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## THE ROLE OF CROSS-CULTURAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCE: EFFECTIVE TRANSFORMATIONAL LEADERSHIP ACROSS CULTURES

Elena Lvina<sup>1</sup>

### Abstract

*New theoretical frameworks are needed to better understand effective transformational leadership in different cultural contexts. In this article we illustrate the relationship between transformational leadership and the cross-cultural communication competence frame. We show how national culture orientations and cross-cultural communication competence affect the full range leadership framework and transformational leadership dimensions. Attributes of effective leadership and the choice of communication strategies vary for different cultural contexts; however, the charismatic or value-based leadership dimension contributes the most to universally perceived effective leadership styles. We draw attention to the importance of transformational leadership research utilizing the cross-cultural communication competence construct.*

### مستخلص

وهناك حاجة إلى أطر نظرية جديدة لفهم أفضل القيادة التحويلية فعالة في سياقات ثقافية مختلفة. في هذه المادة ونحن توضيح العلاقة بين القيادة التحويلية وبين الثقافات إطار الاختصاص

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الاتصالات. وتبين لنا كيف توجهات لثقافة الوطنية وبين الثقافات اختصاص الاتصالات تؤثر على الإطار القيادي مجموعة كاملة وأبعاد القيادة التحويلية. صفات القيادة الفعالة واختيار استراتيجيات الاتصالات تختلف عن سياقات ثقافية مختلفة. ومع ذلك، يساهم البعد القيادة الكاريزمية أو على أساس القيمة الأكثر لينظر عالميا أساليب القيادة الفعالة. نود أن نلفت الانتباه إلى أهمية البحث القيادة التحويلية الاستفادة من بر الثقافات الكفاءة الاتصالات بناء.

**Keywords:** *Communication, Competence, Transformational, Leadership, Across Cultures*

## A. Introduction

Transformational leaders rely heavily on their rhetorical skills in order to articulate a vision and create meaning for their followers. While the leader's message is important, the process by which it is communicated appears to be just as significant. The communication style is a critical distinguishing factor in whether the leader's message will be remembered and endorsed. Flauto (1994) determined that every leadership dimension (charisma, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation) was positively correlated with the communication competence construct. Implicit in this assumption is the belief that leader's communication competence is a prerequisite for effective leadership (Barge, 1994). Stigall (2005) found that individuals who are perceived as emergent leaders have significantly greater self-reported and other-reported communication competence. This suggests that effective transformational leadership is at least partially dependent on the leader's ability to competently construct messages and engage in communication.

We propose that national culture differences impose constraints on the leader's communication style and influence the leader's choice of effective communication strategies. We believe that understanding the theoretical basis for the relationship between the national culture dimensions and transformational leadership is necessary to generate clear predictions about the role of communication competence in effective transformational leadership

across cultures. This article attempts to summarize transformational leadership approaches and communication strategies that are typically used in various cultural contexts.

## **B. Transformational Leadership**

Organizational leadership research has evolved from the trait, behavioral, and contingency approaches to neocharismatic theories of leadership (House & Aditya, 1997). Three most widely recognized neocharismatic theories are the theory of charismatic leadership (House, 1977), the strategic theory of charismatic leadership (Conger & Kanungo, 1987), and the full range theory of leadership (Bass, 1985). The full range theory of leadership identifies two styles of leadership: transformational and transactional. Transactional leaders are seen as ones who use either contingent rewards as positive reinforcement when the standards reached or management-by-exception as punishment or negative feedback after problems occur. Transformational leaders, in turn, are able to influence their followers to transcend self-interest and release their full potential for performance toward the goals of their organization (Bass, 1985).

Transformational leadership is accomplished through idealized influence or charisma, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration (Avolio, 1999; Bass, 1998). Idealized influence “refers to charismatic actions of the leader that are centered on values, beliefs, and a sense of mission” (Antonakis et al., 2003: 264). Transformational leaders motivate their followers to do more than they initially intend to and think they are capable of. Identification with their leaders is an important characteristic of idealized influence. Among its most cited consequences are followers respect and trust, and identification with both their leaders, and with the mission and goals of their organization. Inspirational motivation refers to the leader’s ability to articulate values and goals which cause followers to transcend their own self-interests. Again, followers identify with inspirational leaders and are ready to put forth efforts to

achieve the mutual goals are promoted by the leader, and to meet the leader's high expectations of them (Bass, 1985). Transformational leaders invoke inspirational motivation by providing followers with challenges and meaning for engaging in shared goals and undertakings (Bass & Steidlmeier, 1999), as well as future work and opportunities. Transformational leaders demonstrate high confidence, hope, and optimism to the followers, engaging them to be hopeful, confident, and optimistic as well (Avolio, 1999).

