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Leadership branding has been proposed as a new approach for transforming the impact of leaders in organizations by developing a shared leadership identity. There has, however, been little empirical evidence to support the concept. In this paper, we combine new theories of leadership identity construction with dialogue theory to provide a more adequate explanation of why leadership branding might offer multinational enterprises (MNEs) with a useful conceptual framework and a set of practices to help resolve the integration-responsiveness problems they face. We do this by using data from a longitudinal case study of a UK-based MNE. Our findings support the claims that successful identity construction and dialogue help explain the process of leadership branding. They also show that a leadership-structure schema emphasizing shared values and dialogue can assist in resolving integration-responsiveness problems in MNEs, although strong corporate leadership brands are difficult to establish and may not be beneficial in the long term.

Keywords: branding; dialogue theory; identity theory; leadership; multinationals

Introduction

In line with current business and management literature and newer ideas on the relationship between corporate governance and organizational climate (Martin and Gollan 2012; Farndale, Paauwe and Boselie 2010), HRM has (re)discovered the role that strategic leadership can play in achieving key people management, organizational and business outcomes. The nature of strategic leadership and top management teams has been extensively researched, and while there is still some debate over senior executives' impact on important organizational outcomes, the general conclusion is that top executives matter

(Finkelstein, Hambrick and Cannella, Jr., 2009). However, senior executives have also come under increasing scrutiny because they can also get it wrong. Following a decade or more of corporate scandals where the behaviour of senior leaders has been severely questioned, and the inadequacy of previously feted leaders during the global financial crisis, there has been a 'falling out of love' with the charismatic/heroic/leader-centric models of leadership that dominated the literature and business press from the 1980s onwards (Hamel 2009). In their place, models of shared or distributed leadership have become popular (Pearce and Conger 2003), which are aimed at dispersing leadership throughout organization

Dispersed leadership, however, is often a de facto reality for many multinational enterprises (MNEs) that have grown through mergers and acquisitions because of the attendant complex relations between the corporate centre and subsidiaries (Martin and Beaumont 2001). Corporate centre–subsidiary leader problems can arise in situations, for example, involving cross-border mergers of 'equals', or when powerful subsidiaries are not dependent on corporate headquarters for key resources, or when they occupy positions in the organization's value chain as important sources of knowledge, intellectual capital and/or revenue streams (Kostova 1999; Edwards 2009). Tensions in MNEs can and do exist because of a need to maintain a balance between strong corporate identities and control while remaining responsive to diversity, local market conditions, subsidiary aspirations and the demands and expectations of sometimes powerful local executives. These are all contributing factors to the so-called integration-responsiveness problem facing MNEs (Rosenzweig 2006), and these tensions are intimately related to the nature, aspirations and motivations of leadership in MNEs because of the impact of corporate and local leaders on organizational identity, corporate branding and reputations (Martin and Hetrick 2006; Martin, Gollan and Grigg 2011).

As a solution to organizational identity problems, Ulrich and Smallwood (2007a, b) have proposed the (re)branding of leadership in some widely read practitioner publications.

Unsurprisingly because of the target audience, they have under-theorized their ideas, with the exception of relating them loosely to identity theory. In particular, they do not explain how strong and stable corporate leadership (and followership) identities are formed over time or the conditions under which the creation of a corporate leadership identity might become effective. Yet despite their under-theorization, we agree with Ulrich and Smallwood's (2007b) central premise regarding the need for leadership teams to create more positive images and send out 'honest' signals to employees. This message has been a feature of recent critical leadership literature, not least because they are important influences on employee attraction, work engagement, organizational identification and overall 'climate governance' (Farndale et al. 2010). Thus HRM in MNEs is heavily implicated and has a key role to play in making this happen. However, like other attempts to promote corporate integration, cohesion and identification, there is likely to be a 'too-much-of-a-good-thing' effect (Pierce and Aguinis 2011), which refers to a paradox in organizations where usually beneficial antecedents cause harm when are taken too far.

Thus, the purpose of this paper is to address the focal question: can, how and under what conditions does leadership branding work in theory and practice to address the integration-responsiveness issue in MNEs. We do this first, by integrating ideas from two bodies of theory into an adapted conceptual framework that addresses the focal question. For our purposes, the most important of these is new leadership identity construction theory (LICT; De Rue and Ashford 2010), which has great explanatory value but has not been tested to date. The other is dialogue theory (Amett, Grayson and McDowell 2008), which has a long history in organizational research and can be used to address weaknesses in LICIT as we see them.

Second, we use this adapted conceptual framework to analyse the effectiveness of a case study of leadership branding in a UK-headquartered MNE to assess the relevance of the model to IHRM. We conclude with a discussion of the strengths and weaknesses of leadership branding in the final section and make some suggestions for further research and practice.

