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Cross-Cultural Leader Development in a University Club: An Autoethnography

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Abstract

There is a growing body of research on the organization, effectiveness, and strategies of leadership teams. Less research exists on such aspects in cross-cultural teams. Little is known about how team leadership can be used in cross-cultural university clubs and how such settings foster leader development. Within the framework of existing literature, this analytic autoethnography examines how I develop leadership skills in university students cross-culturally through a student choir club by utilizing a team leadership model. This study provides an understanding of how leader development can occur in university clubs in cross-cultural settings through employing a team leadership model. Student club advisors may benefit from knowing the benefits of consciously developing leadership skills with club members and some strategies of how to develop such skills. Students might recognize the advantages of clubs that can help them become better leaders. Current club leaders can see that leadership skills can be developed in all types of clubs, especially within a choir. University administrators can see the practical value of extra-curricular student clubs in developing leaders.

Keywords: international education, qualitative research, mentoring.



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Introduction

Many student clubs and organizations are supported and advised by a university employee from student affairs, a faculty member, or other university representative. The purpose of the advisor is to aid the students in completing club tasks and following university guidelines, but the advisor also has an opportunity to assist in developing their leadership competencies (Taylor, 2008; Wankat & Oreowicz, 2002). Therefore, the advisor or adult leader can support the development of leadership skills in university students through a student club experience.

While developing leadership in student clubs has been addressed in the North American and European university settings, little is known about this process in a cross-cultural/international setting. The purpose of this study is to examine how I develop leadership skills in university students cross-culturally through a student choir club by utilizing a team leadership model.

A few students approached me one day to ask if I would help them start a choir. I quickly refused their request at the time. During the summer break, I continued to think about their request and decided to give it a try. At the beginning of the next semester, I organized an informational meeting for all students who might be interested in participating in a choir. The turnout was more than I expected, and I immediately knew a choir was important for these students.

After the first couple of months of rehearsal, I realized that I needed help if the choir was to continue. Nearly 100 students came to rehearsals and it appeared there were 100 different opinions on what our choir should be. Building a choir seemed impossible at Nazarbayev University and I wanted to quit. However, one day, about three months after the choir began, I decided to try one last thing. I decided to form a team of five choir members to advise me and help guide the direction of the choir—the leadership team.

Working in teams and groups is common practice in almost all types of organization. There is scholarly research in many fields regarding how teams function, how teams lead projects, the characteristics of effective team leaders, and how members of the team grow and develop. The following is a review of the relevant literature on team leadership, two main styles of how to lead a team, cross-cultural studies of teams, and important elements of leader development.

Team Leadership

Team leadership can be defined as an “organizational group that is composed of members who are interdependent, who share common goals, and who must coordinate their activities to accomplish these goals” (Northouse, 2016, p. 363). Teams provide a collaborative environment where individual strengths are employed and weaknesses are curtailed. Teams have the benefit of access to multiple skills, talents, and abilities among the members to facilitate more robust approaches to accomplishing goals. Some teams share leadership equally, however most teams have an appointed leader to help guide the team. There is no singular better way to organize and manage a team.

In their study of 45 production teams in two companies, Stewart and Barrick (2000) learned that “a single optimal structure for work teams does not exist” (p. 145). This implies that each team should be structured around the unique factors within and surrounding a

team. These factors include things such as the charisma and ability of the team leader, the abilities and motivation of the team members, environment or context, tasks and goals of the team, and quality of communication within the team and with the lead member.

It is important to consider the team size. Oliver and Marwell (1988) found that the appropriate team size is simply the size that is best for the task. They argue there is no magic formula to determine team size; rather it is the leader's responsibility to assess the situation, the task, team member efficacy, and context to determine the appropriate team size. Team size may be difficult to determine, especially at the outset of a project.

Team leadership fosters greater innovation. Hoch (2013) conducted a study of 43 work teams in two companies. She found that shared leadership is positively associated with innovation. Organizations whose objective is innovation would do well to promote team leadership.

Teams go through a constant cycle of planning and action. Marks, Mathieu, and Zaccaro (2001) note that teams may cycle through planning, or what they call "transition", and action several times and may do these differently at different phases of the task. The planning, or transition, phases are when the team develops goals, ideas, tasks, and formulates how to implement change. In the action phases, they implement their plans, execute tasks to accomplish the goals, and evaluate progress.

