

Leadership excellence in East and West: reports from the trenches

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ABSTRACT

This article shows that leadership excellence is not uniformly perceived in one multinational. In a company active mainly in the USA, Malaysia and Singapore, half the management population (414 managers at all levels) joined in 39 focus sessions to define leadership excellence. This provided a database of 4000 statements. 105 themes were extracted and factor analyzed, leading to a set of seven leadership factors. The factors signify leadership styles that emerged from the focus group sessions. They were labeled: dependable optimist, approachable helmsman, focused people developer (universal); caring parent, proactive guide (only found in the East); passionate professional, vision-implementing team player (only found in the West). Conclusion: in one company there is partial, but not full consensus about excellent leadership.

This is an inductive study, based on company-wide focus group generated statements, and thus original in its method. The first research step, classifying the statements, is strongly interpretative, and the factor analysis explorative. The findings are practical and they have a message about deep cross-cultural differences. The themes and factors are relevant for leadership development in other multinational companies.

A practical limitation of the study is that the company was mainly active in only three countries: Malaysia, Singapore, USA. Similar studies in companies that are active in other parts of the world could yield more leadership attributes.

The method of coding statements from focus groups and using them in a factor analysis is original. The leadership factors have value for organization development and leadership training.

Keywords: leadership, culture, personality, Southeast Asia, organizational development, focus groups.

Introduction

Multinational organizations face the difficult task of reconciling different leadership styles across their subsidiaries. The authors have observed first-hand the hidden costs of strained relationships due to misinterpretation of behavior, or downright intercultural ineptness at crucial times by leaders. What do the leaders of a transpacific company have to say, most of whom have experienced the difficulties of leading and being led by people with very different backgrounds? The present inductive study became possible due to the availability of a unique database of statements about leadership excellence created in a company-wide leadership development program in a high-tech manufacturing company, hereafter referred to as WTP for WorldTechPro (real name withheld). WTP is active around the world, notably in the USA, Malaysia and Singapore. Its aim is to investigate to what extent leaders in this multinational hold culturally determined perceptions of leadership excellence. The data consist of statements made by the company's united leaders across 39 focus group sessions. This means that any topic that surfaced during the discussion in any of the sessions made it into the research database.

We first review the literature more or less chronologically. Then we describe the focus group study. We use the literature review for classifying the themes that originated from the focus groups. Then we describe the new order among the themes resulting from exploratory principal-component analysis. We discuss the results at some length, referring back to the literature and commenting on method, and draw conclusions.

Leadership research

Origins

In the USA, the leader is a culture hero (M. Hoppe & Bhagat, 2007). This may not be equally true around the world. Are there universals of leadership as well as local variants? As for universals, Robert J House and Aditya (1997) review the 20th-century history of empirical leadership research. The behavioral school of leadership provided an important contribution. Influential in the nineteen-fifties and -sixties at Harvard, Ohio State Leadership Center and the University of Michigan, this school empirically identified two broad classes of leadership behaviors: *task-oriented* and *person-oriented*. A third dimension, *individual prominence*, was identified by the Harvard group but ignored in subsequent leadership literature. House and Aditya (1997) assume this may have been due to the social disapproval of individual prominence seeking. For our purposes the central concepts from the behavioral and trait-based streams of leadership research can be categorized into three super-classes: individual prominence, social qualities and task-oriented behaviors.

Last century

Since the early nineties, leadership across cultures has become an important topic in research. That cultures differ greatly in many respects and that this is crucial for management across countries has become accepted since Hofstede (1980); (2001). Recent studies have zoomed in, and the economic rise of Asia has broadened the spectrum. The GLOBE study (R.J. House et al., 2004) clearly showed the variety of conceptions of leadership across the 62 societies in which the project ran. Other significant studies besides GLOBE include Smith, Misumi, Tayeb, Peterson, and Bond (1989), who question whether leadership measures are cross-culturally universal, Yeung and Ready (1995) on leadership development, Newman and Nollen (1996) on managerial practices across cultures, Dorfman et al. (1997) on the emic-etic distinction in a five-country study, Offermann and Hellmann (1997) with a 39-country study, Pillai, Scandura, and Williams (1999) on leader-member exchange. Each of these studies confirms that both leaders and the expectations of subordinates differ greatly across the world.

