

Effective Cross Cultural Leadership for Attaining Organizational Learning, Performance and Business Results

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Abstract: With the increasing interplay among cultures, environments, followers, technology, distance, and time in global knowledge organizations, there is a growing recognition of the opportunities and challenges facing leadership. Although there is a widely espoused belief that leadership is the marshalling force behind organizational learning, the specific practices through which leaders influence learning across national cultures remain abstruse. As the success of global organizations increasingly hinges on intercultural cooperation, the development of a more rigorous, coherent, and comprehensive understanding of leadership practices effective for organizational learning across national cultures becomes critically exigent. This paper discusses a quantitative research study conducted to address the abovementioned gaps based on survey data collected from 206 knowledge workers in three engineering organizations in a large multinational high-technology firm headquartered in the United States. The unique contribution of this study was a fine-drawn model of the linkages between leadership and organizational learning across three nations: namely, the United States, Malaysia, and India.

Keywords: Leadership, Organizational Learning, National Culture, Knowledge Work, Learning Organization, and Cross-Cultural Research.

1. Introduction

Despite the widespread presumption that leaders have an efficacious influence on organizational learning (Lähteenmäki, Toivonen, & Mattila, 2001; Senge, 1994), few researchers have explored the specific practices through which leadership could stimulate organizational learning (Crossan & Hlland, 2002; King, 2002). The sparse body of research linking leadership and organizational learning lacks rigor and coherence because of the inconsistencies in the definitions, theories, and models of leadership and organizational learning (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Crossan, Lane, White, & Djurfeldt, 1995; Vera & Crossan, 2004). A systematic assessment of published work in the field makes it apparent that researchers have not given adequate attention to the dimensions of national cultures when studying the linkages between leadership and learning in organizations. The dearth of empirical research in cross-cultural leadership is attributable to the lack of well-accepted, universal theories of national cultures and to the inconsistencies in research methodologies (Wren, 1995). The mitigation of the challenges facing global organizations in the new millennium requires a clear-cut knowledge of specific leadership behaviors for guiding organizational learning strategies across nations.

This quantitative, correlational research study employed contemporary paradigms to build an empirical model of the relational linkages between leadership and organizational learning across three nations. Helped by the ability to digitalize intellectual property and telecommunicate, the United States, Malaysia, and India are among the nations collaborating to harness their collective potential (Koh, 2003), and such cross-cultural partnerships spanning national borders are resulting in new work formats and organizational arrangements for which the theories of the past provide little prescription (Goldsmith, Greenberg, Robertson, & Hu-Chan, 2003). Therefore, this research study investigated the specific linkages between leadership and organizational learning across the United States, Malaysia, and India. This research differed from precedent studies in that it used contemporary models of leadership and organizational learning: namely visionary leadership theory

(VLT) and organizational learning system model (OLSM) that reconcile several of the divergences extant in previous models.

2. Theoretical Background

2.1 Leadership

The preponderant perspectives in leadership theory have pivoted around traits, personalities, and competence (Stogdill, 1948); power (House, 1967; Machiavelli, 1513/1958; McClelland, 1987); leader-follower transactions (Burns, 1978); context (Bennis, 1961; Fielder, 1967; Hersey & Blanchard, 1969); values and service (Greenleaf, 1977; O'Toole, 1996); transformation (Bennis & Nanus, 1985; Kouzes & Posner, 1988; Tichy & Devanna, 1986); and culture (Schein, 1997; Trice & Beyer, 1991). Although each of these viewpoints has contributed fragmentary knowledge, no one theory has offered a widely embraced explanation of the leadership phenomena (Bennis & Nanus, 1985). Sashkin and Sashkin (2003) adopted an integrative approach to leadership by incorporating elements of leader behaviour, leader character, and leaders' actions aimed at building organizational culture. Their visionary leadership theory (VLT) was consistent with other approaches to transformational leadership, such as those of Kouzes and Posner (1988) and Bennis and Nanus (1985). It also drew on key aspects of other such approaches, such as those of House and Howell (1992), Jacques (1986), Kotter and Heskett (1992), and McClelland (1987). Although VLT broadly postulates the leadership factors that matter, the specific practices and behaviours through which leaders could catalyze learning, innovation, and quality in organizations require further delineation.

