Cultural Differences in Leadership Style

By Ricki Sharpe

Do cultural differences exist in personality traits considered important for effective leadership? Yes they do, according to a recent study published in the International Journal of Cross Cultural Management.

The findings indicate that the importance of specific leadership traits is determined partly by cultural norms and partly by the requirements of the leadership role.

Cultural Differences

Cultural background influences the importance of various traits with regard to effective leadership. Australian culture is renowned for its emphasis on egalitarianism, whereas Chinese culture is renowned for being authority oriented.

In this study, Australians rated traits that attenuate power differences between leaders and followers (i.e. communicative, friendly, humorous, participative, and respectful) more highly than did the Chinese.

The Chinese, however, rated the traits integrating and modest higher than did the Australians, which is consistent with collectivism and Confucian values.

The results also revealed cultural similarities such as concern for followers’ interests, diplomatic, innovative, inspirational, persuasive, and team-player.

Leadership Level Differences

Clear differences in the importance of various traits for low-level leaders and high level leaders were found. Both the Australians and the Chinese regarded it more important for high-level leaders than for low level leaders to be courageous, innovative, inspirational, persuasive and visionary.

These traits can be linked to strategic leadership in that such leaders need to create a vision that usually involves insight and risk-taking, and a need to inspire others to undertake the risks generally associated with visionary leadership.

Both cultural groups also regarded it more important for low-level leaders than for high-level leaders to be friendly, humorous and a team-player. These traits can be linked to the idea that emotional leadership is more important for low-level leaders because of their greater and closer involvement with followers.
Australians regarded *communicative* as very important for effective leaders regardless of the leader’s hierarchical level, whereas they regarded being *friendly* and *humorous* as more important for low-level leaders than for high-level leaders.

Similarly, the Chinese regarded being *modest* as very important for effective leaders regardless of the leader’s hierarchical level, whereas they regarded being *friendly* and *humorous* as more important for low-level leaders than for high-level leaders.

These differences demonstrate the combined effects of cultural values and job requirements on the importance placed on different traits for effective leaders.

The consistent message from this and other studies is that leaders need to recognize the importance of cultural values and practices, and thereby adapt to different cultural expectations in order to be perceived as acceptable and effective.

Furthermore, leaders must be aware of the different requirements associated with low-level and high-level leadership and need to tailor their style to suit the different roles.

**Reference**