Yet by the turn of the century, a massive meta-study by White (2002) revealed that there was still work to do, since many prior studies carried little relevance for management practice. The USA was often the country of reference, and correlational methods across samples of questionnaires were the methods. Around that time, Cheung et al. (2001) put the Big Five personality model to the test in China and Hawaii and found robust evidence for a sixth factor that they label Interpersonal Relatedness.

This century

Since then, studies specific to the Asia-Pacific region have multiplied, spurred by the enormous successes of the region. There are voices that assume convergence in leadership across cultures, e.g. Liden (2012) who states "The immense popularity of Western designed MBA programs offered in Asian countries (...) has led to the transplant of many Western practices (...) These developments will also serve to reduce the differences in leadership and the perception of leadership across national boundaries. (p. 206)".

This statement seems to be corroborated by a study on leadership perception among MBA students in Singapore and the USA in 1993, in which hardly any country differences were found (Campbell, Bommer, & Yeo, 1993). The respondents, and their generation, are now probably business leaders. What about their current leadership perceptions and practices?

A number of recent studies shed light on this. There are voices reporting cross-cultural similarity in leadership, e.g. Kirkman, Chen, Farh, Chen, and Lowe (2009). Others find differences, e.g. Bosch, Lee, and Cardona (2013) who used a three-dimensional framework to interview managers and found that Asian respondents placed more emphasis on the "external" and "interpersonal" dimension, while non-Asians placed more emphasis on the "personal" dimension. Tung (2013) suggests that the question of differences is not one of either...or, but rather one of complementarities. Lam, Huang, and Lau (2012) note that mainstream leadership research largely relies on universalist theory, and suggest, with Liden (2012) that cultural moderators of the effects of universally endorsed leadership constructs should be identified.

Several authors also caution against treating Asia as one culturally homogeneous place (Bruning & Tung, 2013; Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010; Rowley & Ulrich, 2012).

Whether one finds similarities or differences may depend on the scope and method of one's data collection. A focus on the individual is more likely to yield similarities, while a focus on the context brings

differences to light. Liden (2012) explicitly cautions that for studying leadership in China, one needs to take the team context into account.

Implications of prior studies

These various studies clearly point to the existence of both universals and culture-specifics in leadership. If these authors are right, there is not one recipe for leadership, but leaders and followers have to be matched in order to be successful together. This means that the very behaviors that serve a leader well in his or her home country can be a source of failure in another (Dooley, 2003a, 2003b). This poses practical problems for multinational organizations. How can a company establish a coherent operational culture across different national cultures that require different leadership styles? What habits should international managers unlearn and what skills should they acquire?

This study attempts to show if, when defining leadership excellence in their own company, the managers of WTP’s locations go for one company model, or for local variants in leadership models, or perhaps for a combination of universal elements and local variants.

Methods

Focus sessions about leadership excellence

In 1998-1999, WTP undertook an internal study of its managers worldwide for establishing a model of leadership excellence to be used for assessment, recruiting, succession planning, and management development (Dooley, 2003a, 2003b). In the study, 39 focus sessions were conducted. Overall, there were 414 participants to a total management population of 827. All levels of the organization participated - frontline supervisors, managers, directors, VPs, and the CEO and his executive team. All functions were also represented, including R&D, engineering, manufacturing, sales, and administrative functions. The sessions were not monitored for nationality of participants. The site managers participated, regardless of their country of origin. In the Asian sessions, management levels were segregated, according to local custom. Since the locals were the preponderant contributors in all sessions it was possible to distinguish between Eastern (Asia) and Western (US and Europe) sessions. This distinction coincides with the cultural gap in individualism and power distance between the two groups of countries as apparent from the work of Hofstede et al. (2010). Table 1 gives an overview of sessions.

Sessions	East / West	Location	Participants	Nationality
4	West	Rochester, US	Executive Team, Directors, Frontline	US
13	West	Irvine, US	MT, Directors, Managers, Frontline	US
3	West	San Jose, Ca, US	Mix of Directors, Managers, Frontline	US
3	West	Europe	Mix of levels	14 German, 7 UK, 3 US, 1 French, 1 S-African
7	East	Malaysia	One level per session	40 Chinese, 22 Indian, 16 Malay, 3 US
8	East	Singapore	One or two levels per session	88 Chinese, 11 US, 1 Indian, 2 Malay
1	East	Japan	Mix of levels	Japanese

Table 1: overview of focus group sessions in WTP’s leadership excellence study.