A systematic assessment of the literature makes it apparent that leadership researchers have not given adequate attention to the dimension of national culture. Hofstede (2001) underlined that "managers derive their *raison d'être* from the people managed: culturally, they are the followers of the people they lead, and their effectiveness depends on the latter" (p. 93). Despite the growing awareness of the significance of the influence of culture in leadership studies (Hofstede, 2001; Schein, 1997; Triandis, 2001), the cumulative research in the field is sparse and incongruent. The dearth of empirical research in cultural leadership is attributable to the lack of well-accepted, universal theories of national cultures, and to the inconsistencies in cross-cultural research methodologies (Wren, 1995).

2.2 Organizational Learning

Scholars and practitioners have propounded organizational learning as an indispensable constituent of strategic management based on its influence on business process improvement and innovation (Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Vera & Crossan, 2004). Despite its potential, the accumulative progress in the field has been slow, primarily due to epistemological and terminological deviations in the definition of organizational learning (Fiol & Lyle; Crossan et al., 1995). The divergence in the definition of organizational learning has stemmed from the underlying presuppositions of the scholars. Some theorists have defined organizational learning from an ontological perspective depending on whether the learning takes place at an individual, group, organizational, or interorganizational level, whereas others have defined organizational learning depending on the mechanics of learning (cognition and behaviour) or its relationship to performance (Crossan et al.). Schwandt and Marquardt (2000) adopted a sociological perspective of organizational learning in their systemic model to reconcile several of the dissimilarities extant in previous theories.

Schwandt and Marquardt (2000) proposed OLSM with underpinnings in Parsons' (1956) social action theory. OLSM allowed for the conceptualization of the organizational learning as a complex, dynamic, environment-aware system consisting of data processing, information processing, and knowledge processing subsystems (Johnson, 2000), wherein the learning system model consisted of four units responsible for acquisition, creation, sharing, and retention and reuse of knowledge.

The unification of these four units completes the organizational learning system, defined as a “system of actions, actors, symbols, and processes that enable an organization to transform information into valued knowledge, which in turn increases its long-run adaptive capacity” (Schwandt & Marquardt, p. 43). The OLSM envisaged organizational learning as a delicate and multidimensional sociological phenomenon composed of four building blocks: namely, external interface subsystem, action and reflection subsystem, dissemination and diffusion subsystem, and meaning and memory subsystem (Schwandt & Marquardt, 2000). Although OLSM broadly postulates the factors that matter in organizational learning, the specific predilections, practices, and processes for fostering learning, innovation, and quality management, particularly across cultures, require further demarcation.

3. Conceptual Framework

The purpose of this research study was to develop an empirical model of the relational linkages between leadership and organizational learning across the United States, Malaysia, and India. The study used a population of knowledge workers ($N = 750$) in three engineering organizations located in the United States, Malaysia, and India. These three organizations were part of a large multinational high-technology firm headquartered in the United States. The target population consisted of knowledge workers, defined as highly educated and skilled contributors (Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2002). This study used The Leadership Profile (TLP; Sashkin & Rosenbach, 1996) survey instrument to measure the construct of visionary leadership and the Organizational Action Survey (OAS; Johnson & Schwandt, 1998) survey instrument to measure the construct of organizational learning. Figure 1 illustrates the anatomy of this research study along with the postulated relational linkages between leadership and organizational learning. The research study tested 40 hypotheses based on the two questions.

Research Question 1: What is the nature of relationship between leadership and organizational learning?

Research Question 2: How does national culture influence a leader’s practices for organizational learning?

