

Going global: coaching with a global mindset



What does it *mean* to have a 'global mindset'?
Wendy Wilson explores the concept of global mindedness from a cross-cultural coaching perspective.



Our 21st century world will be defined almost entirely by change. This is the era of globalisation, ushering in an unprecedented international merger of cultures and activity that is technologically driven and increasingly bypasses the nation state.

The work of the cross-cultural coach has always been seen as a niche area of expertise but, as frontiers dissolve and companies rethink their employment strategies, this is no longer the case.

In the business arena there's a growing sense of panic as the implications of this new global paradigm dawn on thousands of companies. The bottom line is: restructure yourselves for a globalised, highly competitive and unpredictable future or get left behind.

There's now plenty of research within the field of business management and leadership development identifying the urgent need for a more flexible, adaptable, creative and globally mobile workforce, and that same research warns of the inevitable obsolescence of traditional hierarchical management structures. Today, companies need to nurture talent from across their organisations, creating culturally diverse teams. Most importantly, they also need to develop a *global mindset*.¹

And we, as coaches, must keep pace.

What is happening in the worlds of business, commerce and education has presented us with a need for a new cognitive perspective, or a global mindset, as a way of coping with the increased cultural diversity and business complexity that now exists in the global arena.²

Facing their own international challenges, companies are now generating a new breed of globally mobile employees: a next generation who see the global experience as intrinsic to their career development. This 'global talent' is a workforce already known variously as local plus,

global nomads, frequent business travellers and virtual commuters.³

For example, in the world of banking it's becoming common to have small teams that include people from Asia, South America, Britain and Europe. Every professional issue becomes eclipsed by the shadow of cultural communication as a close-knit unit wrestles with establishing common purpose and goal coordination. It's a taste of things to come.

Add to that the 'changing capitalism' debate that is gathering steam under the clouds of global recession. There is a sense now that existing business models have failed and the search is underway worldwide for something better.

This proposed change in organisational management and global leadership development will almost certainly lead to an increased demand for coaches to take a more integrated and 'global' approach to their practices as they engage with the more complex client portfolios emerging from this shift.

Increasingly, globally mobile professionals will undergo transformational shifts in identity and perspective that will effectively distance them from their cultural origins.⁴ And, as increasingly diverse workforces face the challenges of cross-cultural differences,⁵ new multinational teams are being formed who are much more than the sum of their own national stereotypes.

For the coach that means a more complex client portfolio of individuals from different cultural backgrounds with identities derived from different contexts.⁶ That, in turn, requires the coach to have a firm grasp on just how cultural and intercultural communication issues might affect the coaching process. S/he will also need a more global mindset to help navigate the client through the inevitable challenges ahead.

Coaching practice is about to face a new complexity of psychological, developmental and intercultural dilemmas thrown up by this shift. That means the profession must consequently re-evaluate and transform *its own* mindset by taking a more multidimensional and multifaceted 'global' approach to coaching in the new paradigm of international business where change is now a constant.

As a cross-cultural coach, I now work with such challenges and complexity within a multicultural client list. Hence my curiosity to further explore this global mindedness construct, its implications and how it might be cultivated. Also, the term is now frequently used within business and management circles to imply some sort of preferred state of mind, yet at the same time is often referred to and described as some sort of an entity, an asset, something that one needs to acquire, to be in possession of. I'm curious to find out what 'it' might be.

On a personal note, my keen interest in cross-cultural coaching and intercultural communication issues stems from my own personal experience of frequent moves, transitions and cross-cultural adaptation – a concise 10-year period spent planting and transplanting through Russia, the Middle East and America with my three children, following the unpredictable postings of a journalist husband. Into the familiar mix of frequent removals, cultural surprises and adaptation were thrown a war in Chechnya, a two-year intifada in the Holy Land, an Asian tsunami and Hurricane Katrina – my hinterland to raising a family and supporting new friends in raising theirs.

This experience of extensive global mobility opened a window through which to re-examine my own world-view from a more global perspective. It has also facilitated my desire

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to support other globally mobile individuals in managing uncertainty and change and is what prompted me to retrain as a coach on repatriation to the UK.

Culture versus strategy

I have reviewed the existing literature on the topic as well as studies across different disciplines such as business and management development,⁷⁻⁹ HR and leadership development,^{10,11} international education,^{12,13} study abroad programmes,¹⁴ international relocation and expatriation,¹⁵ and cross-cultural coaching.¹⁶ From these studies I have pooled existing definitions and themes on the global mindedness construct, including its dimensions, possible influencing factors and common emergent research themes.

My investigations have uncovered what appears to be a fragmented field of study. As global mindedness is a theoretical construct and an abstract concept, I have found few conclusions on its core properties and no common terminology to describe the construct.

It seems that global mindedness is a well-used phrase without an agreed definition. There's a yawning gulf in perception of the concept across different disciplines. Attempts to define the construct are mainly confined to business management and development literature and there is a lack of studies across other disciplines, leading to diverse perceptions of the concept.

A common thread running through all the literature is evidence of a divide over the perception and comprehension of the global mindedness concept. Studies tend to be conceptualised within two dimensions of the global environment - the 'strategic' perspective, which focuses on the strategic complexity that stems from globalisation,⁹ and the 'cultural' perspective, which focuses on cultural diversity and managing across cultural boundaries.

The 'strategic' perspective is the approach most popular in the field of business and management, HR and leadership development. This perspective focuses on the strategic complexity that stems from globalisation and advocates the development of a more complex managerial mindset in order to successfully influence the 'other'.

