

Developing a Global Mindset: The Relationship between an International Assignment and Cultural Intelligence

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Abstract

A global mindset is argued to be critical for managers to develop their firms' current and future international success. An international assignment is considered to be one of the most powerful means of developing a global mindset. The skill sets, cognitive complexity, and expanded networks resulting from an international assignment provide expatriates with unique and often tacit knowledge. Yet, every overseas assignment is not successful and not every foreign assignment results in the expatriate gaining a broadened perspective and enhanced skill sets. We develop a model that explicates how an individual's cultural intelligence will affect the relationship between an international assignment experience and the development of a global mindset; and, we suggest that a moderator – cultural intelligence – must play a role in the transformation of the international experience into a global mindset.

Key Words: International assignment, global mindset, cultural intelligence, expatriate

1. Introduction

Organizations competing across national borders recognize the need to have managers with a global mindset (Crowne, 2008; Earley & Peterson, 2004; Yan, Guorong, & Hall, 2002). Firms need individuals whose abilities allow them to deftly work across multiple cultures to achieve organizational objectives. As the development of a global mindset is an issue for both business executives and researchers, the means of acquiring and further developing this mindset has been frequently reviewed (Ang & Inkpen, 2008; Earley & Peterson, 2004; Gupta & Govindarajan, 2002; Shapiro, Ozanne, & Saatcioglu, 2008; Somerville, 1998; Thomas & Inkson, 2004). Although the methods for building a global mindset are numerous, an international assignment is one of the most powerful means of developing the skills and knowledge needed by global leaders (Crowne, 2008; Gregersen, Morrison, & Black, 1998). A foreign assignment is often used as a surrogate for a global mindset in executives (Sambharya, 1998). Yet, every foreign assignment does not result in the manager achieving the organization's desired goals.

Expatriate failure is an issue that organizations confront when providing managers for international assignments (Ashamalla, 1998; Johnson, Lenartowicz, & Apud, 2006; Lee, 2007). While the degree of expatriate failure is an ongoing debate (Gregersen, et al., 1998; Harzing, 2002; Harzing & Christensen, 2004; Lee, 2007), Black and Gregersen (1999) have estimated that about half of all expatriates are ineffective and their assignments are costly failures. Failure to achieve performance objectives in their global assignments, expatriate maladjustment, and turnover problems are each types of expatriate failure (Lee, 2007). Thus, all expatriate failures are a detriment to international business success and can lead even the best and brightest in an organization's worldwide operations to view their global assignments as negative.

Equating an executive's international assignment with a global mindset, thus, is problematic. The assumption that the experience of a completed international assignment equates to a developed global mindset must be questioned. While an international assignment can provide managers with inimitable knowledge, an expanded worldview, and an appreciation for the diversity of cultures, we propose that the international experience does not necessarily lead to a global mindset.

From this perspective, we argue that the international assignment experience does not necessarily lead to a global mindset; rather, cultural intelligence facilitates the transformation process of an international experience into a global mindset. We posit that an individual's cultural intelligence will affect the relationship between an international assignment experience and the development of a global mindset.

The purpose of this paper is to examine the development of a global mindset in managers. The role of cultural intelligence in developing a global mindset will be explicated and a model will be proposed to elucidate the importance of an individual's cultural intelligence in developing a global mindset. First we begin with a discussion and a brief literature review of what constitutes a global mindset. Following our discussion of global mindset, we review the literature on cultural intelligence and then we review the research concerning international assignments and managers. With these three elements defined, we present our argument and model for the role of cultural intelligence in moderating an international assignment in the development of a global mindset.

2. Global Mindset

Understanding the concept of global mindset allows for an examination of the subtle differences between the multiple viewpoints of what constitutes a global mindset. According to Rhinesmith, a global mindset "is a way of being rather than a set of skills. It is an orientation of the world that allows one to see certain things that others do not. A global mindset means the ability to scan the world from a broad perspective, always looking for unexpected trends and opportunities that may constitute a threat or an opportunity to achieve personal, professional or organizational objectives" (1995: 24). Murtha, Lenway, and Bagozzi (1998) argue that managers who achieve a global mindset cognitively balance competing country, business, and functional concerns. Kedia and Mukherji (1999), echoing an argument similar to Rhinesmith (1995), explicate that within the firm, an individual manager's global mindset provides him or her with the insight to recognize the firm's interdependence on the global economy even though the firm's activities appear confined to the domestic market. Maznevski and Lane argued that rather than seeing situations through an interdependence lens, a global mindset is "the ability to develop and interpret criteria for personal and business performance that are independent from the assumptions of a single country, culture, or context; and to implement those criteria appropriately in different countries, cultures, and contexts" (2004: 172).

