

Leadership across the Pacific Ocean: a tri-national comparison

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Abstract:

In spite of years of international management research that recognizes the crucial role played by culture, few researchers have studied how specific cultural characteristics may affect the ideal leadership styles as perceived by managers in different countries. This paper explores potential impacts of culture by examining the prevalent views of leadership in three countries that have intertwined economic interests across the Pacific Ocean: the United States, Japan, and Taiwan. These nations are similar enough in their economic systems yet differ significantly in many cultural dimensions. After identifying major attributes of desirable leadership styles in these three nations, we move ahead to trace their historical and cultural roots. Following an idiographic approach suggested by Teagarden and her colleagues, we have developed some propositions on the basis of both a literature review of the past cross-cultural research and a comparison of prevalent conceptions about leadership in three specific cultures. We argue that, although a multinational firm ought to maintain a certain degree of system-wide consistency in terms of its leadership style, the operational rules used overseas should be carefully blended into the local cultural context. Some feasible strategies that may help create a balance between globalization and localization are also discussed.

Keywords: Leadership; Asia-Pacific region; Cross-cultural comparison

Article:

Research in the area of leadership has been moving along for years without paying much attention to cultural differences (e.g. Adler, 1983; Boyacigiller & Adler, 1991; Hodgetts, 1996; Redding, 1994; Roberts, 1970; Yeung & Ready, 1995). Such ignorance, as Hofstede (1983) noted, stems from an entrenched belief in the so-called convergence hypothesis: there are principles of sound management that remain valid regardless of culture and, once such universal principles are demonstrated to be effective in various cultural contexts, different societies will become more and more alike in the future. Nonetheless, there is increasing evidence that the management practices used by real-life organizations in different cultures are characterized by both convergence and divergence (Child, 1981). Even if the convergence hypothesis appears plausible for certain macro-level issues (e.g. how a performance appraisal system should be designed for an organization), there may be divergence across cultures in terms of micro-level behaviors (e.g. the way employee participation is actually induced by supervisors). Ironically, the lack of knowledge on why the perceived meanings of leadership diverge at the micro-level could hamper multinational firms' movement toward the state of convergence at the macro-level.

We are convinced that the best starting point to resolve such a problem is to disentangle the relationship between cultural characteristics and the perception of normative leader roles on the theoretical ground. This seems to be an essential step before we can interpret cross-national differences in a meaningful manner (Von Glinow, 1993). Although cross-national variations in normative leadership behavior often result from cultural differences, we should not consider culture as merely a synonym for nation (Bhagat & McQuaid, 1982). Cross-national studies, to be sure, ought to be encouraged all the time. Nonetheless, the interpretation of any significant finding would be, at best, ad hoc unless the focus of research shifts from 'nation' to 'culture.'

In this paper, we intend to explore the impacts of certain cultural characteristics on desirable leadership styles or leader qualification. We view culture as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the

members of one human group from another,” as defined by Hofstede (1980). This is, of course, not the only way to define culture. In the past decades, culture has been conceptualized in numerous ways. For instance, Geertz (1973) defines culture as “a system of inherited conceptions...by means of which men communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about attitudes towards life.” Most anthropologists, however, tend to adopt Kluckhohn’s view that culture consists in patterned ways of thinking, feeling and reacting, acquired and transmitted mainly by symbols, constituting the distinctive achievements of human groups, including their embodiment in artifacts (Kluckhohn, 1951). Triandis (1972) distinguishes between objective and subjective cultures in accord with whether the culture is expressed in objective artifacts or “characteristic way of perceiving the man-made part of its environment.” We do not see any noticeable incompatibility among these definitions. Nevertheless, the cultural characteristics we examine in this paper will be, by and large, subjective, perceptual, and value-laden.

