

SHARED BEGINNINGS and DIVERSE HISTORIES: A Comparison of Leadership Behavior in Five Countries with Anglo-Saxon Based Cultures

By Helen Peters and Robert Kabacoff

The sun may have set on the British Empire, but the impact of the Anglo-Saxon cultural heritage remains strong in the former British colonies and current Commonwealth countries. This legacy is most visible in a common language, but can be seen as well in a myriad of ways from the judicial and educational systems to culinary preferences, architectural styles to sports enthusiasms, religious institutions to holidays celebrated.



Does the influence of the shared Anglo-Saxon heritage in these countries extend to leadership style and approach as well? Or, have the distinctive histories of the former British colonies overshadowed their common cultural beginning, creating unique management profiles tied to country specific values, social norms, and economic perspectives?

THE CURRENT RESEARCH

Management Research Group®, a firm specializing in the creation of behavioral assessment instruments used for individual and organizational development, has collected extensive data regarding the management and leadership behavior of managers across the globe. This study compares the leadership practices of almost 25,000 individuals in management positions (from first line department supervisors to company Presidents) in five countries: the UK (data is aggregated for the UK and the Republic of Ireland), the US, Canada, Australia, and South Africa. These managers work within a broad spectrum of government and industry sectors, and functional areas. All have direct reports. Their average age is forty-two. Most are seasoned managers, with an average of eleven years of management experience.

The data used for comparing leadership styles across these Anglo-Saxon cultures is based on self-assessments by the managers using MRG®'s Leadership Effectiveness Analysis™ Questionnaire. This Questionnaire measures twenty-two different leadership practices. These practices define the managers' ability to develop a vision or direction for the organization, to engender the support of others for that vision, to implement the vision in organizational terms, and to ensure that things happen according to the plan. Also measured were the managers' orientation towards achieving results (setting high standards of performance for themselves and their organizations), and their ability to work within a team environment.

When looking at aggregate data, as we did in this study, we can begin to paint a picture of a general leadership style or approach, and we can compare managers from different countries in relationship to each other based on those generalities. However, we need to use care in interpreting this data. First, it is based on self-assessments only. We do not know how accurate the managers' self-perceptions are, how others in the environment view these managers, or how effective their leadership styles actually are in achieving results in the real world. There are also differences in demographics for the various countries included in the study, which could be coloring the results of the data analysis. And finally, it should be remembered that this is aggregate data, and the behavior and style of any given manager in any given country will be distinctive. Leadership approaches are based on many factors beyond country culture, including personality, role, industry, and individual company values.

GENERAL OBSERVATIONS

The data presented four very clear and strong general messages:

- **The managers in Australia, North America, and the British Isles are more similar to each other than different from each other in their approach to the leadership function.**
- **The South African managers have a unique leadership style.**
- **There are practically no differences in leadership approach between US and Canadian managers.**
- **Australian managers are more like their US and Canadian counterparts than like managers from the British Isles.**

Underneath these broad generalizations, the details of the data present many interesting insights into the similarities and differences in approach to leadership in these countries. Some of the findings were predictable, while some were quite surprising.

Comparison of Leadership Approach Across Countries

The behavior of these Anglo-Saxon managers was most similar on the following dimensions:

- The extent to which the managers delegate important activities to others and give their teams sufficient autonomy to exercise their own judgement.
- The amount of feedback on performance they give to others.
- Their comfort level in the leadership role; that is, their willingness to be in positions of authority, to take charge, and to lead and direct the efforts of others

The Australian, Canadian, UK/Ireland, and US managers were also very similar in terms of:

- Their orientation toward acting in an outgoing, friendly and informal manner.

- The amount of emphasis they place on focusing on tactical, short-term, and practical strategies.

On these two measures, the South Africans were remarkably different, rating themselves much lower in terms of being outgoing, but much more oriented toward a hands-on approach to their leadership role.

The largest differences among the managers were found in four areas:

- Their ability to be persuasive, building commitment by being convincing and winning others over to their point of view.
- Their respect for the ideas and opinions of people in authority.
- Their willingness to co-operate with others, deferring on personal objectives in order to accommodate the needs and interests of others.
- The extent to which they take a traditional approach, using the lessons of the past to ensure predictability, reinforce the status quo, and minimize risk

Let's look at each of these differences in greater detail.

Ability to Persuade Others

One of the key skills a leader needs to implement a his/her vision for the organization is the ability to persuade others to work together to execute on the leader's ideas and initiatives. The managers from the UK and South Africa scored themselves significantly higher on this leadership attribute than did the managers from Australia, Canada, and the US. Individuals who score high are often perceived as using language effectively, being sensitive to and knowledgeable about political realities, and being willing to use this to their advantage. There is a definite element of selling associated with this behavior. Individuals who score lower tend to want others to judge their actions rather than their words. Their style may be perceived as sincere and candid, or overly direct and blunt.

