Perceptions of Effective Leaders: Cross Cultural Influences?

Uma D. Jogulu and Glenice J. Wood

COMMON
GROUND

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Abstract: This paper suggests that values, attitudes and behaviours are strongly culture specific. Therefore, it is contended that if culture exerts an influence in behaviours and attitudes of people it will be evident in the way leadership is perceived or traits of effective leadership is distinguished in organisations around the world. In the Western leadership literature, effective leadership appears to be correlated with organisational performance and profitability, subordinate extra effort and subordinate satisfaction with the leader. The Western literature also suggests that the measure of effective leadership at an individual level involve rating "by subordinates, superiors and peers and leaders themselves" (Eagly, Karau, & Makhijani, 1995, p. 128). However, there is limited knowledge and specific details of leadership characteristics that may constitute effective leadership practices outside the West, nor how universal the Western theories and models may be beyond the Western settings. There is a need to expand the existing knowledge and findings to understand whether Western leadership behaviours and practices are acceptable, appropriate or relevant in other cultures. In order to address this broad topic, the present paper will explore the perceptions of effective leadership in two diverse cultures of Malaysia and Australia. The middle managers in four industry types participated in the present research and the study found differences within and between female and male middle managers in both countries in terms of how leadership effectiveness is perceived and evaluated.

Keywords: National Culture, Leadership Effectiveness, Gender

Introduction

LEADERSHIP HAS BEEN described as "one of the most observed and least understood phenomena on earth" (Burns, 1978 p.3), and the quest to enhance the understanding of leadership and recognise practices that constitutes effective leadership has led to an enormous body of research and literature which has spanned centuries. To date Western research dominates the theories and models which describe leadership styles and evaluations of effective leadership practices in the literature. There is limited knowledge and specific details of leadership characteristics that constitute effective leadership practices outside the West, and limited understanding of how universal the Western theories and models are outside Western settings.

In fact, a considerable number of studies in the relevant literature acknowledge that culture shapes values, attitudes and behaviours of people (Alves, Lovelace, Manz, Matsypura, Toyasaki, & Ke, 2006; Hofstede, 1991, 2001, 2003, 2006; Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; House, Hanges, Ruiz-Quintanilla, Dorfman, Javidan, & Dickson, 1999) and that different cultures influence views and expectations with respect to the way things 'ought to be done'. For example, recent research suggest that the early history of Malaysia and the early colonisation inheritance in Australia had a strong influence on the formation of the culture of both nations which subsequently shaped the values, beliefs and attitudes that people hold (Jogulu & Wood, 2008). It is likely that these culture specific behaviours such as independence and dislike of authority in Australia and acceptance of inequality in society and hierarchies in organisations in Malaysia has been the manifestation of such early history. In contemporary terms such values and attitudes may continue to impact on the behaviours and expectations held towards women and men, particularly where roles of authority and power are evident.

In addition, such influences will impact on the evaluation of leadership effectiveness as well as the perceptions of what constitutes effective leadership. However, there is still a lack of understanding about leadership effectiveness outside the Western paradigm. Therefore, there is a need to expand the existing knowledge base and findings in order to understand whether Western definitions of effective leadership are acceptable, appropriate or even relevant in other cultures.

In order to address this broad research topic, this paper focuses on exploring the perceptions of middle managers originating from two diverse countries. Views and perspectives of the two diverse groups of managers will be compared and contrasted to explore perceptions held toward leadership effectiveness. It is possible that national cultures are likely to have an impact on human behaviours and interrelation-

ships in general (Hofstede, 1980) as well as on organisational leadership in particular (House *et al.*, 2004). A comprehensive literature review which highlights the development of what constitutes leadership effectiveness is presented below.