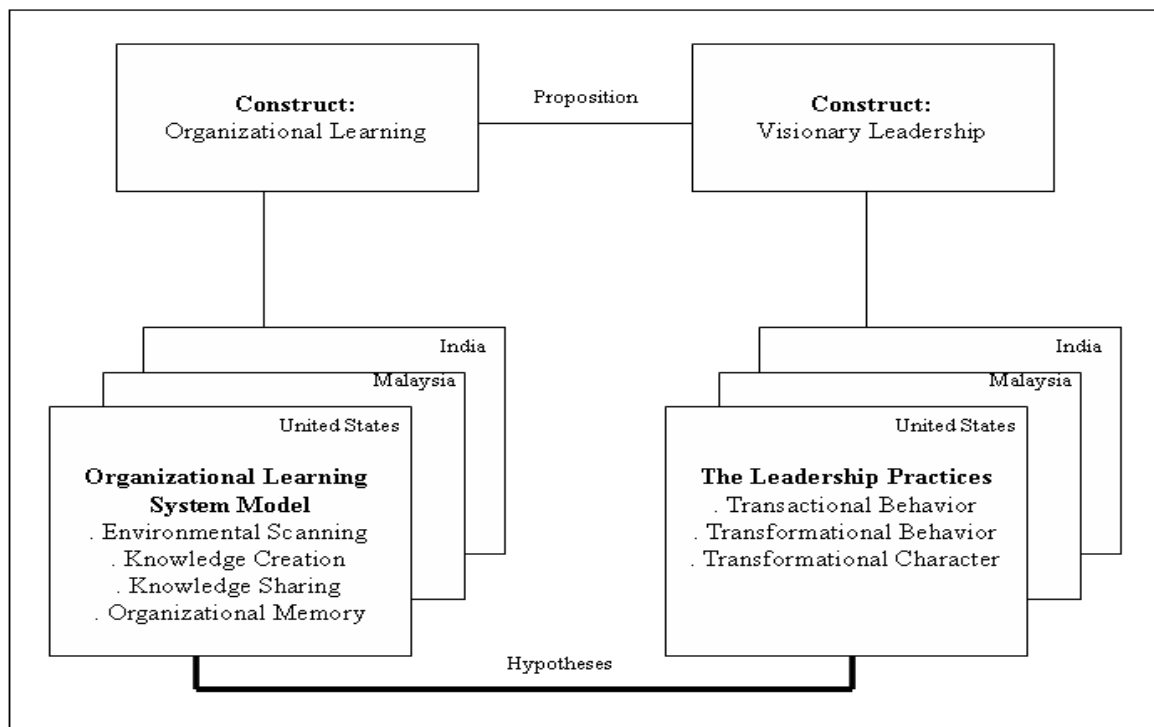


Figure 1. Anatomy of the research study and postulated relational linkages.

4. Research Methodology

4.1 Instruments

Each TLP subfactor is composed of five questions. Subfactors 1 and 2 (capable management and reward equity) in the TLP instrument assessed transactional behavior. Subfactors 3-6 (communication leadership, credible leadership, caring leadership, and creative leadership) assessed transformational behavior. Subfactors 7-10 (confident leadership, follower-centered leadership, visionary leadership, and principled leadership) measured transformational character (Sashkin & Sashkin, 2003). The overall leadership score was an aggregate of transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, and transformational character.

The dimensions of organizational learning (environmental scanning, knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, organizational memory, and overall organizational learning) were assessed using participant ratings on specific learning-related items in the OAS. The overall organizational learning score was an aggregate of environmental scanning, knowledge creation, knowledge sharing, and organizational memory.

4.2 Population and Sampling

This research study used a proportional stratified random sample design in which every participant from each stratum of the population had the same chance of selection as every other individual. The national culture samples were composed of participants who were born and who worked in a given country. This resulted in national culture samples consisting of 56 American knowledge workers, 77 Malaysian knowledge workers, and 35 Indian knowledge workers ($n_{\text{American}} = 56$, $n_{\text{Malaysian}} = 77$, and $n_{\text{Indian}} = 35$). To account for nonresponses or invalid responses, randomly selected replacements within each stratum were contacted until the number of acceptable returns equaled the required sample targets.

5. Results and Analysis

5.1 Descriptive Statistics and Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The study sample consisted of 206 participants in three engineering organizations located in the United States, Malaysia, and India. The composition of the sample by the organization is shown in Table 1. Table 2 describes the sample by the nationality of the participants.

