

A Framework for Developing Leadership Model Based on National Culture Aspects

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Abstract

This is a conceptual paper inspired by studies that focus on leadership in specific cultural settings. It is based on the assumption that there is a systematic way by which national culture shapes multinational corporations' leadership styles. Such leadership styles should be consistent with host-countries' cultural values shared by members working in companies' subsidiaries. Unfortunately, researches conducted on such area failed to present a simple model for managers and executives to implement it. Further, companies attempts to identifying the company-specific leadership attributes that apply around-the-world, failed in employing the right steps and procedures.

This paper proposes a framework that helps in bridging a gap between theory and practice. It proposes a user-friendly framework to help companies develop their unique leadership model. When companies apply such framework on their subsidiaries in different host countries, they will be able to identify and consider the generalizable and idiosyncratic (context-specific) characteristics of effective leadership. This will increase the companies' ability to maintain its competitive advantage and to activate its code of conduct. The paper also presents a checklist based on which companies can follow up on the process presented in the framework. The framework focuses on leaders' activities, followers' perception towards leadership styles, as well as the contextual factors, other than culture, that may impact this process. This is not a onetime process. It should be replicated, especially if host-countries experience unusual social changes, or companies are entering new markets. The paper proposes that both case study research and action research are the best research methodologies that help in implementing the framework and building the leadership model.

Key words: national culture, leadership, cultural fit, contextual factors.

1. Introduction

The paper main focus is cultural leadership, particularly, in cross-cultural settings. It is inspired by studies that apply cultural lens to extant leadership theories (Dickson et al. 2003). Such studies are part of the immerging field of research known as cross-cultural leadership, which became a standalone field of study rather than an "adjunct to cross-cultural research" (Dickson et al. 2003). Cross-cultural leadership attracted many researchers over the past years (Shahin & Wright 2004). However, few researches have been conducted on cross-cultural leadership models competencies and approaches in particular settings (Morrison 2000; Javidan et al. 2006). Cross-cultural issues appear as employees in multinational companies' subsidiaries work on international operations (Suutari 1996b), or deal with managers, peers, and subordinates from different countries.

2. Significance of the study

Scholars suggest that leaders' practices affect both subordinates' performance and organizational performance (Jing & Avery 2008). Effective leadership increases the organization's ability to maintain its competitive advantage and to activate its code of conduct (Jones & George 2003, 443). However, leadership effectiveness is even subject to many factors such as the followers, the situation, and others (Luthans 2005, 58; Byrne & Bradley 2007; Zhu 2007). One of the main factors is culture (Jing & Avery 2008). Both national culture and organizational culture impact the leadership styles and practices. However, the company's home country cultural values have a significant effect on the organizational culture and the company performance (Lau & Ngo 1996). Yet, the feasible leadership style depends also on the culture of the subordinates (Hofstede 1980; Jing & Avery 2008).

Thus, leaders working on international assignments should not depend on their domestic leadership practices (Morrison 2000). Their practices should, also, be consistent with the host-country norms and values shared and internalized by the members working in multinational companies' subsidiaries (Kirca et al, 2009). This issue should not only be considered on the individual level; i.e.; the leaders, but also on the organizational level; the organization approach for leadership. Thus, multinational corporations should be cautious in developing their managerial methods and principles for their corporate units and subsidiaries located in foreign countries (Suutari 1996a).

3. Study problem: A Gap Between literature and practice

Many companies attempted to develop their customized leadership model. Some of them succeeded while others failed. Companies were mainly unsuccessful as they failed in employing the right steps and procedures in order to develop their unique leadership model (Morrison 2000). Furthermore, researches conducted on such area failed to present a simple model for managers and executives to implement it. Also, the data collection instrument was always an issue as some cultures response would be better when using specific instruments (Morrison 2000). This presented a major factor that impacted results. Thus, academics and human resource management professionals must find new ways to work more closely together in the future, to develop reliable and user-friendly leadership models (Morrison 2000; Jepson 2009).

4. Paper objectives

The main objective of this paper is to propose a user-friendly framework that helps mainly multinational companies, in exploring host-countries' cultural values that have a significant effect on its performance (see Lau & Ngo 1996). This framework will help them in developing unique leadership models and implementing leadership practices that fit into the host-countries' cultural aspects.