The essential task each group was given was to agree on what behaviors, qualities, and values should make up a leadership excellence model for all managers of WTP in order to ensure a long term successful future. The same experienced facilitator monitored all sessions but two Californian ones that were done by a colleague she trained. The facilitators used a mind-mapping technique, i.e. drawing an ad hoc tree of concepts visible to all, to visually capture the work of the group as it unfolded. Opportunity was given toward the end of the session to “disagree” with any attributes placed on the map. Although very few in number overall, these items were removed from that session’s model of excellence. Each session yielded its 360° model of leadership excellence.

Classifying items into themes

Most sessions generated between 80 and 120 distinct observations, totaling over 4,000 items from all sessions. During the session, observations that were very similar were recorded as occurrences of one statement on the mind map. In this manner each statement from each session acquired a frequency of mentioning.

In order to reduce complexity, the statements from all 39 sessions were then pooled and grouped into themes based on similarity of intended meaning. The authors concentrated on the symbolic meaning of statements, not on the terms used in it. The approach was strictly bottom-up, starting with the statements. Table 2 presents some sample statements.

Statement
Exercises good judgment
Knows what to say or not to say
Has common sense
Thinker
Has many alternative strategies at any given time
Takes in the right input
Sensitive to nature of issues and problems

Table 2: Some of the statements that were classified in theme 'Good judgment'.

The process of grouping statements into themes was structured as follows. The 2nd author created a first version of a tree classifying all statements into themes. The 1st author carefully studied it and proposed changes, both for splitting or joining themes and for reallocating statements. The 2nd author carried out the changes or motivated why she disagreed. This process went through four iterations until both authors agreed. This was a decidedly researcher-dependent procedure. The authors took into account the intention with which a statement was made, rather than relying on verbal content only. The 1st author was critical about the classification while the 2nd author had first-hand knowledge of the sessions, having facilitated them. Compared to the first theme tree, the last had about 20% of the statements in new themes that had been formed through splitting or merging.

Semantically classifying themes

During the classification of statements into themes, a two-dimensional superstructure was created to provide an overview of the 105 themes. Note that this 'thematic grid' only provides a concise way to present all the themes in this article, and is not used in our analysis. Its vertical axis was based on the behavioral leadership literature. Each theme was classified as a personal, an interpersonal or a task-oriented quality. Many themes were mixtures of two of these, so three combined classes were created as well.

The horizontal axis was purely semantic. In distinguishing between themes we had frequently encountered related issues that differed in emphasis. For instance, 'good judgment', 'decisive', 'even-keeled' and 'balanced' are all personal quality themes and fairly similar. Roget's thesaurus (Browning & Roget, 1987) showed that *good judgment* emphasizes cognition, *decisive* emphasizes volition, *even-keeled* is more about emotions and *balanced* has to do with virtue. These four categories became the second axis of the superstructure. Table 3 summarizes the superstructure with all the themes and their frequencies. The ten most frequently mentioned themes in the sessions are: Responsible, builds skills, empowers others, team builder, goal oriented, open / adaptable, good judgment, communicates cross-functionally, honest, trustworthy.

	Cognition	Volition	Emotion	Virtue
Personal	Good judgment 82 Proactive 53 Visionary 30 Quick/responsive 31 Creative 30 Intelligent 12	Open, adaptable 100 Driven 41 Decisive 40 Change agent 33 Develops self 28	Optimistic 50 Even-keeled 37 Sense of humor 30 Confident 26 Emotionally mature 16 Passionate 5	Committed / loyal 37 Balanced 32 Courageous 10 Disciplined 4
Personal / inter-personal	Trustworthy 66 Skilled presenter 51 Trusting 24 Team player 23 Professional 12	Approachable 54 Influential 23 Firm 14	Sociable 34 Empathetic 27 Charismatic 21 Direct 14	Honest 76 Non-selfish 59 Role model 58 Good reputation 28
Inter-personal	Team builder 106 Develops people 54 Coach 45 Politically savvy 19 Ensures understanding 18 Reads & uses non-verbals 7 Skilled at 2-way communication 7	Supportive 49 Intervenes 20 Encourages disclosure 17 Manages conflict 16 Promotes social gatherings 14	Gives recognition 64 Listens with interest 62 Considerate 38 Creates positive environment 33 Cares in the workplace 28 Cares beyond the workplace 19 Protective 8 Cares, but not too much 5	Fair workload 46 Respects others 30 Respects different cultures 23 Non-blaming 20 Respects individual diversity 18
Inter-personal / task	Builds skills 120 Communicates cross-functionally 77 Obtains skills 50 Plans succession, careers 38 Manages external environment 37 Customer oriented 27 Communicates up & down 24 Defines roles and responsibilities 14 Conducts effective meetings 12 Communicates content 9	Empowers others 120 Encourages accountability 23 Encourages risk taking 16 Delegates tasks 12 Encourages creativity 9 Encourages commitment 4	Motivates others 56 Listens before acting 15 Maintains stability 8	Shares information 52 Fair (objective feedback) 41 Consistent 29
Task	Technically skilled 61 Understands core business 61 Prioritizes, organizes 38 Establishes vision 35 Long term oriented 33 Understands big picture 24 Competent in writing 20 Gets information 13	Goal oriented 102 Plans 58 Optimizes process, resources 57 Implements 52 Takes action on vision 41		
Personal / task	Rational 39 Results-oriented 18	Focused 24 Involved 17 Ambitious 10	Able to take risks 21	Responsible 123 Unbiased 33