Rather than build a new theory totally on the basis of abstract reasoning, we will explore the effects of culture by conducting a three-way comparison of perceived leader roles in three cultures: the United States, Japan, and Taiwan. Similar type of country-specific studies have been found useful in verifying the generalizability of general leadership models (e.g. Bjerke & Al-Meer, 1993; Campbell, Bommer, & Yeo, 1993; Swierczek, 1991; Vaught & Abraham, 1992). We choose to compare these three cultures for some reasons beyond merely data convenience. First, all three nations have established free-enterprise systems for many years. As a matter of fact, the market-driven economies in both Japan and Taiwan have been developed in accordance with the blueprint that they took from the United States. As such, the economic systems of these three nations are strikingly similar to each other. This is also a major reason we included Taiwan rather than the People’s Republic of China. Even though Taiwan is culturally part of China, the economic system used in mainland China has been so different from the United States and Japan as to mask the cultural influence on leadership behavior. Second, although the cultures in both Japan and Taiwan have been deeply influenced by Confucianism, they also differ on certain critical cultural dimensions (Hofstede, 1980). This might be the reason why Taiwanese and Japanese enterprises only superficially share some formal structural elements but differ substantially in terms of the superior–subordinate relationship and flow of intraorganizational communication (Silin, 1976). Thus, our tri-national comparison will not only help decipher the East–West differences but also facilitate the exploration for some roots of Asian cultures beyond the impact of Confucianism.

The third reason for selecting these three cultures for comparison pertains to the common interests of multinational corporations (MNCs) around the world. Many large and famous MNCs, such as IBM, Motorola, and Hewlett Packard, have been present in Japan and Taiwan for years. Most other MNCs are also eager to establish branch offices or subsidiaries in these nations. Regardless of a company’s original nationality, it would be a horrible mistake to ignore any of these three nations if any MNC were truly serious about globalizing its business operations and markets.

Following an idiographic approach suggested by Teagarden and her colleagues, we shall develop propositions on the basis of both a literature review of the past cross-cultural research and a comparison of prevalent conceptions about leadership in three specific cultures (Teagarden, Von Glinow, Bowen, Frayne, Nason, Huo, et al., 1995). Nevertheless, it should be noted that this article is not intended to prescribe the best leadership style in either a contingency or a universal sense because such prescriptions cannot be reliably made without examining the organizational performance data (which we are still trying to gather). Implicitly, however, we do submit that organizational effectiveness will be enhanced if there is a good fit between the leadership style and the cultural environment. As such, our discussion will focus on crucial criteria that define effective leadership as perceived by people in each of these three countries.

1. Leadership as perceived in various cultural contexts

Inasmuch as the basic function of leadership is questioned, a universal answer seems to be easy to come by. Researchers generally agree that leadership is needed because it fills many of the voids left by conventional organization design, allows for greater responsiveness to environmental changes, provides a way to coordinate the efforts of diverse groups within the organization, and facilitates organizational membership and personal

need satisfaction (Katz & Kahn, 1978; Steers, 1991; Yukl, 1988). It represents an attempt to influence the activities of followers through the communication process and toward the attainment of some goal or goals (Fleishman, 1973). Effective leaders will help establish direction, align people's efforts, and then motivate, inspire, and empower them to achieve desirable outcomes (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Conger, 1989; Kotter, 1990; Peters & Austin, 1985).

Although these concepts appear to be culture-free, we should not ignore the fact that people in various cultural environments may interpret such concepts differently, thereby favoring different patterns of leader behaviors. For instance, even if 'empowerment' is universally viewed as desirable, how it should be translated into specific behaviors might still be subject to cultural influences. As Conger (1989) observed in his study of American firms, an 'I Make a Difference Club' that recognizes excellent job performance of a few staff members in a visible and personal way seems to be an effective means to empower employees. In a highly collectivistic culture such as that of Japan, however, the word 'I' may have to be replaced with 'we' in order to avoid generating counterproductive resentment among co-workers. Indeed, Ouchi (1981) found that IBM encountered enormous resistance when it tried to transplant an individual-based bonus system from the United States to its Japanese subsidiary.

In the following sections, we will first discuss major differences among the cultures of the United States, Japan, and Taiwan. Desirable attributes of leaders are then identified for organizations in these three cultures. Following the comparison on each cultural dimension, we will submit a generalizable proposition that succinctly states the relationship between a particular cultural characteristic and the desirable attributes of leaders. Since all these propositions use 'culture' rather than 'nation' as the explanatory variable and the arguments supporting each proposition are rather general, such propositions should be applicable to all cultures.