The following definitions hail from leadership development (1) and business and management literature (2, 3 and 4) and highlight this strategic approach to the construct.

- 1) A global mindset is a mix of individual attributes that enable an individual to

successfully influence those who are different from him or her.¹¹

- 2) Geocentrism (global mindedness) is a global approach to decision-making where headquarters and subsidiaries see themselves as parts of an organic world-wide entity. Superiority is not equated with nationality. Good ideas come from any country and go to any country within the firm.¹⁷
- 3) A global mindset is one that combines an openness to and awareness of diversity across cultures and markets with a propensity and ability to synthesise across this diversity.⁸
- 4) A global mindset is a predisposition to see the world in a particular way, to set boundaries, question the rationale behind things that are happening around us and establish guidelines to show how we should behave.¹⁰

The more holistic 'cultural' perspective tends to be adopted by those in the field of international education, cross-cultural coaching and training. It recognises the concept of *global mindedness* as a global attitude. This perspective focuses more on cultural diversity and managing across cultural boundaries and highlights the underlying dimensions of 'cosmopolitanism' and openness to difference and the 'other', as these definitions from international education literature show.

- 1) *Global mindedness* is a worldview in which one sees oneself as connected to the world community and feels a sense of responsibility to its members. This commitment is reflected in the individual's attitudes, beliefs and behaviours.¹²
- 2) *Global mindedness* is having an open mind while actively seeking to understand cultural norms and expectations of others and leveraging this gained knowledge to interact, communicate and work effectively outside one's environment.¹³

The headline, if there is one, between how the global mindedness construct is contextualised from either a cultural or a strategic perspective is the lack of a common language. This is crucial to the coach because it can lead to confusion and misunderstandings about the needs of the coachee. The coach needs to be aware that this 'cultural' versus 'strategic' perspective will determine how the concept of global mindedness is contextualised by an individual. Coaches also need to be aware of how they themselves tend to perceive the construct and

whether their perception might differ from, or even contradict that of their client.

Understanding how the concept of global mindedness is contextualised is also important from the organisational perspective. If a coach tends towards a cultural approach to the construct then there is a danger that the needs of an organisation for a more strategic coaching approach to developing their employees for global leadership roles might not be met.

Conversely, if the coach adopts a strategic approach to the construct then there is a danger that the needs of the individual might not be recognised or met, if their tendency is towards a cultural approach.

It is vital that the coach is aware and understands both perspectives and how they are contextualised to meet the needs of all the stakeholders in the coaching relationship.

Implications for coaching

From a coaching perspective the divide in how the concept of global mindedness is perceived and contextualised is a timely reminder of the need for greater awareness of how, as coaches and individuals, we all tend to view situations from different perspectives - how what we say can mean different things to different people.

Global mindedness is an abstract concept and as such is just one part of the bigger picture. There are many different issues that can affect the coaching process but an increased awareness that this new century is leading to the development of more 'global citizens' is surely moving up our list of priorities. A rapidly globalising world demands from us more integrated thinking and the readiness to view cross-cultural adaptation as a universal phenomenon.¹⁸ Global citizens will present a different type of client profile because their experience of complex and rapidly evolving work cultures, coupled with increasing cross-border mobility, will lead to an increase in cultural, developmental and identity dilemmas - a range of complexities that, as coaches, we will be required to understand and support.

Given the recognition of these developments, it is important for *all* coaches to have an understanding of the influence of culture in the coaching process within this new paradigm.

Coaching practice is about to face a new complexity of psychological, developmental and intercultural dilemmas, and that means the profession will also have to re-evaluate and transform *its own* mindset by taking a more multi-dimensional and multi-faceted global approach to coaching in the new

paradigm of international business where change is now a constant.

There will be those who insist this is still the limited concern of a niche sector of coaching practice, but consider the changes we have seen in just the last 15 years. I registered my first email account in 2000, and I bought my first mobile phone just one year before.

We are now on the threshold of an unprecedented global handshake. What our complacency fails to acknowledge is that it will be between equals rather than on our Western terms.

Monocultural coaching tools are unlikely to be able to handle the systemic, cultural, societal and psychological issues our clients are starting to bring to us. Boundaried ways of thinking must give way to a more inclusive and integrated 'systems' approach to coaching that *transcends culture*. There is now a clear need for more inclusive and integrated ways of thinking and for a more global perspective to coaching.

In conclusion

We are all cross-cultural coaches now and, as such, we need to equip ourselves with a variety of techniques and methodologies for use in different contexts. We'll need to be more resourceful and innovative, to think outside the box, to be more resilient, to ask more powerful questions and to develop better listening skills – to really hear *how* our clients make meaning of their world. Instead of defending our boundaries, we, as coaches, will need to loosen them, to reinvent ourselves by developing new ways to help our clients better.

With an integrated global coaching approach, the client can better understand the transformative nature of critical experience and embrace a more integrated 'systems' way of thinking. A supportive coach can manage that transition by helping clients protect their sense of self and their confidence in who they are and where they belong, while letting go of old ways and making new meanings of the world.

I simply offer food for thought and the germ of a dialogue between coach and client as, together, they search out a better understanding of the context of their individual lived experience.

Profound global change is a certainty and it will force a new development stage and will also demand a 'systems' approach to managing complexity. Our job as coaches will be to acknowledge that reality and guide our clients through the evolving paradigm.

The big picture is that unprecedented change is happening – and the big picture is our business. ■

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