Leadership Effectiveness

Early leadership theories defined leadership "as an interpersonal influence, exercised in situations and directed, through the communication process, toward the attainment of a specified goal or goals" (Tannenbaum, Weschler, & Massarik, 1961, p. 24) and as "any act of influence on a matter of organizational relevance" (Katz & Kahn, 1966, p. 344). Many early definitions of leadership emphasised the significant role *influence* played in distinguishing a person who is performing the function of leadership suggesting that control of employees was a necessary element of effective leadership (Jogulu & Wood, 2006).

However, more recently, the extensive Globe study which encompasses cross-comparative research findings in the area of organisational leadership has elaborated on this definition by describing leadership as "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members" (House *et al.*, 2004, p. 56). Therefore, recent definition of leadership that constitute leadership effectiveness now extend beyond influence to include motivation and enabling of others to help achieve organisational goals.

In addition, the focus of effective leadership has recently been linked to organisational success (Ogbonna & Harris, 2000) with a view that effective leaders are believed to determine such organisational success (Fiedler, 1996; Ogbonna & Harris, 2000). Organisational success is strongly associated with transformational leadership (Bycio, Hackett, & Allen, 1995; Howell & Avolio, 1993) and leadership effectiveness appears to be correlated with a transformational leadership style, subordinate extra effort and subordinate satisfaction with the leader (Lowe, Kroeck, & Sivasubramaniam, 1996; Niehoff, Enz, & Grover, 1990; Seltzer & Bass, 1990).

Evidence in the literature indicates that transformational leadership is the most effective way of leading people in contemporary organisational settings because transformational leaders are believed to accomplish greater levels of success in the workplace compared to others, and are often promoted in their roles (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999; Eagly, Johannesen-Schmidt, & van Engen, 2003; Manning, 2002; Ogbonna & Harris, 2000). More significantly, transformational leaders are believed to produce better financial results (Bass, 1997) and hence the broad definition of leadership effectiveness is an "outcome of leaders' behaviour rather than a particular type of behaviour" (Eagly *et al.*, 1995 p.128). Such direct outcomes of leadership effectiveness are also evident in followers' job satisfaction, workplace attitudes and behaviours, level of commitment to the organisation and motivation towards the job (Howell & Costley, 2006).

In addition to the explicit financial outcomes of effective leadership, there will also be ratings "by subordinates, superiors and peers and leaders themselves" (Eagly *et al.*, 1995, p. 128) to provide another measure of leader's effectiveness. For example, employee evaluation is reported to be positive when the leader is described as effective because peers and subordinates find working more satisfying and fulfilling (Bass, 1997, Hater & Bass, 1988). In particular, effective leaders are believed to exhibit attitudes and behaviours that can influence the follower's motivation, commitment and overall dedication towards work. It is likely that when a leader is supportive, nurturing, encouraging and considerate towards followers, employees will experience higher job satisfaction, which will subsequently result in better attendance to work, low likelihood of leaving the organisation and fewer grievances (Howell & Costley, 2006). These leader behaviours are considered essential for creating an environment that is conducive and supportive to work for both subordinates and superiors.

However, the above conclusions and the overall discussion on leadership effectiveness in the management literature so far have predominantly originated from a Western perspective. It is likely that perceptions of leadership effectiveness vary across cultures in order to suit the needs of the diverse workforce as well as the culture specific organisational context. Furthermore, there is little knowledge about whether the Western characteristics that constitute effective leadership such as motivating and inspiring employees, sharing of decision making as well as organisational power or empowerment of subordinates are universally attributed to all cultural surroundings. Therefore, comparing perceptions of middle managers from two diverse cultures may shed light on and improve our understanding of behaviours that constitutes effective leadership in general. As a result the following research questions are posed:

RQ1: Will the perceptions that constitute effective leadership behaviours vary between Malaysian and Australian middle managers?

RQ2: Will the perceptions that constitute effective leadership vary between female and male middle managers in Malaysia and Australia?

RQ3: Will the description of effective leadership found in the Western literature (i.e. collaboration, participative and empowerment of subordinates) be reflected in the responses of the Australian and Malaysian middle managers?

