
Multicultural Leadership

By Lothar Katz

Who do you consider your personal role model as a leader? Which characteristics make the person a role model?

These questions, frequently discussed in MBA classes, dish up interesting food for thought when it comes to multicultural leadership. Does a person's cultural background influence their definitions of great leadership? In other words, are the traits and behaviors that people expect from a good leader universal or culture-specific? What does the answer teach you about leading in a global environment?

It is easy to reach agreement over some exemplary leaders. With his vision, courage, and integrity, Nelson Mandela, for instance, makes almost everyone's list. By the same token, Kim Il Jong receives no mention, ever. Even the North Koreans he 'leads' seem to realize that Kim's leadership is substantially lacking.

These examples indicate that everyone, regardless of cultural, social, or political background, values certain important qualities. In politics, business and elsewhere, we all want those leading us to combine visionary thinking with a dose of realism, to be trustworthy and dependable, proactive and dynamic, optimistic and energizing.

Beyond such traits, however, what makes someone a great leader seems a bit more controversial when looking at different parts of the world.

Some Leadership Behaviors Are Viewed Differently across Cultures

Mahatma Gandhi probably enjoys greater respect in certain Western countries than he does in Asia, where many consider his style overly soft and conciliatory. These critics apparently appreciate a 'tougher' leadership style, one that is indeed common all around Asia. Another aspect often surfaces when discussing Ronald Reagan, the former movie actor who later served two terms as President of the United States. Across most of the political spectrum in the U.S., people cite decisiveness and 'street smarts' as some of his strong leadership qualities. In contrast, many continental Europeans view Reagan as rather narrow- and simple-minded. [Don't mistake this for a matter of political standpoints. US-Americans prefer smart leaders, as indicated by the person's actions, while Europeans tend to place greater emphasis on intellectual capability, as demonstrated through academic records, publications, speeches, etc.]

Similar differences in perceptions are found in the business world. Richard Branson, the British self-made man and serial entrepreneur, is widely admired in the U.K. and the U.S. for his unconventional business style and initiative. This very style meets with reservations in Southern Europe or Latin America, however, where a leader's behavior is expected to reflect class status, formal upbringing, and proper education.

At the core of such differences are cultural orientations shaping people's expectations of what constitutes great leadership. In the U.S., Canada, or Sweden, for instance, family background and upbringing matter relatively little to someone's perceived leadership potential. In these achievement-oriented cultures, the person's past accomplishments and demonstrated capabilities play a much more significant role. In contrast, highly ascrip-

tion-oriented cultures such as France, Mexico, or India place great emphasis on aspects such as family status, education, and titles.

Another cultural factor is something called power distance, defined as the degree to which inequality is accepted within a group or society. In much of Asia, the Arab World, Latin America, and other places where there tends to be a large power distance, most leaders are autocratic and somewhat aloof. Leveling with subordinates is often viewed negatively in these cultures. Members of cultures at the other end of the spectrum, such as Australians, Norwegians, or the Dutch, are likely put off by such behaviors and might even ridicule them.

Leading in a Global Environment

In light of diverse cultural orientations and the resulting differences in views of the 'right' leadership behavior, there can be little doubt that the most important ingredient to global leadership success is adaptability.

Few business leaders have demonstrated this more clearly than the current dual CEO of car makers Nissan and Renault: born in Brazil and raised in Lebanon, Carlos Ghosn spent most of his career working in the United States, Japan, and France. In each of these countries, he acquired a strong reputation for his willingness to learn about local customs and adapt to business practices without giving up his trademark characteristic of being a hard-charging and demanding leader. Working across cultures, he projects himself differently depending on cultural context, acting more autocratically in France and Japan than in the States, for example. As a result, he built a successful alliance between highly diverse partners, a feat few have ever accomplished.

None of this is magic. For the most part, all it took for Ghosn to achieve what he did was an unusual willingness to learn and adapt. If your own role requires you to lead across cultures, maybe Carlos Ghosn could be a role model?

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A seasoned former executive of Texas Instruments, a Fortune 500 company, Lothar regularly interacted with employees, customers, outsourcing partners, and third parties in more than 25 countries around the world. He teaches International Project and Risk Management at the University of Texas at Dallas' School of Management and is a Business Leadership Center Instructor at the Southern Methodist University's Cox School of Business.