Branding of leadership, leadership identity construction and dialogue in MNEs

HRM scholars and practitioners have recently turned to marketing and branding literature for new insights, most notably in employer branding and reputation management (Martin et al. 2011; Edwards 2010). The branding of leadership is a natural extension of employer branding and reputation management because leadership signals and behaviour have a significant impact on a range of key employee attributes and behaviours, including employees' perceptions of trust in the organization (Schoorman, Mayer and Davis 2007), employees' cognitive moral development (Jordan, Brown, Trevino and Finklestein in press), implicit theories of effective leaders, (Schyns and Schilling 2011), willingness to engage with their work (Bakker, Schaufeli, Demerouti and Eeuwema 2006) and to identify with their organizations (Edwards and Peccei 2007). Branding can be seen as part of an identity creation process (Dutton, Dukerich and Harquail 1994; Ashforth, Harrison and Corley 2008; Walsh and Gordon 2008). By extension, leadership branding can be conceived as an attempt to influence the self-construal of individual members of an organizations' leadership team so that they promote an ideal or preferred corporate identity. Ulrich and Smallwood (2007a,b) argue that the key features of a leadership brand are (1) a focus on building a less leader-centric perspective of leadership in an organization, and (2) on being known externally for high quality leadership among key stakeholders, demonstrating links with corporate branding, as well as having a good internal reputation among employees for excellent leadership. Thus, the notion of 'identity work' (Alvesson and Sveningsson 2008) is central to the concept of leadership branding. This refers to work that people do to create, sustain or recreate and revise identities, often in a context of developing more positive images or to fit changing environments. Identity work is also at the heart of LICT, which we believe helps explain more clearly why, how and under what conditions the process of corporate leadership branding might be effective, giving the concept a stronger theoretical and practical basis. In their most recent statement of LICT, De Rue and Ashford (2010) address 'how leadership and leader-follower relations develop in organizations' (p. 627). They do so by theorizing leadership as a dynamic process of leader-follower interactions, which is shaped by key

antecedents and contexts. And, depending on the quality of identity work undertaken by organizational leaders, this identity work results in different types of stable or unstable leadership structures. Thus their proposals provide the basis for a process theory (Langley 1999) of how a leadership brand might be created and sustained over time. De Rue and Ashford (2010) describe the construction of a leadership identity as a process in which individuals self-construe themselves as leaders and followers by making and affirming iterative claims at three levels – the individual, relational and collective levels. Since our interest here lies in the potential for creating a common leadership brand for a top management team in an MNE comprising corporate centre and subsidiary senior executives, we adapt De Rue and Ashford’s leader–follower terminology to the circumstances of these teams in MNEs (see Figure 1). Thus, self-construal at the individual level in MNEs would typically involve individual corporate centre and subsidiary leaders making and granting claims among themselves for a corporate leadership identity. In short, they have to think of themselves and be thought of as corporate leaders by others for identity construction to begin. Next, self-construal at the relational level involves corporate and subsidiary leaders recognizing the legitimacy and dependency of their respective roles. Finally, self-construal at the collective level is where both corporate and subsidiary leaders are collectively endorsed as part of a more ‘corporatized’ leadership community. Without this process of claims and grants being successfully completed, a new leadership identity will not be internalized at the individual level, recognized in relations between corporate and subsidiary leaders, or endorsed at the organizational level.

Identity work in an MNE context can create stable or unstable cycles of corporate centre–subsidiary leader grants and claims (De Rue and Ashford 2010), which, for the purposes of this paper, can be thought of as outcomes of LICT. These stable or unstable structures are contingent on three sets of beliefs and expectations. The first of these refers to how corporate and subsidiary leaders believe leadership should be structured: either as a hierarchy with a single source of authority or as a flatter leadership structures with dispersed authority? The second is the visibility, clarity and credibility of identity work:

the more the claims by corporate leaders for a new corporate leadership brand embody such qualities, the more likely are subsidiary leaders to reciprocate by granting claims. The third set of beliefs and expectations relates to the history of claims and grants of leadership identity in an organization since a history is likely to influence future claims and grants.

A final key insight of LICT into the leadership branding process in MNEs is the delineation of antecedents that explain the conditions under which individuals are likely to claim and grant leadership identities. The lack of such antecedents is a major weakness of the leadership branding theory of Ulrich and Smallwood (2007a,b); LICT helps by outlining three such conditions. The first is that leaders and followers share implicit theories of leadership (and followership) for a stable leadership structure to emerge (Schyns and Meindl 2005). These implicit theories of leadership refer to mental models containing the traits and behaviours of effective and ineffective leaders (Schyns and Schilling 2011). The second condition is the requirement for appropriate motivational rewards to influence leaders to claim their respective identities in the first place, and that the risks of claiming such leadership identities are not deemed to exceed the benefits. The third condition is that the existing formal structure of an organization, which itself is an institutionalized form of previous claims to corporate and subsidiary leader roles, supports further claims to a corporate leadership identity.

However, while LICT sheds light on the leadership branding process in MNEs, we argue that its claims for a process theory of change in organizations are limited because of its underlying positivist ontology (in identifying antecedents and stages of change), and its focus on outcomes that are limited to stable and unstable leadership structures. This type of theorization is inconsistent with 'processual' perspectives of change in which the self and the social are always 'becoming' rather than in a state of 'being' in organizations better characterized by change and emergence than stability and planning (Langley 1999; Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Thus we argue that this adaptation of De Rue and Ashford's (2010) LICT to leadership branding can be made more analytically useful by incorporating