Table 1: Sample Composition by Organization and Work Location

| Work location | Frequency | % |
|---------------|-----------|-------|
| United States | 93 | 45.1 |
| Malaysia | 78 | 37.9 |
| India | 55 | 17.0 |
| Total | 206 | 100.0 |

Table 2: Nationality of the Study Participants by Work Location

| Work location | Current nationality | Nationality at birth | <i>N</i> | % |
|---------------|---------------------|----------------------|----------|------|
| United States | American | American | 56 | 91.8 |
| | | Indian | 2 | 3.3 |
| | | Other | 3 | 4.9 |
| | Indian | Indian | 17 | 100 |
| | | Other | 15 | 100 |
| Malaysia | Malaysian | Malaysian | 77 | 98.7 |
| | | Other | 1 | 1.3 |
| | | Indian | 35 | 100 |

5.2 Measurement Scale Screening

Cronbach's alpha was used to assess the internal consistency of the scales employed in this study. The reliability scores for each of the measurement scales used in this study were computed using the Reliability Analysis procedure in SPSS. Cronbach's alphas for the overall organization as well as those for each of the national cultures were calculated. They are presented in Table 3.

Table 3: Reliability Analysis for Visionary Leadership and Organizational Learning Scales

| Factors in visionary leadership and organizational learning | Number of items | Reliability (Cronbach's alpha) | | | |
|---|-----------------|--------------------------------|-------------------|----------------|----------------------|
| | | American culture | Malaysian culture | Indian culture | Overall organization |
| Transactional behavior | 10 | 0.857 | 0.900 | 0.877 | 0.882 |
| Transformational behavior | 20 | 0.916 | 0.943 | 0.956 | 0.940 |
| Transformational character | 20 | 0.711 | 0.868 | 0.831 | 0.841 |
| Overall visionary leadership | 50 | 0.855 | 0.869 | 0.859 | 0.863 |
| Environmental scanning | 4 | 0.492 | 0.841 | 0.806 | 0.776 |
| Knowledge creation | 3 | 0.775 | 0.691 | 0.653 | 0.739 |
| Knowledge sharing | 4 | 0.476 | 0.824 | 0.718 | 0.752 |
| Organizational memory | 4 | 0.606 | 0.690 | 0.537 | 0.672 |
| Overall organizational learning | 15 | 0.766 | 0.877 | 0.838 | 0.857 |

The internal consistency of most of the scales employed in this study was robust. Only the reliability for organizational memory was consistently below the acceptable mark. Even though environmental scanning, knowledge creation, and knowledge sharing had reliability levels for some national cultures below the acceptable benchmark, their reliability levels for the combined organizational level were acceptable.

6. Findings

6.1 Leadership and Organizational Learning

The null hypotheses that there are no relationships between transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership and organizational learning

were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses indicated that leadership has a significant and positive association with organizational learning ($r = 0.67, p < 0.01$). The results of the analyses revealed that each of transactional behaviour ($r = 0.57, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($r = 0.63, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($r = 0.59, p < 0.01$) has a significant and positive relationship with organizational learning.

6.1.1 Leadership and Environmental Scanning

The null hypotheses that there are no relationships between transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership and environmental scanning were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses suggested that leadership has a significant and positive association with environmental scanning ($r = 0.39, p < 0.01$). The analyses revealed that each of transactional behaviour ($r = 0.39, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($r = 0.35, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($r = 0.42, p < 0.01$) had a significant and positive relationship with environmental scanning.

6.1.2 Leadership and Knowledge Creation

The null hypotheses that there are no relationships between transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership and knowledge creation were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses indicated that leadership has a significant and positive association with knowledge creation ($r = 0.58, p < 0.01$). The analyses revealed that each of transactional behaviour ($r = 0.53, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($r = 0.54, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($r = 0.53, p < 0.01$) had a significant and positive relationship with knowledge creation.