Chong (2007) found that high performing teams are positively associated with team trust. Lencioni (2002) argues that trust is foundational because it encourages the team to engage in healthy conflicts, which is also argued as being foundational to effective teams. Not only is trust important, Graen, Hui, and Taylor (2006) found in their study of leader-member exchange leadership in project teams that dyadic respect and commitment are also important for successful project teams. They conclude that early estimates of these three—trust, respect, and commitment—are not reliable.

Larson and LaFasto (1989) constructed a framework for cultivating and maintaining effective teams that is still considered to be a valid foundation for teams today (Northouse, 2016). Based on a three-year research study of 32 management teams, Larson and LaFasto found eight characteristics of effective teams that emerged from the data. These eight characteristics are: a clear, elevating goal; a results-driven structure; competent team members; unified commitment; collaborative climate; standards of excellence; external support and recognition; and principled leadership. They argue that these characteristics must all be present for a team to function at its most effective.

Directive vs. Coaching Styles of Team Leadership

There are two main styles of team leadership: directive leadership and coaching leadership (DeRue, Barnes, & Morgeson, 2010). A leader with a directive style of leadership demonstrates this through providing goals, giving direction, assessing progress, and making adjustments based on emerging circumstances. A leader who demonstrates a coaching style of leadership seeks to encourage and develop the team members and empower them to take ownership of the assigned tasks. Both styles of team leadership can be effective, and it seems that the type of leader and team member type greatly influence the success, performance, and effectiveness of the team.

Pearce and Sims (2002) were able to discover that a more directive style of team leadership led to better team performance. However, Manz and Sims (1987) found that a coaching style of team leadership led to more effective teams because these teams could self-evaluate and make internal role modifications as needed. This suggests there is no one best style of team leadership.

In their study, DeRue et al. (2010) found that a coaching style of team leadership was more effective with low levels of team member self-efficacy and a directive style was more effective with high levels of team member self-efficacy. Team leaders should be chosen based on the team members' self-efficacy levels, or team members should be chosen based on the leader's preferred style. They suggest that as self-efficacy grows, the leader should adjust to be more directive. This leads to one interesting conclusion that seems to be illogical, and that is that as team members develop, a more directive style of leadership is considered better.

Cross-Cultural Considerations of Team Leadership

How do these theories of team leadership translate in another cultural context? Harrison, McKinnon, Wu, and Chow (2000) conducted a mixed-methods study of cultural factors that affect a fluid team and their leadership. Fluid teams are teams where there is regular change of membership. Their data suggests that the differences between Anglo-American and Chinese teams "were substantially driven by cultural differences" (p. 504). They note that the fluid nature of the teams caused the Taiwanese teams to struggle more than the Australian teams. This suggests that team leaders in cultures similar to Chinese-based cultures with regard to high power distance and collectivism should avoid fluid teams.

Diversity is a natural aspect of working cross-culturally. In their book on helping managers develop diverse teams and utilize the strengths of the diversity, Gardenswartz and Rowe (2003) provide valuable insights on working with diverse teams. They found significant differences between working with homogenous American teams and culturally diverse teams. Being a leader or member of a diverse team is different than being in a homogenous team. There are different strengths, weaknesses, and challenges that must be managed.

Leader Development

Whether a leader is born or made, all leaders develop their competencies, abilities, and skills as they grow and journey through life. In their book, Van Velsor, McCauley, and Ruderman (2010) provide a definition of leader development as "the expansion of a person's capacity to be effective in leadership roles and processes" (p. 26). They argue that developing one's leadership capacity is a process centered on personal development in areas such as self-management, social skills, and work capabilities. Therefore, leadership development provides a more holistic form of development.

Gould, Voelker, and Griffes (2013) also found that leader development was grounded in personal development. They learned that developing personal skills, such as coping with pressure and stress management, not only helped the athletic teams succeed during game time, but also helped the individuals in their personal lives. They found that the biggest mistake made by the coaches was giving improper amounts of responsibility, whether too much or too little, to the team captains.