Willingness to Defer to Those in Positions of Authority

Leaders must be able to initiate change and make decisions. But they also need to be responsive to colleagues higher up in the organization. Individuals who score high on this leadership dimension are inclined to consult with and listen to their boss, follow rules, and work well within a hierarchy. On this leadership dimension, the US and Canadian managers rated themselves the highest. The Australian managers rated themselves somewhat lower, followed by the British and Irish managers. South

African leaders, however, rated themselves significantly lower than any of the other groups, indicating a reluctance to be influenced by or listen to those in authority. They are not likely to accept a decision as “right” or “good” simply because it was made by someone at a higher level.

Achieving Organizational Goals through Co-operation

There was also a great deal of variance among the scores of the five management groups in terms of their willingness to accommodate themselves to the needs of others. The Canadian and US leaders, who scored the highest, are more oriented toward compromise and may be looked upon as good team members. Conversely, the South African and British managers, who scored much lower, are more apt to be focused on their own priorities and less concerned with being helpful to others. The Australians, who fell in between, may be best at balancing the needs of the organization while still focusing on accomplishing their own objectives.

Learning from Past Experience

Once again, the US and Canadian managers scored highest in their orientation toward minimizing risk through building on previous experience. The UK managers showed much less patience with the past and much more focus on the present. They are likely to begin anew with each issue rather than looking for tried and true solutions. In fact, they may be much more flexible and open to change than the other groups in the study. The Australians and the South Africans fell between the UK and North American managers on this leadership characteristic.

THE SOUTH AFRICAN PROFILE:

As mentioned earlier, the South African leaders have the most distinctive profile of the five groups included in this study. Our research does not provide an explanation for the differences found, but we surmise that the unique history and political development of South Africa, along with the influence of both Dutch and indigenous cultures, may account for the development of their singular leadership style. In addition, a larger percentage of the South African leaders included in the study hold higher level positions in their organizations than do managers from the other countries. The need for varying leadership strategies at different organizational levels may have also impacted the findings.

In comparison to other leaders, the South Africans rated themselves as:

- **more innovative:** and therefore more comfortable in fast changing environments, more willing to take risks and to consider new and untested approaches.

- **more strategic:** taking a long-range, broad approach to problem solving and decision making.
- **highly persuasive:** effectively using language and political savvy to get ideas adopted.
- **much less outgoing:** far less likely to establish free and easygoing relationships, more difficult to get to know, and possibly seen as somewhat distant or aloof.
- **more energetic:** and apt to operate with a good deal of excitement, with a capacity to keep others enthusiastic and involved in their vision for the organization.
- **more oriented toward control:** taking nothing for granted, and following up to make sure expectations are met.
- **holding high expectations:** much more apt to have a strong orientation toward achievement, pushing for ever higher levels of accomplishment from themselves and others.
- **much less co-operation:** unwilling to defer performance on their own objectives in order to assist colleagues with theirs.
- **very low on respect for authority:** and less orientation toward being loyal to organizations.
- **less empathetic:** not given to establishing close bonds with those they work with or becoming personally involved with them, remaining more distant and more objective.

CONCLUSIONS

The current research concludes that the managers from four of the five countries studied are more alike than different in their management style and behaviors. However, the individual geographies, histories, and vantage points of the five countries have also created differences in approach on key measures of leadership behavior and orientation. When working across Anglo-Saxon cultures, leaders should be sensitive to the fact that although they share many characteristics (the most obvious being language), this does not mean that there are no differences. Divergent approaches to common business and leadership dilemmas may at times create conflicts that overshadow the benefits of a shared cultural heritage.

About the Authors:

Helen Peters, M.A., is former Managing Director (EMEA), Management Research Group, Munich, Germany and now runs her own coaching and consulting practice in the Silicon Valley.

Robert I. Kabacoff, Ph.D., is V.P. of Research and Development, Management Research Group, Portland, Maine.

Results of other MRG studies on leadership can be found on the MRG web site at www.mrg.com.



Management Research Group®
Ardeen Mews, 10/11 Marine Terrace
Dun Laoghaire, Co. Dublin
Ireland
Telephone: +353 1 280 4430
Fax: +353 1 280 4434
e-mail: info@mrg.com

Management Research Group®
14 York Street, Suite 301
Portland, Maine 04101 USA
Telephone: + (207) 775-2173
Fax: + (207) 775-6796
e-mail: info@mrg.com