

The Melody and Cacophony of Global Leadership

By Cynthia Cherrey, ILA President & CEO

After our successful global conference in Atlanta, I have received numerous requests for a copy of my opening remarks at the plenary on Thursday morning. It is my pleasure to share these remarks (lightly edited for print) with all ILA members in this article.

Wednesday evening, we began the 18th annual global conference with a welcome to Atlanta and a march to the Center for Civil and Human Rights. What a powerful and symbolic way for us to begin our conference with the theme of *The Dynamics of Inclusive Leadership*.

A special thank you to Janet Rechtman — conference chair — and the planning team, the Global Conference Advisory Team, and the ILA staff for their work in putting this conference together.

This morning's plenary session began with piano music performed by Denny Roberts, ILA member. Many of you know him as an administrator, a teacher, an author, and he is also a musician.

Music is such a powerful way to convey meaning and emotions. Music can invoke feelings of beauty, love, joy, and it can also evoke feelings of angst, anger, and anguish. We all have experiences where music touched our very soul.

The last piece by Rachmaninoff that Denny played begins with a simple melody around which the entire piece is built. The musical piece moves into a segment that is more searching, discordant, dissonant, jarring. The music then moves into a wandering interlude that climaxes into a huge crescendo.

In that piece is a melody — a beautiful sequence of collectively harmonized music and cacophony — a turbulent and discordant mixture of sounds.

When we engage in leadership, at times it may appear simple, but often it becomes much more complicated and unclear. We may experience harmony in our leadership work and we may find dissonance. This is not unusual. We live and lead in turbulent times. Reflecting on our experience we find meaning in the harmony and in the dissonance. Leadership embodies both. Then we may realize that some of the things we thought were there in the beginning are still there, but with greater complexity—bringing greater depth, richness, and elegance to what we originally thought or experienced.

Music gives us a metaphor to embrace the melody and the cacophony of leadership. In today's turbulent global environment we must embrace the melody and the cacophony of leadership and get beyond the illusion of deifying the concept of leadership.

Globalization: The Present Frontier

Leadership — the study, the teaching, the practice — is hard work. The nature of leadership and its role has intensified and has become much more complex with the increasing international interaction among people, among organizations, and among nation states. Globalization imposes new demands on what we expect and what we should expect from leadership.

The World Economic Forum this year cited a lack of leadership as one of the major crisis facing the world today. Why? Perhaps because the international community has largely failed to address the global issues we are facing.

Many historians, political theorists, economists, environmentalists would argue that the globalizing of our world has the capability of changing the course of the human journey on this planet. Every day in this world of ours: political realities are unfolding in countries around the globe; violence and terrorism continue to fester and grow; and we see a progressive destabilization of the global environment.

This danger is more gradual, but it is relentlessly cumulative. As guests on this planet we are on the verge of destroying where we live. There are no boundaries to the air we breathe, the dirt we till and the water we drink.

Albert Einstein adeptly describes the dilemma we face: "The significant problems we face cannot be solved at the same level of thinking we were at when we created them." I would argue, nor can these problems be solved with the same leadership we had at the time we created them.

As societies are more and more influenced by political, social, economic, and technological transactions across borders, development and change is influenced not only internally but also by individuals interacting across other organizations, institutions, and countries.

These transactions create the first ever semblance of a global civilization and they connect diverse cultures within and across all continents. Modern civilization is beneficial in many ways and in other ways creates complex problems.

We live in a time between paradigms of civilization. It is a time of stark contrasts and accelerated evolution in which some want to hold on to the familiar and even return to the past. What is needed, however, is fundamental change towards co-creating ways of living together in our ever increasingly interdependent global home.

We need to embrace the melody and the cacophony of leadership.

The system that we call the economy — the way we extract and produce, transport and consume — dominates our global society. And it is changing from the industrial era, which had a focus on diminishing our natural capital, to the age of the knowledge economy, which has to embrace all forms of capital — financial, industrial, human, and environmental capital. A global economy that involves: Reframing business to be profitable and sustainable and in governance involves requiring collaborative efforts between the sectors of civil society, business, and government.

Globalization is impacting us today in ways we know and in ways we don't know.

What we know is that post World War II saw the beginnings of the need for new governance structures for a global economy.

What we know is that globalization is changing expectations and creating new opportunities and challenges for growth.

What we know is there is no going back.

And we need to embrace the melody and cacophony of global leadership.

The Roadmap Moving Forward

For too many of us today, “global” simply means projecting our own values and beliefs on the world around us — applying these perspectives to a larger geographic scale.

The term global, however, is more than geography. It is also cultural in terms of people and has intellectual reach in terms of a global mindset and skill set “Globalizing” requires hearing and learning from each other to find solutions from our shared humanity and support our shared sustainability.

No single researcher or speaker, from any one nation or culture, profession or sector, can possibly hope to capture the complexity of the changing patterns of leadership in today's world. We need each other to collectively assemble the montage. We need to ask ourselves “what does it mean to think and lead globally?”

If you think about what is happening in the world today there is a new form of a global society that is emerging that requires thinking globally and studying leadership from a global context.

The study of global leadership is an emerging field of research. Today we have data from the World Economic Forum, the United Nations, and data specific to leadership research studies such as the GLOBE project and the Global Literacies study

Global Acumen

Today's global society requires global acumen — the understanding, experience, and insights of working, living, and leading in a global society.

Today's leadership requires an understanding of multiple and diverse cultures — engaging and influencing those different from ourselves and searching out diverse perspectives. We all have different ways of understanding, thinking, acting, and communicating. We need to find ways to expand our understanding and ways to influence individuals and organizations that are unlike ourselves.

Many of us know it but either avoid it or are struggling to develop global understanding.

Moving Forward

The International Leadership Association — the ILA — is one of the best ways to engage with others different from ourselves from all over the world — from different sectors and different disciplines — but all focused on the study, teaching, and practice of leadership.

We are here to learn from each other. It is through our collective human capital that we do our best work in leadership. The richness of our learning is through this collective space — being together at the ILA global conference — bringing together diverse and different voices.

In *a capella* groups each and every voice is essential. Diverse voices can create the harmony and the cacophony that is needed for each voice to be heard.

We are the conductors. We set the tempo.

We can change the lyrics.

At the 18th annual global ILA conference with the theme of *The Dynamics of Inclusive Leadership* may each of us: Lift our batons; increase our tempo; and continue to do this important work of leadership research, teaching, and practice — and ensure that every voice is heard.