This paper explicitly embraces Gupta and Govindarajan's (2002) more expansive definition. They view a global mindset as a combination of awareness and openness to the diversity of cultures and markets with an inclination and capability to integrate across the diversity. A global mindset is an ever developing and evolving process built upon cognitive feedback mechanisms that encourage the search for experiences that expand and refine an individual's mental schemas.

Kedia and Mukherji (1999) developed a two-pillared model to explain the foundations of a global mindset (see Figure 1). Simplifying the tack taken by Srinivas (1996), they argued that there are only two elements that comprise the basis of a global mindset: knowledge and skills. Knowledge, Kedia and Mukherji argued, is "an appreciation of the existence of differences" (1999: 237) and skills are the "ability to put knowledge into action" (1999: 238). Explicating the forms of knowledge required to develop a global mindset, they listed three specific knowledge bases a manager must have: (1) a mastery over technology, information systems, and telecommunications, (2) an understanding of the socio-political factors of the different countries in which the firm operates, and (3) an appreciation of the role of culture and cross-cultural issues that impact management's decisions. The primary foundations of skills articulated by them are acculturation and the ability to develop leadership for managing diversity. In combining knowledge with the appropriate skills, managers develop a global mindset.

Insert figure 1 about here

Knowing the framework of a global mindset does not necessarily grant an understanding of that structure. However, in the model presented above, the information leading to deeper understanding is provided: (1) formal education and targeted training, (2) pre-assignment acculturation training, (3) in-country acculturation training, (4) CD-ROM/Multimedia software/Internet based training, (5) participation in multinational team projects, (6) foreign culture short-term immersion (1-3 months), and (7) expatriate assignments (over one year at a foreign posting). Although there are numerous ways to develop a global mindset, an international assignment is argued to be the most powerful means of developing the skills and knowledge needed by global leaders (Gregersen et al., 1998).

3. Cultural Intelligence

Earley (2002) proposed the construct *Cultural Intelligence* (CQ) to accentuate the need to understand how an individual adapts to new contextual inputs based on exposure to unfamiliar social milieus.

CQ is defined as “a person’s capability to adapt effectively to new cultural contexts” and thus refers to “a form of situated intelligence where intelligently adaptive behaviors are culturally bound to the values and beliefs of a given society or culture” (Earley & Ang, 2003: 26). Building from previous theoretical work on intelligence measures such as cognitive intelligence (IQ), social intelligence (SQ), and emotional intelligence (EQ), Earley proposed that an individual’s capacity to adapt to unfamiliar cultural environments is based on three dominant facets: (1) cognitive, (2) motivational, and (3) behavioral (see Figure 2).

Insert figure 2 about here

The cognitive facet is based on self-knowledge by the individual; however, high self-awareness is not fully sufficient. An increased cognitive understanding does not guarantee an increased behavioral effectiveness. An individual must desire to learn that which is not-invented-here. To emend organizational capability, individuals must continually work with and learn from people worldwide (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992). An individual must have the ability to flexibly reshape his or her own self-image based on new environmental stimuli – an openness to new experiences. Another aspect of the cognitive facet is strong reasoning skills. The individual must have an ability to recognize and integrate different social and environmental cues and properly interpret those cues in their contextual setting. With self-awareness and strong reasoning skills an individual is able to develop *metacognition*. As discussed by Earley, “Metacognition is a critical aspect of CQ since much of what is required in a new culture is putting together patterns into a coherent picture even if one doesn’t know what this coherent picture might look like” (2002: 277). Ang et al. (2007) later operationalized CQ with metacognition being the fourth facet.