Methodology

The research was carried out in nine organisations in Malaysia and Australia. Four similar industries in both countries were compared. These industries are manufacturing, transport, postal and warehousing, finance and insurance services and information media and telecommunications. The research adopted a probability sampling design because all the respondents in the study are middle managers, hence every middle manager in the participating organisation had a high probability of being selected to complete the survey.

The sample for this study consisted of female and male middle managers, drawn from either multinational organisations with representation in both countries or organisations from the same industry classification in both countries. The justification for using the above selection criteria was to clarify whether middle managers in similar industries, but in different countries, will perceive effective leadership as similar or different. A total number of 324 respondents participated in the quantitative research by filling in the survey (191 completed surveys from Malaysia and 133 from Australia). The response rate in Malaysia was 76% and in Australia, 67%. In addition, 39 semi-structured interviews were conducted (16 Malaysian managers and 23 Australian managers).

The questionnaires were distributed through the various Human Resources departments of the participating organisations. The interview sample was drawn from respondents who indicated their willingness to participate in a follow up research on a final question on the survey. In both the quantitative and qualitative stages, a covering letter was attached to introduce the researchers, purpose of the study and a clear indication of ethics approval to ensure confidentiality, and anonymity.

Results

Table 1 presents the demographic characteristics of the sample. The analysis of the demographic data in the sample shows that Malaysian women in management are younger, less qualified compared to their male counterparts and similar proportions were married or single and more than half were childless. In contrast, the Australian women in management are of a similar age to their male counterparts, are more qualified (especially at postgraduate level) compared to their male colleagues and are likely to be in a couple arrangement. In addition, almost half of them do not have children.

Table 1: Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

		Malaysia		Australia	
Sex		Male (%)	Female (%)	Male (%)	Female (%)
Age	Under 30	25	28	16	20
	31-34	14	26	16	14
	35-39	19	12	20	21
	40-44	21	13	17	20
	45-49	11	12	13	16
	50-54	8	7	10	9
	55-59	2	1	8	0
Education Qualification	Below Year 12 Secondary School	5	10	8	12
	Year 12 and High School	N/A	N/A	14	14
	TAFE or College/Diploma	17	24	14	9
	Undergraduate Degree	51	34	37	25
	Postgraduate Degree	19	21	22	40
	Others (e.g. Secretarial course, ACCA, CIMA,	8	11	4	0
Living Arrangement	Single (including divorced, separated, widowed)	18	49	15	23
	Married or Partnership	81	51	84	74
	Others (e.g. Living with parents, In a relationship but not legally married/partnered	1	0	1	3
Number of children	No children	34	60	32	46
	1 to 2 children	40	29	46	40
	More than 3 children	26	11	22	14

To explore perceptions of effective leadership, managers in the Malaysian and Australian sample were asked to describe "effective leadership" in their own words. This was an open ended question and the responses were subjected to a content analysis which identified five categories or themes. The themes were: inspirational, role model, empower and develop staff, ability to have a vision and lead others towards the vision, and ability to lead and manage.

As reported in Table 2, the majority of the participants in Malaysia indicated that an ability to lead and manage was an important characteristic when considering effective leadership. That is, 34 percent of men and 25 percent of women managers in the Malaysian sample concurred with this perspective. Only 16 percent of male and 9 percent of female managers described effective leadership in terms of empowering and development of staff. A further 15% of male managers and five percent of female managers viewed effective leadership as an ability to have a vision and to lead the followers towards achieving the vision. Of interest is the finding that the overall Malaysian sample in the present research did not view effective leadership as an act of being 'inspirational' (males=2%; females=5%). Being a role model was highlighted by only 11 percent of male and 2 percent of female managers in the sample. The chi-square test reported a significant correlation (χ^2=26.954; df =12; p<.01). In particular, the Malaysian male managers were more likely to describe effective leadership as an ability to lead and manage compared to their female counterparts.