Table 3: thematic grid presenting an overview of all 105 themes. For each theme the table shows: name, no of times a statement was made across all sessions.

Factor analysis

Table 3 shows how the researchers grouped the themes. But how did the focus groups group them? To find out, a factor analysis was conducted on the theme frequency matrix. That matrix consisted of the count of statements per theme and session across all 105 themes and 39 sessions. A section of the matrix is presented in Table 4.

Theme	Session						
	R1	R2	R3	R4	I1	.....	.....
Responsible	1	2	4	3	5	...	...
Empowers others	1	6	3	1	4	...	...
Team builder	2	1	1	2	2	...	...
Goal oriented	2	2	2	3	2	...	...
Open / adaptable	1	4	6	6	2	...	...
Good judgment	0	3	2	3	2	...	...
Communicates cross-functionally	0	3	0	0	2	...	...
Honest	0	1	0	2	2	...	...
Trustworthy	0	1	2	1	0	...	...
.....

Table 4: section of theme frequency matrix showing 9 of 105 themes and 5 of 39 sessions

An exploratory factor analysis was carried out on the matrix of 105 themes as variables and 39 sessions, or leadership models, as cases. This was allowable despite the low case / variable ratio because the 39 cases really contained the contributions of 414 participants. Across 39 sessions, Principal Components analysis yielded a scree plot with slight breaks at two and at seven components. We extracted seven components (=factors). The resulting structure had two factors that were not easily interpretable. Taking Churchill and Iacobucci's advice (2002; p. 811) we then omitted 17 themes that failed to load at .4 with any of the factors and ran another analysis. The themes left out were: Involved, Develops self, Quick-responsive, Balanced, Courageous, Unbiased, Motivates others, Encourages creativity, Manages conflict, Develops careers, Non-verbally skilled, Promotes gatherings, Shows interest, Respects individual differences, Long-term oriented, Results-oriented, Defines roles. The resulting structure was very similar but more readily interpretable.

Results

Table 5 presents the factor structure of the analysis on the matrix of all 39 sessions x 88 of the 105 themes. Retained for this analysis but not appearing in any factor because they had no loading $\geq .4$, were the following themes: Able to take risk, Good at 2-way communication, Obtains skills, Encourages commitment, Role model, Consistent, Delegates, Good reputation, Plans, Ambitious, Mature, Communicates up and down, Open-adaptable, Understands core business, Politically savvy, Gives feedback.

In order to test the reliability of the factors across the sessions, Cronbach's alpha was computed not only for all sessions but also for the Eastern (i.e. Asian) and Western (i.e. USA and European) sessions separately.

