Summary

This article briefly describes a recent study conducted by Management Research Group, comparing the leadership practices of 96,000 leaders in 26 countries. Common leadership practices were found to vary substantially by country. In particular, leaders and managers differed significantly in their approach to problem solving, initiating action, managing change, and building teams. Understanding these differences is an important component in successful leadership across geographic boundaries.

Introduction

With the growth of globalization, the boundaries between countries are becoming increasingly permeable. Businesses are likely to exist across political boundaries, and those that do not must engage successfully on a global stage in order to compete. In this new environment, leaders are faced with the challenge of working with and successfully leading teams of individuals who come from widely disparate backgrounds and cultures. Understanding how individuals in other cultures approach the task of leadership and management is a key first step in building mutually effective and satisfying interactions throughout the organization. This is especially important for leaders given the task of building effective cross-national teams. Even in cases in which the team exists entirely within one country, the increase of labor migration makes it likely that there will still be individuals from more than one culture in the mix.

A fundamental component of Management Research Group’s (MRG) mission is to provide organizations and OD consultants with assessment tools that can be used globally for leadership and organizational development. In a recent investigation of country differences in leadership, we studied the leadership/management practices of 96,000 leaders in 26 countries, 8000 organizations, and 30 industries over a 10 year period.

Each participant completed the Leadership Effectiveness Analysis™ (LEA) as part of ongoing organizational development activities. The LEA is a broadly descriptive assessment, describing those fundamental management and leadership practices and behaviors most commonly found in a wide range of managerial settings and cultures. Specifically, the LEA measures twenty-two leadership practices in six functional areas: Creating a Vision, Developing Followership, Implementing the Vision, Following Through, Achieving Results, and Team Playing (see Table 1).

The underlying LEA model is descriptive rather than prescriptive. The assessment describes behaviors and practices, rather than competencies. The model assumes that the effectiveness of any specific
leadership practice depends on the context in which it occurs—the broader culture, the organizational culture, the managerial role, unique aspects of the situation, and the individual characteristics (e.g., personality, ability) of the manager and the people he or she works with. Additionally, the model assumes that each leadership practice or behavior has assets and liabilities, with effectiveness again depending on the specific context.

The leadership practices included in the LEA model are seen as fundamental in the sense that they describe important aspects of the management/leadership role, independent of time and culture. While the emphasis on some behaviors may wax or wane according to leadership fads, the basic set of practices does not vary significantly. Thus, transformational leadership may be seen as a combination of Persuasive, Excitement, Management Focus, Communication, Consensual, and low Restraint. Other types of leadership would be described by a different combination of practices. However, the underlying leadership practices exist to varying degrees in most managerial settings.

**Findings**

Leadership practices were found to vary widely by country. One approach to describing common similarities and differences among countries is cluster analysis. In the current context, cluster analysis was used to group countries into groups (called clusters) so that countries within a cluster are more similar to each other than they are to countries in other clusters. The results are summarized in Figure 1.

![Figure 1. Similarities among countries based on leadership practices. Countries with the same circles are more similar to each other than they are to countries outside their circles. Results are based on hierarchical clustering.](image-url)
Countries that are within the same circles tend to be more similar to each other than they are to countries outside these circles. For example, Canada and the United States are similar, as is Australia and New Zealand. All four countries are more similar to each other than they are to Singapore. All five countries are more similar to each other than they are to Denmark, and so on.

We can see this more clearly by plotting the median country profiles against each other. In Figure 2, the median leadership profiles of China and Mexico are plotted against each other. Scores on each leadership practice are percentile ranks relative to a large US business population. As you can see, the profiles are rather similar (the configuration or shape is consistent between the two profiles).

Leaders in both countries tend to emphasize a leadership approach that includes the use of effective persuasion to build commitment to their ideas and initiative (Persuasive), a hands-on short range practical approach to tasks (Tactical), and a focus on tracking to assure that assigned tasks are accomplished (Control) completely and on time.

![Figure 2. Median LEA profiles for China and Mexico. These leadership profiles are quite similar.](image-url)
In contrast, the leadership profiles of the United Kingdom and South Africa differ markedly (Figure 3). Very large differences (20-30 percentile points) are observed with regard to Strategic, Outgoing, Production, and Cooperation. Compared with the United Kingdom, leaders in South Africa are more likely to emphasize the importance of analyzing the current and future impact of decisions (Strategic) and leading by setting and pushing to meet aggressive goals (Production). Compared with South African leaders, leaders in the United Kingdom are more likely to lead in an extroverted, informal, and gregarious manner (Outgoing) and accommodate to the needs and interests of others in order to obtain organizational goals (Cooperation).

The data displayed in Figure 3 suggest that leaders in the United Kingdom may find leaders in South Africa to be overly cerebral and somewhat aggressive in their approach. In contrast, South African leaders may find United Kingdom leaders to be overly informal and team oriented. In fact each of the behaviors assessed can be beneficial for organizational effectiveness. However, if leaders come together with differing expectations, misunderstands and unwarranted inferences are easily made.