The paper first presents review of relevant scholarly work that focused on leadership in cross-cultural aspects. Second, based on such review the researcher presents the main assumptions that helped in creating the framework. It also describes the proposed framework which presents a guide to developing effective leadership models. Further it presents a proposed methodology to implement this process. Moreover, it presents the limitations of the proposed methodology.

5. Review of literature

5.1 Companies attempts to develop a Cross-cultural Leadership Model

Companies started to focus on developing their own specific leadership competency models with a global perspective (Morrison 2000). Many companies dedicated long-term human resource management teams to develop a template that present the company-specific leadership attributes that apply around-the-world (Morrison 2000). However, such attempts did not succeed as the human resource management teams faced many problems. For example, the models developed were really complex and their results were inconsistent, which decreased the models reliability and acceptance by employees. Another problem was the pressure that the team faced from managers to enforcing specific leadership approaches that they believe to be successful. This resulted in biased results. This discouraged HRM teams from working on further projects (Morrison 2000). In addition to multinational companies' attempts to create their company-specific competency models, the second approach to reach such creating models was through depending on generalizable competency models developed by academic researchers (Morrison 2000).

5.2 Academic attempts to Cross-cultural Leadership

Most of the academic results were not useful. Some results were complicated and contained a large number of competencies which are hard for employees and managers to comprehend. Other researches were limited to transformational leadership themes. Others need specific characteristics in the company's leaders so as to successfully implement them, with partial insight on the unique leaders' characteristics. Further, others focused on differences across-cultures rather than similarities which did not help in developing an aptitude of work across diversity of cultures. Also, the data collection instrument used in the research was a major factor that impacted results. Some cultures responded well when interviews are used, while others prefer questionnaires (see Morrison 2000).

Thus, academics and human resource management professionals must find new ways to work more closely together in the future (Morrison 2000). Future researches should focus on helping companies in developing unique leadership models. Such models should be flexible enough to embrace and tolerate differences in national cultures of all the countries in which they operate (Jones & George 2003, 202). Researches should focus on developing frameworks and procedures to guide companies, working in international environment, in considering the different host-countries national cultures (Jones & George 2003, 202). This is important as the norms and values shared inside subsidiaries should be consistent with the value and belief systems in the host-countries (Kirca et al. 2009).

5.3 Researches on Cross-cultural Leadership

Researchers, such as Suutari, Van Oudenhoven, and Scandura and Dorfman (the GLOBE Project researchers), presented different frameworks addressing leadership in cross cultural settings.

For example, Suutari (1996a) identified eight aspects of leadership that are significantly related to differences across different national cultures. Suutari (1996a) based her work on Hofstede's dimensions as they remain the most relevant base for formulating and developing leadership studies from a cultural perspective. These leadership aspects are decision participation, autonomy-delegation, rewarding, production emphasis, role clarification, conflict management, individualized consideration and providing vision (Suutari 1996a).

Suutari conducted multiple researches using multiple data collection instrument such as interviews (telephone), and questionnaires (Suutari 1996a, 1996b; Suutari & Riisala, 2001). The main focus of the study was to discover if the national origin of managers is a significant factor in determining their leadership styles. The researcher used the matched sample principle strategy. This helped in getting similar samples of managers across countries, to control the effect of contingency factors and observe the effect of nationality. This process is easier when conducting researches on multinational companies, as in such companies the technological and structural variables are controlled. However, this may lead to a question regarding the organizational culture and its impact on multinational companies. As a point for further studies, the researcher suggested that instead of focusing only on managers' point of view, subordinate's point of view should also be considered as well. Also the researcher called for more researches to be conducted on other multinational companies from different industries and different origins to increase the generalizability of findings (Suutari 1996a).

