
Leading Across Cultures: Learn to Adapt Your Style



By Erin Meyer , INSEAD Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour

Whether you feel the best boss is more of a facilitator among equals or a director who leads from the front, to succeed in international business you need the flexibility to adapt your style to your cultural context.

This lesson was brought home to me when I taught a group of Heineken executives. Heineken, of course, is a Dutch brewing company. When you visit Heineken’s headquarters in Amsterdam, you will find a lot of tall blond Dutch people and also a lot of Mexicans. In 2010, Heineken purchased a big operation in Monterrey, Mexico, and now a large number of head-office employees come from Northern Mexico.

Among them is Carlos Gomez, who described to my class his experiences since moving to Amsterdam a year earlier. “It is absolutely incredible to manage Dutch people and nothing like my experience leading Mexican teams,” Gomez said, “because, from my experience, the Dutch do not care at all who is the boss in the room.”

The amount of respect we show to authority is deeply rooted in the culture we are raised in. We begin, as young children, to learn how much deference should be shown to an older sibling, a parent, a teacher – and later, in business, these same ideas impact how we view the ideal relationship with our boss or subordinates.

For someone such as Gomez, who has learned to lead in a culture where deference to authority is relatively high, it is both confusing and challenging to lead a team where the boss is seen as just one of the guys. In this case, the challenge was particularly strong, as the Netherlands is one of the most egalitarian cultures in the world. Gomez explained:

I will schedule a meeting in order to roll out a new process, and during the meeting my team starts challenging the process, taking the meeting in various unexpected directions, ignoring my process altogether, and paying no attention to the fact that they work for me. Sometimes I just watch them astounded. But often I just feel like getting down on my knees and pleading with them, “Dear colleagues, in case you have forgotten I.....am.....the boss.”

Power distances

Geert Hofstede, one of the first researchers to look at the idea of what good leadership looks like in different countries, coined the term “power distance”, which he defined as “the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally.” As subsequent researchers continue to explore and research this topic we have been looking at questions such as:

- How much respect or deference is shown to an authority figure?
- If you want to communicate a message to someone two levels above or below you, should you go through the hierarchical chain?
- When you are the boss, what gives you your aura of authority?

The answers to these questions vary dramatically depending on what country you come from. One of my INSEAD colleagues, Professor André Laurent polled hundreds of managers, asking: “Is it important for a manager to have at hand answers for most of the questions subordinates may raise about their work?” While 45 percent of the Japanese sample claimed it was important for the boss to have most of the answers, only 7 percent of Swedes thought the same way.

One Swedish manager commented, “Even if I know the answer, I probably won’t give it to my staff... because I want them to figure it out for themselves!” Conversely, one Japanese executive said, “I would try not to ask my boss a question unless I was pretty sure he knew the answer.”

How they follow the leader

Most East Asian countries are high-power-distance cultures. One of the many reasons for this is the strong impact of Confucianism. Confucius believed that mankind would be in harmony with the universe if everyone understood their role in society and behaved accordingly. He devised a system of interdependent relationships, in which the lower level gives obedience to the higher, while those who are higher protect and mentor the lower.

In order to understand many East Asian hierarchies, it is important to think not just about the lower level person’s responsibility to follow, but also about the responsibility of the higher person – whether father, boss or elder – to protect and care for those lower down – whether sons, staff or youth. Although Confucius has been dead for centuries, anyone leading a team in China can benefit from understanding these principles.

During a research project I conducted with my colleague Elsie Shen, we interviewed Steve Henning, an Australian who had lived in China for many years. “In China, the boss is always right,” Henning reflected, “and even when the boss is very wrong, he is still right.” Gradually he had learned to understand and respect this system of reciprocal obligations. “Your team may follow your instructions to the letter, but in return, you must understand your role to coach and take care of them,” he explained.

In a hierarchical culture, protect your subordinates, mentor them, always look out for their interests, and you may reap many rewards. As Henning put it: “There is great beauty in giving a clear instruction and watching your competent and enthusiastic team willingly attack the project without challenging you every step of the way.”

In today’s global business environment it is not enough to be either a low-power-distance leader or a high-power-distance leader. You may find yourself leading a team with both Dutch and Chinese employees (as well as Italians, Swedes and Mexicans). You need to develop the flexibility to manage up and down the cultural scale. Often this means going back to square one. It means watching what makes local leaders successful. It

means explaining your own style frequently. It may even mean learning to laugh at yourself. But ultimately it means learning to lead in different ways in order to motivate and mobilise groups who *follow* in different ways from the folks back home.

Erin Meyer is an Affiliate Professor of Organisational Behaviour at INSEAD where she is also the Programme Director of [Managing Global Virtual Teams](#) and [Management Skills for International Business](#) two of INSEAD's executive development programmes. She is also the author of [The Culture Map: Breaking Through the Invisible Boundaries of Global Business](#). You can follow Erin on Twitter [@ErinMeyerINSEAD](#)

Follow INSEAD Knowledge on [Twitter](#) and [Facebook](#)

Find article at

<https://knowledge.insead.edu/leadership-organisations/leading-across-cultures-learn-adapt-your-style>

About the author(s)

Erin Meyer is Professor of Management Practice in the Organisational Behaviour Department at INSEAD. Erin is the Programme Director for INSEAD's executive development programme [Leading Across Borders and Cultures](#).