2. Collectivism

One of the most frequently studied cultural dimensions is collectivism (e.g. Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, Bontempo, Villareal, Asai, & Lucca, 1988). There is ample evidence affirming that American and Japanese employees differ in terms of collectivism (Fukuda, 1988; Ouchi, 1981; Masatsugu, 1985). A notable difference has also been found between American and Chinese managers in terms of individualism– collectivism (Earley, 1989). Indeed, in Hofstede's 40-nation comparative study, both Taiwan and Japan were classified as 'low-individualism' countries while the United States had one of the highest score in individualism (Hofstede, 1980). Since a major responsibility of leaders is to pursue organizational goals by coordinating and directing people's efforts and such a responsibility can be fulfilled with varying degrees of authoritarianism, the level of collectivism may be a critical factor affecting participative management. By definition, collectivism helps determine the amount of decision-making power shared by the leaders with their followers or the amount of involvement solicited by a manager in exercising his or her leadership.

Our past research and consulting experiences in the United States, Japan, and Taiwan have revealed noticeable cross-cultural differences in terms of the extent to which leaders are expected to generate participation and involvement from employees. In the United States, where individualism is strongest, competent leaders are expected to exercise their authorities and discretions carefully so that they can help individuals to realize their full potential. Comments and suggestions from employees may be invited, but such participation is usually used as a means to soften possible resistance or inertia against the manager's intended actions; the final say is always within the realm of the manager's jurisdiction.

In Japanese firms, by contrast, participative management has been considered as an essence of leadership in general. Although higher participation is not equivalent to more democracy in decision making, the perceived competence of a leader seems to heavily hinge on the ability to generate consensus among organizational members. Even if a manager does have the authority to make a crucial decision or take vital action, there seems to be an implicit understanding that leaders cannot exercise their authority before consulting with all group members. This propensity, observed by Ouchi & Jaeger (1978) and other researchers (e.g. Hattori, 1968), may be traced to the highly valued *wa* in Japanese culture, which means group harmony and social cohesion. As

Alston (1989) points out, Japanese tend to evaluate activities in light of how they will affect the long-term development of the group's *wa*.

Little research so far has focused on the leadership style of Taiwanese managers. Silin (1976) noted that, for leaders of large-scale Taiwanese enterprises, group action is thought essential to achieve goals yet cooperation is understood as difficult. A study by Yang (1986) alludes to a general trend toward democratic attitudes in Taiwan. In fact, Hofstede (1980) found that the level of collectivism in his Taiwanese sample was even higher than the Japanese counterpart. The exceptionally high degree of collectivism in Taiwan was also noted by other researchers with different samples (e.g. Huo & Randall, 1991; Yeh, 1988). Indeed, our extensive interviews with Taiwanese managers indicate that, when evaluating leadership, they place enormous emphasis on a leader's ability to generate cooperation among employees. Although this qualification is not equivalent to the consensus-generation ability that is deemed critical for Japanese managers, the degree of participation implied by such a criterion is even higher. Leaders are not only expected to consult with the group members; they are supposed to derive their solutions by integrating the opinions and ideas contributed by everyone!

Although a comparison of these three nations' favorite leadership styles may not suffice to prove that there is always a positive correlation between collectivism and participation and there might be other factors affecting the choice of an ideal leadership style, the collectivism–participation relationship seems to hold true in general. In a collectivistic society, organizational members are less likely to tolerate autocracy. Leaders are expected to share their views with others, solicit inputs, iron out disagreements, and create a commonly acceptable solution for the problem in hand.

Proposition 1: Other things being equal, the higher the level of collectivism, the more the leader is expected to enable participation of organization members.

3. Egalitarianism

One major responsibility of managers is evaluating employees' performance and dispensing rewards accordingly. Although resource allocation is not included as a major duty in the commonly accepted definition of leadership (e.g. Bennis & Nanus, 1985), it is definitely an important mechanism through which leaders motivate followers and influence other people's behaviors. According to equity theory (Adams, 1963, 1965), equitably treating all employees is universally desirable. In reality, however, leaders often resort to egalitarianism as they have difficulties with the ambiguity inherent in the very concept of equity.¹

Cross-cultural differences in terms of egalitarianism or equality have been observed by many social scientists (e.g. Béteille, 1977; Hofstede, 1980; Osigweh & Huo, 1993; Rokeach, 1973). In the context of leadership, such differences may have resulted from differing perceived difficulties of equalizing the outcome–input ratios (as defined by Adams) for all employees in a truly fair and objective manner. Given the ambiguities embedded in the definition and measurement of outcomes and inputs, an egalitarian rule for the distribution of outcomes is more likely to be used when most people in a culture perceive a low probability of success in overcoming such ambiguities.

