

THE INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF BUSINESS & MANAGEMENT

The Impact of Culture Context on the Transfer of Best Leadership Practices by International Hotel Firms

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Abstract:

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to investigate the culture context impact on the transfer of best leadership practices by international hotel firms operating in Zimbabwe. The failure of managers on foreign assignments was identified as a serious problem which needed to be investigated in order to understand the cultural impact on leadership practices. Data for analysis were collected using Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X), Value Survey Model (VSM) survey instruments and open-ended questions interview. A total of 97 middle managers completed the MLQ and VSM survey instruments and 11 senior managers participated in open-ended interviews. Data from the study were analyzed using the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS) and a content analysis of the interview responses. The study findings indicated that culture impacts the transfer of best leadership practices and that cultural understanding is paramount when managing across cultures. The study findings also revealed that, leadership styles transcend cultures but should be applied in the context of local culture or environment.

Keywords: Culture Context

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural leadership, or managing diversity, has been at the center of leadership studies in recent years (Shahin & Wright, 2004). This interest has resulted from the growing need for leaders who are qualified to manage diversified workforces in the technology driven business environment. Increased interest in the field of cross-cultural leadership has also shown the need for the development of effective global organizations that have the capacity to lead and manage a multicultural workforce, and compete in diversified markets (Krishan, 2005).

Most research has been carried out in western countries, with little attention paid to the African continent (Shahin & Wright, 2004). However, Africa is fast becoming an important source of skilled workers and raw materials, and Africa is an emerging international market for many goods and services (Triandis, 2004). Bond and King (1985) suggested highlighted that emerging economies when adopting the free enterprise system of the West in process tend to assume and become part of the western capitalistic system. Further, Mouton and Blake (1970) argued that exposure to western ways of engaging in business often results in the adoption of western values. This suggests that the demands, opportunities, and management/leadership styles of a technologically advancing society are more often shaped by the value systems of the cultures from which the technology is adopted from rather than from indigenous cultural forces. There was an exigent need to carry out research to better understand the African culture and market since its recent economic growth allows researchers to examine development and change as it occurs.

2. Problem Statement

The failure of managers in foreign assignments is a serious problem. In their study findings, Baruch (2004) and Sims and Schraeder (2004) both identified culture as a factor impacting the ability of leaders to lead across cultures and transfer foreign leadership knowledge easily. Baruch (2004) and Sims and Schraeder (2004) estimated that it costs American firms over \$2 billion in premature manager departure costs, equivalent to a 16% to 70% failure rate, on a yearly basis. Hofstede (2004) concluded that leading across cultures is a problem contributing to the failure of international managers because of differences in cultural understanding and perception. Research studies by Hofstede (1980), Hall (1976), and Trompenaars (1973) have all highlighted the cultural dimensions such as power distance, avoidance uncertainty, individualism/collectivism and feminism as sources of cultural differences impacting leadership styles or follower behavior. Bass (1990) concluded that culture impacts leadership style and follower behavior.

Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE, 1999) research identified universal leadership styles transcending cultures to include transformational (initiation, intellectual, motivational) skills and charismatic personalities. The western orientation of research continues to stimulate debate on the generalization of research findings by theorists such as, Hall

(1976), Hofstede (1980), and Trompenaars (1973). Within this context, the purpose of this study was to investigate how culture has impacted the leadership perceptions and management styles of Zimbabwean senior and middle managers working in the hotel industry.

3. Literature Review

According to Dickson, Den Hartog, and Mitchelson (2003), and Connerley and Pederson (2005), the study of leadership has steadily developed since the mid-1990s. Researchers have focused on global leadership, leadership across nations, and leadership within multicultural organizations and environments. Chien (2006) argued that, “cultural differences affect leadership behavior, management systems, management effectiveness and ultimately organizational performance” (p. 2). As globalization increases, so does the need to study its interrelatedness with cultural leadership.

A review of the literature on the topic of cross-cultural leadership showed a convergence in terms on the impact of the cultural context on the transfer of best practices, concluding that managing cultural diversity is the key to the success for international corporations (Hofstede, 2003; Javidan & House, 2004; Walumbwa & Lawler, 2003). Literature reviewed also revealed that cross culture findings have not been conclusive due to the dynamic nature of culture ((Adler, 2002; Hofstede, 2001; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2004; Shanin & Wright, 2004). Most leadership theories are North American in origin and it may not be appropriate to apply them wholesale in cultures which differ in significant respects from America (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2004; Shanin & Wright, 2004). The literature also converges on the notion that the modern business environment requires transformational leaders who are flexible and adaptive (Bass, 1990).

