

# Looking beyond the

Leadership studies have been dominated in the past by a Western mindset. **Sharon Turnbull** describes new research into non-Western leadership styles – Worldly Leadership – that could profoundly influence responsible and sustainable management and business practices

**The majority of leaders across the globe today have been conditioned at least in some way by Western and US-centric leadership theories and methodologies.**

This thinking has been largely driven by a business school curriculum that for many years has been rooted in Western leadership thinking and practice. Case studies, books and articles derived from US and European studies are the bedrock of today's business education. Leadership models focus on the leader as individual, often charismatic, heroic or transformational. And leadership biographies reflecting this perspective are often global best-sellers, perpetuating this view.

Even Eastern collectivist and indigenous community-based cultures, whose societies are based on very different social norms and principles, have nonetheless increasingly bought into the Western leadership knowledge base, seeking to strengthen their economies, their ability to compete on the global stage and to

enhance the career prospects of their emerging talent by adopting Western leadership models.

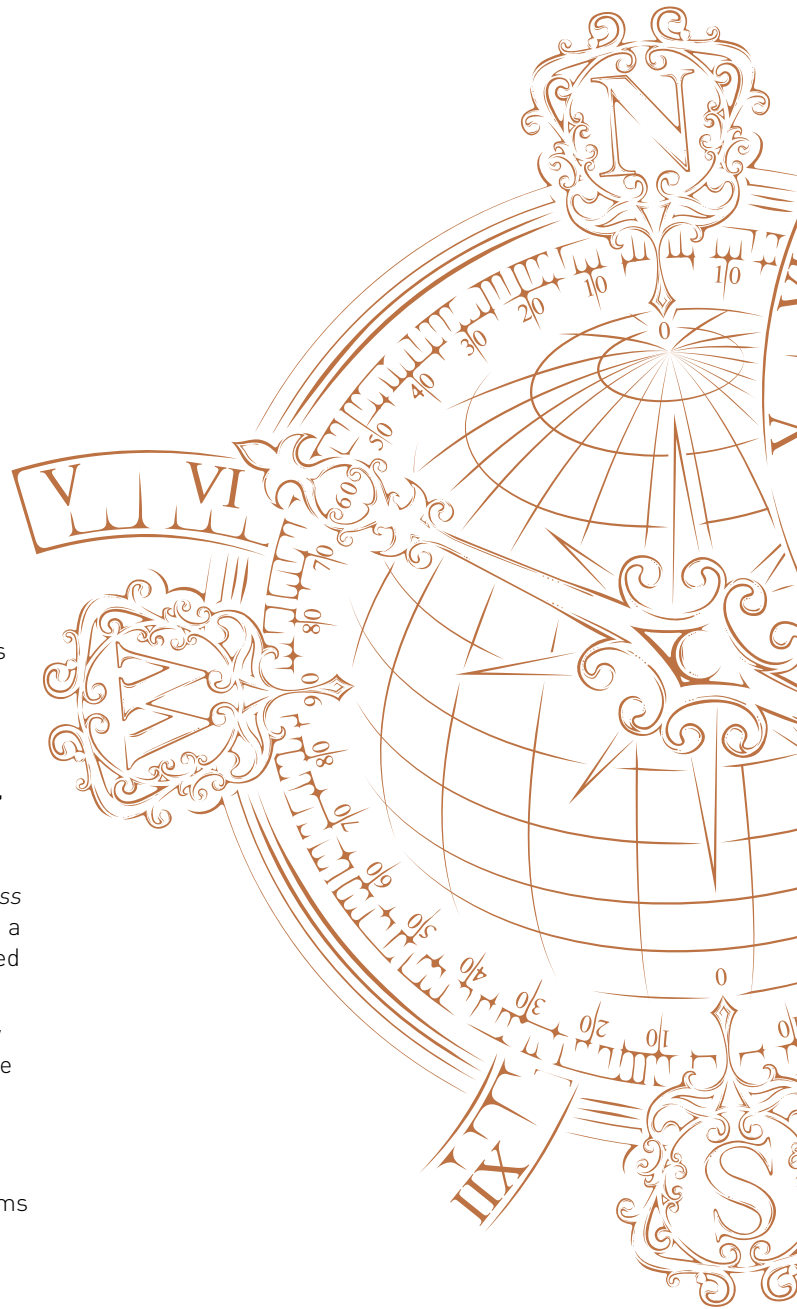
While this dominant mindset may have served many parts of the globe well in supporting business education and wealth creation – and the value of Western leadership knowledge is not in question – we now believe that it has limitations and that the many challenges to our 21st century world cannot be addressed by a Western mindset alone.