Motivational, the second facet, is built on two pillars: self-efficacy and conscientiousness (Earley, 2002). Self-efficacy is the belief in one’s ability to succeed. The global manager can successfully accomplish tasks and comfortably interact with foreign nationals. Therefore, an individual with higher self-efficacy has a propensity to face novel situations in new cultural milieus. Without this readiness to face novel conditions, adaptation cannot occur. The individual must have the motivation to initiate interactions even in the face of uncertainty and ambiguity. And the individual with a global mindset has the self-confidence that he or she can interact with foreign colleagues as equals (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992). Conscientiousness is the motivational desire to reengage in the face of uncertainty, setback, or failure. The desire to achieve the goal must outweigh any hesitation. Conscientiousness, thus, is the willingness to continually reengage to achieve a goal, and the commitment to face challenges since in cross-cultural interactions, misunderstandings, setbacks, and failures do occur more frequently than in culturally homogenous business environments (Earley, 2002).

Earley’s (2002) behavioral facet reflects an individual’s ability to act appropriately for the contextual situation in which he or she is engaged. A person must be able to adapt their actions to the culture by consciously acquiring or even subconsciously mimicking behaviors appropriate to the situation without any hesitation. This can take some time and many different experiences to accomplish. Motivational desire will have a great influence on the behaviors learned because “learning by seeing and doing” usually means failure during the first attempt but having the perseverance and tenacity to continue on the task until success is realized.

From the above discussion, those managers with higher cultural intelligence are the ones most able to develop a global mindset. CQ allows an individual to appreciate the diversity of experiences to formulate rapid, accurate, and situationally sensitive responses to emerging issues.

4. The Value of an International Assignment

Gregersen et al. (1998) define an international assignment experience as living and working in a foreign country for at least one year. International assignments allow expatriates to live and work long enough in another part of the world so that they are likely to develop an understanding of the relationships among worldwide operations and capabilities (Black & Gregersen, 1999). Sambharya (1996) suggested that a manager’s international experience represents three separate but interrelated issues: (1) a proxy for the reduction of uncertainty, (2) a surrogate for accumulating cultural knowledge, and (3) the firm’s intent to internationalize its management team members to the environments of an evolving global market and economy. Thus, as a substitute for ambiguity easement and as a proxy for expansive cultural knowledge, international experience is proposed to provide individuals with skills that are not easily developed through other means (Black et al., 1999).

The experience exposes them to a different value system, language, and institutional environment; and, it is anticipated that the experience will instill new ways of learning and responding to stimuli because of social-cultural differences. Executives that have completed an international experience report that the experience enhances their ability to scan, organize, and reorganize firm capabilities in response to changing global situations (Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2000; Oddou & Mendenhall, 1991; Osland & Osland, 2006).

J. T. Battenberg, the retired CEO of Delphi, a U.S. auto components manufacturer, summed up his three years in Belgium and three years in England by observing that, “Prior to these experiences, I was very ethnocentric; then I started learning different languages, different cultures. It changes your thinking. It awakens you to the reality that this is a global world” (quoted in Warner, 2005: 23-24).

Carpenter and Fredrickson noted that international experience is “one of the most broadening elements of executives’ backgrounds, since it typically complements and expands on the role played by other experience” (2001: 535). A survey of the top 700 executives in the U.S. revealed that only 33% had international experience (Warner, 2005). Many successful executives lack the experience of an international assignment. These executives rose through the corporate ranks accumulating experiences that allowed them to function more effectively than other members of their management team cohort. Yet, as these executives look at the future for their firms, they acknowledge that the career paths that allowed them to reach the executive suite are not the paths that will lead to future leadership positions for the current middle managers (Black, Gregersen, Mendenhall & Stroh, 1999; Gregersen et al., 1998). In an observation on his leadership of General Electric and the executives that he envisaged succeeding him, Jack Welch stated,

“The Jack Welch of the future cannot be like me. I spent my entire career in the United States. The next head of General Electric will be somebody who spent time in Bombay, in Hong Kong, in Buenos Aires. We have to send our best and brightest overseas and make sure they have the training that will allow them to be the global leaders who will make GE flourish in the future” (quoted in Gregersen et al., 1998).