Transformational leadership is described as the extent to which a leader, as an independent agent, engages with followers to raise motivation to a higher level of achievement (Burns, 1978; Krishan, 2005). Kayes et al. (2005) identified the learning competencies critical to the transfer of knowledge as valuing different cultures, building relationships in the host culture, listening and observing, coping with ambiguity, translating complex ideas, taking action, and managing others. Romie (2002) posited that culture is central to all parts of the enterprise and that culture is all about business. This conclusion is also well stated by Novicevic and Harvey (2004):

the need to manage cultural diversity has been accelerated by globalization that has outpaced much organization’s ability to identify and develop an adequate number of qualified expatriate managers ... necessity to compete in hyper-competitive global markets necessitates having global leaders who have competencies that are able to differentiate organizations’ strategic choices. (p. 1)

Scholars agree that challenges in managing across cultures include such variances as the validation of quality, decision-making processes criteria, standardization (protection of values and norms), and perceptual variances on quality, space, speed, and time (Shanin & Wright, 2004). The variances are cultural in nature and can include things like personal background, history, norms, values, beliefs, ethnicity, and religion (Hofstede, 2004). Hence the need to understand that each culture is unique and that certain modifications should be made in order to integrate a diversity of cultures into an effective unit that is able to compete in the global market.

High-context culture societies mainly come from Africa and Asia, have a colonial background, and are more receptive to the master-servant leadership style (authoritarian rather than participative) (Hall, 1976). This is slowly changing as the economic situation in these countries improves and as the citizens become more and more affluent, meaning the culture of the nations involved in this process gradually becomes low-context culture. High-context cultures are influenced by the environment (collectivist), and low-context cultures are personally driven (individualistic). The cultural differences, according to the literature reviewed, impact the understanding of employees and leaders in the transfer of best practices (Fernandez & Fernandez, 2004; Shanin & Wright, 2004). The ethnocentric approach by United States firms has, over the years, negatively affected the easy transfer of knowledge, causing a high failure rate estimated at over 30%, annually costing billions of dollars in staff relocation costs (Baruch, 2004).

Hofstede’s four dimensions—power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, and masculinity—also directly affect the transfer of knowledge between nations and cultures. Although scholars still depend on Hofstede’s models when constructing their own research projects, many researchers have begun to take issue with Hofstede’s work. Magala (2005) and Jackson (2004), critics of Hofstede’s four dimensions, have argued that the dimensions have been overtaken by time, and single company and industry research might not be adequate to arrive at a representative conclusion. However, Hofstede’s findings are supported by scholars such as Adler (1977), House et al. (2004), Javidan and House (2004), and Trompenaars (1994).

In recent years, the economic profiles of countries have changed, with many countries doubling their average GDP per capita. Tang (2005) argued that “power distance and individualism are highly correlated with a country’s economic factors, especially GDP per capita ... significantly affected by homogeneity of ethnic groups, language, religion, and legal system” (p.12). The inference is that as a country modernizes the power distance reduces moving towards the western countries although the ingrained culture values and beliefs still remain a major challenge in managing across cultures.

Methodology

The research methodology for this study was a mixed-method. A mixed method study builds on the strengths of both qualitative and quantitative data (Neumann (2003). Qualitative piloted open-ended interview data were collected from 11 senior managers, giving the managers an opportunity to express themselves. Data collected using the recorded open-ended interviews focused on leadership perception and individual view on culture impact. The Value Survey Module (VSM 94; Hofstede, 1994) and the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X; Bass, 1995) quantitative data were collected from 97 middle managers added an objective perspective to the study (Creswell, 2002).

3.1. Research Questions and Hypotheses

In addressing the purpose of this study, the following research questions and hypotheses guided the research. The three research questions identified the degree to which culture dimensions of power distance, avoidance uncertainty, individualism, masculinity/femininity impact leadership styles and behavior. Open-ended interview questions allowed respondents to give an insight into their thoughts and experiences (Creswell, 2005). The interview sub-questions further revealed the respondents' perspectives. The research questions listed below also helped find answers to similar questions revealed in the literature reviewed (Hofstede, 2004; Magala, 2005; Munoz & Luckman, 2005; Shanin & Wright, 2004; Walumbwa, Lawler & Avolio, 2005).