In Ouchi's pioneer study, Japanese firms were found to be more likely to apply the rule of egalitarianism in treating their employees than their American counterparts. This does not mean that Japanese are less likely to trust a leader's ability to render fairness to group members. Quite on the contrary, the level of interpersonal trust is generally higher in Japanese firms. Their egalitarian treatments of employees probably reflect the lack of trust on the effectiveness of typical bureaucratic control systems. In fact, Ouchi (1981) claims that egalitarianism is a central feature of Type Z organizations, which he considers as an ideal form of organization. Implicitly, he suggests that higher trust be placed on the employees' commitment to their jobs rather than mechanistic devices that differentiate rewards on the basis of individual performance.

The effect of egalitarianism on leadership may be manifest in differing expectations of leader behaviors in different cultures. Fairness might be emphasized by firms in all cultures, but it could carry very different

meanings. In the American culture, where egalitarianism is relatively low,² it means that leaders ought to dispense rewards and punishments based on some objective measures of individual performance. In Japan, however, it means that leaders should treat group members equally without playing favoritism.

High egalitarianism has also been found in the Chinese culture, although it may not be as high as in Japanese culture (e.g. Fukuda, 1988; Lin, 1962; Osigweh & Huo, 1993). The influence of the traditional Chinese culture that favors 'the middle way' has been even more salient in Taiwan than in the People's Republic of China. Leaders in Taiwan are likely to be concerned with the prevention of disorder caused by egocentric behavior while they try to differentiate rewards on the basis of individual performance (Silin, 1976). As a result, the fairness concept in Taiwan seems to reflect a compromise between equal treatments of all group members and some respect paid to individual differences.

In sum, even though a leader is universally expected to be fair to all group members in dispensing rewards, the rule in use might err in the direction of either equity or equality, depending on the level of trust placed on the formal control systems. High egalitarianism found in a culture usually reflects a higher trust placed on the people than the control mechanisms built into the organization structure. As a result, a leader in a culture of high egalitarianism is expected to treat group members equally rather than differently. Conversely, the concept of equity as defined by Adams (1963) is more likely to constrain the leader behaviors in a low-egalitarianism culture.

Proposition 2: Other things being equal, the higher the level of egalitarianism, the more the leader is expected to be fair by equalizing the outcomes per se rather than equalize the outcomes–inputs ratios among organizational members.

4. Importance of organizational loyalty

Few would disagree with Robert Roy (1977) when he proclaimed that, in modern society, organizational membership is such an inseparable part of almost everyone's life that "organizations are as familiar and ubiquitous as people" (p. 3). Needless to say, although a person may belong to many organizations simultaneously, the most important one is invariably the organization he or she is working for.

People in different cultures seem to perceive their relationships with the working organizations differently. Such differences may be manifested in several dimensions, including the perceived time horizon of the employment relationship (e.g. permanent or short-term), the scope of interpersonal interactions between superiors and subordinates (e.g., whole-life-concern or work-related-only), and the extent to which the personal life is overlapped with the work life. For instance, workers in large Japanese corporations are more likely to view their employment relationship as permanent; superiors are supposed to pay whole-life concern to their subordinates; and the work life is a vastly important portion of the personal life (Ouchi, 1981; Ouchi & Jaeger, 1978). Similar findings have been reported in cross-national studies with some other East Asia countries (e.g. Alston, 1989; Earley, 1989; Hofstede, 1980; Osigweh & Huo, 1993; Yang, 1986).

Such cross-cultural differences may explain why the importance of organizational loyalty seems to vary across countries. When people perceive some vital, long-term interests of their own to be intertwined with the interests of their employers, they are more likely to value organizational loyalty. Conversely, if a job is generally viewed as a temporary, easy-to-switch means of making a living that is only loosely linked to the personal life, organizational loyalty would probably be of little importance to either employers or employees.