Another researcher, Van Oudenhoven (2001), based his study on Hofstede's cultural model. He focused on the national cultural aspects associated with workplace, through highlighting leaders' activities, companies' approaches, and subordinates' perceptions. The main assumption for this research is that companies should focus on "double layered acculturation" that focus on leaders' adjustment based on organizational culture and national culture. He believed that such work may benefit in decreasing expatriates' failure, through increasing the awareness of international variations in culture. The researcher used short questionnaire in order to enhance the participation of respondents. However, this resembles a difficulty in assessing the reliability of the research instrument. His sample included (higher education) university students from different educational institutions in different countries. Van Oudenhoven, (2001) depended on using statements to stimulate topics relevant to culture. Through such statements participants were asked to describe the issue and how it impacts their perception towards their leaders' practice and organization approach. He referred to the decision making process to measure the power distance; the level of formalizing rules and regulations to measure uncertainty avoidance; the level of career orientation versus relationship orientation to measure masculinity; and the level of separation between work and personal life to measure individualism. In addition to culture, the researcher considered gender, age, and working experience to be the most relevant contextual factors for the study. At the end of this research Van Oudenhoven, (2001), raised the issue that national culture is not static and questioned whether such changes increase or decrease the differences in national cultures. He also highlighted a new aspect for research, mainly focusing on the increased participation of females in organizations and how they may impact organizational practices, as mainly females tend to value low power distance (Van Oudenhoven 2001).

Further, researchers of the GLOBE project highlighted some leadership practices associated with national culture; charismatic/value-based, team oriented, participatory, human oriented, autonomous, and self-protective (Scandura & Dorfman 2004). This was actually the second step of the GLOBE project that focused on perceptions about leadership, using questionnaire as data collection method. Findings, confirmed that the cultural values surrounding the leader determine which leadership behaviors tend to be most effective. However, this project was conducted on managers only. It considered leaders' perception while neglecting subordinates' perception. Thus the GLOBE project researchers suggest that future researches should focus on followers' perception in determining the characteristics of the ideal and effective leader within their country or culture. Such research will help in developing frameworks that help in narrowing and providing direction for future research in cross-cultural leadership (Dickson et al. 2003).

5.4 Other relevant aspects: contextual factors other than culture

In addition to the cultural aspects associated with workplace and the leadership practices associated with national culture, researches that tackle leadership in cross-cultural settings should also consider other contextual factors. It should consider factors, other than culture, which impact leadership practices. According to Jepson, (2009) there are three levels of contexts; the immediate social context which includes the group, the hierarchy, the job, technology, the department, the organization and the industry; the general cultural context which includes the organizational culture, national culture; and the historical, institutional context which includes history, education, regulations and socialization.

6. A proposed User-Friendly Framework (a guide to developing effective leadership models)

6.1 The main assumption

The model is inspired by the need for further studies highlighted in literature (see Suutari 1996a; Morrison 2000; The Corporate Leadership Council 2000; Van Oudenhoven 2001; Dickson et al. 2003; Jepson 2009). This research aims to present a user-friendly framework to help companies operating across-countries in developing their unique leadership model (see Morrison 2000). This framework should help companies fit their leadership practices into the host-countries' national cultural aspects. Thus its main focus is to explore the systematic process by which multinational companies can consider the host-country's national cultural values that impact workplace, in order to develop successful leadership practices and approaches. To investigate this process, two main aspects should be considered; leader' activities and subordinates' perceptions towards best leadership practices (see Suutari & Riusala 2001; Dickson et al. 2003).

6.2 Proposed steps and checklist

This research propose that the process that help companies in fitting leadership practices into host-country national culture can be explored through investigating the cultural aspects that impact workplace, the leadership practices associated with the host-country national culture, and the contextual factors that impact this process.

Companies, that intend to develop their unique leadership models, should identify the cultural aspects associated with workplace based on employees' (leaders and followers) perception. The cultural aspects identified can be verified through inquiring about their impact on workplace. Further companies should identify the recommended leadership practices based on participants' perception towards the outstanding and disruptive leadership activities. This process should also take into consideration the contextual factors that impact the employees' perception towards best leadership practices. Furthermore, this process should consider comparing and contrasting leaders' current practices to the recommended leadership practices to identify area of development needed. As a matter of fact, the successful implementation of such leadership practices may vary due to some contextual factors. Such factors should be considered when companies attempt to develop their leadership approaches to fit their leadership styles and practices into the host-country national culture. Nevertheless, this process should be an ongoing process as companies should put into consideration that culture changes overtime. Thus, companies should always examine subordinates' perception towards current leadership practices and identify factors that cause variances, when they exist. However, the interval by which such process should be replicated, need to be considered in further research work. Further the replication of this process is urgent if host-countries experience unusual social changes (see Dickson et al. 2003), or companies are entering new markets. Thus even companies whom developed their unique leadership model need to continuously reassess the validity and effectiveness of such model. The following figure summarizes the process flow.