Three key elements of leader development are challenging experiences, dependable support, and proper assessment (Van Velsor et al., 2010). First, challenging experiences stretch the person in new ways that may make them feel uncomfortable. Second, giving dependable support helps the individual handle the challenges they face by being a listening ear, helping make suggestions, providing resources, and being a general source of encouragement. Third, proper assessment from the leader or outsiders will help the learner understand their current strengths, effectiveness, and needs. The individual will learn what needs to change and can also create benchmarks for future growth and development.

Team leadership is unique within the field of leadership studies because of the focus on a group of people instead of a single leader. Aspects of teams, such as structure, size, mutual trust, and member competencies must be examined. Adding a cross-cultural component to team leadership brings another dimension that must be evaluated. Communication and expectations can vary considerably from one culture to another. Team members can also benefit from personal leader development. They can develop and sharpen their personal and professional skills such as self-management, social skills, and abilities. This study seeks to explore how a university club can employ cross-cultural team leadership effectively and how it can foster leader development.

Methodology

For this study, I have chosen to employ an analytic autoethnographic method to provide insights and understandings from my own personal perspective. Autoethnography is a participant-observation research method that incorporates personal experience and reflexivity to understand an experience (Muncey, 2010). Analytical autoethnography is characterized by five key features; “complete member researcher status, analytic reflexivity, narrative visibility of the researcher’s self, dialogue with informants beyond the self, and commitment to theoretical analysis” (Anderson, 2006).

This analytic autoethnographic case study examines leadership practices in a university student choir in Kazakhstan from my perspective as the choir’s director. More importantly, the examination seeks to describe and analyze how, as the director, I encourage the development of leadership skills in a diverse group of students who have emerged as student group leaders. I examine my experiences of leading, compare them with literature on the respective approaches to leadership, and consider the unique aspect of the cross-cultural context.

My central research question for this study is: How do I develop leadership skills in leadership team members of a university club in this cross-cultural context? My sub-questions to help answer the central question are:

- How do my team leadership experiences compare with the literature on team leadership?
- How can I encourage leader development in leadership team members?
- What cross-cultural challenges emerge in my team leadership and leader development efforts?
- What changes can I implement to facilitate better leader development opportunities?

Leadership teams have been referred to by different terms throughout the literature. Terms such as teams, work teams, working teams, workgroups, leadership teams, and team

leadership have all been used to describe a similar concept that I will refer to as leadership teams as previously defined by Northouse (2016).

Results and Discussion

In my role as the choir director, I formed a leadership team comprised of five members of the choir. The leadership team members were selected based on their commitment to the choir and their demonstrated leadership abilities. The team has provided cultural insights of which I was unaware, ideas that are more suited to their generation's style preferences, and help for preparing concert performances. In their roles, they develop their leadership skills, and I purposefully seek opportunities to further their leadership development.

Choir Leadership Team

The leadership team was formed in January 2013. Challenges come and go, and the team has learned from the past. In the beginning, some team members did not know each other and had to develop relationships. Two members of the then newly-formed team arrived at the university just four months prior to being elected to the team. Over the coming months and semesters, the team developed mutual friendships and the choir began to learn how to function with me as their director and the team as peers with influence.

The leadership team has developed its own unique structure, as Stewart and Barrick (2000) suggest. I was unable to find other similar choirs who had a leadership team from which to borrow a structure. Figure 1 depicts the leadership structure we use. I, the director, have the highest authority and influence on the leadership team and the choir. The leadership team members are part of the choir, as seen by the significant overlap with the choir. They provide ideas, thoughts, guidance from a cultural perspective for me, and they also help the choir understand our direction from a peer's perspective as well as help the choir by answering questions and guiding them. This structure is unique and works well for our choir.



Figure 1. Structure of the Choir

Not only is our leadership structure unique, the choir is also unique in three main ways. First, the choir is not a formal university course; instead it is an extra-curricular student club. Second, choirs usually do not have a team of leaders. Having a leadership team for a choir is not common because usually the director is the sole leader. Choirs may have section leaders, but they are not involved in the overall guidance of the choir. Third, this student club and the leadership team are multicultural. I am from the United States and most of the choir members are from Kazakhstan. There is a mix of ethnicities in the choir, including Kazakh,

Russian, Korean, and Tajik. The choir members are all non-native English speakers but the rehearsals are all conducted in English. These three major differences between our choir and other choirs necessitate a unique leadership structure.

