



## What Kind of Leaders Do People Love?

Ones that look like them. As Freud noted, people are basically narcissists. One needs to look no further than the leadership ranks of his or her organisation to find anecdotal evidence. Indeed, extensive academic research shows leaders are especially enamoured with their own capabilities. Not surprisingly, they tend to attract and select people who are comparable to them.

The biases in play are reinforced by subordinates who more readily see leadership potential in colleagues who behave similarly to those already in power. When these findings are applied to a global context, a foundation for explaining cross-cultural differences in leadership expectations begins to emerge.

Companies headquartered in places such as Western Europe, US and Australia require their leaders to be ambitious. These organisations look for self-starters who independently take initiative. Their high-potential evaluation and leadership selection models evidence these criteria. Military-turned-business mantras like “lead from the front”, and “find the highest hill” have long illustrated these expectations. In these locations ambition is a factor that contributes to both leadership emergence and leadership effectiveness.

Multinational Corporations (MNCs) headquartered in these places will assume employees who do not exhibit these characteristics are not “leader-like.” Yet those who tend to emerge as leaders in Northeast Asia (e.g. Japan, Mainland China, and South Korea) as well as in locations such as Thailand demonstrate their drive in a different way. In these locales, dependability, self-discipline and general achievement-orientation are more acceptable ways to demonstrate one’s intrinsic

motivation. Since consensus must be achieved for business processes to continue uninterrupted (e.g., resource management, negotiation, conflict resolution) individualistic pursuit is seen as counterproductive.

Differences in leadership behaviours present obvious problems for MNCs trying to deploy a consistent competency model for their managers and executives worldwide. The behaviours that support perceptions of employee drive, as well as an acceptable communication style and which derailment characteristics are more or less tolerated, can vary by country. As a result, many high potentials from these locations are passed over. Assessing leaders (<https://www.hcli.org/research/hr-leadership-stall-points-0>) across the world with a rigidly mapped set of behaviours will do better to ensure headquarters' expectations are met; however, leaders who emerge as a result are more vulnerable to organisational "organ rejection" due to misaligned or even opposing expectations of in-country subordinates.

The benefits and drawbacks of a singular versus adaptable leadership assessment model has been fodder for decades of debate. What also needs to be addressed is the tendency to generalise Asia. When what amounts to a country-level leadership characteristic (<https://hbr.org/2016/05/what-leadership-looks-like-in-different-cultures>) is misunderstood, or even when culturally sensitive leadership evaluation is advocated, the entire continent of Asia is particularly susceptible to oversimplification. Concepts like "Confucian Asia" and "Asian Management Style" popularised in the literature are evidence of this persistent issue.

Singapore is especially affected by sweeping generalisations of organisational leadership in Asia. What seem to be comparable experiences with stakeholders from China and Japan can lead managers from the US, EU or Australia to extend their assumptions to other regional powerhouses like Singapore and Hong Kong. If countries are more culturally similar to each other than HQ, so the thinking goes, then the leadership expectations should be as well. Yet this perspective completely ignores sociological, political and economic movements that have serious implications on how organisations have and continue to conduct business, and therefore which leadership style tends to thrive.

For example, the Chinese Communist party's early state-owned system forced the entire working population to consider relations with coworkers equal to those with family members; a generation of educated managers was lost during the Cultural Revolution; additionally, much of China's current labour force has been defined in part by the one child policy, with parents prioritising their only child's educational security at the expense of early professional interaction.

It is no coincidence that organisational leaders in Mainland China operate according to rules and expectations very different from Singapore's, whose business landscape has its own history and influences. There are real, measurable differences in the practices and customs of workplaces in Mainland China and Singapore, despite managers there having somewhat similar cultural identities. At the same time, executives from geographically distant territories with seemingly dissimilar cultural expectations (e.g., Singapore and UK) tend to reward similar types of leaders in the

workplace. This is because socio-economic factors on a national level (e.g., The Cultural Revolution in Mainland China or British colonial influence in Singapore) have as much, if not more to do with shaping local leadership expectations in the workplace than cultural identity.

To understand these nuances in finer detail, variance in leadership expectations across Asia should be examined through locally sourced personality data. If the assessments (<http://www.hoganassessments.com/>) used are based on sound theory and modeling, and if they predict workplace outcomes and feature a translation process that adheres to best practices, the results can be easily applied to real world talent evaluation and competency development.

Although leadership is a topic that attracts universal interests, it seems that the meaning and understanding of what constitutes leadership is somewhat different in each cultural context. One size does not fit all across the world or across Asia. Predictive data that highlight the nuances in leadership drive, communication style and derailment tendencies are imperative to successful global high potential programs, selection and development of regional managers, international merger and acquisition (M&A) management due diligence, and expatriate or talent relocation assignments. To believe one's local leadership style is the only way to achieve success is to truly embrace the narcissistic tendencies Sigmund warned us about.

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