Intellectual stimulation refers to a transformational leader's encouragement of her followers to think about new approaches to solving problems (Hater & Bass, 1988). Not only transformational leaders emphasize the importance to think differently but also they "promote organizational culture in which followers are encouraged to question old assumptions, beliefs, and paradigms" (Jung, Bass, & Sosik, 1999: 6). This approach is argued to stimulate follower's creativity and innovativeness (Avolio, 1999). Individualized consideration emphasizes giving the followers individual recognition and praise for their performance. Transformational leaders are known to build one-on-one relationships and to adapt to individual needs of followers. Transformational leaders pay special attention to specific needs of the followers, e.g., for personal growth and achievement. Thus, transformational leaders are often perceived as a coaches and mentors by followers (Bass, 1985). The personal attention they receive builds confidence, motivation to meet the leader's high expectations, and increases their overall job satisfaction.

Rafferty and Griffin (2004) re-examine the theoretical model developed by Bass (1985) to identify five dimensions of transformational leadership: vision, inspirational communication, supportive leadership, intellectual stimulation, supportive leadership, and personal recognition.

- 1) Vision is the expression of an idealized picture of the future based around organizational values. Vision results in the internalization of organizational values and goals that

encourages individuals to adopt desired behaviors (McClelland, 1975). House (1977) defined vision as a transcendent ideal that represents shared values. House (1977) argued that charismatic leaders demonstrate a number of behaviors, including articulating an ideology that enhances goal clarity, task focus, and value congruence.

- 2) Inspirational communication is the expression of positive and encouraging messages about the organization and statements that build motivation and confidence. Inspiration refers to “the extent to which a leader stimulates enthusiasm among subordinates for the work of the group and says things to build subordinate confidence in their ability to perform assignments successfully and attain group objectives” (Yukl, 1981: 121). Inspirational leaders use appeals and emotion-laden statements to arouse followers' emotions and motivation.
- 3) Supportive leadership is expressing concern for followers and taking account of their individual needs. Supportive leaders direct their behavior toward the satisfaction of subordinates' needs and preferences, display concern for subordinates' welfare, and create a friendly and psychologically supportive work environment (House, 1996). Supportive leadership is a component of the individualized consideration leadership construct.
- 4) Intellectual stimulation is enhancing employees' interest in and awareness of problems and increasing their ability to think about problems in new ways (Bass, 1985). Intellectual stimulation increases followers' abilities to conceptualize, comprehend, and analyze problems and improve quality of solutions (Bass & Avolio, 1990).
- 5) Personal recognition is the provision of rewards such as praise and acknowledgement of effort for achievement of specified goals. Personal recognition occurs when a leader indicates that she values individuals' efforts and rewards the achievement of

outcomes consistent with the vision through praise and acknowledgment of followers' efforts.

### **C. National Culture Orientations and Cross-cultural Communication Competence**

#### **1. National Culture Orientations**

National cultures can differ in many ways, for instance team members from different cultures vary in their communication behavior, their motivation for seeking and disclosing information, and their need to engage in self-categorization (Gudykunst, 1997). We focus on five cultural orientations: richness of the communication context, power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, and performance orientations. Studying the role of communication in culture and distinguishing cultures and communication by the information surrounding an event regardless of the verbal message, Hall (1976, 1989) viewed cultures on a low-to-high context continuum. Low-context cultures use low levels of programmed information to provide context; the explicit code, the words, carry the message. The message eclipses the medium, words convey the information, and meaning is explicit. North America's task-centered communication, in which relatively little information is needed about a person or a company before business can be transacted, is a good example of low-context communication (Marquardt & Horvath, 2001).

High-context cultures convey the message through non-verbal context; the physical setting and the individual's internalized values, beliefs, and norms convey the message (Hall, 1976, 1989). High-context cultures, such as Russian culture, share meaning implicitly. The listener knows the context and needs little background information (Hall, 1989). Communication and behavioral rules are implicit in the context. Communicators need rich contextual information about a person or a company before business transactions can be completed successfully (Marquardt & Horvath, 2001).