We have tried to find the best leadership team size for our choir. We started with five, and after two years, we increased the size to seven. Hoch (2013) found that teams provide greater innovation than single leaders, but it seemed that we had too much innovation in our team and not enough time to talk through the details of the ideas. After struggling with seven team members for one year, the team agreed to reduce the size back down to five members.

The leadership team now understands the planning-action episodes that occur (Marks et al., 2001). They now know at which times during the semester we usually have meetings to reflect on past events and plan for future events. For small events where we sing one or two songs, the planning meetings are rather short in length. However, for the concerts that we produce, we have a least one large planning meeting that may last two hours, and several follow-up meetings to discuss progress that range from twenty minutes to one hour.

I further evaluate the choir's team leadership against Larson and LaFasto's (1989) eight characteristics of effective teams. I believe we have five characteristics. First, we choose team members based on their demonstrated competencies and their willingness to work on tasks beyond simply singing in the choir. Second, the team and I are unified in our commitment to see the choir continue to succeed despite the various non-choir commitments in our lives. Third, as a team, we have developed an environment for collaboration. Team members work together well and will challenge the ideas of others in constructive ways.

Fourth, the choir and the leadership team members know I expect excellence in everything they do. As a trained performer myself, I expect the choir will either perform with excellence or we will not perform at all. I emphasize my standards of excellence regularly and make sure that anything that is not up to a certain standard will not be performed. I believe this motivates them to work harder because they want to perform as often as possible.

Fifth, we also have what Larson and LaFasto (1989) call a results-driven structure. The leadership team members focus on resolving problems, being creative, and being tactical in their efforts. I encourage them to constantly think along these lines to help move the choir forward to be better. I seek regularly to recognize them and support their work publicly. I acknowledge their efforts in front of the choir and at every concert in front of the large audience. I want the leadership team members to know they are appreciated for their extra work.

My Leadership of the Team

Once I formed the choir's leadership team, I became, by default, the formal leader of the team. I notice that I and the team operate within the Diversity Model as opposed to the Homogenous Model as described by Gardenswartz and Rowe (2003). Living in Kazakhstan and working with students at this university for nearly seven years has taught me much about operating cross-culturally with diverse views. There is one issue that surfaced recently that highlights some ways of how I lead the team. I will share the story and discuss how the

events in the story relate to dyadic trust, dyadic communication, my efforts to be a leader with integrity, and the struggle to balance directive and coaching styles of leadership.

Story of the Mandatory Rehearsal

For our two major concerts every year, we conduct a mandatory dress rehearsal that occurs the evening before the concert. One member, Dima, told me as he ran to meet his friend that he had another performance during our dress rehearsal so he will not come. I asked the leadership team members individually through text messaging about what they suggest doing. I received six responses. Five of the leadership team members indicated clearly that he must come to our dress rehearsal. The sixth member suggested we try to talk with him to find a solution.

I informed Dima that the leadership team decided that if he misses the dress rehearsal, he will not be allowed to participate in our concert. He apologized and stated that he will quit the choir. I was shocked that not only was he missing our concert, but he was quitting the choir.

I contacted all members of the leadership team immediately to call an emergency meeting the next morning. I explained to them my interaction with Dima, which included me telling Dima that the leadership team decided he would not participate in our concert. The leadership team told me that they wanted Dima to perform at our concert. However, I had messages stored on my mobile phone from each of them that, without question, stated otherwise.

I responded. I looked at each member and recounted almost verbatim what they wrote to me regarding their decision about what to do with the two choir members who wanted to miss our mandatory dress rehearsal. Culturally, it is impolite to do this in front of a group, but I believed I needed to be extremely direct. When they heard what each other wrote and felt my directness, things changed. It was clear we needed to act quickly to find solutions. Dima later apologized. I allowed him to participate in the concert, but I did not allow him to sing his solo.

Reflections on the Story

Fortunately, the story ended well for everyone involved. Dima is still a member of the choir, and the leadership team learned some valuable lessons of leadership. There is dyadic trust between me and the leadership team. Despite our occasional disagreements, we trust each other. They know that I will support them unless I have valid reasons for not supporting them. They know I will be open and honest about the issues that arise. I know they want the best for the choir and will strive for harmony among the choir.

