21 Leaders for the 21st Century, How Innovative Leaders Manage in the Digital Age by Fons Tromprenaars and Charles Hampden-Turner

Reviewed by Maj Luke Turrell RA

Fons is recognised around the world for his work as consultant, trainer, motivational speaker and author of various books on all subjects of culture and business. As founder and director of Tromprenaars Hampden-Turner (THT), an intercultural management firm, he has spent over 25 years helping Fortune 500 leaders manage and solve their business and cultural dilemmas to increase global effectiveness and performance, particularly in the areas of globalisation, mergers and acquisition, HR and leadership development.

I’ve never written a book review before, but I know one thing. Don’t judge a book by its cover. And in the case of 21 Leaders for the 21st Century it is entirely justified. The cover is awful. The book however is far from awful – it is actually very good. And despite being slightly out-of-date (it was first published in 2001) and entirely focused on non-military leaders, it offers hugely valuable leadership lessons for the Armed Forces of today. In an era characterised by
Defence Engagement, Short Term Training Teams and diversified recruit demographics, the book provides a methodology (“meta-theory”) of effective 21st century leadership based on the leader integrating seemingly conflicting cultures, challenging the status quo and resolving the resulting cultural dilemmas. In addition, the Trompenaars Hampden-Turner framework of recognition, respect and reconciliation provides a useful means of attempting to resolving those dilemmas.

The opening chapters provide a short summary of the main thesis. The language is quite technical and at times tricky to break down but this is not a heavy, theory based text book. The majority of the book is a series of case studies of twenty-one selected leaders including Richard Branson, Lego and the former Prime Minister of Russia and provides tangible and fascinating examples of the thesis in action. Lego realised that their rules designed to prevent failures inhibited creativity and impeded the realisation of good ideas. Sound familiar? Equally, British Airways realised it was worth losing two business class seats to give the previously under-valued cabin crew more room and show that they cared. Critically the authors have gained extensive experience and evidence based on direct data gathering and close partnering with the case study subjects. What struck me about the case studies is that they have been written by people who know the subject well. Equally, that Hampden Turner and Trompenaars have the credibility to demand so much time with the world’s business leaders.

The authors argue that successful leaders rarely issue orders, they create and manage a culture by fine-tuning and reconciling major dilemmas. It is the culture 'what actually happens on a routine basis' that runs the organization.

“problems have grown in complexity beyond the expertise of single professionals and even beyond the mandate of top managers...giving orders rarely works anymore”

The book lists seven major dilemmas which, put simply, are the different ways in which people and organisations may work. Fundamentally, the book recognises the centrality of culture, but for the serving soldier it teases out a more subtle lesson. When working with

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different organisations you must take the time to learn and understand the complexity of the culture, not just along ethnic or national lines but team by team, group by group, before you can begin to reconcile the challenges.

One of the seven dilemmas is rule-making vs exception finding (universalism vs particularism); do people in the organisation tend to follow standardised rules or do they prefer a flexible approach to unique situations? In a business context the best example is whether a global business should impose standardised regulations or allow local norms to prevail at the expense of your values. The case study is of a Taiwanese tech company that developed a global brand and reputation for standardised manufacture but with local marketing and distribution.

The solution the company achieved is an example of the art of achieving one value through another in a ‘virtuous circle’, a process the authors call ‘through-through thinking’. This virtuous circle essentially combines seemingly opposed values into coherence. In a military context an example may be whether strategy should be directed from above or originated from below? If you take a binary approach of one or the other you may have an incoherent strategy that lacks ground truth or a strategy that lacks longer term vision. The authors’ solution is a continuum:

“top management carefully studies and appraises the strategies that have emerged from outside its orbit....and weaves them into a designed synthesis that combines all the best accomplishments which....top management carefully studies and appraises....”

In this case, top down strategy is better informed, and the subordinates recognise the strategy as valid and valuable. As a positive, the book doesn’t seek to provide a list of habits or universal applications for leaders. However, the authors are keen to point out that ‘through-through’ thinking is not guaranteed to deliver results – importantly it is ‘useless unless the judgements are sound’. Nevertheless, what the authors call ‘transcultural competence’ is a learned process of bridging and unifying differences; in one of the most compelling

\[\text{p. 62.}\]
Statements of the book, it is ‘what delineates the manager from the leader and the successful leader from the unsuccessful one’.

The key to learning that ‘transcultural competence’ is the Trompenaars Hampden-Turner (THT) framework. This simple framework encompasses recognition, respect and reconciliation. The first is the most important, especially to British serving personnel because “the first step for leaders is to help all players recognise that there are cultural differences – to recognise their importance and how they have an impact”\(^3\). Too often we as individuals and as an organisation have failed to heed that message; both in our daily dealings with civilian companies, Other Government Departments or in foreign countries. In sum, I thoroughly recommend this book; it delivers a powerful central message, well supported by interesting case studies that draw out some fascinating and hugely relevant lessons for the leaders of the British Army in the 21st century.

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\(^3\) p. 440.