Table 2: Perceptions of Effective Leadership Characteristics by Country and Sex

	Malaysia		Australia	
	Male	Female	Male	Female
Ability to lead and manage	34%	25%	17%	10%
Empower and develop staff	16%	9%	21%	18%
Ability to have a vision and lead the followers towards the vision	15%	5%	23%	34%
Inspirational	2%	5%	13%	22%
Role model	11%	2%	17%	16%

In comparison, the most frequent response by the Australian sample described effective leadership as an ability to have a vision and lead the followers towards the vision. That is, almost a quarter of the male managers (23%) and more than a third of the female managers (34%) expressed this view. In addition 21 percent of males and 18 percent of females perceived effective leadership as a capacity to empower and develop staff or subordinates. 'Inspirational' characteristics were also noted by 13 percent of males and 22 percent of females in the sample as equating with effective leadership. Almost similar proportion of male (17%) and female (16%) managers indicated that being a role model was important in effective leadership behaviours in general. Fewer Australian female managers (10%) compared to male managers (17%) indicated that the ability to manage and lead was important. Chi-square tests did not indicate significant differences between gender and the responses that described effective leadership in the Australian sample. Of interest is that the Malaysian sample's views on the latter four categories (i.e. having a vision and leading followers towards the vision, empowering and developing staff, inspirational and being a role model) were all considerably lower than the Australian sample responses. That is, it appears that the Malaysian female and male managers place less importance on these characteristics when considering effective leadership.

Qualitative Results

In addition to the above open question on the survey, interviews were conducted with 39 respondents. In a semi-structured interview, interviewees were asked "How would you describe the most effective leader in your department?" This question was designed to ascertain the interviewee's personal views and perceptions relating to an effective leader in their department or organisation. The highest proportion of respondents in both countries (3 females and 6 males in the Malaysian sample and 5 females and 4 males in the Australian sample) indicated that the ability to communicate well was crucial in order to be effective. In order to elaborate on what respondents meant by "communicate well" probing techniques were utilised.

The following are a selection of responses by the Malaysian male managers in relation to leadership effectiveness, in which the ability to communicate well is seen as paramount.

She is a people person, and keen on developing others. Someone who has a heart although result oriented, communicates well too and I must

say that she is just as capable as her male counterparts or sometimes better in managing the employees

He has the real personality, he goes down to the ground and relates to the people, tells people what to do and what not to do, in a way it helps because he knows what people at lower level are thinking or doing and that maybe useful. Upward communication if you like

In contrast, the Malaysian female managers' responses demonstrated subtle views that equate effective leadership with an ability to correct inappropriate actions as they occur, as well as a capacity to direct subordinates appropriately. There is an indication that leader's should be able to act as a father figure. The following quotes reflect this view:

He tells us his plans and how it should be done. He communicates the strategy well and expects to have the job done by such and such a day. A bit like a father telling children what to do, and how to do it

His communication and PR is excellent, he recognises and appreciates good work and at the same time corrects when we make mistakes

In comparison, the views expressed by the Australian managers in the sample appeared to be slightly different to their Malaysian counterparts. In particular, the responses acknowledged the need for characteristics such as respect, trust, engaging with staff, being an inspirational role model as well as the ability to envisage the future of organisational and personal responsibilities as essential. These interviewees believed that the above attributes should be evident in individuals who are effective leaders. The following views were highlighted by the male middle managers in the Australian sample:

I would say, he is obviously setting a vision for us, his communication skills are fantastic, he personally runs the sessions for all employees, he communicates where the business is heading and where he is trying to take us and how to keep the morale up during difficult times. He is very impressive

My own manager is one example; he is quite good at communicating and understanding what is going on in the organisation. The senior management in here somehow have not really communicated the vision but they definitely managed to set parameters around things that control and make the organisation much more cost efficient

