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# Practical Lenses Into Servant Leadership In Asian Millennial: Case Study

The following case study is extracted from real situations in MNCs, observed by the author, in actual interviews during consulting engagements. Characters' names have been modified for privacy protection. The purpose of sharing the case study is twofold:

1. Every character in the case is from the Millennial generation. They have achieved leadership positions in the international environment and are foreign to the country they are working in Asia. Situations come from MNC business environments. These Millennials, not only have travelled away from their comfort zone from their families to work abroad, in addition, they are now managing up, down and trying to influence their peers, without authority, in a very multicultural ambience. This is the very point we want to demonstrate and discuss their leadership style preferences and viewpoints within the Asian context.
2. Identify the characters' behaviors and how adapting to servant leadership would be useful for them to further their growth in their current role.

To document the case study, we will be using the cultural dimensions from Hofstede's Insights. In addition, we will discuss how the needs of the case characters can be supported by Van Dierendonck's list of servant leadership behaviors. Opportunities to ameliorate the situations in the cases will be presented, and business implications will be discussed.

Case: Managing a peer to peer relationship

Sophia is in her late twenties, arriving from the United Kingdom in her first international and regional responsibility job since one and a half years, has three direct reports and is based in Singapore for an FMCG brand management company. She and her team are responsible for managing the retail placement of brands deployment around the Asia Pacific region. There are a lot of first times for Sophia in this role in aspects that are absolutely new to her: multicultural, greater responsibilities, having direct reports in the regional headquarters of Singapore and indirect reports in the countries. In addition, Sophia is in charge to develop people down and manage up.

Daily Operations

All in all Sophia is handling her role quite well; except for she is having challenges with a peer in a joint regional project. Her peer is very experienced in similar expertise, a Gen X, hence, has been in the business much longer than Sophia, in fact, she mentored Sophia during her onboarding when she joined the Singapore office. Sophia has disagreed with her peer on a decision and has decided to deploy the project despite achieving consensus with her peer. Now, she has trouble finding her ground vis-à-vis her colleague of Singaporean origin. Their relationship is currently aloof and merely functional. Sophia wishes to start the relationship with her colleague from scratch and tried to approach her on a one-on-one basis to find out what went so wrong to cause the blaming attitude and coldness in their interactions. There is clearly a sense of mistrust in this situation.

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## Power Distance

Sophia's peer, a Singaporean, may be feeling overstepped on Sophia's decision and misalignment of project deployment decision, not merely on the functional level, but also on the cultural dynamic level. What this means is that how we were brought up with beliefs, values and traditions, can be highly influenced by the culture we come from that instills expectations and attitudes towards behaviors such as decisions and communication style. Singaporean culture respects seniority and hierarchy (74 power distance high) compared to the UK (at 35 power distance low) which means Sophia, despite her colleague having more experience and having mentored her, she may just see her as equal.

## Individualism

Combined with UK's high individualism where meritocracy is Sophia's focus, able to think for herself and is more oriented towards 'me' than 'us' thinking, against low individualistic society of Singapore, who believes in harmony, where restraint of disagreements to respect the seniors is favored, stemming from Confucius teachings, therefore, her peer would work towards building consensus in decisions, hence, this demonstrated a clear clash.

## Uncertainty Avoidance

The UK is found with low uncertainty avoidance, where not many rules are needed to run the day, little planning, merged with high individualism they are interested in novelty and what is different, so thinking out of the box suits their taste. Compared to Singapore which is an even lower rating, which may at first come across as strange since Singapore is a society with many rules, but they do not concede due to the need for structure, rather, because of high power distance.

## Long Term Orientation

Singapore scores high on long term orientation, which means they are pragmatic, nothing is completely black and white – either/or – concept, they believe a combination of both would enhance a possibility, also prudent with resources, do not give up, slow results, relationships valued by order of status, are very much a Confucius resonant society, holding virtue more importantly than curiously seeking the truth comparatively to Westerners' preference for the latter.

## Indulgence

In terms of indulgence, the UK has a high score, prone to optimism, spending, enjoying life, deciding life through impulses, whilst Singapore with an intermediate score would be hard to judge their directional preference.

## Masculinity

It is also worth mentioning the masculinity of the UK given that is high, nevertheless, they are more of 'read in between the lines' society and do not always mean what they say, which may not be understood by many. Whilst the Singaporeans are more prone to work with shared values, at lower mid-range masculinity, this society is more prone to feminine aspects of

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consensus, conflict is avoided at home and at work, and sympathy for the underdog is favored, as respect for the individual is encouraged in the society.

### Opportunities

A one-one-one 'clear the air' meeting is most probably what Sophia needs to begin with, however, she needs to be prepared with her mindset, intentions and actions to recover her relationships with her peer. Much will depend on Sophia's communication style during her conversation with her peer and it may not only take one meeting to build trust. From Hofstede's dimensional analysis, it is apparent that the high power distance of the Singaporean cultural aspect from Sophia's peer where seniority is expected to be respected, in addition to her having been Sophia's mentor during her onboarding, has caused a substantial damage. Furthermore, the high individualism score of the UK stemming from Sophia's unilateral decision making without seeking consensus or at least alignment with her colleague, who has a very low individualism cultural score may have made things worse.

### Servant Leadership Applicability

The core essence is to identify and articulate what has been 'broken' in the relationship causing mistrust, in order to begin to repair the situation. In addition, it would be helpful to clarify each other's responsibilities and communication norms in a mini-team charter, where specific behaviors are accepted during team work and consequently methods to call on each other for feedback, as well as, what challenge resolution methods are used for scenarios where non-consensus decisions need. A pivotal aspect is for Sophia to act as a servant leader to her colleague through humility, authenticity and interpersonal acceptance, in other words, having the courage to acknowledge what went wrong, apologize when needed, identify the actions to take to moving forward and giving the permission to be called upon with respect would be a solid way to build the foundation to a new beginning in this relationship.