructure, digital uptake indicators showed that these resources were increasingly replacing physical content.

Prior to the restructure, library workshops and events promotion to academics was ad-hoc and awareness of library workshops by teaching staff varied considerably across centres and campuses. Following the restructure, many meetings have been held with heads of centres, and regular library presentations to academics in centre meetings and a variety of workshops have been organised. These new communication channels have resulted in a remarkable increase in awareness of library services. Liaison librarians have reported increased requests for more tailored library workshops for different courses. Requests for creation of more online tutorials and online training materials have also grown.

The overall outcome of all these achievements is an increase in quantity and quality of library information literacy indicators for students. That students benefited from the outcomes of the changes made was evidenced in a substantial increase in students’ accessing the library online databases of e-books and journal articles. Furthermore, a
routine annual library survey undertaken in the months following the completion of the restructure was compared to the results in the previous year. This showed a 14% increase in student satisfaction with library staff services, and library staff were the most highly rated at 97%, in comparison to non-library services at the university.

3. Conclusion

An Australian international university library in Vietnam underwent major changes that included a new staff structure, led by a new expatriate manager of an existing team of Vietnamese librarians. The challenges in leading and managing a library restructure in a cross cultural context were contextualised in reference to both eastern and western leadership styles that have been described in the literature (Cox et. al., 2014; Harms & Credé, 2010). This case study illustrates that although cultural differences can be perceived, understanding the cultural similarities in what is viewed as effective leadership and management are key to implementation success.

A global leader is thought to require the ability to influence people who differ from the leader and come from very different cultural experiences;

The essence of global leadership is the ability to influence people who are not like the leader and come from different cultural backgrounds. To succeed, global leaders need to have a global mindset, tolerate high levels of ambiguity, and show cultural adaptability and flexibility (Javidan et al., 2006, p. 85).

Global leaders require the ability to tolerate a high level of unknowns, and to be patient and prepared to look at the world via a different lens.

In contrast to previous experiences, local Vietnamese staff felt closely supported, heard, understood, and consulted. Informed by the observations of Javidan et al., (2006) and described in Table 1, the approaches used to address the major library service delivery issues identified were in accord with a transformational leadership style applied sensitively to a cross cultural context. These characteristics enabled the implementation of a new library strategy in which a key element to increased effectiveness was the successful restructuring of the library.

Cross cultural orientation and communication training is an important area in all international organisations and it is not always given adequate investment relative to
its potential importance. However, cross cultural orientation availability should be considered by human resources departments in multinational organisations, suitably adapted to the various contexts both organisational and cultural.

Finally, in the context of westerners operating in an organisations located in Vietnam, Nisbett’s (2010, p. 5) discussion of harmony and harmonious relationships in the east, “...I am the totality of roles I live in relation to specific others…” can be fruitfully transposed to the notion of high performance teams that are aspired to in the West.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

Figure

RMIT Vietnam Library structure chart.