Unfortunately, not every foreign assignment results in the expatriate gaining a broadened perspective and enhanced skill sets. While some managers enjoy the stimulus of living in a foreign country and view it as a mind-broadening experience, for others the foreign assignment is an ordeal. Going abroad for protracted periods places strains on managers and their families. Estimates range between 10% and 45% of U.S. expatriates fail (i.e., return to home country early) because of adjustment difficulties in foreign countries, and for those that complete an overseas assignment, another 20% leave their parent firms within a year of repatriation (Black et al., 1999; Black & Gregersen, 1999). Moreover, managers taking foreign assignments typically fear the risk of “being out of sight and out of mind” for corporate advantage or promotion and of being pigeonholed as a manager for foreign subsidiaries with limited upward mobility (Ashmalla, 1998).

With failed overseas assignments running as great as 45% of U.S. expatriates, the propensity of individuals to develop a global mindset after such a dismal experience is questionable. Anecdotally, tales of culture shocked expatriates retreating to “golden ghettos” to alleviate their inability to adjust militates against whatever degree of awareness of diversity, openness to diversity, and an ability to integrate the international experience into their mental schemas possibly could have occurred. As a result of living in a foreign country, the expatriate will gain the experience of a specific culture; however, if he or she lacks the openness and flexibility to accept the cultural differences, then the expatriate has rejected the new experience, has put a negative cast on the international assignment, and becomes more isolated through choosing to live in the golden ghetto.

In his seminal study on the multinational corporation, Perlmutter (1969) identified three primary attitudes of executives in firms competing on the world stage—ethnocentric, polycentric, and geocentric. An ethnocentric mindset and business culture reflects a belief by the organization that home-country managers are the only suitable leaders for the firm in all of the firm’s offices worldwide since they inherently know, understand, and reflect the home-country cultural paradigms. Polycentrism, the second primary attitude, takes the view that foreign countries are different beyond the ability of the home-country headquarters to understand and direct. Senior managers overseas will still be home-country nationals; however, managers at all other levels will be host-country nationals. Only the host-country managers know the best way to succeed in their homeland. Finally, Perlmutter (1969) identifies the geocentric firm as the truly global business. A geocentric firm takes a worldwide approach in selecting managers for both headquarters and its subsidiaries. Managers are drawn from all sources; the criterion for selection is the ability to succeed. The geocentric firm uses both material and human resources not only efficiently but also optimally. When the management team is concerned not with nationality but performance and when country of origin has no relation to promotion opportunities, then a firm has achieved a geocentric worldview and developed a global mindset.

Gregersen et al. (1998), describing a humorous four-element typology of American businessmen who have worked abroad, highlighted the failure of an international posting to develop a global mindset in everyone that experienced an overseas assignment. Gregersen and his coauthors developed their typology by using an analogy of a tall U.S. businessman visiting Japan. Upon entering a traditional restaurant in Japan, the businessman smacks his forehead on the doorframe.

Returning to the restaurant the next day, he again hits his forehead. On the third trip to the restaurant, the businessman thinks to duck his head. Has the businessman broadened his experience base or simply adjusted his actions for the immediate situation? Gregersen and his coauthors saw the four elements of their typology as demonstrating the level of global mindset the managers had developed. The first basic type resulting from the businessman's head smacking the doorframe is "Broken Heads". These people were characterized as having no global mindset development potential. They failed to even realize they were striking their heads and continued doing what they had always done with no integration of new stimuli into their way of approaching the differences and diversity. The overseas assignment provided no learning experience to these managers and they can best be described as ethnocentric. "Bruised Heads" adjust to the moment.

The managers' failure to internalize the lessons learned, and their resultant actions in resuming previous habits upon repatriation to their home country, demonstrate that they have a very limited potential to broaden their mental schema into a global mindset. Individuals in this category can be expected to vary their responses to differences between ethnocentric and polycentric viewpoints. The third type, "Bright Heads," encompasses those individuals who learn country-specific lessons – those people who learn to duck after hitting their head the first time. These individuals have a moderate degree of ability and fluctuate between ethnocentrism and some realization of a global mindset. "Brilliant Minds," the fourth type, are those individuals who recognize something is different and change their mental schemas to add a new reference point. They do not simply adjust to the situation, but rather add contingency options to the paradigms that constitute their mental maps. These individuals have a global mindset and are continually using the new inputs to allow themselves to better frame ambiguous and uncertain situations into coherent pictures. They do not just adjust to the local situation but have added additional cognitive clues for future encounters.