4. Central Research Questions

- R₁: How do the different values and attitudes of cultural context theory impact upon effective leadership practices in the global hotel industry?
- R₂: How do foreign leadership practices or theories apply abroad, and how can these practices enhance or curtail a leader's efficacy in managing across cultures?
- R₃: How do host country managers perceive foreign leadership cultures?

5. Hypotheses

The hypotheses listed below formed a guide to the research process, and involved predictions that may or may not be supported by the data collected (Creswell, 1994; Leedy & Ormrod, 2001). Hofstede (1980) culture dimensions (power distance; avoidance uncertainty; individualism, masculinity) were identified as independent variables and leadership styles as dependent variables. The dependent variables included: leadership styles— idealized-influence-attribute, idealized-influence-behaviors, intellectual-stimulation, inspirational-motivation and individualized-consideration, management-by-exception (active), contingent reward, management-by-exception (passive) and management by laissez-faire. The null and alternative hypotheses derived from the problem statement are presented below:

- H1o: There is no relationship between cultural context, understanding and leadership style/practices.
- H1a: There is a relationship between cultural context,, understanding and leadership style/practices.
- H2o: There is no relationship between cultural context power distance and leadership style/practices.
- H2a: There is a relationship between cultural context power distance and leadership style/practices.
- H3o: There is no relationship between cultural context individualism and leadership style/practices.
- H3a: There is a relationship between cultural context individualism and leadership style/practices.
- H4o: There is no relationship between cultural context masculinity/femininity and leadership style/practices.
- H4a: There is a relationship between cultural context masculinity/femininity and leadership style/practices.
- H4a: There is a relationship between cultural context masculinity/femininity and leadership style/practices.
- H5o: There is no relationship between cultural context uncertainty avoidance and leadership style/practices.
- H5a: There is a relationship between cultural context uncertainty avoidance and leadership style/practices.

6. Research Results

The process of data analysis involved identifying the cultural context dimensions (independent variables) and leadership styles (dependent variables) correlations and impact on the transfer of best leadership practices. The presentation of qualitative data using MicroSoft Word and Statistical Package for Social Scientists (SPSS) data analysis package guided data analysis in order to arrive at research conclusions and make recommendations.

The response rate recorded for this study was 49.5% survey and 55% interview. The interview instrument piloting recorded 60% response. According to Creswell (2003) a sample return of 30 to 50 is acceptable as representative of a sample of a population. The respondents' educational level ranged from 10 years to 18 years of formal education. In this study, the term formal education reflects years of formal school education including primary school. There were significant number of respondents who indicated 16 years and over of formal education. Although demographics data were collected in this study the results were not interpreted in as far as their influence on the research findings. The results of the survey and interview are presented below:

6.1.1. Leadership Survey (MLQ 5x, 1995)

The MLQ (5X) survey findings indicated that transformational and transactional leadership styles as the predominant styles in Zimbabwe hotel industry. Table 1 presents the sample leadership style mean scores. *Transformational Leadership*. The findings of the study indicated that 91% of the respondents mean score ranged from 3.25 to 3.37 with a standard deviation ranging from .48 to .60, higher than the mean score of >3.0, which according to Bass (1990), is the minimum score for transformational a leadership. The sample average scores by leadership element were >3.0 for transformational and >2.5 for transactional leadership elements. Transactional and non-transactional indicated mean score of >2.5 and >.90 respectively.

6.1.2. Culture Survey (VSM, 94)

The findings on culture index indicated that Zimbabwe had a PDI of 86.01 (high), IDV 21.79 (low), MAS 4.13 (low), UAI 41.89 (low), and LTO 49.25 (Medium). The Zimbabwe culture differs from United States and European countries which are characterized

by low PDI, high IDV, medium MAS, UAI, and LTO respectively. Hofstede (1980) found the United States culture to be low in PDI (40), high in IDV (91), low in UAI (40), and moderate in MAS (62). The United States and European indexes for PDI, IDV, and MAS differences with Zimbabwe indexes draw cultural parallels between the societies re-affirming earlier study findings by Adler (1976), Hofstede (1980, Trompenaars (1978), and GLOBE (1999