Pick up any newspaper or journal today and it is likely there will contain something about globalisation and its effects on our society or economy. The "credit crunch", volatile oil prices, recession and climate change all remind us how interconnected our globe has become.

Sustainability, energy security, food and water security, poverty, health and wealth distribution need to be urgently addressed and these global problems can no longer be ignored by business. We believe that it is now time to tap into the many wisdoms around the world beyond the

# West for leadership





West that can help to throw light on and address today's shared global problems.

The global economic crisis has taught us that material growth and wealth creation by and for a few nations, without close attention to the interconnected nature of our world and the growing number of interdependencies within it, is not sustainable.

The exclusive focus by a corporation on the creation of shareholder value, for example, without acknowledging or attending to the impact of its actions on the societies, environments and cultures of the economies in which it operates, is increasingly deprecated.

Christopher Meyer and Julia Kirby in the *Harvard Business Review* (April, 2010) have called for more transparency in a corporation's external impact on societies, their so-called "externalities".

We agree; but would go further. We believe that it is only through tapping into the wisdoms of societies beyond the West that we will find real solutions to the cumulative impact of these externalities.

At The Leadership Trust we have been researching non-Western, Eastern and indigenous leadership wisdoms since 2008. Our research has been exploring questions hitherto unexplored in the leadership field.

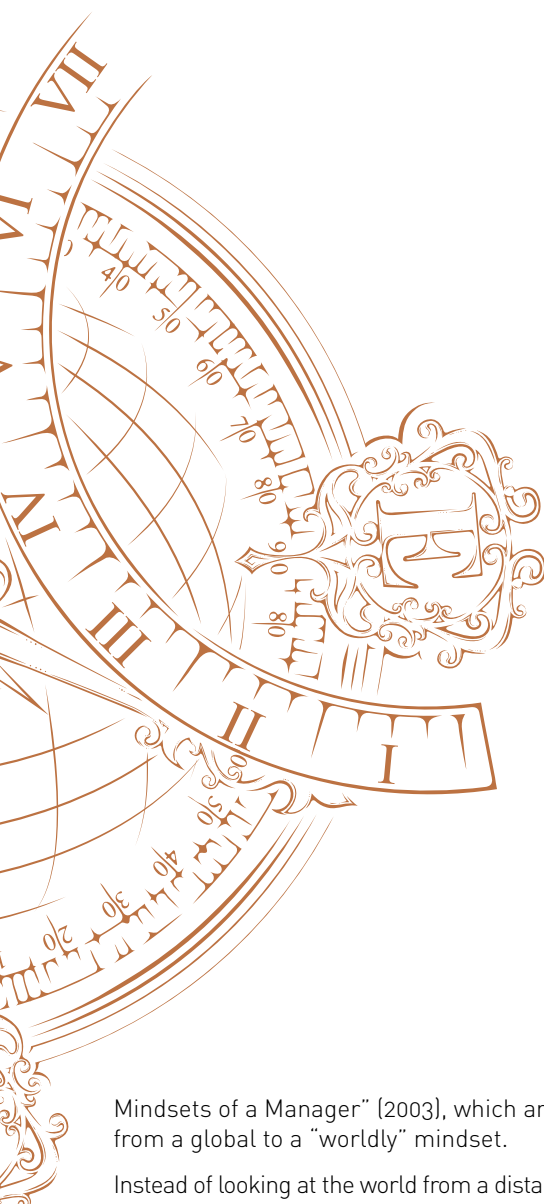
We have asked, for example, what wisdoms beyond the West are currently lost or hidden from mainstream view as a result of focusing on a knowledge base that is predominantly derived from one part of the world.

Our research has focused on what insights non-Western traditions can offer to organisations grappling with the challenges facing the world as a result of rapid globalisation and the continually changing digital economy. We have also explored how the leadership wisdoms contained within ancient texts might be brought into focus to help us to address these apparently intractable problems.

For this leadership research we adopted the term "worldly", influenced by Henry Mintzberg and Jonathan Gosling's *Harvard Business Review* article "The Five

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Mindsets of a Manager" (2003), which argued for a shift from a global to a "worldly" mindset.