6.1.3 Leadership and Knowledge Sharing

The null hypotheses that there are no relationships between transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership and knowledge sharing were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses suggested that leadership has a significant and positive association with knowledge sharing ($r = 0.68, p < 0.01$). The analyses revealed that each of transactional behaviour ($r = 0.61, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($r = 0.64, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($r = 0.58, p < 0.01$) had a significant and positive relationship with knowledge sharing.

6.1.4 Leadership and Organizational Memory

The null hypotheses that there are no relationships between transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership and organizational memory were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses indicated that leadership has a statistically significant positive association with organizational memory ($r = 0.59, p < 0.01$). The analyses revealed that each of transactional behaviour ($r = 0.51, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($r = 0.57, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($r = 0.50, p < 0.01$) had a statistically significant and positive relationship with organizational memory.

The significant and positive associations between dimensions of leadership and organizational learning revealed the key influencing role played by leaders in directing the course of organizational learning. These associations also suggested that a gestalt perspective of leadership is essential for considering approaches to organizational learning. This finding is consistent with Vera and Crossan's (2004) theoretical postulation that transactional behaviours and transformational behaviours are essential to effective organizational learning.

6.2 Effect of National Culture on Leadership for Organizational Learning

The null hypotheses that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership do not affect organizational learning were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses indicated that the interaction between national culture and leadership has a significant influence on organizational learning ($F = 46.25, p < 0.01$). The analyses revealed that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour ($F = 36.62, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($F = 38.56, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($F = 33.51, p < 0.01$) have a significant influence on organizational learning.

6.2.1 Effect of National Culture on Leadership for Environment Scanning

The null hypotheses that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership do not affect environmental scanning were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses indicated that the interaction between national culture and leadership has a significant influence on environmental scanning ($F = 15.42, p < 0.01$). The analyses revealed that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour ($F = 12.17, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($F = 12.89, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($F = 14.96, p < 0.01$) have a significant influence on environmental scanning.

6.2.2 Effect of National Culture on Leadership for Knowledge Creation

The null hypotheses that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership do not affect knowledge creation were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses indicated that the interaction between national culture and leadership has a significant influence on knowledge creation ($F = 26.09, p < 0.01$). The analyses revealed that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour ($F = 25.24, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($F = 22.19, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($F = 18.10, p < 0.01$) have a significant influence on knowledge creation.

6.2.3 Effect of National Culture on Leadership for Knowledge Sharing

The null hypotheses that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership do not affect knowledge sharing were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses indicated that the interaction between national culture and leadership has a significant influence on knowledge sharing ($F = 50.42, p < 0.01$). The analyses revealed that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour ($F = 38.46, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($F = 43.67, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($F = 31.97, p < 0.01$) have a significant influence on knowledge sharing.

6.2.4 Effect of National Culture on Leadership for Organizational Memory

The null hypotheses that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour, transformational behaviour, transformational character, and leadership do not affect organizational memory were rejected. The rejection of these hypotheses indicated that the interaction between national culture and leadership has a significant influence on organizational memory ($F = 34.42, p < 0.01$). The analyses revealed that the interactions between national culture and transactional behaviour ($F = 26.96, p < 0.01$), transformational behaviour ($F = 30.56, p < 0.01$), and transformational character ($F = 24.51, p < 0.01$) have a significant influence on organizational memory.

These findings are in line with Hofstede's (2001) claim that the values, proclivities, and practices of people vary based on national culture. Cultural differences play a vital role in the learning and leadership asymmetries across the national cultures. The nature of association between leadership and organizational learning across national cultures supports the need for contingent leadership approaches in multicultural learning organizations.

6.3 Supplementary Analysis

The results of two-way ANOVA analyses presented in Table 4 revealed that communications leadership, principled leadership, reward equity, and confident leadership have the most significant effect on overall organizational learning for the overall organization.