Theme	Component						
	1 Depend- able Optimist	2 Caring Parent	3 Pas- sionate Profes- sional	4 Ap- proach- able Helms- man	5 Vision- implem- enting Team Player	6 Pro- active Guide	7 Focused People Develop- er
Non-selfish	.61						
Trustworthy	.61						
Sense of humor	.59						
Non-blaming	.57						
Honest	.56						
Goal oriented	.55						
Decisive	.50						-.47
Confident	.49						
Team builder	.49						
Intervening	-.46	.45					
Creative	.43						
Even-keeled	.43						
Optimistic	.42						.40
Coach	.40						
Cares beyond work		.77					
Disciplined		.71					
Visionary		.65					
Influent		.63					
Considerate		.63					
Cares at workplace		.62					
Respects different cultures		.53					
Skilled presenter		.50					
Communicates content		.48	.41	.46			
Cares, but not too much			.78				
Passionate			.73				
Respects others			.66				
Responsible			.65				
Professional			.63				
Good judgment	.41		.53				
Trusting			.42				
Builds skills			-.41				
Loyal				.67	.41		
Organizes, prioritizes				.63			
Understands big picture				.59			
Ensures understanding				.55			
Charismatic				.54			
Approachable				.51			
Empowers others				-.51	.43		
Sociable				.50		.43	
Manages external environment				.46			
Good in written communication				.41			
Establishes vision					.77		
Conducts effective meetings					.65		
Takes action on vision					.64		
Creates positive environment					.61		
Encourages discipline					.54		
Optimizes processes, resources					.54		
Implements					.53		
Team player					.53		
Customer oriented		.45			.48		
Technically skilled					-.41		

Theme	1 Depend- able Optimist	2 Caring Parent	3 Pas- sionate Profes- sional	4 Ap- proach- able Helms- man	5 Vision- implem- enting Team Player	6 Pro- active Guide	7 Focused People Develop- er
Listens before acting						.68	
Sets fair workload						.57	
Proactive						.56	
Direct						-.51	
Encourages risk taking						.50	
Encourages accountability						-.49	
Supportive						.49	
Communicates cross-functionally						-.49	
Change agent						-.49	
Empathic						.48	
Firm						.42	
Develops people							.60
Focused							.59
Protective							-.57
Rational							.51
Driven							.49
Maintains stability							-.49
Gives recognition							.48
Intelligent			.47				.48
Obtains information							-.44
Shares information							-.41
% of variance explained	6.84	6.55	6.49	6.49	6.41	6.15	5.91
Eigenvalue	6.02	5.76	5.71	5.71	5.64	5.41	5.20

Table 5: Rotated Component Matrix with loadings $\geq .40$. Extraction Method: Principal Component Analysis. Rotation Method: Varimax with Kaiser Normalization. All loadings in bold were included in the factors.

Component	Cronbach's alpha		
	All sessions (n = 39)	East (n = 16)	West (n = 23)
1 Dependable Optimist	.81	.88	.70
2 Caring Parent	.79	.87	-.21
3 Passionate Professional	.61	.20	.69
4 Approachable Helmsman	.74	.51	.81
5 Vision-implementing Team Player	.80	.88	.75
6 Proactive Guide	.77	.78	.67
7 Focused People Developer	.73	.56	.80

Table 6: Cronbach's alphas and total variance explained. The alphas are based on the themes that make up each factor (shown in boldface in Table 5).

Table 6 shows that with a threshold of $\alpha = .7$, all factors but F3 Passionate Professional are reliable across the entire WTP population. F3 is the only one that does not attain .7, but it has an alpha of .72 for the US sessions (n = 20), meaning it is stable to US respondents.

Several other factors acquire their reliability from only a part of the sessions, because their themes were hardly mentioned on one side of the East – West divide. F2 Caring Parent makes no sense at all in Western sessions. F4 Approachable Helmsman and F7 Focused People Developer showed more consistent structure in Western than in Eastern sessions,

though Focused People Developer would acquire an alpha of .68 for Eastern sessions if theme 'Gives recognition' were omitted. Omitting also the single Japanese session would raise alpha to .70. It appears that giving recognition is a Western preoccupation.

The next question was to what extent the factors were differentially endorsed across sessions. Using the East / West division, the differences in factor scores were analyzed. Table 7 presents the results.

Factor	T	df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference West - East	Std. Error Difference West - East
1 Dependable Optimist	.37	37	.72	.12	.33
2 Caring Parent	-1.83	16.31	.086	-.67	.37
3 Passionate Professional	2.94	37	.006	.87	.30
4 Approachable Helmsman	-1.18	35.96	.25	-.35	.30
5 Vision-implementing Team Player	1.74	37	.091	.55	.32
6 Proactive Guide	-2.64	37	.012	-.80	.30
7 Focused People Developer	.60	37	.55	.20	.33

Table 7: Independent Samples T-Test for equality of means across Eastern and Western sessions. N.B. equality of means has not been assumed for F2 and F4, in accordance with Levene's test.