some insights from dialogue theory, since the identity construction process implies a need for continuous dialogue, change and critical reflexivity (Cunliffe 2002; Shotter 2006) in the claiming and granting of leader identities. Moreover, previous analysis of the relationships between centre and subsidiaries in MNEs has highlighted the nature of communications as a key factor in shaping such relationships (Martin and Beaumont 2001; Kostova 1999). Thus, the desire to incorporate subsidiary leaders into a corporate leadership brand is exactly the kind of problem that dialogue theory can help with since it does not propose that all parties should think, say and do the same things, which is implied by the stable leadership structures outlined by De Rue and Ashford (2010). Rather, dialogue theory as proposed by Amett et al. (2008) argues that differences are essential, since without dialogue you are left with competing monologues. To develop this argument it is useful to refer to the work of Bakhtin (1984), who saw dialectics and dialogue as two distinct philosophical positions on communications. He defined a dialectical perspective as a 'mechanical contact of oppositions' embodied in two distinct monologues – thesis and antithesis. Such competing monologues reduced to near zero the probability of a creative synthesis. Thus dialectics were 'finalizing', in that each pole in a dialectic entailed a completed view of the other with change only occurring when either the thesis or the antithesis 'won out' by being 'affirmed or repudiated' (Bakhtin 1984, p. 80). In contrast, dialogue, a position he very much advocated, was always 'unfinalized' and inherently 'changeable'. As a result, we propose that the LICT and leadership branding are contingent on and characterized by continuous dialogue, not only as a set of communicative practices as indicated by their focus on visibility, clarity and credibility, but also as a distinct philosophy of leadership, acceptance of the need for difference and distance as well as engagement in dealing with the competing logics embodied in integration-responsiveness dilemma facing MNEs.

So can leadership branding work in MNEs in theory?

Based on a synthesis of these two theoretical approaches, we suggest a more adequate

definition of the leadership branding process in MNEs as follows:

Leadership branding is the identity work undertaken by corporate and subsidiary leaders aimed at influencing their self-construal at the individual, relational and collective levels, to create and sustain a dynamic corporate leadership identity or brand. For such a dynamic leadership branding process to be sustainable, the following contingencies, prior conditions and leadership philosophies need to be embodied in it:

(1) The philosophy of leadership and communications has to come to embrace a dialogical, rather than dialectical, perspective to create the conditions for dynamic identity construction.

(2) Individual leaders have to identify with the claims made for the new corporate leadership identity.

(3) Individual leaders have to accept their relational roles as part of a corporate leadership team, in the process subordinating previous leader or follower identities and monologues.

(4) Individual leaders need to be accepted as part of the leadership team of the Organization

5) There has to be a working reciprocity among leaders and subsidiary leaders' implicit theories of leadership, especially regarding cultural stereotypes for a dialogue to emerge.

(6) There are appropriate motivational rewards in place to positively influence leaders to seek and claim a leadership identity, and to ensure that the risks of doing so are not seen to outweigh the benefits.

(7) Communications among leaders have to be characterized by dialogue, and clarity, visibility, credibility and reflexivity.

(8) The formal structure and history of centre–subsidiary relations in the MNE supports claims to a corporate leadership identity among corporate and subsidiary

leaders.

In an MNE context, these conditions are often difficult to meet because of the overlay of national cultural and institutional differences on existing organizational cultural differences between the corporate centre and subsidiaries (Martin and Beaumont 2001; Kostova 1999). Much of the international business literature is predicated on the assumption that national cultural and institutional differences are key variables that explain variations in organizational behaviour and HRM. Although recent research in international HRM has begun to question the importance of these national culture differences as an explanatory variable (Gerhart 2009), whether they are overstated or exist ontologically as an independent reality, however, may not be important because, from a social constructionist perspective, employees create and enact national cultural differences through their frequently diverse definitions of the situation, identity discourses and behaviours (Gould and Grein 2009). Thus, to adapt W.I. Thomas's well-known theorem (cited in Merton 1995), it is through such interactions that subjective impressions of national culture as a source of identity becomes real in their consequences, and therefore the basis of identity formation. The debate over whether such subjective impressions and how they are enacted in everyday life in comparative HRM is typically structured along divergence/convergence lines. For example, Hofstede (1998, 2001) argued that followers from different national cultural backgrounds often hold divergent implicit theories of leadership and are therefore likely to enact these in relations with colleagues from similar and different national cultures. In contrast, the main results from the GLOBE studies showed that managers from different national cultures held broadly similar perceptions about leader attributes which they described as implicit theories of effective leadership (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta 2004).

To conclude this section of the paper, we argue that our adaptation of LICT framework and incorporation of insights from dialogue theory can help researchers and practitioners understand and create more effective leadership in MNEs by addressing our focal research

question: can, how and under what conditions does leadership branding work in theory and practice to address the integration-responsiveness problem. In the next section of the paper, we use our framework to examine a case of leadership branding in a UK-based MNE.

Leadership branding in practice: the case study of 'Jade'

Research approach

The present research might best be described as theory elaboration (Lee 1999), in that it elaborates theoretical links addressed in the literature and seeks to provide new insights by drawing on case study data. The case is based on an action research study of Jade, a pseudonym for an MNE in which one of the authors was involved as a consultant–researcher. Action research is based on a collaborative problem-solving relationship between researcher and client, which aims to solve problems and generate knowledge based on the principle that you only know a phenomenon by having to change it (Coghlan and Brannick 2007). As Reason and Bradbury (2008) and Van de Ven (2007) have argued, engagement with practitioners over what matters to them provides insights unavailable to conventional researchers because it involves practitioners and researchers working towards practical outcomes and creating new forms of understanding by reflecting on their actions. Action research is also consistent with our social constructionist perspective to data collection and analysis, focusing on how actors interpret and enact their definitions of reality. We also report the case using a context, content and process framework of change in the company (Pettigrew 1990), with the process stage constituting the attempts to create a dialogical approach through data collection, feedback and action.