Sambharya (1996) argued that a foreign assignment is a surrogate for a global mindset. Yet, with every incidence of failed overseas assignments and the inability to *a priori* identify executives who may return from a completed overseas assignment as "Broken Heads" as opposed to those who may return as "Brilliant Minds" makes it more important to identify how/why one manager develops a global mindset while another one does not. We propose that it is more cogently argued that a moderator – cultural intelligence – must play a role in the transformation of the international experience into a global mindset.

5. The International Assignment, Cultural Intelligence, and a Global Mindset

Since international experience by itself is not a determinant of global mindset, cultural intelligence, we argue, acts as a moderator of the international experience transforming the information gained during the overseas assignment into knowledge and ultimately into a global mindset. Our model (see Figure 3) is built on three elements: (1) the international experience of managers and how it broadens perspectives to add information from which the individuals can draw in future encounters and business ventures, (2) the role of cultural intelligence on transforming the information accumulated from an overseas experience into knowledge and skill sets, and (3) the resultant global mindset that allows managers to operate in uncertain environments and, yet, form coherent strategies to accomplish firm goals or initiate new strategies to take care of emerging opportunities.

Insert figure 3 about here

The cognitive style of individuals who possess global mindsets is highlighted by three commonalities: (1) individuals have a high tolerance for ambiguity and remain able to function effectively during periods of great uncertainty, (2) personal skill sets are broad with individuals able to draw from a greater number of available tools and supporting networks when facing the uncertainties of new situations, and (3) individuals with global mindsets are capable of examining cultural cues from their international interactions with other peoples from a holistic vs. an analytic mode of thinking – the individuals with global mindsets are able to examine all the contextual clues in relation to one another rather than trying to analyze each as it is encountered (Nummela, Saarenketo, & Puumalainen, 2004; Oddou, Mendenhall, & Ritchie, 2000; Osland & Osland, 2006).

The successful international experience remains the most effective means of acquiring the skills and knowledge needed by prospective executives (Carpenter & Fredrickson, 2001; Carpenter, Sanders, & Gregersen, 2000; Gregersen et al., 1998). This first-hand education paired with a developed cultural intelligence will lead to the global mindset demanded of managers in a geocentric business world. Cultural intelligence begets a transformation of the accumulation of an individual's experiences. The interactions with people and ideas of many cultures become more than the sum of its parts. As a synergistic moderator to the international experience, cultural intelligence develops the individual's genuine belief that culturally diverse perspectives and approaches foster more creative and effective ways of managing people and businesses (Adler & Bartholomew, 1992). Though knowledgeable, managers may not possess the requisite skills to use their knowledge effectively.

Knowledge and understanding must be the basis of taking action, as intellectual action may not transfer directly and automatically into a high degree of skill unless the individual has a finely developed cultural intelligence. The individual without a finer (i.e., more developed) cultural intelligence may not exploit the knowledge effectively. Because the expatriate needs to adjust to his or her host country demands and simultaneously respond to the parent corporation, he or she must have the capability to integrate the local knowledge into his or her own existing knowledge system and schemas to use this expanded knowledge base to benefit the firm's global operations. Considerable practice is involved in developing these skills that enable him or her to be a conduit between the cultures (Osland & Osland, 2006). Placing knowledge into practice is the essential way to develop these skills. The manager with the higher cultural intelligence is most likely to balance a need for integration and diversity and thus develop a global mindset.

Cultural intelligence and international experience have a complex interrelationship. International experience and cultural intelligence are mutually reinforcing interrelationships; therefore, as international experience increases, the development of cultural intelligence will increase affecting a concomitant impact on the international experience's influence in developing a global mindset. While cultural intelligence moderates the role of international experience on global mindset, there is also the direct effect that the international assignment plays in developing and broadening an individual's cultural intelligence. Herrmann and Datta (2002) suggest that international experience decreases the psychic distance and helps managers integrate the learned culture with their own, therefore, such experience will have impact on the values and cognitive orientation of managers.