Inasmuch as organizational loyalty counts and managers are viewed as behavioral models for other employees, the degree of loyalty demonstrated by individuals to the organization may serve as a gauge to assess a person's suitability to be a leader. This is probably why job seniority has played a much more important role in Japan than in the United States for selecting and promoting managers. To be sure, even in American firms job seniority could provide an employee some advantages. The use of seniority systems in hiring, firing, promoting or compensating is considered a legal exception to discrimination as covered by Title VII of the Civil Rights

Act of 1964. Nonetheless, seniority by itself is rarely viewed in American firms as a necessary condition for becoming a manager. So long as someone has demonstrated good managerial skills and outstanding performance, low seniority is unlikely to preclude him or her from being promoted to a managerial position.

In Japan, however, the so-called ‘fast-trackers’ commonly seen in American firms are extremely rare. No matter how competent someone is, in the opinions of most Japanese executives, it takes years for an employee to ‘mature’ or become seasoned enough to serve as a leader. More importantly, emphasizing job seniority as a critical condition for promotion helps stimulate organizational loyalty; it signals to all employees that only those employees who have stayed with the organization long enough, thereby having demonstrated their loyalty to the organization, are allowed to be promoted to managerial positions. As such, seniority itself has been a very important criterion for leader selection in Japan. This seems to be true in both public and private sectors.³ We found job seniority to be important in Taiwanese firms as well, although its impact on leader selection may be less powerful than in Japan.

In general, a high value placed on organizational loyalty might reflect the desire to avoid uncertainty. As Hofstede (1980) points out, people in countries that score high on uncertainty avoidance tend to change jobs less frequently. As a result, the average seniority of employees in these cultures tends to be higher. On the other hand, higher seniority has been found to be associated with greater organizational commitment (Hofstede, 1980). Thus, the relationship between the importance of organizational loyalty and the use of seniority as a criterion for selecting leaders could also be explained by the desire to maximize the organizational commitment from managerial employees.

Proposition 3: Other things being equal, the more organizational loyalty is valued in a culture, the more likely seniority is used as a criterion in selecting leaders.

5. Belief in human potential

So long as there is a superior–subordinate distinction in an organization, it is indispensable that differences exist among organizational members with respect to power, privileges, and social status. This form of inequality is usually seen as tolerable primarily because every organizational member is granted an equality of opportunity.⁴ Nonetheless, the fact that everyone has equal opportunity to become a leader does not imply that everyone has equal potential to become a leader. There seems to be a cultural difference concerning the general belief in human potential. The way people perceive the distribution of wisdom within an organization or evenness of human potential could, more or less, affect the normative behavior of leaders.

Researchers of leadership have found that effective leaders usually facilitate organizational communications by playing the roles of both information transmitter and information receiver (e.g. Luthans & Larson, 1986; Penley & Hawkins, 1985; Vaught & Abraham, 1992). However, we noticed striking differences between managers in the United States, Japan, and Taiwan in terms of the relative weights assigned to these two roles. American managers seem to be better speakers while Japanese managers are better listeners. By contrast, Taiwanese managers usually try to strike a balance between these two roles. As a matter of fact, executives of American firms tend to emphasize ‘being a good communicator’ as an important criterion for selecting leaders. To be sure, the word ‘communicator’ per se does not necessarily imply an inordinate emphasis on speaking over listening. However, the list of desirable leader attributes identified by American executives seems to always include such items as ‘the ability to articulate the corporate vision’ or ‘the skill to persuade employees to heartily accept the corporate goals and objectives.’ In Japan, by contrast, ‘being a good listener’ is more often cited as a crucial requirement for managing people. This requirement is often translated into specific criteria such as the ability to solicit creative ideas from employees and sensitivity to employees’ complaints about the corporate policies or managerial decisions.

These cross-cultural differences in terms of normative leader behaviors may be attributed to the differing assumptions about the uniformity of human potential as mentioned earlier. Confucius once said: ‘Everyone can potentially be my teacher.’ Probably owing to the cultivation of the Confucian thought, both Japanese and Chi-

nese seem to believe that leaders are not necessarily smarter or wiser than followers. They are convinced that there is plenty of wisdom hidden in the minds of organizational members, and managers are supposed to try their best in exploiting such ‘brain resources.’ As a result, Japanese and Chinese managers are more likely to listen attentively to the comments, suggestions, critiques, and complaints from subordinates. In contrast, Americans tend to use the conception of social Darwinism to explain the difference between leaders and followers: managers are supposed to be more competent and wiser than their subordinates—that is why they have been promoted in the first place. Because most of them do not expect their subordinates to be able to generate ideas that are better than their own, they are more likely to subconsciously downplay the role of listener—even if they understand that an ideal leader ought to be excellent on both speaking and listening.