Context of leadership branding in Jade

Jade is a leading international developer and supplier of business and management software for small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). It claims to differentiate itself from competitors by (1) an 'installed customer base of 5.5 million customers', (2) a local focus but with global scale, and (3) a market focus on SME's' (company brochure). Jade grew rapidly between 1990 and 2005 by acquiring more than a hundred SMEs, usually

leaving the CEO intact. Thus it resembled what senior managers described as ‘a federation of businesses’ to address the local responsiveness problem (Rosenzweig 2006). However, it also attempted to address the integration problem by developing and diffusing a set of global corporate values – integrity, simplicity, innovation, agility and trust.

In 2006, the company was in the FTSE 100 with a market capitalization of around £3 billion. Its main areas of operation were the UK, the USA, continental Europe, principally France, Germany, Portugal, Poland, Switzerland and Spain, and a ‘catch all’ territory that labelled Australia and ‘the rest of the world’. By 2010, it employed 15,039, including 2695 in the UK, 5653 in continental Europe, 4939 in the USA, and 1752 in Australia and the rest of the world. This represented a seven-fold increase on 1990.

Yet despite being successful with its acquisition strategy, Jade faced significant strategic problems in 2006. Increased competition and a lack of organic growth among some of Jade’s operating companies, particularly in the USA, were seen as the cause of these problems internally. In 2006–2007, organic growth for software license sales across the whole company had declined to 4% from 7% in 2005–2006. These competitive forces led to a perception among the Executive Board that Jade needed stronger and more consistent leadership at senior and operating company levels. Feedback from the 2006 annual attitude survey of employees also attested to a ‘leadership deficit’. These survey results supported the perception that existing managers of the subsidiary operating companies lacked the ability to develop and execute strategies for growth. They were also seen to be lacking the requisite experience and skills to lead a ‘bigger ship’, especially an international one. An interview with the Group HR and Communications Director in September 2006 highlighted low levels of cross-cultural leadership capability as a key risk to Jade’s business strategy. This executive cited the problems of staffing two business acquisitions in Asia in early 2006, a region where the company’s existing managers had little experience of doing business. The company’s ‘2010 and beyond’ strategic objectives were directed towards changing Jade to becoming a customer-driven organization to meet the needs of their core

SME customers by providing value-added services and innovative products to secure organic revenue growth. These objectives were heavily contingent on what the Executive Board described as ‘the need for leaders to become more skilled in creating and developing new and existing business, especially in new countries’. However, they also recognized the need to balance entrepreneurial flair with Jade’s corporate branding and integration agendas, which were to develop a global corporate brand that would be respected globally for the company’s values of integrity, simplicity, innovation and agility. There was also a perceived need to secure greater product development and support integration. These corporate integration agendas were thought to be increasingly important so that the ‘downside’ risks associated with Jade’s multiple acquisitions’ approach and its federal business model did not have a negative impact on its corporate brand. As a consequence, they sought to produce guidelines for what was to be owned and driven centrally and what was to remain under local control.

‘Content’ of the leadership branding in Jade

The idea of leadership branding as a method of dealing with the leadership deficit was first introduced by the HR director of Jade, following her attendance at an Ulrich seminar on the subject. Her proposals were accepted by the Executive Board of Jade, which translated the aim of leadership branding into a need to develop a corporate leadership framework ‘to align the senior management of [Jade] more closely to the company brand and the business vision and goals’ (Interview with CEO, 2006). The key issues were expressed as a desire to develop a leadership framework that aligned with the company’s strategic goals for 2010 and beyond, and to define a core set of leadership principles that would differentiate Jade from other organizations.

As a consequence, a review of potential approaches to leadership was carried out in May 2006 by the Group HR Director. Although, the senior members of the Executive Board had first proposed a corporate approach to leadership, two potential options were outlined. The first was to define what a corporate approach might look like in terms of a global framework to deliver a consistent ‘customer experience’, owned and controlled

centrally. The second option was to continue with a decentralized business model characterized by multiple, local leadership identities. The company attempted to take a systematic approach to assessing the benefits and risks of each option. The benefits of the corporate route were defined as aligning leadership with strategic goals, and setting out clear expectations of senior management with regard to leadership. This would also be consistent with a desire to develop a corporate identity and reduce the 'federal image' of Jade that was strongly held by the organization's employees.

However, this developing trend towards 'corporatization' was also seen as a significant risk by some managers because it was felt to be counter-intuitive to Jade's decentralized business model. This opposing view was particularly prevalent among subsidiaries that were less resource-dependent on the corporate centre than others and/or where some subsidiary managers felt that they would lose their traditional autonomy. At meetings during August 2006 with the Executive Board, the Group HR Director outlined the issues involved in creating a global framework, pointing out the challenges of reconciling the integration-responsiveness problems, especially as they related to leadership. The Executive Board recognized the benefit of localizing leadership, but were also aware of a number of associated risks, including (1) inconsistencies in talent management, (2) variable quality of people management because of inconsistencies in leadership behaviours, and (3) difficulties in measuring and comparing the performance of the operating companies. As a result, what became a critical decision on reflection was to undertake some systematic research into these issues and, at the same time, signal to operating company managers the need to gain their cooperation through a more dialogical approach. Thus an action research project, based on a classical survey-feedback model of organizational development, was initiated to manage the process of defining and implementing a leadership brand. Significantly, this decision may be seen as the first of a series that signalled a desire on behalf of the Executive Board to establish a more dialogical perspective on leadership in the company.