Expatriates with successful international assignment are expected to possess the skill sets that give them greater confidence to operate in foreign business environments. Daily, Certo & Dalton, (2000) postulate that direct experience in managing international operations provides managers with a more complex understanding of the contribution of the subsidiaries to overall firm performance. Thus, with international experience, the manager will be more motivated to integrate activities across his or her firm's international business units. Henry McKinnel, now retired, reflected on how his assignment as a manager in Japan influenced his actions as CEO at Pfizer. Having witnessed the Japanese consensus-building management style where ideas flowed from the bottom upwards, McKinnel noted, "That became the basis for our emphasis on teamwork at Pfizer; as I like to put it, 'All of us are smarter than any of us'" (quoted in Martin, 2004: 31).

As cultural intelligence is further developed by exposure to inherent differences arising from the individual's foreign interactions, greater is the ability of the individual's cultural intelligence to ascribe increasingly more subtle and complex interpretations to the observed unique occurrences in any society (Crowne, 2008). Thus, mental schemas are always being refined and broadened to accept additional inputs with which to prompt the individual when he or she faces new uncertain and ambiguous encounters. In essence, two aspects of our model, cultural intelligence and international experience, are mutually self-reinforcing and interdependent.

The intelligence quotient (IQ) construct often has been debated as a product of nature predominantly or nurture predominantly. Not desiring to commence a nature vs. nurture debate, a higher "Q" is postulated to increase the capability of an individual to be aware of and notice cultural differences; however, it is the interplay between the individual's native intelligence, personal motivation, and behaviors that determines a person's ability to develop cultural intelligence (Tan, 2004). The desire to develop and enhance one's cultural intelligence is formed by a person's motivation to persevere in the face of obstacles and failures and is the foundation of cultural intelligence. Conscientiousness takes the individual back into the fray time and again in order to accomplish business goals, and this reengagement, when the individual encounters obstacles due to his or her insufficient or naïve cultural intelligence, provides additional inputs to develop the mental schemas allowing appropriate actions during subsequent situations. A successful international manager never waits for guaranteed results; rather, he or she accesses their own cultural intelligence, tries something, faces failure, grows from the experience, and tries again (Davies, 1996).

6. Discussion

Competition to the firm is from all corners of the business world. Development of a global mindset is critical to operating in a global environment and even in a domestic environment. As global leadership remains in ever increasing demand, the impetus to post managers overseas for the international business and cultural leavening will continue. Yet, the fact of assignment to an overseas post by itself does not develop a global mindset. An individual must have cultural intelligence to transmute the experiences encountered, as well as the ambiguities and uncertainties faced, into a global mindset. Our model argues for the role of understanding how an individual's cognitive, motivational, and behavioral propensities impact his or her ability to develop the attributes of a global mindset.

It is further postulated that the interrelationship between the international experience and cultural intelligence is complex and dynamic. As individuals' international experiences increase and their cultural intelligence develops with those experiences, the level of complexity and subtlety apparent to the individual increases allowing an even more refined ability to draw coherence from ambiguity.

Conceptually, the construct of cultural intelligence requires further explication and operationalization in order to provide greater usefulness to researchers. Without multiple measures that have reliability and validity, the construct will suffer developmentally. Only in the last few years have we begun to quantitatively develop the construct (Ang et al., 2007). An operationalized construct should provide the means for researchers and practitioners to evaluate managers on their potential ability to function effectively during a proposed international assignment. The assignment parameters could be evaluated as well. Is the assignment one where a high-potential manager is being observed and trained for a future executive position or is the assignment one where a technical manager is required to establish technical standards or resolve technical difficulties in an already functioning subsidiary? Firms could make assignments overseas based on the degree of cultural intelligence exhibited by the individual manager and the perception of the complexity, ambiguity, and uncertainty that is expected to face the individual during the overseas posting. Global managers of today face challenges unanticipated by firms previously. The ability of international managers and executives to effectively operate within and across multiple cultural boundaries requires that the individual maintains an awareness of and appreciation for the diversity he or she faces in all his or her business activities and actively works to integrate each new stimulus into existing mental schemas. Only by purposefully enriching one's cultural intelligence can an individual develop an inclusive global mindset.