6.2. Leadership and Culture

6.2.1. Hypotheses Testing.

A Pearson correlation coefficient was used to test null hypotheses and also measure the relationship between leadership and culture. The five null and alternate hypotheses were used to investigate whether there was no or was a relationship between leadership and culture dimensions (power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism and masculinity/femininity). According to Neumann (2003) if p-value is $< .05$ the null hypotheses is rejected and alternate may be retained. Hypotheses H1o, H3o, H4o and H5o testing results indicated p-values $> .05$. Thus the null hypotheses stating that there was no relationship between leadership styles/practices and culture, understanding, individualism, uncertainty avoidance and femininity/masculinity were retained. Hypothesis H2o testing results indicated a p-value $< .05$ thus the alternate hypothesis H2a stating that there is relationship between cultural context power distance and leadership styles/practices was retained.

6.2.2. Leadership Styles and Culture Correlation

The correlation coefficient between transformational style and culture indicated a negative result of $-.09$ and p-value of $> .05$. The result may suggest that there is no statistically significant correlation between transformational leadership elements and culture context. Transactional elements of contingent reward and management-by-exception-active indicated positive correlations of $.02$ and p-value $< .05$ respectively. This result may indicate that a statistically significant correlation exists between transactional style and culture elements. Non-transactional elements of management-by-exception-passive and laissez-faire indicated a positive correlation of $.22$ and p-value $> .05$. The coefficient may also suggest that no statistically significant correlation exists between the two variables of non-transactional leadership styles and culture understanding. Outcome elements of extra effort and satisfaction indicated a positive correlation $.03$ and p-value $> .05$. The coefficient may suggest that there is no statistically significant correlation between the two variables of leadership and culture.

6.3. Responses to 17 Sub Questions

The 11 interview participants representing 55% of the sample responded to 17 sub questions which were categorized as: (a) organizational leadership, (b) organizational culture, (c) transformational leadership, (d) foreign culture, and (e) best practices. The findings related to these categories are interpreted below.

6.3.1. Organizational Leadership.

Approximately over 60% of the respondents described an ideal hotel leader as one who is adaptive to change, visionary, a good communicator, innovative, cares for people, is a role model/exemplary, and possesses the ability to manage diversity. The participants highlighted these qualities because of the nature of the industry, which is highly diversified. Thus, a leader should be able to manage diversity at all levels both internally and externally. For example customer needs are constantly changing and require that management or leaders to embrace change accordingly.

6.3.2. Transformational Leadership.

All the respondents indicated that there were many ways of inspiring and motivating followers, but that the most successful practices involved empowering, skills development, clear career path management, and recognition for good performance. All the respondents indicated that good communication enhances organizational performance.

6.3.3. Organizational Culture.

All the respondents indicated that foreign models apply to Zimbabwe's culture, but that there was a need to make certain adjustments in order to meet local culture needs. Rules and regulations were necessary in order to maintain standards and for benchmarking with world best practices. The convergence of responses by participants on the applicability of business/leadership models answers a central question of this research as to whether foreign leadership styles apply across cultures.

6.3.4. Foreign Culture.

Respondents were of the view that foreign cultures conflict with Africa's culture because locals perceive foreigners as possessing a superiority complex and foreign leaders are often slow to embrace local culture. The respondents were of the view that culture can impact organizational performance, hence the need to embrace local values into the organizational business processes. Respondents were of the view that having cultural exchange programs, exposure training programs, skills training, pre-departure orientation programs for expatriates and foreign leaders, organized social activities, and the creation of mixed residences would greatly enhance the potential success of cross-cultural management. Drawing from the above responses it may be concluded that differing culture values can be a source of conflict between host and foreign leaders.

6.3.5. Best Practices.

All the respondents were of the view that action learning, mentoring, measurement, and coaching can enhance an organizational team building, performance, and could potentially improve efficiency. Hence, it is important for leaders to keep abreast of current global management trends in order to meet customer needs and wants.

Drawing conclusions from the responses to the 17 sub-questions, it can therefore be concluded that culture context impact the easy transfer of best leadership practices across cultures. Findings also highlight the need for leaders on foreign assignment to take cognizant of the culture context potential impact on their ability to achieve desired goals. The study findings have thus, also indicated that foreign leadership styles can be applied across cultures, but should be applied in context of the local conditions. Study findings revealed that foreign leaders needed to improve in the areas of communication, relationship management, and respect or embrace host culture values. In order to succeed foreign leaders can apply leadership styles that infuse both foreign and local practices (Walumbwa & Avolio, 2003).