Process of leadership branding

This action research project involved four stages, all of which helped to create dialogue over a new leadership identity at the individual, relational and corporate or collective levels of self-construal. The first stage involved data collection, conducted during the autumn of 2006. The second and third stages involved a series of workshops to resolve the tensions arising from the divergent views on leadership across the company and to secure agreement on a leadership brand identity. These took place over the period from October 2007 to April 2008. The fourth stage involved an evaluation of the leadership branding program conducted during the summer of 2010.

Data collection

The first stage involved two methods of data collection. Exploratory interviews were conducted with all members of the Executive Board, and the CEOs of each of the subsidiary operating companies. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on the strategic challenges facing the company and interviewees' personal views on leadership. Interviewees were invited to talk freely about the company, the key internal and external issues it faced, and the notion of leadership, including what it meant for them, and the extent to which they were able to put into practice their beliefs about leadership. These interviews raised a number of issues that the senior leadership team and consultant researcher sought to explore in more detail. These issues included organizational support, commitment to the organization, the climate in which the company was operating, the competitive strategy, rewards and approaches to leadership. The second stage of data collection was an online questionnaire. For reasons of space, however, we do not discuss the results here, except to note that they were broadly consistent with the interview data.

The sample sizes for the interviews and questionnaire were relatively small, thus any conclusions based on national cultural or institutional differences, which were anticipated at the time to be important, have to be treated with caution. The sample included seven American interviewees, eight continental European (including two each from Spain, Germany, France and Portugal), eight from the UK and two from Australia. Interviewees

demonstrated a high level of engagement with this stage of the research. The interviews lasted about 60 minutes or more each, and were taped and transcribed. Each set of transcribed interviews together with the interview notes were content analysed using NVivo to identify key themes.

Challenges facing the branding of leadership in practice: dialogue and differences

A working consensus over the need for a corporate leadership brand

The dominant view emerging from the interviews was a lack of a coherent identity and approach to leadership in the company. A number of interviewees spoke of Jade's acquisition strategy lacking 'due diligence'. The company had preferred to base acquisitions on trust, resulting in a company characterized by multiple cultures and legacy systems. With each acquisition, Jade had also acquired increased diversity of views on leadership. According to a number of senior Executive Board interviewees, this strategy had helped the company grow but had also resulted in a progressive lack of coherence on policy and practice. They defined the problems in terms of 'few rules, codes or formal procedures', with an organizational structure that created leaders who 'protected their territory', often at the expense of collaboration and knowledge transfer. However, the majority of interviewees outside the Executive Board saw the biggest challenge as developing leaders as quickly as possible. Customers were beginning to demand higher standards of execution, partnership and initiative in the race to stay at the forefront of technological innovation. Thus, it was felt that a leadership model had to align organizational behaviours with the need to execute the 'customer experience' strategy. A customer survey mirrored employees' needs for a corporate leadership approach and a staff survey conducted in May 2006 pointed to a lack of focus, clarity and vision of leadership as major issues for employees. Over 70% of respondents agreed that leadership was a key success factor for the future of the company. A number of interviewees also voiced this issue. Thus, a UK headquarters' executive complained that 'everyone wants to do their own thing, which can be painful' (Interview, September 2006), whereas, a senior manager in an American operating company opined that they were 'getting tired of the

lack of clarity about what drives success and what our leadership is'. Another American manager expressed the view of most interviewees:

to be successful globally we have to move more to a global leadership approach

...

we need

to know what leadership means in [Jade]

...

we need to take the talent we have and build on it

...

for we have people who are sought after by big competitors. (American senior manager, October 2006).

Thus the general conclusion on this issue was that the time was right to express clearly what the company wanted from its leadership and to create a leadership identity that would sustain and develop company growth. However, they also anticipated that such a strategy might result in what one American executive described as 'a cookie cutter approach to leadership'. This referred to the danger that leaders, regardless of local expectations and cultures, might be coerced into thinking, feeling and acting in the same way, thus providing evidence of a lack of affirmation of a hierarchical leadership model.

Lack of consensus over the nature of a leadership brand: definitions of leadership

Although operating company executives accepted the need for a common perspective on leadership, their definitions of what such a perspective might look like was heavily coloured by their previous history and cultural/institutional context. These interviews revealed considerable differences in respondents' implicit theories of leadership, reflecting the national stereotypes that permeate cross-cultural management literature (House et al. 2004), and their willingness to affirm a global leadership identity.

Such stereotyping was especially evident among Jade's continental European managers. As one of the Spanish managers argued:

In every country, leadership is different. The Spanish are more Latin, more aggressive

...

Germans are more structured

...

French are similar to Spanish – more aggressive, passionate

...

this rich mix helps our company to be so diverse and unique. (December 2006)

The dominant discourse of continental European interviewees was of concern over

importation of an Anglo-Saxon perspective on leaders and leadership, which they saw as

an unwelcome threat to their identities. For example, they seemed to prefer the term 'management' over 'leadership' because it connoted an implicit continental European

theory of management being more 'participative, collaborative and inclusive'. This

perspective contrasted with expressions of what leadership meant to subsidiary leaders in

the American and British operating companies, who preferred the discourse of a

leader-centric, transformation model, which typically emphasized the need for 'visionary'

and 'charismatic' leaders.

Leadership involves being able to think strategically, develop a vision and execute it

...

with

flair and charisma. (US senior manager, 1 December 2006)

Our leaders need to be hungry for success

...