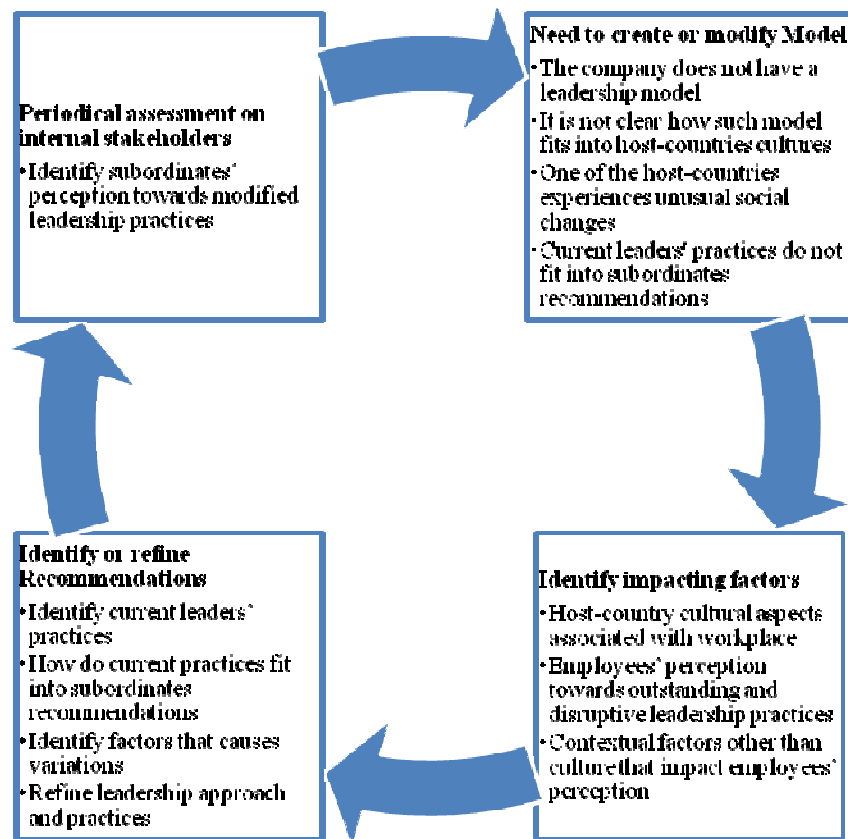


Figure 1: A User-Friendly Framework: Process Flow

The researcher proposes a checklist based on which companies can follow up on the process presented in the framework. It is guided by Van Oudenhoven (2001) cultural aspects associated with workplace, Suutari (1996a) leadership practices associated with national culture, and Jepson (2009) conceptual factors (See Appendix).

6.3 Proposed methodology

The researcher proposes that the qualitative paradigm should guide the implementation of the proposed user-friendly model, for many reasons. First, the research nature is subjective and mainly depends on respondents' opinion and perception. Second, this may need a direct interaction with participants. Third, the words will be mostly expressive and qualitative rather than quantitative. Fourth, the study is "value-laden" as it is subject to the informants and the researcher values and biases (Creswell 1994, 5). Fifth, this study is an inductive process rather than a deductive process, where its' categories emerge during the study instead of specifying them before the study (Creswell 1998, 16).

This process should be conducted on two phases. The first phase of the study is an exploratory one which should be implemented using a case study research methodology. This will help the investigators in obtaining an in-depth insight, in real-life context (Yin 2003, 9). It is recommended for several reasons. First, the study mainly will focus on exploring factors. Second, the study will focus on contemporary events rather than historical events; third, the study does not require control over behavioral events (Yin, 2003:1). Multiple case studies should be conducted, with replication logic, to reach more robust findings and develop a rich theoretical framework (Yin, 1981 2003, 46; Payne et al. 2007). It is proposed to conduct multiple case studies, so as to cover several subsidiaries from different host-countries. Each subsidiary presents a single case study. It is advised to 1) first, implement the study (apply the process checklist) on few selected departments, functions, or business unities in each subsidiary; 2) second, analyze findings; 3) third, replicate the study (apply the process checklist) on the rest of the departments, functions, or business unities, in each subsidiary, to see if they will reveal the same findings as the ones discovered in the second step. Such literal replication will help in presenting more robust and generalizable findings from each case study. This study should focus on both leaders and subordinates working along the company organizational hierarchy, instead of focusing only on the perceptions of managers (see Suutari 1996a; Suutari & Tahvanainen 2002; Jepson 2009). The case study sample should present employees from different business units/functions, and through all managerial and non-managerial positions.