6.4. Conclusion

The results of this research indicate that culture has an impact on the transfer of best leadership practices and foreign leadership styles can be applied abroad, but should be applied in context. This answers the three central questions in this research study: (a) How do the different values and attitudes of cultural context theory impact upon effective leadership practices in the global hotel industry?, (b) How do foreign leadership practices or theories apply abroad, and how can these practices enhance or curtail a leader's efficacy in managing across cultures?, and (c) How do host country managers perceive foreign leadership cultures? The five null hypotheses that suggested that there was no relationship between culture dimensions (PDI, IDV, MAS, UAI, and LTO) and leadership style/practice.

Pearson's correlation coefficient analysis indicated different levels of statistical significance between leadership elements of transformation, transaction and laissez-faire, and culture values. Transformational and non-transactional leadership indicated p-values $>.05$ and transactional p-value $<.05$ indicating no significance and significance respectively. The results of hypotheses H1o, H3o, H4o and H5o testing indicated p-values $>.05$ thus all hypotheses were retained (Neumann, 2003). Hypothesis testing result H2o indicated a result of p-value $<.05$ and the alternate hypothesis, indicating that there was a relationship between PDI and leadership styles/practices was retained. Therefore, it can be concluded that different culture dimensions impact leadership differently and hence there is need to understand the impact on the transfer of best leadership practice across cultures (Hofstede, 2004; Javidan, 2005).

The results also indicated that Zimbabwean leadership style was predominantly transformational as indicated by transformational leadership mean score of >3.30 and that some transactional elements were also preferred as indicated with a mean score result of >2.5 for management-by-exception-(active) and contingent reward. Results from the interview responses were in sync with the quantitative findings, indicating that transformational and transactional leadership were preferred styles. The results of the cultural values indicated a high PDI, low IDV, low MAS, medium UAI, and LTO respectively. The results of the cultural value indexes is consistent with African cultural values which are very much family oriented. Respondents indicated that best practices such as coaching, mentoring, measurement techniques were beneficial to organizational performance. A view supported by McDermott, Levenson, and Newton (2007) who postulated that, "coaching has the biggest positive impact on micro-level outcomes such as developing future leaders and improving leadership behaviors and individual employees' performance" (p. 2).

6.5. Implications of Study

The implications of this study are the importance of understanding the impact of culture on leadership and development strategies for the purpose of reducing any negative effects on individual and organizational performance. A view shared by Aimar and Stough (2007) who stated that an "understanding of comparative leadership practices among cultures is paramount to successfully managing global activities" (p. 2). This study provided new research for the hotel industry, not only in Zimbabwe, but in Africa and is meant as a foundational study in the field of hotel management and other sectors. Prior research tended to focus on the United States and in Europe with little attention paid to Africa or Asia (Shahin & Wright, 2004). This study builds a strong case for the need to undertake more cross cultural leadership studies. As globalization increases, there is an exigent need to undertake cross cultural studies in order to enhance management efficiencies (Walumbwa & Avolio, 2003).

Further, the findings and conclusions of this study will add to the body of knowledge regarding cross cultural leadership by providing empirical evidence which contributes to further development of a general theory on cross-cultural leadership. The study revealed preferred leadership styles, behaviors, perceptions, and cultural values of Zimbabwean managers in the hotel industry. The findings of the study can help international hotel groups or any other multinational in developing or training their managers for overseas assignments, thus reducing failure rates. The results of this study can also help consultants or organizations to predict more accurately potential problems regarding cross-cultural interactions and develop strategies to increase cross-cultural business operations efficacy. Themes and findings from this study suggest the need for future research in order to further understand other factors that impact the transfer of best leadership practices across cultures. Since this study was a foundational study undertaken in Zimbabwe, more research in other parts of Africa will help validate some of the conclusions and findings from this study. Africa is a melting pot of culture diversity; hence there is a need to undertake further research (Walumbwa & Avolio, 2003; Matuvik, 2007). The Zimbabwe situation, as both recipients and exporters of best leadership practices, presents yet another research opportunity focusing on Africa cross culture transfer of best leadership practices.

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