Proposition 4: Other things being equal, the more people in a culture believe in the uniformity of human wisdom, the more likely leaders are expected to be good listeners. Conversely, the more a culture assumes that leaders are wiser than followers, the more likely the leader’s role as a speaker is emphasized.

There is another culture-related presumption concerning human potential that affects how leaders are trained or cultivated in different cultures: how likely a person may climb to the top of the organizational hierarchy. Some researchers (e.g. Ouchi, 1981) noticed the tendency of Japanese companies to rotate their employees among different jobs; sometimes such rotations may even be cross-functional. An explanation for such a phenomenon is that Japanese firms use the job rotation system to train general managers who are expected to possess broad-scope skills and understand all functional areas. In contrast, American managers are more likely to follow a narrower path of promotion along the functional lines of their specialization.

This is exactly what we observed in our field studies of American and Japanese firms. Most firms in Taiwan, once again, seem to follow a compromised approach between these two extremes. They generally encourage specialized technical training for lower-level managers but, once a person is viewed as a potential candidate for a top-level post, he or she will receive well-rounded training in a variety of functional areas.

We may again trace such differences to the underlying assumptions about the potential of individual employees. If it is generally believed that most people, if not everyone, in an organization has equal potential to reach a top management position, a wider spectrum of skills would be expected of all leaders. Conversely, if only a few organizational members are believed to have the potential to climb to the top level and most people in the organization focus on well-defined functional tasks throughout their career lives, expertise in specialized areas would probably be emphasized more heavily.

Proposition 5: Other things being equal, the more prevalent the belief on the uniformity of human potential is, the more likely general management skills will be emphasized in training leaders. Conversely, the more a culture assumes that human potential is uneven across organizational members, the more likely leader training will emphasize specialized expertise.

The differences between the United States, Japan, and Taiwan in terms of desirable leadership attributes are summarized in Table 1. In short, a number of cultural characteristics affect how leaders are selected, trained, or molded. High collectivism in a culture seems to encourage the use of participative management. The degree of egalitarianism may determine how much differentiation is allowed in the way leaders treat their followers or allocate rewards among group members. Job seniority may be a more important leader-selection criterion in countries where organizational loyalty is highly valued. A general belief in the uniformity of wisdom among organizational members would make the listener role much more salient for leaders. Finally, broad-scope expertise and general management skills are more likely to be viewed as an important leader qualification when the potential of different organizational members to become top-echelon leaders is assumed to be approximately the same.

Table 1
The relationship between desirable leadership styles and cultural characteristics in three nations

	United States	Japan	Taiwan
<i>A. Collectivism</i> Important leader qualification	<i>Low</i> The ability to help individual members to realize their full potential	<i>High</i> The ability to generate consensus	<i>Very high</i> The ability to facilitate cooperation
<i>B. Egalitarianism</i> Normative leader behavior	<i>Low</i> Dispense rewards/punishments equitably based on individual performance of employees	<i>High</i> Be fair to everyone and insure that favoritism is not played in rewarding of reward differentiation	<i>Medium</i> Recognize and reward best performers but encourage worst ones as well; keep the range narrow
<i>C. Organizational loyalty</i> Important leader qualification	<i>Not important</i> Seniority is downplayed	<i>Very important</i> High seniority is a desirable leader qualification	<i>Important</i> Seniority counts but kinship/connection to the owners or executives is even more important
<i>D. Belief in the uniformity of wisdom</i> Major leader role expected	<i>Not strong</i> Convey organizational vision and goals to subordinates	<i>Strong</i> Listen to ideas, complaints, or opinions and respond	<i>Strong</i> Facilitate two-way communications and consider good ideas or suggestions
<i>E. Belief in the homogeneity of potential</i> Emphasis on leader training	<i>Not strong</i> Expertise in specialized areas are emphasized	<i>Strong</i> Broad-scope skills and experiences are emphasized	<i>Moderate</i> Broad-scope experience is balanced with specialized training