Our strong dyadic communication likely made them feel they could blame me for the miscommunication. Since I strive for integrity, I provided the facts of the situation that could not be refuted. I made it clear that they made the decision to be strict with our policy, and this situation was not my fault, their fault, or the policy's fault; instead it was Dima's fault for not communicating with us and for not being committed to the choir through learning his parts.

Leader Development

In my experiences of being the team leader, I see that the members of the team are learning and developing their leadership skills and abilities. I keep an open line of communication with the team to let them come to me for support, but also for them to hear and experience the challenges that arise at my end. The challenges that arise give them opportunities to think through the reasons for the challenge, create possible solutions, anticipate outcomes, and put a plan into action. Our interactions and discussions provide opportunities for the team to think through their respective plans and then they can put them into practice when they communicate with the choir.

I can see what Gould et al. (2013) found in their study, regarding leader development being grounded in personal development. When I try to teach the leadership team to lead with integrity, I explain how this is not only beneficial for the choir but for themselves as individuals. I tell them that integrity is a personal characteristic that influences how a person leads. Another example is I teach them how to care for our choir members. I try to demonstrate this by caring for the choir members myself, and I highlight opportunities that I see where members of the leadership team can care for and encourage fellow choir members.

As I reflect on the three elements of leader development given by Van Velsor et al. (2010), I see that I make sure they have challenging experiences which help them develop, I provide regular support and encouragement, however I do not believe I am doing a good job at providing proper assessment and feedback of their work.

The second element of leader development, providing support, comes naturally for me. I am a supporter and encourager, and I know this about myself. I seek to motivate them to do well in their studies, to stay healthy, and to be an encouragement to their friends. I want them to know that I care for and support them as people and as fellow leaders. In their efforts to lead the choir, I try to praise them when they have successes and provide advice when they struggle. Furthermore, I praise them and their work in front of the choir and in front of our audiences at our concerts. Given my natural tendency to offer support and encouragement, I sometimes struggle with the third goal of providing good assessment of their work.

After reading about the need to provide good assessment of a team, I realize that I am weak in this area. I can identify strengths in each person and I try to capitalize on those strengths by assigning tasks accordingly, however I do not give feedback to each member regarding their effectiveness in those tasks. Additionally, I do not talk to them about the areas in which they need to improve. I must help the team members learn about themselves through providing proper assessment that is culturally appropriate.

Conclusion

I work closely with the leadership team and have closer relationships with them than I do with the other choir members. I have watched some of them mature from children to young adults during their time in the university. The informal setting of a student club, as opposed to a university class, allows more flexibility and casualness in our interactions. I can learn more about them as people than I might in a formal classroom setting. We also have non-singing activities and games that help build relationships and team-cohesiveness.

The leadership team members know each other well. They have found ways to help each other and respectfully challenge each other. They also help me understand some of the cultural expectations and understandings that surface so that I can lead them and the choir with more confidence. While I still coach them in some areas, I have moved to a more directive style of leadership, but I still exercise a coaching-style leadership when needed. The members of the leadership team have developed competencies in many areas of what they do, so they no longer need as much coaching as they do direction (DeRue et al., 2010). Larson and LaFasto's (1989) eight characteristics of effective teams help me think through what is going well and what needs improvement.

A leader can develop leadership in others unknowingly, but research shows that it can be more effective if done purposefully (Gould et al., 2013). The challenges the leadership team face, the support they receive from me and others, and the assessment and feedback that I will focus on providing should all contribute to help them grow as people and as leaders.

There are several implications of this study that are primarily for university students involved with or considering student clubs and club leadership. Student club advisors and adult leaders may benefit from knowing the benefits of consciously developing leadership skills with club members and some strategies of how to develop such skills. Students might recognize the advantages of clubs and organizations that can help them become better leaders and develop better followers. Current club leaders who are students can see that leadership skills can be developed in all types of clubs, especially in a choir. University administrators can see the value of extra-curricular student clubs in developing leaders and healthy relationships. Student clubs are a great place to exercise team leadership. Furthermore, the student club advisor can take advantage of the opportunities to foster leader development in promising young adults.

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