He has the ability to understand the issues at hand and to summarise them quickly with very little explanation and make a decision and give

advice or determine the way forward. You often go to your leader with a problem, it is a very common thing to do, you go to your boss and say look we have a problem with this and this is how I see it. An effective leader should be able to summarise that and understand it quickly, with very little explanation and give advice or determine the way forward. I certainly have experienced someone like that

The majority of the female respondents (6/7) held similar views to their male colleagues. In particular, they noted that a capacity to pay attention to the growth needs of staff, being available when subordinates need clarification, and showing personal interest in people are traits they considered necessary for effective leadership. Some of these views are presented in the following quotes:

She always takes time to talk personally to people, makes time for people, she knows a bit about the person she is talking to, she makes personal comments e.g. you look nice today or how are such and such going? She seems to have genuine interest in the individual

He has an extremely good sense of direction and how the business needs to proceed and how to get there. He makes decisions, and communicates those decisions with staff well, he is consultative but he takes the lead; he is very smart

Discussion and Conclusion

The results of this study highlighted some interesting similarities and differences between the managers in the two countries when describing leadership effectiveness. That is, both the female and male managers in the Malaysian sample described effective leadership as an ability to lead and manage. Qualitative responses also suggested that effective leaders are people who possess an ability to be in control of their staff, and who know how to supervise. In addition, there seems to be an underlying assumption that effectiveness equates to "doing things right" which was framed as an ability to manage in order to make sure followers are getting the job done. If the ability to manage and lead is seen as synonymous with effective leadership in Malaysia, it can be argued that Western research, which equates leadership effectiveness with characteristics such as collaboration in undertaking organisational tasks, sharing of power and authority, effective delegation of managerial duties, the ability to develop, support and encourage followers, is not applicable to explain leadership effectiveness in the Malaysian cultural context. What the Malaysian culture is defining as effective leadership appears to equate more with a directive, com-

mand and control style as opposed to the participative, nurturing style more favoured in Western literature.

In comparison, the results received from the Australian managers in the present study are different to their counterparts in Malaysia. Australian managers in the sample believed that effective leadership is an ability to have a vision and lead the followers towards that vision. In particular, female managers perceived that leaders with vision and ability to communicate the vision to the rest of the team were exemplifying effective leadership behaviours. Furthermore, Australian male managers defined effective leadership as a capacity to allow the empowerment and development of their subordinates. These views expressed by the male manager's are rather unexpected because these attributes do not distinctively reflect commonly ascribed masculine attributes. In fact, these latter skills are more readily associated with feminine characteristics. It is also interesting to note that male managers in the Australian sample appear to value what has been described as 'feminine leadership' characteristics (Rosener, 1990) when they define effective leadership. This is believed to benefit organisations when management practices "display a high amount of feminine characteristics" (Powell *et al.* 2002, p.189). Furthermore, according to Powell *et al.* (2002) the feminization of the contemporary leadership roles has led to a decrease in the valuing of masculine characteristics for managers

(Powell *et al.* 2002), and a recognition that organisations that embrace the feminine traits will survive in the future (Powell *et al.* 2002).

The overall findings of the present study highlight an awareness that culture plays an important role in influencing the perceptions that constitute effective leadership in different societies. It is evident that cultures exert a clear influence on the different views and expectations of individuals in a given society with respect to the way things ought to be done. In the area of leadership, attributes that constitute leadership effectiveness appeared to be divergent between Malaysian and Australian middle managers. To-date, studies from diverse cultural contexts have been minimal despite a vast body of literature generated in the field of leadership overall. This literature has led to an assumption that Western theories and models will enhance an understanding of leadership in organisations in general. The current research indicates that such assumption may be erroneous in other cultures. The results highlight that the characteristics of effective leadership are more likely to reflect the dominant style of command and control in cultures where a paternalistic leadership approach is favoured i.e. Malaysia. In comparison, in Australia which is a more egalitarian society, the participative approach which empowered staff, and the ability to lead followers towards a common vision, appeared to constitute leadership effectiveness.

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