Power distance is defined as the degree to which members of a culture expect power to be distributed unequally (Hofstede, 1980). Power distance determines how a community stratifies its individuals and groups with respect to power, authority, prestige, status, wealth, and material possessions (Javidan & House, 2001). Low power distance cultures prefer consultation, participation, cooperation, and practicality, while high power distance cultures prefer autocratic or majority rule decision-making and are reluctant to trust one another. Cultures that are low on power distance, such as Denmark, the Netherlands, and the United States, tend to be more egalitarian and prefer participatory decision making. Cultures that are high on power distance, such as Russia, Thailand, and Spain, make the distinction between people with status and power, and people without it.

The individualism-collectivism orientation describes whether the culture values individual goals (individualism) or group goals (collectivism) (Hofstede, 1980). This orientation reflects the degree to which people of a certain culture are encouraged to integrate into groups within organizations and society (Javidan & House, 2001). Cultures that are collective exhibit more emotional dependence on the team, and are more conforming, orderly, traditional, team-oriented, and particularistic. Individualistically-oriented cultures, such as the United States, Germany, and Hungary, value autonomy, self-interest, and performance. In contrast, collective cultures, such as Japan, Sweden, and Russia, value group harmony, cooperation, and satisfaction.

Uncertainty avoidance indicates whether uncertainty and ambiguity are perceived as threatening within a culture (Hofstede, 1980). This cultural orientation refers to the extent to which people seek orderliness, consistency, structure, and laws (Javidan & House, 2001). Low uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as Russia, Greece, and Venezuela, demand less structure and do not display great concern about following rules and procedures. High uncertainty avoidance cultures, such as Sweden, Germany, and, to a degree, the



United States, prefer consistency, structured lifestyles, and clearly articulated expectations.

Performance orientation refers to the degree to which a culture rewards its members for performance improvement and excellence (Javidan & House, 2001). In a similar way to Hofstede's (1980) masculine and feminine cultural dimensions, the least performance-oriented cultures, such as Russia, Italy, and Argentina, value tradition, loyalty, belonging, and family. The most performance-oriented cultures, such as Singapore, Hong Kong, and the United States, particularly value performance, training, development, and advancement.

## **2. Cross-cultural Communication Competence**

A cross-culturally and communicatively competent leader is able to establish an interpersonal relationship with a foreign national through effective exchange at both verbal and nonverbal levels of behavior (Spitzberg, 1983). Past research identified various characteristics that constitute cross-cultural communication competence, including relationship skills, communication skills, and personal traits such as inquisitiveness (Black & Gregersen, 2000; Kealey & Protheroe, 1996; Mendenhall, 2001; Moosmüller, 1995). Cross-cultural communication competence entails not only knowledge of the culture and language, but also affective and behavioral skills such as empathy, human warmth, charisma, and the ability to manage anxiety and uncertainty (Gudykunst, 1998; Spiess, 1996, 1998). Others argue that cross-cultural communication competence requires sufficient knowledge, skilled actions, and suitable motivation to make an individual a competent interactant (Spitzberg, 1991).

Cross-cultural communication competence is traditionally analyzed with the help of conceptual models (Abe & Wiseman, 1983; Chen, 1989; Cui & Awa, 1992; Dean & Popp, 1990; Martin & Hammer, 1989). Abe and Wiseman (1983) report five dimensions of cross-cultural effectiveness: ability to communicate interpersonally, ability to

adjust to different cultures, ability to adjust to different social systems, ability to establish interpersonal relationships, and ability to understand others. Cui and Awa (1992) identify five dimensions of cross-cultural effectiveness: interpersonal skills, social interaction, cultural empathy, personality traits, and managerial ability. The Cross-cultural Communication Competence Model includes four dimensions: interpersonal skills, team effectiveness, cultural uncertainty, and cultural empathy (Matveev, 2002; Matveev & Nelson, 2004; Matveev, Rao, & Milter, 2001).