They need to move upwards, to want to succeed

for [Jade], not just for themselves

...

as we now have a bigger ship to turn [in terms of]

people, larger profits and wider geographical spread. (US senior manager, 2 December 2006)

The company cannot continue to grow at the same rate without changing. To make the change

happen leaders must articulate where we are going and what we need to do to get there

...

they need to be an agent for change

...

without that we will be swallowed by the bigger

players. (UK senior manager, December 2006)

(leadership is) envisioning the future beyond the 12 month plan

...

to inspire and energise.

It is about painting a picture of the future. (UK executive, December 2006).

Surprisingly, these Anglo-Saxon views on the importance of leaders were not so evident in

the Australian operating company, whose senior managers expressed the view that

leadership should be more concerned with developing working relationships and being

people-centred by creating a 'great place to work':

Leadership is about ensuring that the culture is relaxed

...

we are 100 metres from the beach.

People come to work in t-shirts and shorts. However, we are not relaxed about customer care;

we must build great partnerships with [customers]. (Australian executive, December 2006).

Leadership means taking the company forward and being serious about what it [Jade] does

...

we need to do it in a respectful way and give people the time they need [to grow and

develop]

...

we have to ensure that people come with a smile on their face and go away with

an even bigger smile. Then you have achieved that perfect result. Leadership is about being

proactive, not aggressive and dictatorial

...

(Australian managing director, December 2006)

So, from these interviews at least, we can see that although the need for a corporate leadership brand was seen to be necessary, expectations among subsidiary managers and thus willingness to affirm claims for a corporate leadership identity varied quite markedly. Moreover, these variations typically reflected national stereotyping of implicit leadership theories. Given the small sample sizes, it is difficult to discern whether these differences reflected interviewees' national culture or local organizational culture variations. Nevertheless, for this group of managers these data suggest that the identity claims of leaders popular in the American and British subsidiaries were quite different from the managers in the continental European and Australian operating companies. These differences in legitimate identity claims also extended to claims on leadership styles. In the USA and UK, leadership was typically described by managers as hierarchical, individualistic and directive, typified by the comment that leadership style was: riding ahead on a white horse, providing direction and leading the way through the complexity of the corporate maze, so that the rest of the people can follow a clear path, unhindered.

(UK senior manager, December 2006)

Similarly in the USA, leadership was described as 'leading followers from the front

...

providing strategic direction' (MD, December 2006). The rationale provided by the

American and British managers for this style was summarized by one interviewee People have not until now had visions painted for them

...

middle managers don't know how

to execute the vision

...

we need to lead from the front

...

(UK executive, September 2006)

However, in the continental European and Australian operating companies, leadership was defined as providing support rather than direction, reflecting expectations of a more shared or distributed approach to leadership:

We need to enable our people to take the lead

...

to be responsible and accountable

...

our

role is to provide advice when required and catch them when they fall. (French senior manager, December 2006).

Lack of consensus over the nature of a leadership brand: different leadership criteria

Differences among operating company executives were also evident in their views of the success criteria for leaders. Typically achieving profit targets was considered as the most important factor among American and British subsidiary executives. Although company rhetoric stressed on 'being close to the customer', leaders believed themselves to be successful if they achieved their financial targets and 'met the numbers':

Delivering the numbers is what the culture is

...

delivering at any cost

...

it is still important

above all else

...

People who deliver do well. (UK senior manager, December 2006)

My success is determined by it [hitting the targets]

...

if I don't achieve my targets then I

doubt that I will still be in the organization. (US senior manager, December 2006)

Such a focus on profits by managers might be expected in a commercial organization that was originated in an Anglo-Saxon business system (Whitley 2007). Nevertheless, a minority of managers in these companies recognized that 'profit before people' and focusing on the numbers could and did have a negative impact on the morale and motivation of staff:

although people are considered to be important

...

the company is losing its focus on people

as it becomes larger

...

People seem to take second or third place to delivering profit. (UK senior manager, December 2006)

If it is all about revenue and not about people we will see more people doing unethical things to meet the numbers. (US senior manager, December 2006)

These dissenting voices, however, were in the minority, in sharp contrast to those of the managers in the continental European and Australian operating companies.

The expectations of the latter group concerning what made leaders successful typically focused on 'inspiring and motivating people' as 'resourceful humans' rather than treating them as 'human resources' and sophisticated human resource management theory (Storey 2007). Reflecting on their implicit theories of leaders and leadership as being more about building relationships and people rather than profits, the widely held belief was that motivated and inspired individuals and teams would provide superior customer service.

For some managers, inspiring others was their personal source of motivation:

'it has always been my main issue for my job'. '[My] personal commitment [is] to make a difference. I have a lot of enthusiasm and commitment

...

[it] helps me to inspire others’.

(Portuguese manager, December 2006)

This view was echoed by German, Spanish and French managers, all of whom provided further insights into their people-focused measures of success as leaders:

for me it is about making a difference to the people who work with me

...

I want to ensure that

they are satisfied in their work and see their future being with [Jade]. (German manager, December 2006)

I believe to keep people motivated they need to always have a dream to come to work every morning. It is not just an automatic job

...

we need to help them to be motivated and innovative

...

We need to help them to be confident about management in [Jade].

(Spanish senior manager, December 2006)

No one can lead a business without having trust from their employees and other stakeholders.