It is important to note that the goal of cross cultural research is not the promotion of stereotypes. Leaders within countries obviously differ from each other with regard to approach and emphasis. The
purpose of the current research to assess the importance of country differences in understanding the myriad ways human beings approach the role of leader. It can help to identify possible points of friction and misunderstanding.

While there is insufficient space to present the similarities and differences among all 26 countries on each leadership practice, we hope that this short article has piqued your interest. There is ample evidence that leaders differ in their fundamental behaviors by geographic region, and an understanding of these differences is important for organizations intending to work effectively in global environments.

**Conclusions**

It is our strong contention, backed by years of experience and research, that there is no one single right or best way to lead. Effective leadership depends on the context—the characteristics of the situation, the task, and the people involved. Effective leaders and managers are aware of these components and are able to meld their needs with the diverse needs and expectations of others to achieve desirable results. Understanding how others operate in business settings is key to being able to present one’s ideas and goals in a manner that they will understand and accept. Understanding differences can help a leader to forge a working relationship with others that is comfortable and mutually beneficial. Finally, developing sensitivity to the different leadership approaches that others use can help build a team of individuals who benefit and gain strength from their diversity.

Increasing globalization and diverse workforces are a fact of life. In order to succeed, managers must work effectively with individuals from many countries—individuals who have different backgrounds, beliefs, experiences, and approaches to leadership. The challenge for managers is to identify how these differences can strengthen their teams and organizations, and to adopt approaches that reduce resistance or misunderstanding and forge stronger and mutually beneficial working relationships.

**Going Further**

MRG has completed extensive research on the impact of culture, gender and generation on leadership approach and effectiveness. For more information on country differences in leadership, you may find the following articles useful:


- Kabacoff, R. Senior best leadership practices by country.
• Peters, Helen. & Kabacoff, R. Going global: What U.S. and European leaders need to know about each other.

• Peters, H., & Kabacoff, R. Shared beginnings and diverse histories: A comparison of leadership behavior in five countries with Anglo-Saxon cultures.

• Peters, H., & Kabacoff, R. Global or local: The impact of country culture on leadership style in Europe.
Leading Across Boundaries
Country Differences in Leadership and Why It Matters

CREATING A VISION
Conservative: Studying problems in light of past practices to ensure predictability, reinforce the status quo and minimize risk.

Innovative: Feeling comfortable in fast changing environments; being willing to take risks and to consider new and untested approaches.

Technical: Acquiring and maintaining in-depth knowledge in your field or area of focus; using your expertise and specialized knowledge to study issues and draw conclusions.

Self: Emphasizing the importance of making decisions independently; looking to yourself as the prime vehicle for decision-making.

Strategic: Taking a long-range, broad approach to problem solving and decision making through objective analysis, thinking ahead, and planning.

Outgoing: Acting in an extroverted, friendly and informal manner; showing a capacity to quickly establish free and easy interpersonal relationships.

Excitement: Operating with a good deal of energy, intensity, and emotional expression; having a capacity for keeping others enthusiastic and involved.

Restraint: Maintaining a low-key, understated and quiet interpersonal demeanor by working to control your emotional expression.

DEVELOPING FOLLOWERSHIP
Persuasive: Building commitment by convincing others and winning them over to your point of view.

Implementing the Vision
Structuring: Adopting a systematic and organized approach; preferring to work in a precise, methodical manner; developing and utilizing guidelines and procedures.

Tactical: Emphasizing the production of immediate results by focusing on short-range, hands-on, practical strategies.

Communication: Stating clearly what you want and expect from others; clearly expressing your thoughts and ideas; maintaining a precise and constant flow of information.

Delegation: Enlisting the talents of others to help meet objectives by giving them important activities and sufficient autonomy to exercise their own judgment.

FOLLOWING THROUGH
Control: Adopting an approach in which you take nothing for granted, set deadlines for certain actions and are persistent in monitoring the progress of activities to ensure that they are completed on schedule.

Feedback: Letting others know in a straightforward manner what you think of them, how well they have performed and if they have met your needs and expectations.

ACHIEVING RESULTS
Management Focus: Seeking to exert influence by being in positions of authority, taking charge, and leading and directing the efforts of others.

Dominant: Pushing vigorously to achieve results through an approach which is forceful, assertive and competitive.

Production: Adopting a strong orientation toward achievement; holding high expectations for yourself and others; pushing yourself and others to achieve at high levels.

TEAM PLAYING
Cooperation: Accommodating the needs and interests of others by being willing to defer performance on your own objectives in order to assist colleagues with theirs.

Consensual: Valuing the ideas and opinions of others and collecting their input as part of your decision-making process.

Empathy: Demonstrating an active concern for people and their needs by forming close and supportive relationships with others.