

Why International Experience Does Not Automatically Make You an Intercultural Leader

Exposure to other cultures creates opportunity. Competence depends on what leaders learn to notice, question, and adapt.

An executive can spend years traveling internationally, lead businesses in several countries, and manage teams made up of many nationalities—and still interpret unfamiliar behavior almost entirely through the assumptions of his or her own culture.

International experience matters. It exposes leaders to different institutions, expectations, and ways of working. But exposure alone does not guarantee learning.

Sometimes it produces the opposite result.

A leader accumulates anecdotes, converts them into rules, and becomes increasingly certain that people from a particular country “are” direct, hierarchical, cautious, emotional, slow, or relationship-driven. Experience has produced confidence, but not necessarily understanding.

This distinction matters because intercultural leadership is not measured by the number of countries on a résumé. It is revealed by what a leader does when another person’s behavior does not make immediate sense.

Culture is easiest to see in other people

Culture is often compared to the water surrounding a fish: ever-present, influential, and largely invisible to those immersed in it.

We readily notice the cultural assumptions of others. We are much less likely to recognize our own.

Our expectations about how a meeting should run, how quickly a decision should be made, what respectful disagreement sounds like, or how an ambitious executive should discuss the future rarely feel cultural. They simply feel reasonable.

That is where many intercultural problems begin.

When another person behaves differently, leaders may interpret the difference as a lack of clarity, confidence, urgency, initiative, or commitment. The judgment feels objective because the cultural standard behind it remains invisible.

The first requirement of intercultural leadership is therefore not knowledge of another culture. It is greater awareness of one’s own default assumptions.

Experience can confirm what leaders already believe

International exposure provides leaders with more observations. It does not automatically improve how those observations are interpreted.

Confirmation bias encourages us to notice evidence that supports an existing belief and overlook what contradicts it. Once a leader decides that a team is resistant to change, every request for additional information can look like further proof. Once a colleague is described as deferential, moments of thoughtful disagreement may pass unnoticed.

The problem is not forming an initial cultural hypothesis. Leaders must often act with incomplete information. The problem is treating the first hypothesis as a conclusion.

A culturally curious leader asks:

- What assumption am I making about this behavior?
- What else might explain it?
- What evidence would show that my interpretation is wrong?
- How would someone from this context interpret my own behavior?

These questions convert experience into inquiry. Without them, experience can harden stereotypes rather than weaken them.

Recognizing difference is not the same as adapting to it

Milton Bennett's developmental model of intercultural sensitivity helps explain why considerable international experience may coexist with limited intercultural competence.

People do not move directly from unfamiliarity to adaptation. They may first deny meaningful differences, defend their own way of doing things, or minimize difference by emphasizing that "people are basically the same."

Minimization is especially common among experienced and well-intentioned leaders. Statements such as "I treat everyone equally" or "good leadership works everywhere" sound inclusive. But they can conceal an important limitation: equal treatment does not always produce an equivalent experience.

A career conversation that invites candor in one context may put an executive in an uncomfortable position in another. Public recognition may feel motivating to one person and embarrassing to someone else. An open invitation to challenge the leader may not overcome years of learning that disagreement with authority carries risk.

Adaptation begins when leaders recognize that a sound principle may require different expression.

That does not mean imitating every local behavior or abandoning personal values. It means developing enough range to act effectively without losing coherence.

The capabilities behind adaptation

In my teaching, I organize this developmental work around four intercultural capabilities.

Emotional Resilience helps leaders remain constructive when familiar signals disappear, intentions are misunderstood, or progress takes a different form than expected. It prevents frustration from becoming judgment.

Flexibility & Openness makes it possible to suspend a preferred interpretation, consider another perspective, and change approach when the context requires it.

Perceptual Acuity allows leaders to notice what is not stated directly: who speaks first, how disagreement is signaled, what silence may mean, and where influence actually resides.

Personal Autonomy provides the internal anchor that makes adaptation authentic. Leaders can modify their behavior while remaining clear about their values, responsibilities, and boundaries.

No single capability is sufficient. Perception without flexibility may produce insight without change. Flexibility without autonomy can become imitation. Resilience without perceptual acuity may help a leader tolerate difficulty without understanding it.

Together, the four capabilities turn cultural awareness into leadership capacity.

International careers do not develop themselves

Organizations often treat international assignments as inherently developmental. The assumption is that exposure to another country will naturally make an executive more adaptable and globally minded.

It can—but only if experience is accompanied by reflection, feedback, and the willingness to question one's own interpretation.

Otherwise, an executive may complete an assignment having learned how to operate around local differences rather than how to understand them. The résumé becomes more international while the leadership repertoire remains largely unchanged.

This has consequences beyond individual development.

Leaders who misread culturally unfamiliar behavior can overlook talent, misjudge readiness, and conduct career conversations that fail to reveal what an executive actually wants. Organizations may then interpret a departure as unexpected, even though the executive has spent months experiencing a widening gap between intention and reality.

Culture does not replace the leadership and career dynamics that influence retention. It shapes how those dynamics are expressed, experienced, and understood.

What leaders can do differently

International experience becomes developmental when leaders approach it deliberately.

They can:

- Treat cultural models as starting hypotheses, not descriptions of individuals.
- Seek evidence that challenges their first interpretation.
- Ask trusted colleagues what an ambiguous behavior may mean locally.
- Reflect on emotional reactions before assigning motive or competence.
- Distinguish between the leadership principle they want to preserve and the behavior through which they express it.
- Request feedback not only on what they decided, but on how their leadership was experienced.

The objective is not to eliminate mistakes. Mistakes are inevitable when people cross cultural contexts. The objective is to become better at noticing, examining, and learning from them.

Final thought

International experience creates the conditions for intercultural growth. It does not guarantee it.

The real test is not how many cultures a leader has encountered. It is whether those encounters have changed the way the leader observes, interprets, and acts.

Exposure broadens a career.

Reflection and adaptation broaden a leader.