(French senior manager, December 2006)

These contrasting beliefs of leaders in the different operating companies on what constituted an effective leadership identity combined with the widespread view that greater integration was also needed, reflect tensions inherent in the integration-responsiveness problem in MNEs. On the one hand, there was a consensus view that a corporate leadership model was needed; on the other, there were significant differences

over what this model should look like:

What is needed is an understanding that we are one family, one community, and one framework. (Spanish manager, December 2006).

Because we are a group of little companies, strung together, with different cultures with different personalities and no attempt to achieve consensus

...

We need to move from an 'I do

it my way and you do it your way' approach. (US senior manager, December 2006)

As noted, these qualitative data were broadly supported by our survey data, which we do not report in this paper. It is sufficient to note that the survey showed continental European regional leadership teams rating innovation as more important than the British and American teams, which, in turn, placed more emphasis on 'delivering on the annual operating plan'.

Thus the data gathering revealed a lack of consensus over a corporate leadership brand, nevertheless, it also indicated a willingness among the Executive Board and operating company leaders to work towards a consensus over how a co-constructed leadership identity should be defined, the capabilities needed for leadership and the criteria for measuring and rewarding effective leadership behaviours.

Process of moving towards a working consensus

Following investigations into the challenges of establishing a corporate leadership brand and variations in implicit theories of leadership, the second stage of the project was designed to achieve a working consensus over the branding of leadership. This process began with workshops involving senior leaders from across the company in October 2007 to define the leadership brand, and was followed up with similar developments with HR staff in May 2008 to clarify definitions, issues and implementation plans. Workshops were also held with customers during December 2007–April 2008 to gain insight into their expectations and willingness to act as advocates of the corporate brand. The senior

leaders' workshop resulted in agreement that a corporate-wide leadership brand was necessary because it would help in making the company look and feel different to others, especially with customers and employees, and that leaders in the operating companies needed to collaborate as well as compete. However, they also agreed that any statement or policy had to reflect the local differences highlighted by the research.

Thus a 'boilerplate' set of leadership competencies was constructed by a working party of leaders from the corporate centre and the operating companies as essential to the desired brand identity. They identified these as 'Passion, Accountability, Collaboration and Entrepreneurship' (known internally as PACE). These competencies were symbolically 'handed over' to operating company leadership teams for adaptation to local labour

markets and customers. The handover took place at the annual leadership conference in May 2008, during which corporate leaders who had taken part in the workshop in October 2007 gave a presentation to subsidiary leaders about the leadership brand identity, which also emphasized their involvement as part of the 'global leadership cohort'. Following this presentation, subsidiary leaders began to address the issues involved in applying the leadership brand to their own local circumstances.

Thus the process of implementation and the survey can be seen, for the first time in Jade, as an attempt to create a dialogue over strategic issues. However, this process remained essentially 'top-down', symbolized by the handover process, and so not fully reflecting the dialogical approach proposed in our framework as a condition of leadership identity construction. This mixed process may have led to some mixed results in an evaluation of the leadership branding process conducted in 2010.

Taking stock of the process to date: mixed results?

The handover and 'localization' of the leadership branding exercise was evaluated as part of the project in August 2010. The evaluation involved follow-up interviews with all

leaders who took part in the 2006 interviews to find out what had changed since the introduction of the leadership brand. Data from these interviews were predominantly supportive of identity reconstruction, showing a consensus over the corporate leadership brand among some subsidiary leaders. These operating company leaders seemed to be more willing to take on the values of the corporate leadership brand as expressed by an emerging discourse of a new corporate culture:

‘The success of PACE is the change in culture in Jade. Culture is no longer an initiative. We are now moving towards what leadership means across the company. Personally, I now know the culture that is expected in [Jade], the kind of people we need, what is expected in terms of doing business.’ (Spanish subsidiary CEO)

As a culture we did not focus on people: that is now changing. Today there is a plan about how we can train our people, what kind of skills we need. (French subsidiary CEO).

The discourse of culture change was also supported by a discourse of changed behaviours across the company. For example, they saw leadership brand in the following terms: driving behaviour. We are much more conscious of the way we behave; we have the PACE attributes in our minds. (UK subsidiary CEO)

providing a framework, a reference point, for how a Jade Leader will behave. (US subsidiary CEO)

It is like the DNA of the HP way

...

Jade did not really have this before. It is the Jade way

...

guiding lights. (French CEO)

When we recruit someone we use it. We look at how candidates compare to PACE.

(Spanish senior manager)

Finally, operating company leaders perceive that collaboration across the operating companies had also increased, that subsidiary leaders were more accepting of their new

roles, and that the senior team was made strides in endorsing subsidiary leaders into the leadership team.

A culture shift in collaboration is beginning to happen. We are getting more involved in global issues. For example a global team on Extraordinary Customer Experience is being led by [subsidiary executive] this makes the operating companies take it more seriously. It gave us a more structured role. (UK subsidiary Managing Director)

Collaboration has increased; we now have committees, with teams taking group wide decisions. For example, there is a technology committee, and a product marketing committee. The teams are made up of people from across the globe. (French subsidiary Managing Director)

These data may suggest evidence of the emergence of a stable leadership structure and a reflection of a dialogical philosophy of leadership. However, there was significant pockets of evidence to the contrary, indicating that such changes were not universal. In particular, a number of interviewees were concerned about the ongoing commitment from the senior leadership team to the process and the lack of consistent or honest signals from senior leaders. These concerns are illustrated by the following quotes:

It [leadership brand] needs to be more visible with clear support and reinforcement from a senior leadership standpoint including regular dialogue and communications surrounding it.(US subsidiary manager)

I think people understand it intellectually but don't quite understand how to put it into practice. We have pockets of the company which are doing well and others which are not. Employees have not really received consistent messaging in a way that drives commitment. It has also not been embedded in our performance management system in a consistent way. (German subsidiary manager)

Concluding reflections on leadership branding: lessons learned for theory and practice

In this paper we have built on the LICT and dialogue theory to provide new insights on

leadership branding, which is a novel practitioner-oriented concept for HRM. We have also used the framework to reflect on data from an action research project on leadership branding that sought answers to the integration-responsiveness problem in our case study company. The data tend to show that leadership branding appears to be producing positive results though not universally so. These can be explained by our framework and the absence of conditions that would support leadership identity reconstruction, so providing supporting evidence for the framework.