Table 4: Reliability Analysis for Visionary Leadership and Organizational Learning Scales

| Source | <i>F</i> | Sig. | Partial-eta squared |
|------------------------------|----------|------|---------------------|
| Capable management | .010 | .921 | .000 |
| Reward equity | 5.356 | .022 | .029 |
| Communication leadership | 6.864 | .010 | .037 |
| Credible leadership | 3.020 | .084 | .017 |
| Caring leadership | .016 | .899 | .000 |
| Creative leadership | .460 | .498 | .003 |
| Confident leadership | 5.119 | .025 | .028 |
| Follower-centered leadership | 2.264 | .134 | .013 |
| Visionary leadership | .002 | .965 | .000 |
| Principled leadership | 6.196 | .014 | .034 |

The results of Tukey's honestly significant differences (HSD) and Tamhane's T2 analyses testing revealed that the American means for overall organizational learning, environmental scanning, knowledge sharing, and organizational memory were significantly higher than the corresponding Malaysian means. The means plots in Figure 2 illustrate the specific differences in the American and Malaysian means for overall organizational learning, environmental scanning, knowledge sharing, and organizational memory.

Tukey's HSD and Tamhane's T2 analyses also revealed that the American and Malaysian means for transformational character were significantly different. The analyses also indicated that the American and Malaysian means for credible leadership and principled leadership differed significantly. The mean scores of confident leadership were significantly different for all three cultures. Figure 3 illustrates the means plots for these variables.

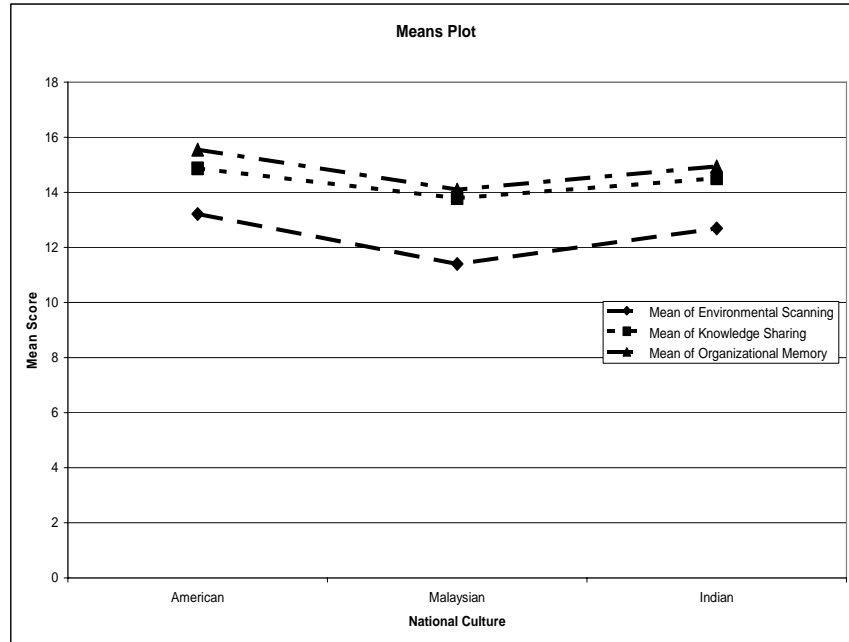


Figure 2. Means plot for key organizational learning dimensions.