Table 7 shows that F1, F4 and F7 score approximately the same across Eastern and Western sessions. F2 and F5 score differently at $p < .1$, but not at $p < 0.05$. F3 and F6 definitely score differently in East and West.

All in all, the following picture results:

Factors endorsed universally	Reliable?	Endorsed?
1 Dependable Optimist	Universally	Universally
4 Approachable Helmsman	West (East .51)	Universally
7 Focused People Developer	West (East .56)	Universally
Factors endorsed in the East		
2 Caring Parent	East only	East ($p < .086$)
6 Proactive Guide	East (West .66)	East ($p < .012$)
Factors endorsed in the West		
3 Passionate Professional	USA (West .69)	West ($p < .006$)
5 Vision-implementing Team Player	Universally	West ($p < .091$)

Table 8: summary of factor structure

So one universally endorsed leadership factor, Dependable Optimist, is very clear. Two more, Approachable Helmsman and Focused People Developer, are semi-universal, in the sense that they are endorsed everywhere but they are not so reliable across the Eastern sessions. This may be due to the segregation of management levels in the Eastern sessions.

In addition, both East and West have two additional leadership factors, one of which does not make sense across the ocean (East: Caring Parent and West: Passionate Professional), and the other of which does make sense but is not endorsed (East: Proactive Guide and West: Vision-implementing Team Player).

Discussion

Data quality

The session results were not detached, noncommittal statements. The sessions took place on-site in the actual WTP work context. Without exception, they provoked rich discussion and ownership, with most groups requesting a copy of the model they had generated. The group discussions stretched the notion of what constitutes leadership “priorities” beyond what is captured in traditional US management literature. There is a practical, from-the-trenches quality to the statements.

An open atmosphere and a high degree of commitment by the participants characterized all sessions. Yet some themes may have been mentioned more often than others for reasons of being in fashion: ‘empowers others’, for instance. Others may not have been mentioned because they were taken for granted, or simply because only positive qualities were solicited. Some statements, e.g. a number of the 46 mentions of ‘fair workload’ (in factor Proactive Guide) may have expressed frustration with current leadership. Some statements were given in the negative, e.g. the statement ‘not a slave driver’ in theme ‘cares in the workplace’. A number of taboo themes have been avoided, such as religious, ethnic or gender issues, or behaviors in the range of blackmailing or otherwise intimidating subordinates. A good look at the thematic grid suggests that many themes could be added. For instance, while sorting through the themes to identify what he felt should be priorities in the Malaysian manufacturing environment one Thai manager suggested to create one theme ‘precise, thorough’ that he felt was conceptually missing, even though nobody had mentioned it. Other missing themes are ‘loving’ and ‘healthy’, to name a few.

All in all, despite the breadth of the WTP model, the authors do not claim that it is complete in any sense. More sessions, or similar exercises in other organizations, would no doubt yield a more mature factor structure. Obtaining a large number of committed focus group sessions as data sources is a rather prohibitive precondition though.

Methodological note

The variety of items and themes in researches such as the present one make it hazardous to draw sharp conclusions. Operationalizing concepts is perhaps the trickiest aspect of research on organizational behavior. [M. H. Hoppe \(1998\)](#) cautions that a term may not mean the same thing across cultures, using the example of ‘decisive’ as a term that means ‘quick and approximate’ in the US, ‘deliberate and precise’ in France and in Germany, and ‘consensual and long-term’ in Japan. This phenomenon no doubt occurred in our data, and probably contributed to the fact that 33 themes did not load on the factors at $p > .4$. But the richness of the original statements and the fact that one of the researchers knows the context in which they were put forward makes us confident that it is much less prominent than it might have been in a setting of individuals responding to closed questionnaires.

The theme frequency matrix from the WTP leadership excellence program constitutes a unique set of data. Most empirical research input from organizations is based on Likert-type survey data. Closed questionnaires can cover large samples and yield tractable data, but they have the disadvantage of possibly missing relevant issues. The usual complement or alternative is in-depth interviews. These yield rich data but small samples that might not be representative. The 4000 WTP statements from 414 leaders combine the strengths of both methods: they are open-ended as well as covering half the organization’s management population.