The history of relationships between the centre and operating company leaders may be characterized by dialectical communications and relations, beliefs and statements by senior leaders that many operating company leaders were not 'up to the mark' and employee survey data that attested to this leadership deficit. There was also an initial federal organization structure that did not support claims by operating company leaders to be part of a corporate leadership team; nor, one might add, were the incentives to become so evident in the case data. Finally, there was a general lack of consensus of implicit theories of leadership among operating company leaders that reflected national cultural and institutional differences. This history shaped the early stages of the leadership branding process, which began as an essentially 'top-down' change program led by the Executive Board.

However, our reflections on the case data cause us to conclude that the decision to undertake action research through survey feedback to establish the need for and nature of the leadership brand was critical in signalling and establishing a more dialogical relationship between the Executive Board and the operating company leaders. The gradual emergence of this dialogical relationship thus helped create the conditions for identity work to begin. Operating company leaders were, in effect, being asked to regard themselves and make claims to corporate leadership status for the first time, which were readily granted because the Executive Board recognized that their own claims to leadership were contingent on having operating company leaders integrated into the company mission. Nevertheless, the data also point to significant differences among

operating company leaders over the type of leadership brand required. Operating company leaders identified with the need for greater integration and a leadership brand, though not on what it should look like. These differences reflected cultural influences on implicit theories of leadership and were to be expected during dialogue over the nature of the leadership brand. Such differences, however, were recognized, respected and dealt with, signalling a change management process in which dialogical relationships among the centre and operating companies and within the operating companies themselves became embedded. Most notably, the PACE values, although a little more than a set of standard boilerplate statements that could apply to many organizations, were deliberately designed to be equivocal allowing operating company leaders to play a significant part in injecting into them locally relevant language and meaning. As Price, Gioia and Corley (2008) have argued in relation to the projection of organizational images by the corporate centre, 'image equivocality' is often needed to deal with the 'scattered image' problem in complex organizations, which refers to the multiple and often inconsistent images held by employees and leaders over the projected organizational identity. Image equivocality requires that value statements need to incorporate flexibility (relevant to time and context), consistency (which should exclude contradictory images) and inclusivity (relevance and authenticity with most employees). The 'handover' stage was deliberately designed to signal the desire on the part of the corporate centre for a more dialogical relationship on the issue of leadership in the organization and seems to have been interpreted as such by subsidiary managers. Finally, the positive data from the evaluation of the process indicates a degree of endorsement of the corporate leadership brand by some operating company leaders. They also endorse the importance of operating company leaders as members of a corporate leadership team by corporate centre.

However, this process of incorporation and identity reconstruction, as we have suggested, was not universal, which we believe may be due to differences among operating company leaders' beliefs and expectations about how leadership should be

structured in organizations. In essentially pluralistic organizations such as MNEs, such differences may be seen as natural and better 'out that in' for a dialogical relationship to be maintained. We also suggest that the lack of a receptive context for change and the initial top-down process itself may have contributed to these mixed results. Moreover, as we suggest in the next section, too much of a good thing may be self-defeating in the long run.

Implications for researchers and practitioners in MNEs

The integration-responsiveness problem in MNEs has been traditionally cast in terms of techniques of holding out the potential for a dialogical relationship between the corporate centre and subsidiaries, as well as among subsidiaries. However, the reality is often better expressed as a dialectical relationship, often engendered by top-down corporate identity programs, which pay lip service only to the needs for local identity construal. The lessons from this case study on leadership branding as an exercise in identity reconstruction among leaders testify to its potential, especially if there is a receptive context for such changes in the form of dialogical relationship and leadership philosophy. As we have seen from the case data, this dialogical relationship need not necessarily be a precondition but needs to emerge early on in the process of change and be well signalled by key figures. Nor does the theory or case preclude differences; indeed the tolerance of differences and distance, as we have argued, is beneficial in the long run to avoid the too-much-of-a-good thing effect (Pierce and Aguinis 2011) referred to in the introduction. Like many other HR solutions to organizational problems, 'more is better' leadership branding is unlikely to form a linear relationship with organizational outcomes because other research has shown that past a certain inflection point, there will be dysfunctional consequences, including over-identification and burnout (Bakker et al. 2006), group-think and a lack of diversity (Whyte 1998), and a lack of weak ties (Granovetter 1983), all of which are usually deemed inimical to innovation and change in organizations. These potential dysfunctional consequences need to be incorporated into any theory of leadership branding that seeks to go beyond simple prescription on the need for strong corporate cultures. Thus we suggest

that further research needs to examine these potentially dysfunctional consequences of identity integration in MNEs and that practitioners need to be just as aware of these as well as the dangers of engaging in dialectical forms of communication in their leadership initiatives.

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