

LEADERSHIP ACROSS CULTURES

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Abstract

Leadership is often credited (or blamed) for the success (or failure) of international operations. As with other aspects of management, leadership styles and practices that work well in one culture are not necessarily effective in another. The leadership approach commonly used by U.S. managers would not necessarily be the same as that employed in other parts of the world. Even within the same country, effective leadership tends to be very situation-specific. However, as with the other areas of international management you have studied in this text, certain leadership styles and practices may be more or less universally applicable and transcend international boundaries. This chapter examines some differences and similarities in leadership styles across cultures.

Key words: Leadership, leadership styles, MNCs, manager, influencing people, philosophical grounding, autocratic-participative behaviors.

More academic research over the years has focused on leadership than on nearly any other social science topic. Much of historical studies, political science, and the behavioral sciences is either directly or indirectly concerned with leadership. Despite all this attention there still is no generally agreed-on definition of leadership, let alone sound answers to the question of which leadership approach is more effective than others in the international arena. For our present purposes, leadership can be defined simply as the process of influencing people to direct their efforts toward achievement of some particular goal or goals. Leadership is widely recognized as being very important in the study of international management, which raises the question, What is the difference between being a manager and being a leader? While there is no concise answer to this either, some interesting and helpful perspectives have emerged.

The Manager-Leader Paradigm

While the terms manager and leader have often been used interchangeably in the business environment, many believe that there exist clear distinctions in characteristics and behaviors between the two. Some believe that leaders are born, but managers can be shaped. MNCs that have simply sought out employees with appropriate skill sets now face a new challenge: clarifying the seemingly dichotomous roles of managers

and leaders to ensure a cohesive vision going forward. Leadership is more difficult to articulate as views of what makes a leader are inconsistent across studies. Leader status is not something that can be learned, but something that must be earned through respect. In other words, people are not hired as leaders, but appointed as such via employee perspective on the individual. Leaders guide and motivate team members and are extremely visible. While managers often merely focus on reaching objectives by mastering financial information, leaders work to get the right people in the right positions and motivate them; money matters become a secondary objective. Proactive behavior is often crucial as these individuals create change on the basis of a vision of the future. To sum it up in a word, leadership is about the drive to ultimately do the right thing.

The focus of the leader is on the success of team members and building their morale and motivation, as the firm seeks to implement and execute the right strategy. Many firms are beginning to search for an all-encompassing package of skill sets, and while it is imperative for the survival of a business to have both managers and leaders, it is extremely difficult, if not impossible, to find someone who fits the inclusive criteria of both roles. Still, hope abounds that it is a reasonable venture to search for individuals with the latent attributes of the leader-manager, who may benefit from training methods that can magnify the most relevant qualities. Skills in effective communication, planning, organizing, and problem solving are what both leaders and managers should develop in order to live up to their roles. The manager-leader must exhibit the ability to focus on the future while maintaining current organizational trends. After that a certain undefined charisma must come into play, evoking the support and respect of subordinates, since the leadership role is ultimately determined by team member perspectives. The table provides a comparison of perceived differences between leadership and management. Again, whether or not these contrasting qualities and abilities are mutually exclusive or if one list is a subset of the other is highly debatable. But it seems clear that pitfalls loom when individuals who do not really exhibit the capacities of both a leader and a manager attempt to fill both sets of shoes. Uncertain and shifting roles and practices can lead to inconsistencies in execution, leading to a belief among subordinates that those in positions of authority may not have the qualification to serve in either capacity.

In the context of our discussion of international management, it is important to note that cultural perspectives are often responsible for how the roles of managers and leaders are seen to overlap, and in some cases, viewed as synonymous. In some cultures, especially those characterized by high power distance, the aura of leader is projected onto the manager whether or not he or she is ready for it. At the same time, globalization and international operations are evolving such that the manager may be cast into the role of leader out of necessity because there is no one else or no other

choice available. Today, managers that seek to do more than balance the budget may be shaped through appropriate training into the leaders of tomorrow.

Perceived Differences: Managers vs. Leaders

Managers

Can learn skills necessary
Take care of where you are
Oversee
Point out flaws to improve on
Deal with complexity
Are fact finders
Focus on efficiency
Are given immediate authority
Follow company objectives
Have present vision
Do things right

Leaders

Harbor innate characteristics
Bring you to new horizons
Motivate
Give recognition for good work
Deal with ambiguity
Are decision makers
Focus on effectiveness
Earn respect through actions
Set new standards
Have future vision
Do the right things

Leadership definitions may not be universal, yet it is true that relatively little effort has been made to systematically study and compare leadership approaches throughout the world. Most international research efforts on leadership have been directed toward a specific country or geographic area. Two comparative areas provide a foundation for understanding leadership in the international arena: (1) the philosophical grounding of how leaders view their subordinates and (2) leadership approaches as reflected by autocratic-participative behaviors of leaders. The philosophies/approaches common in the United States often are quite different from those employed by leaders in overseas organizations. At the same time, the differences often are not as pronounced as is commonly believed. First, we will review historical viewpoints on leadership and then move on to exploring new findings. One primary reason that leaders behave as they do is rooted in their philosophy or beliefs regarding how to direct their subordinates most effectively. Managers who believe their people are naturally lazy and work only for money will use a leadership style that is different from the style of managers who believe their people are self-starters and enjoy challenge and increased responsibility. Douglas McGregor, the pioneering leadership theorist, labeled these two sets of assumptions “Theory X” and “Theory Y.” A Theory X manager believes that people are basically lazy and that coercion and threats of punishment must be used to get them to work. A Theory Y manager believes that under the right conditions people will not only work hard but will seek increased responsibility and challenge. In addition, a great deal of creative potential basically goes untapped, believes Theory Y, and if these abilities can be tapped, workers will provide much higher quantity and quality of output. The reasoning behind these beliefs will vary by culture. U.S. managers believe

that to motivate workers, it is necessary to satisfy their higher-order needs. This is done best through a Theory Y leadership approach. In China, Theory Y managers act similarly—but for different reasons. After the 1949 revolution, two types of managers emerged in China: Experts and Reds. The Experts focused on technical skills and primarily were Theory X advocates. The Reds, skilled in the management of people and possessing political and ideological expertise, were Theory Y advocates. The Reds also believed that the philosophy of Chairman Mao supported their thinking (i.e., all employees had to rise together both economically and culturally). Both Chinese and U.S. managers support Theory Y, but for very different reasons. The same is true in the case of Russian managers. In a survey conducted by Puffer, McCarthy, and Naumov, 292 Russian managers were asked about their beliefs regarding work.

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