- a. In the interpersonal skills dimension, a team member acknowledges differences in the communicative and interactional styles of people from different cultures, demonstrates flexibility in resolving misunderstandings, and feels comfortable when communicating with foreign nationals.
- b. The team effectiveness dimension includes such critical skills as the ability of a team member to understand and clearly communicate team goals, roles, and norms to other members of a multicultural team.
- c. The cultural uncertainty dimension reflects the ability of a team member to display patience in intercultural situations, to be tolerant of ambiguity and uncertainty due to cultural differences, and to work in a flexible manner with others on a multicultural team.
- d. In the cultural empathy dimension, a culturally empathetic team member has the capacity to behave as though he or she understands the world as team members from other cultures do, has a spirit of inquiry about other cultures and the communication patterns in these cultures, an appreciation for a variety of working styles, and an ability to view the ways things are done in other cultures not as bad but as simply different.

#### **D. The Communication Competence Frame in Transformational Leadership**

Transformational leaders rely heavily on their rhetorical skills in order to articulate a vision and create meaning for their followers (e.g., Gardner & Avolio, 1998; Howell & Frost, 1989). They are adept at communicating and using language, symbols, metaphors, and vivid images as well as nonverbal behaviors to influence their followers. Crafting and communicating an inspirational vision is critical to the success of an organization. Leaders can communicate the same message and yet receive different responses from the followers.

A leader can choose to say "I want us to build X number of products by this year and return so much on our assets" or "I want us to revolutionize the way people see and act in the world through the use of our products". Both statements define or frame an organizational purpose, though with very different meanings. Frames are the snapshots that leaders take of their organization's purpose and use to draw a map for action. Values and beliefs that reinforce commitment and provide guidance for daily actions are essential components in creating a meaningful frame for an organizational mission. While the leader's message is critical, the process by which it is communicated appears to be just as significant. The style of verbal communications is a critical distinguishing factor in whether the message will be remembered and endorsed. This is where the art of rhetoric and communication competence enters the language of leadership (Barge, 1994).

Flauto (1994) examined communication competence in organizations within the theoretical framework provided by transactional/ transformational leadership and leader-member exchange theories. Participants described their leaders and reported a leadership and a communication event typical of their leader's behavior. Flauto (1994) determined that every leadership dimension (charisma, individual consideration, intellectual stimulation) was positively correlated with the communication competence construct (see also Den Hartog & Verburg, 1997).

This result supported the assumption of both transactional-transformational and leader-member exchange theories that leadership exists in the interaction between individuals. Nelson (1998: 309) explored more fully the process of transformational leadership with specific emphasis on the interplay between leaders and followers. The researcher found a moderate, positive relationship between interpersonal communication competence and the preferred leadership practices of middle managers in a large Southeastern textile and chemical manufacturing corporation. This conclusion supports Bass (1990) and Witherspoon (1997) findings that leadership manifests itself in a proactive process of interaction. Transformational leadership, therefore, is partially dependent on the leader's ability to competently engage in interpersonal communication.

Stigall (2005) proposed four dimensions of communication that allow leaders to emerge in collaborative groups, including guidance, vision, individual consideration, and intellectual stimulation. The perceived level of communication competence of a team member affects both the emergence of the leader and the relational and performance outcomes of the individuals and the group. Stigall (2005) found that emergent leaders had significantly greater self-reported and other-reported communication competence. All four of the leadership communication behaviors together significantly predicted positive individual and group outcomes for small group cohesion, leader-member relationship quality, satisfaction, and individual perceptions of productivity; and vision individually predicted each of the four outcomes. These findings support the relationships among emergent leadership, communication competence, leader behaviors, and individual and group outcomes (Stigall, 2005).

#### **E. Transformational Leadership in Different Cultures**

Bass (1997) argues that transformational-transactional leadership is a universal concept, and across cultures people's prototype of leadership is generally transformational. Global Leadership and Organizational Behavioral Effectiveness (GLOBE) study has found both universal transformational characteristics of ideal leadership and ones reflecting cultural specificity within and between the proposed six clusters (House et al., 1999; Scandura & Dorfman, 2004). The middle managers in 62 cultures

were asked to report on cultural practice and values in their societies and rate the effective leadership practices (Den Hartog et al., 1999).

House et al. (1999) used the concept of culturally endorsed implicit leadership theories to list the leadership behaviors and attributes which are “universally endorsed as contributing to effective leadership, and the extent to which attributes and behaviors are linked to cultural characteristics” (House et al., 1999, p. 182). Six global leadership dimensions were used to create the profiles for six cultural clusters: charismatic/value based, team oriented, participatory, humane oriented, autonomous, and self-protective.