How appropriate is factor analysis for this data set? The factor analysis treats each theme as equally important, whether it was mentioned 124 times or 4 times within a session. We did not consider this to be problematic; actually it might help to dampen the effect of socially desirable behavior, notably endorsing one another’s statements, during the sessions.

A striking aspect of this study is the difference between researchers’ and subjects’ minds. We created two analytical dimensions, presented in table 3: cognition / volition / emotion / virtue as one, personal / interpersonal / task as the other. We could have tried to fit the data to this pre-existing set of categories, as was e.g. done for the 18 dimensions in GLOBE. Instead we put all the themes into one bag. Our explorative factor analysis joins

aspects of all table 3's classes into one factor. Apparently, our analytical framework has no meaning for WTP's managers.

As a second option, used in practice-oriented studies, we could have used the frequency of mention across sessions to classify the themes. Here too, our factor analysis leads to a dramatically different picture than does using theme frequencies. Some of the most frequently mentioned themes disappear from view. The most frequently mentioned theme was 'empowers others'. It surfaces as a negative loader to factor Approachable Helmsman. Apparently it goes against the general trend of the data. It may have been a hyped, socially desirable thing to say. The number two theme, 'builds skills', did not load on any factor in the first analysis and it loads negatively on F3 Passionate Professional in the second. Of the other top ten themes, five ended up in the first factor, Dependable Optimist.

All in all we conclude that this study answers the call made by White (2002) for studies that are relevant to management practice. More studies of this kind, covering other countries, would be welcome. It is the 'road less travelled' (Lam et al., 2012), but it yields a wide view.

Cultural spectrum covered

This sample was far from universal across cultures. The Western sessions were almost entirely populated by Americans, except for three European sessions. The Eastern ones involved Singapore and Malaysia plus one Japanese session. We thus captured the worldwide variation on the dimension of individualism – collectivism, much of the variation on power distance and some of the variation on long-term orientation. But we missed most of the variation on masculinity / femininity. The countries involved are all culturally pretty masculine. Managers from feminine countries would likely stress consensus-seeking qualities. They might come up with items related to modesty, a theme that surfaces in GLOBE factor 3 but is noticeably lacking from WTM. As for uncertainty avoidance, the principal WTP countries are uncertainty tolerant culturally. Germany and Japan are not, but represent only three sessions. Most task-oriented, cognitive themes did not make it to the WTM factor tree. 'technically skilled' is a negative loader in factor Vision-implementing Team Player. More representation from uncertainty avoiding countries would bring specialist skills, as well as qualities such as 'precise' and 'thorough' to the fore much more at the detriment of 'creative' or 'approachable' (in accordance with (Offermann & Hellmann, 1997)). A truly global leadership model would need more data from other countries around the world.

Universal factors

Naming factors is always tricky, and the factors from this study are no exception. But it is safe to say that according to the focus groups, the most prominent desirable trait for a leader at WTP is to not be selfish or neurotic. The strongest and the only truly universal factor Dependable Optimist consists of pro-social themes and themes that denote non-neuroticism.

The second, near-universal factor, Approachable Helmsman, unites themes that stress the relation between the leader and the organization. This leader can act as a point of reference for his subordinates, a link between them and the organization at large.

The second near-universal factor, Focused People Developer, is not so easily interpretable. It unites a number of themes around personal excellence (focused, rational, driven, intelligent) as well as themes about developing others (develops others, gives recognition). There are negative loadings for 'protective' and for 'maintains stability'.

Parallel factors across cultures

The unit of analysis in this paper is not the individual, but the focus group and its 360^o model of leadership excellence. In other words, regional leadership models were factor analyzed, not individual-level statements. This is apparent in the complementary Western and Eastern factors. Both have a factor of individual prominence (Caring Parent vs. Passionate Professional) and a factor that is pro-social, i.e. directed towards others and the organization (Proactive Guide vs. Vision-implementing Team Player).

The two prominence-related factors are mutually exclusive, i.e. neither of them makes sense across the cultural divide. The Western version of caring in Passionate Professional, interestingly, was explicitly framed as something very limited in scope, certainly not encroaching on the personal life sphere. This reflects an individualistic worldview in which one's life away from the office is private. In Eastern factor Caring Parent we see the

collectivist counterpart from South East Asia: caring both in and beyond the workplace, because the relationship between manager and subordinate is alike to a parent and child relationship. The 'prominence' factors also both include respect, but again differently styled: the group-level theme 'respects different cultures' in the Eastern factor versus the individual-level theme 'respects others' in the Western one. 'Customer oriented' and 'communicates content' are present in both. This parallelism confirms Smith *et al.*'s finding that high-level goals are similar across cultures but have to be arrived at by different means (Smith et al., 1989).