Thus, “purposive” sampling should be employed to make sure that participants are from different categories (Creswell 1994, 148; Devers & Frankel 2000; Silverman 2000, 104).

The second phase, the implementation process should be conducted using action research. This phase focuses on problem solving to change the organizational behavior. It should depend on the empirical data derived from the first phase, using questionnaires, interviews, or focus groups (see Bargal 2008). In this phase the facilitator and participants can enhance the development and implementation of the leadership model. However, the successful implementation of such phase needs “an intimate, a pleasant, a rewarding organizational climate”, and a “strong institutional support for the program” (see Bargal 2008). In this phase the facilitators may develop several small groups based on job nature, department, function, business unit, and so on. This will help in developing customized leadership practices based on the different priorities and values (see Bargal 2008).

6.4 Limitations of the proposed methodology

However, in qualitative research reality is subjective and multiple. It is constructed by individuals involved in the research situation such as, the researcher, the individuals being investigated, and the readers interpreting the study (Creswell 1998, 76). The researchers’ “values and expectations may influence the conduct and the conclusion of the study” (Maxwell 2005, 108). The researcher may have an influence over individuals’ response (Maxwell 2005, 108). The interaction between research and informants may lead participants to change their behavior to present a “good face” to the researchers (Payne et al. 2007).

7 Conclusions

Multinational companies need to develop a sound leadership model. This model should consider the cultural values of the host-countries where the companies’ subsidiaries exist. Unfortunately, some of the companies’ attempts to develop such models were unsuccessful. They failed in employing the right steps and procedures. Furthermore, researches failed to present a simple model for managers and executives to implement it. This created a major gap between theory and practice.

This paper proposed a user-friendly framework to help companies develop their own unique leadership model. The proposed study was inspired by researches that apply cultural lens to extant leadership theories. It presented the factors that need to be considered in developing a sound approach to cultural fit. It described the process and methodology that helps in identifying and verifying the best leadership practices that fit into the host-country cultural aspects that impact workplace. This framework takes into consideration contextual factors, other than culture, that impact the effectiveness of leadership practices and approaches. This process can be implemented with the help of the checklist proposed to follow up on the process presented in the framework. The researcher proposed that process should be implemented using case study and action research methodologies.

Appendix

Process checklist

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| <p>Major Question(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ What are the main cultural aspects that impact work place and how to successfully approach such them? <p>Minor Question(s)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">○ What are the main cultural aspects associated with workplace, based on the host-country national culture? (What to consider).<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Such as: decision making process to measure the power distance; the level of formalizing rules and regulations to measure uncertainty avoidance; the level of career orientation versus relationship orientation to measure masculinity; and the level of separation between work and personal life to measure individualism○ What are the impacts of such aspects on workplace? (Why to consider them)○ What are the outstanding and disruptive leadership styles, according to the host-country subordinates' perception? (what are the best leadership practices)○ What are the major factors affecting employees' perception towards outstanding and disruptive leadership styles? (what impact employees' perception)<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Such as the group, the hierarchy, the job, technology, the department, the organization and the industry; the organizational culture, historical events, institutional context, education, regulations and socialization.○ How does the companies approach and tackle such cultural aspects? (How to deal with them)<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Such as decision participation, autonomy-delegation, rewarding, production emphasis, role clarification, conflict management, individualized consideration and providing vision○ What are the major factors affecting the effectiveness of leadership practices? (what impact leaders' practices)<ul style="list-style-type: none">✓ Such as the group, the hierarchy, the job, technology, the department, the organization and the industry; the organizational culture, historical events, institutional context, education, regulations and socialization.○ Through comparing current leadership practices to employees recommendations regarding outstanding and disruptive leadership styles what are the aspect that the company should modify or develop (What should the company reconsider) |
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