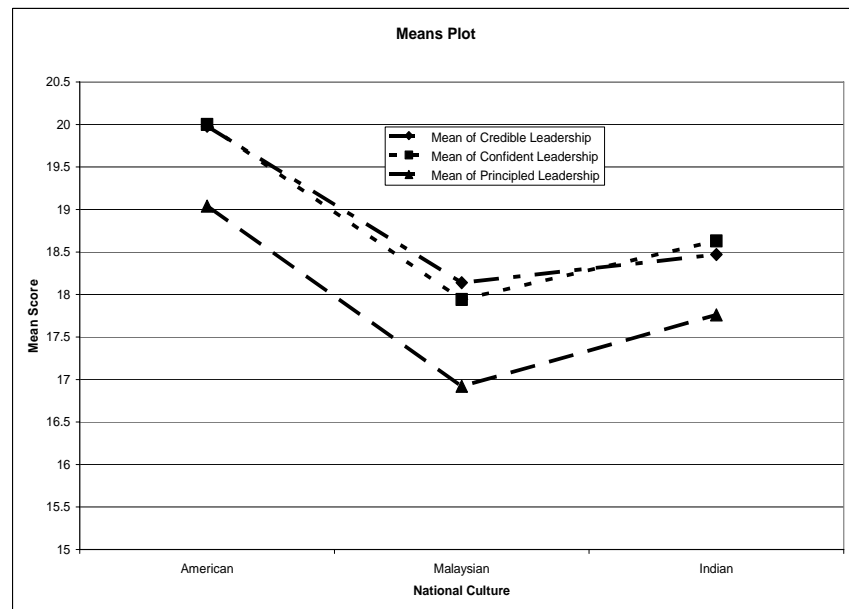


Figure 3. Means plot for key organizational leadership dimensions.

7. Implications

This study indicated that leaders are more effective at fostering organizational learning when they adopt a contingent style that blends transactional leadership and transformational leadership. Specifically, the study found that an amalgamation of communication leadership, principled leadership, reward equity, and confident leadership is an effective approach for multicultural leaders of learning organizations. More specifically, the study indicated that American leaders scored significantly higher on credible leadership and principled leadership compared to their Malaysian counterparts, and that the American leaders scored significantly higher on confident

leadership compared to both their Malaysian and Indian counterparts. The study revealed that as a result of lower scores on certain leadership practices, the relative performance of Malaysian organizations on environmental scanning, knowledge sharing, and organizational memory tended to be lower. This study provided a fine-grained and comprehensive empirical model of the relational linkages between leadership, organizational learning, and quality achievement for the American, Malaysian, and Indian cultures.

Smith (2001) called for renewed investigations into the nature and efficacy of the practices of management in a multicultural world. This research responded to this call by assessing how leadership practices influence organizational learning capacities country to country and identifying the specific learning-friendly practices for leaders in each of the nations included in this research. Another key benefit of this comparative study was the confirmation of the relevance of the Euro-American theories of leadership and organizational learning to Eastern cultures (Malaysia and India). The results of this research study should help leaders gain a deeper understanding of their complex roles and illumine their pursuit with the instrumental guide of leadership in the process of organizational learning across national cultures.

8. Limitations, and Suggestions for Future Research

This quantitative research was designed as a cross-sectional study limited to a single firm and industry at a single point in time. It was assumed that the participants would answer the questions honestly. Subsequent research may attempt replicate this study using other firms and in other types of industries to test the consistency of the findings over time.

Future research may look into specific differences in leadership as perceived by genders and by employees in diverse roles within organizations. Subsequent research may also use carefully controlled experimental designs to limit the impact of the confounding variables for drawing definitive conclusions about the cause-and-effect relationships. Future research may model the linkages between leadership and organizational learning across national cultures using a population of non-knowledge workers.

A methodological suggestion for future research would be to include interviews of key participants and to use qualitative inputs to triangulate the quantitative feedback received via the survey instruments. Subsequent research may also use multi-level analysis, which allows a researcher to capture contextual data at the organizational level, while gathering participants' insights about actions at individual level. Future research may also explore if transactional leadership and transformational leadership cover the full range of behaviours required to foster organizational learning.

9. Conclusion

This paper discussed the relativistic cross-cultural research study designed to investigate the empirical relational linkages between leadership and organizational learning across three national cultures. The intercultural asymmetries suggested that leadership practices must be in tune with the complex global milieu in which leaders perform. The differences in cultural predilections and potentials create challenges as well as opportunities for leaders for synergizing learning through the power of organizational diversity. The study revealed that there is not a fixed set of leadership practices for fostering learning in multicultural organizations. Leaders need to adopt contingent practices that are in tune not only with the demands of the cultures in which they function, but also with the stage of the learning process. The research methodology employed for the study and resulting empirical model revealing the unique predilections, practices, and potentials of organizational leaders across three national cultures should prove valuable to practitioners and scholars in researching, recognizing, and synergizing leadership for organizational learning.

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