
Leadership and the Cultural Conundrum of Body Language



By Li Huang , INSEAD Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour, with Benjamin Kessler, Web Editor

Leaders don't all walk and talk the same. Staying true to one's culture is integral to empowered leadership.

Li Huang vividly recalls her first impression of a particular junior-high English teacher in her native city of Xi'an, China.

On the first day of class, Li says, the foreign-born teacher “sat down, putting his feet up on the desk...” In talking with the teacher months later, she found out that, although committing an obvious Westerners' faux pas in the eyes of his East Asian students, “He felt a great sense of authority when he was striking that pose.”

Now an Assistant Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD, Li says in addition to shaping our standing in the eyes of others, how we carry ourselves can affect whether we feel in control in many life situations. “The mind and body are so closely tied together,” she argued in an interview with INSEAD Knowledge. “They work in tandem; they have a reciprocal relationship. And body postures can actually lead to neural-endocrine shifts

such as increased testosterone and decreased cortisol as well as have a causal impact on how we feel and act.”

Researchers argue the link between physicality and feelings of power has an evolutionary component, citing the expansive postures associated with dominance among several species in the animal kingdom. But for Li, culture plays a critical yet often-overlooked role. As leadership researchers and practitioners have come to realise in the last few decades, physical gestures meant to convey leadership in one cultural context can undermine one’s authority in another. For example, Li’s English teacher later discovered to his dismay and surprise that, instead of thinking he was very teacher-like, Li and her classmates thought, “‘He’s such a big kid.’ Acting in a very rude and haphazard way.”

More important, just as the body language of leadership sometimes sends drastically different messages to audiences with different cultural upbringings, Li argues, body postures do not always shape leaders’ thoughts and actions in a universal way either. East Asians striking a feet-on-the-desk pose would not only appear overly casual and even arrogant to other East Asians but may also fail to draw the same sense of power from the posture as the foreign teacher. In other words, if leaders aren’t careful, not only could their attempts to cut a commanding figure get lost in translation, they might actually make themselves feel less powerful too.

Taking Up Space

Li’s research into this topic is recounted in [**Stand tall, but don’t put your feet up: Universal and culturally-specific effects of expansive postures on power**](#), a paper she co-authored that was recently published in the *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*.

Li and her collaborators administered a series of studies where participants of Western and East Asian descent were instructed to hold a range of postures that “were being pilot-tested for a separate study”, and immediately afterwards underwent tests designed to measure how powerful they felt and how inclined they were to take decisive action. As Li expected, both Westerners and East Asians experienced a greater sense of power after striking most of the more expansive poses (e.g., leaning forward with both hands spread out on a desk), than after adopting a more constrictive attitude (sitting with hands tucked underneath their thighs).

However, the two cultures parted ways on perhaps the most expansive pose of all: leaning back in a chair with both feet propped up on a desk, just like Li's English teacher. For Westerners, the extremely casual but dominant pose appeared to serve as a confidence booster, sending power indicators shooting up. For East Asians, it had the opposite effect, leaving them feeling even less powerful than the constrictive posture.

Pride versus Humility

Li attributes these results to a divergence in Western and East Asian cultural norms. "In Western cultures, the self is construed as independent, unique and separate from others," the paper states. "In contrast, East Asian philosophies such as Confucianism and Buddhism conceptualise the self as inherently interconnected and interdependent with others." This fundamental distinction means leaders from the two cultures are likely to conduct themselves very differently in certain situations: compare the modest posture of Toyota's CEO Aiko Toyoda to the triumphant stance of GM chief Daniel Akerson (above). It also means that the same posture may lead to different neural-endocrine responses, feelings, cognitions, and behaviours in leaders from the two cultures.

Indeed, when self-assertion appears to cross over into arrogance, East Asians see it as a violation of their cultural norms of self-restraint, and their sense of power withers as a result.

Li is quick to point out that all the experiments for the paper were conducted in the United States. "Even though [the participants] were in a Western context, the cultural values that they were raised on were still very much an integral part of their cognitive structure," she said. This suggests that even among multiculturals, the norms of one's original culture inform ideas about what constitutes "proper" conduct for leaders and to act against these values by adopting certain body postures can create negative feelings and actions.

The Expansive Perspective

Why do feelings of power matter? Do they impact work performance as well as perception? Extrapolating from her findings, Li said, "Another very important cognitive consequence of the psychological experience of power is the ability to see the big picture, seeing the forest for the trees. Since we find a consistent effect of these culture norms and postures on [to what

extent you feel powerful and to what extent you take action], [posture and culture] may also interact to affect to what extent you're likely to see the big picture. [They can influence your] having a more overall view of the strategic issues you have on hand and [your understanding] of where the company's going as opposed to the nitty-gritty [operational perspective]. There are so many consequences of power that we can derive from our conclusions based on these findings."

So perhaps in today's globalised workplace there is a danger for multicultural leaders in going completely native, when doing so would quite literally place them in a culturally compromising position. Li's foreign teacher might not have felt so empowered if he'd been asked to exchange bows with students as many East Asian teachers do. By the same token, for a Houston office to expect an executive from Taiwan to adopt a Texan swagger in order to "fit in" could violate the sense of cultural integrity that executive needs to feel confident and perform at his best.

At the same time, leaders must temper diversity with civility to avoid treading on another culture's toes. "We have to pay attention to the symbolic meaning of our postures, of our motor movements in a particular society and context. Not just culture, but even social context," Li said.

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