While the two prominence-related factors do not make sense on the other side of the East-West divide, the two pro-social factors do make sense on both sides of the ocean. It is tempting to attribute this to the fact that a mother's role is more stable across cultures than is a father's; but this may be stretching the metaphor.

Walking the talk

The WTP theme grid has a number of twin themes in which one connotes the 'walk' and the other the 'talk'. The results for these pairs afford some interesting observations. F4 Approachable Helmsman, universal across locations, has for its highest loader 'loyal / committed'. It has a negative loading for 'encourages commitment'. F2 Caring Parent (East) has 'disciplined', while factor F5 Vision-implementing Team Player (West) has 'encourages discipline'. These findings illustrate that displaying or encouraging a trait are two very different things. The issue may be to what degree a leader is supposed to walk the talk. In a US setting, leaders speak their mind if they want something done. In Chinese or Malay culture, messages are more often delivered implicitly. Goddard (1996) discusses the social emotions of the Malay language. Malu ('shame'), bangga ('pride') and marah ('silently angry') are prominent social emotions among Malaysians. All of these are usually kept silent. Others can infer them from subtle signs. In the case of marah, somebody caused the feeling by disregarding the wishes of the person who feels marah, and the feeling involves the wish for that somebody to realize their mistake and atone for it without having to be told. Obviously a leader in a Malaysian context needs social perceptiveness in order to avoid giving rise to marah. Not surprisingly, WTP themes 'empathetic', 'sociable' and 'considerate' were all strongly Eastern.

Implications for organizational development

Both the factor structure and the thematic grid can be used in organizational development. They have obvious benefits for multinational companies that wish to improve the alignment of their leadership with their cultural diversity. They provide, not a norm, but a framework of reference for an internal leadership development program. The framework provides a useful template for organizations wishing to undergo their own internal process of defining and classifying leadership excellence. First, involving the global management team in a conversation about leadership excellence is, in and of itself, a powerful development and synergistic intervention. The breadth of original possibilities is inspiring and, given a way to classify the complexity of responses, unifying. The thematic grid provides a tool for efficiently accomplishing this critical step. In conclusion, the ability to identify and develop leaders who can execute a meaningful *combination* of themes in a given context is the key to magnifying global leadership potential.

The factor structure provides some clear advice to leaders who cross the East-West divide. One theme for which the Eastern view directly contradicts the universal one is 'intervening'. In a society of large power distance, being 'intervening' is not a liability for a leader as in factor 1, but a necessity: subordinates expect to be led. Regarding this theme it can be assumed that organizational cultures of empowerment can collide with national cultures of employees. This also brings to mind the dimension of 'individual prominence' found in the nineteen fifties and dropped later, mentioned in the leadership research section.

The two poles of factor Proactive Guide point to more issues that could lead to conflict in the work setting. The themes at both extremes of this factor express values that could easily become opposed: non-selfish versus ambitious, supportive versus change agent, empathetic versus direct, encouraging risk-taking versus encouraging accountability.

No single leader can combine all seven factors. Any leader can use them to look into the mirror.

Conclusion

The study, being derived from focus sessions from the trenches of a multinational, provides rich context and face validity. It confirms that leadership has both universal and culture-specific elements. The research also specifies which elements are universal and which are culture-bound. The central and most universal trait is that a leader should 1) have a trustworthy and confident personality. Near-universals are 2) be a helmsman, i.e. be loyal, have a sense of position and be approachable and protective, 3) have a sense of direction, develop and reward people. Eastern leaders should in addition be 4) caring father figures as well as 5) proactive mother figures. Western leaders should in addition be 6) responsible, passionate professionals and 7) get results for the organization based on a vision.

It is significant that the factor 'Caring parent', a relational factor linked to the benevolent leadership found by prior studies, had negative Cronbach's alpha for Western sessions. This factor means nothing to the USA respondents.

The study further showed that the a priori categorization by the authors according to intentionality and scope, despite its conceptual clarity, has little to do with the organization of the themes in the minds of the WTP managers. Both the thematic grid and the leadership factors can be used as sources of inspiration for leadership development programs in multinational companies.

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