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Figure 1. Developing a global perspective

Adapted from Kedia and Mukherji (1999)

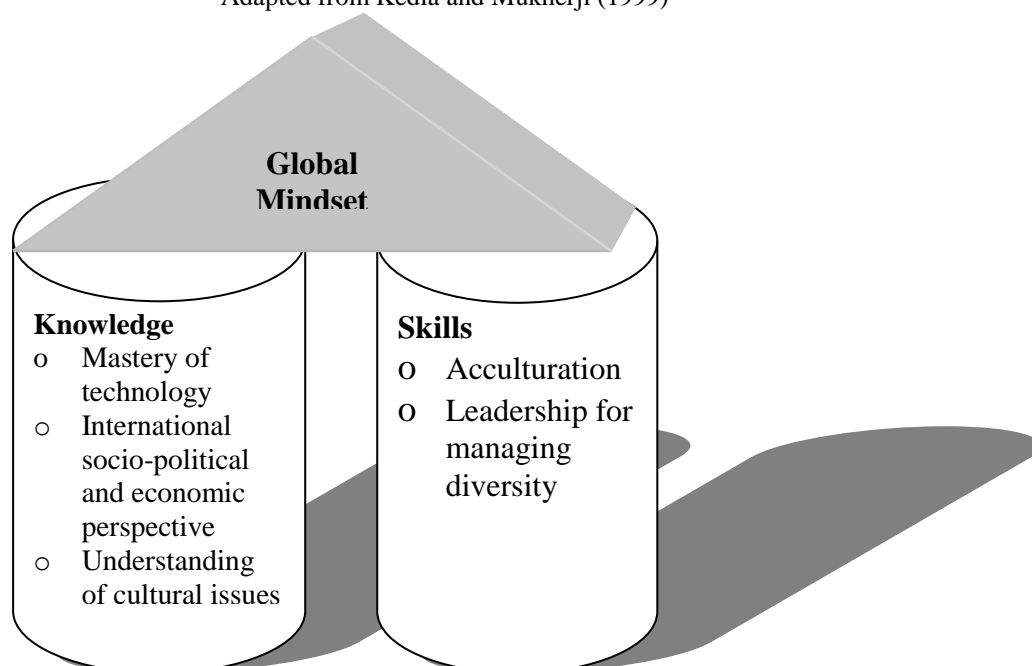


Figure 2. Cultural Intelligence

Adapted from Earley (2002)

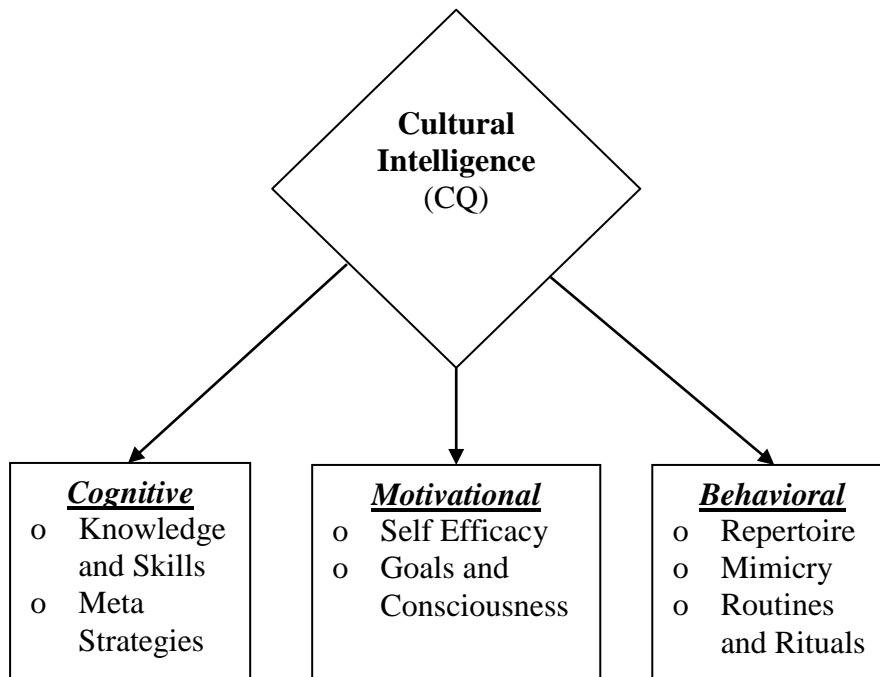


Figure 3: Cultural Intelligence (CQ) → Global Mindset (GM)