6. Conclusion and discussion

In this paper we have submitted some generalizable propositions that depict the potential effects of certain cultural characteristics in leadership. Following an idiographic approach suggested by Teagarden and her colleagues, we have developed these propositions on the basis of both a literature review of the past cross-cultural research and a comparison of prevalent conceptions about leadership in three specific cultures (Teagarden et al., 1995). Such country-specific comparisons should help deepen our knowledge about the central characteristics of Asian leadership beyond the general statement that it is more group-oriented, paternalistic, and authoritative (Swierczek, 1991). We chose to compare the United States, Japan, and Taiwan because these three countries seem to be similar enough in terms of their economic systems but differ significantly in many cultural dimensions.

Understandably, each culture may consist in certain dissimilar subcultures and national boundaries may not always coincide with the cultural boundaries. Indeed, cultural heterogeneity seems to be highest in the United States and lowest in Japan. Nevertheless, this tri-national comparison is intended to demonstrate the influence of culture on leader roles. Given the fact that all three countries are still experiencing rapid social and economic changes, we may expect that some cultural characteristics will be quite different twenty years from now. Accordingly, the prevalent conceptions of leadership in these three cultures may also change in the future. The cultural divergence of Taiwan from China is a case in point. After being politically separated for half a century, Taiwan and mainland China have shown notable differences on some key cultural dimensions (e.g. Huo & Randall, 1991). What will remain unchanged, however, are the relationships between specific cultural characteristics and applicabilities of various leadership styles.

We are convinced that culture plays a crucial role in explaining the cross-cultural differences in leader roles since it determines the values and preferences of organizational members. If, as Lengnick-Hall & Lengnick-Hall (1988) point out, human resource strategy is inevitably affected by values and preferences, this sort of knowledge should help multinational corporations or joint ventures create truly globalized management systems in the most effective manner. To be sure, cross-national differences are not equivalent to cross-cultural differences, and culture is not the only factor affecting the choices among various leadership styles. Nonetheless, in comparison with many other political and economic factors, culture is probably the most stable factor that drives managerial thinking. We are not arguing that culture is a distinct factor totally unrelated to economic, political, or social factors; in the long run, all these factors might affect culture to a certain extent. We firmly believe, however, even if a nation's economic or political system has experienced a drastic change in a short period of time, some work-related values cherished by people may remain stable for many years to come, as evidenced by the ideological clash between people in West Germany and East Germany immediately following their reunification.

As argued earlier, accumulation of human knowledge on international management would be slow unless the interrelations among different studies could be clearly depicted in an overarching framework. We consider our efforts to build a theoretical foundation for cross-cultural leadership research as merely a first stab into a largely unexplored sphere. Enormous amount of work is still needed for the sake of integrating the ideas and findings presented in the past research. Future research should probably continue on the quest for additional cultural dimensions that potentially affect the conception of leadership and empirically verify the cultural influences in multinational and, preferably, multi-period settings.

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Notes:

¹ When justice is viewed as 'equality of proportion' (Benn & Peters, 1969), the equity concept as defined by Adams (1963) may be conceived as a special form of equality (the equality of the outcome–input ratio for all employees). However, in this article we adopt a narrow-scope definition of egalitarianism which only pertains to an even distribution of outcomes in terms of both monetary and nonmonetary rewards.

² The United States may rank even higher than either Japan or Taiwan in terms of egalitarianism if egalitarianism is defined by the absence of social inequality. Blalock (1991) explores the sources of social inequality from both equity and equality perspectives. However, when egalitarianism is narrowly defined by the distribution of outcomes within an organization, Japan and Taiwan score higher than the United States.

³ This seems to be evident in light of the ages of Prime Ministers in the past 40 years.

⁴ For the definition of equality of opportunity, see Plamenatz (1969). Essentially, Plamenatz discerns equality of opportunity from equality of status and equality of control. It is parallel to 'equality of right' or 'equality of influence.' In the simplest definition, equality of opportunity means that, to the extent that competition is inevitable or is good for society, justice requires that all who have to compete should have the same advantages.

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