The charismatic/value based leadership dimension contains the most number of attributes universally perceived as contributors to effective leadership, but the charismatic leadership quality self-sacrifice/ risk taking is not universally endorsed (House et. al., 1999). The Eastern European countries, including Russia, preferred visionary and inspirational charisma, integrity, decisiveness, performance orientation, team integrator, administratively competent, diplomatic, collaborative team orientation as the key outstanding leadership elements (Bakacsi et al., 2002) (Table 1).

The reported key elements of successful leadership in the region are composed mostly of transformational/charismatic and team-oriented leadership. The most respected leaders are visionary, inspirational and decisive. Paternalistic leadership that was historically dominated in Eastern Europe has been substituting by participative leadership. Leaders who have integrity, build team, and behave collaboratively are also highly valued.

While the transformational leadership studies targeted the Anglo-Saxon context, studies in the Eastern European and Russian context exist. Sarros and Santora (2001) examined the value orientations and leadership behaviors of Australian, Chinese, Japanese, and Russian executives. Executives whose values are grounded in fundamental human virtues such as benevolence and honesty, but who also retain a need for personal gratification and success, are closely associated with transformational leadership behaviors (Sarros & Santora, 2001). The relationships between leadership style and value orientations showed a strong positive

correlation between transformational leadership behaviors and values that encourage personal and professional development. Russian values, however, are ordered with the need to maintain social stability and self-direction. Russian managers strongly identify with security as motivating value as Russia continues with its transition from socialism to capitalism (Sarros & Santora, 2001).

Table 1:  
Country and cluster means for GLOBE second-order leadership scales

	<b>Russia</b>	<b>Eastern European Cluster</b>	<b>U.S.A.</b>	<b>Anglo Cluster</b>
Charismatic	5.66	5.73	6.12	6.04
Team oriented	5.63	5.50	5.80	5.74
Self-protective	3.69	3.67	3.15	3.82
Participative	4.67	5.09	5.93	5.72
Humane oriented	4.08	4.75	5.21	5.08
Autonomous	4.63	4.18	3.75	3.82

Source: Ashkanasy et al. (2002), Bakacsi et al. (2002)

Elenkov (2002) investigated the effects of the transformational and transactional leadership behaviors on organizational performance in Russian companies. Transformational leadership directly and positively predicted organizational performance of Russian companies over and beyond the transactional leadership. Other findings include transactional leadership having a positive contribution to the achievement of organizational goals, support for innovation significantly moderating the relationship between transformational leadership and organizational performance, and group cohesiveness positive relationship with transformational leadership (Elenkov, 2002).

Six recent INSEAD case studies focused on Russia as well (Kets de Vries et al., 2005). The “Global Russian” style of young entrepreneurs and leaders with a deep sense of mission, persistent, resilient, and with a high level of emotional intelligence has been emerging in Russia. These leadership dimensions resemble the transformational leadership style.

## **F. Conclusion**

Transformational leaders must articulate an organizational vision that they want their followers to achieve. The perception of leadership effectiveness and the enactment strategy are influenced by the societal values and the cultural context. The leadership styles that are appropriate to the national culture values are reinforced and encouraged by followers. We highlighted several studies of leadership across cultures that effectively illustrate different culturally-bound leadership models. While both universal and particularistic leadership attributes are present, the charismatic or value-based leadership dimension contributes the most to universally perceived effective leadership styles.

Attributes of effective leadership vary for different cultural contexts. The Anglo cultures view effective leaders as charismatic, team-oriented, participative, and humane. Leaders of in this culture cluster focus on importance of displaying care and consideration to what subordinates have to say. Russian managers, unlike their American counterparts, put higher emphasis on the need of autonomous leadership and value less the participative and human-oriented leadership. We explain this difference in the preferred leadership styles with the national culture orientations. Russian subordinates, being higher on power distance dimension, view the effective leader as a superior with necessary authority to make decisions individually and maintain a higher status.

The leadership process has to exist in the interaction between the leaders and their followers. Recent transformational leadership studies show a positive relationship between leadership dimensions, individual and organizational performance outcomes, and a leader's self-reported and other-reported communication competence. The cross-cultural communication competence frame can be instrumental in analyzing and predicting the effective communication strategies and influential transformational leadership across different cultural contexts. We believe that scholars and practitioners will benefit from further investigations of transformational leadership using the cross-cultural communication competence frame.



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