Instead of looking at the world from a distance, they proposed a focus from close-up on the many different worlds within worlds that make up our globe. Furthermore, they argued that adopting a worldly mindset is not simply about observation; it is also about the way that we engage with and act within and across the world(s). Subscribing to this view, we decided to apply the worldly mindset to the study of leadership.

Our "Worldly Leadership" research initiative has sought to deepen understanding of leadership wisdoms from many different cultures and societies around the world. We have discovered that leadership wisdoms beyond Western-centric perspectives are a highly dispersed body of knowledge, which can best be researched in context via a networked research approach.

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applying multiple lenses to understanding, interpreting and applying the leadership knowledge or "knowing" found in these cultures (which is transmitted by word of mouth and remains undocumented).

Our research aim has been to engage particularly with those involved in "close up insider" research into leadership in non-Western societies and to build a network of worldly leadership scholars, thereby avoiding as far as possible the trap of attempting to conduct non-Western leadership research through a Western leadership lens.

A Worldly Leadership symposium was convened in spring 2009 in which papers were presented primarily by indigenous scholars on a range of studies including insights into Maasai leadership wisdoms; women leaders in public administration in Libya; Arab leadership and its distinctive differences; and a variety of studies into leadership theory and practice in countries as widespread as China, Turkey, Iran, Germany and Nigeria.

We followed this later the same year with the first international Worldly Leadership Summit, hosted in conjunction with partners GRLI (a partnership of EFMD/ UN Global Compact) and Ashridge Business School bringing together 100 leaders, including indigenous leaders, from all corners of the globe and many sectors, including business education.

Two specific projects have also been conducted in order to develop our ideas further.

The first has focused on the nature of sustainable leadership by conducting interviews with NGO and community leaders working in Africa and Asia about the nature of their leadership. The focus was on how they have learned their leadership practices, their role models and teachers, their habits and expectations, the influence of their societal, family and religious beliefs on their leadership decisions, their relationship with followers, their ethical frames and the leadership process as a whole.

The second project was a qualitative study of Indian business leaders conducted together with an indigenous Indian researcher about their leadership journeys, their



values and beliefs as well as their role models and other societal influences.

A project on Russian leadership in the post-Soviet era is currently underway.

One of our important findings is that the relational and collective nature of leadership appears to be stronger and more intuitive in indigenous and Eastern communities than in the developed world.

For example, in Kenya's long history of surviving even the worst challenges dealt to it by political and climatic upheaval, the Maasai people have demonstrated a deep understanding of leadership that dates back many years and is embedded in their traditions.

One of our interviewees, Emmanuel, a young Maasai leader, explained:

"Within all the community, everybody is trained to be a leader because everybody should be a leader in our community. We feel a sense of responsibility by being in the same age-set. We feel a sense of responsibility... by being of the same clan. We feel a sense of responsibility...by speaking one language. And that's how we come together and we are proud to be the Maasai."

Through these words, he indicates that group membership is very important but that this membership can be extended outwards in concentric circles from age-set to clan to tribe. Emmanuel also reveals that the Maasai's understanding of leadership is a shared and collective process:

"We don't have a king; we don't have a great leader who dictates things. But the community, the elders, will sit down, will talk and will judge everything."

In the Maasai, a sense of responsibility is purposefully developed from the earliest age.

Every youth learns leadership skills that focus on collective responsibility, securing the community's future and on its protection. There is a long-term sense of building the leadership capacity of future generations in order to ensure its continuity that is rarely articulated in Western leadership narratives.

Researching leadership in cultures where the collective or the community has been a key to its survival and sustainability may, we believe, hold some of the keys to finding new ways to conceptualise leadership and leading in this post-crisis and inter-connected world. Many of the ancient philosophical texts also support these ideas.

The findings of these pilot studies are important and these, together with the research findings of our partners in the project convince us to continue the research and extend it to other parts of the globe. **gf**

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#### WORLDLY LEADERSHIP SUMMIT

The second international Worldly Leadership Summit took place at The Leadership Trust, Ross-on-Wye, UK from 6-7 September 2010. The Leadership Trust's partners for the Summit are GRLI, Ashridge Business School and the British Council. Details can be found at: [www.worldlyleadership.org](http://www.worldlyleadership.org)

#### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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