



Delegating effectively across cultures

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ABSTRACT

This article builds on the contingency approach to global leadership to examine empowerment in a cross-cultural context. Drawing upon ethnographic research on employees of a French NGO in Madagascar, our study demonstrates that effective empowerment is not dependent on the amount of delegation, but rather it is dependent on how delegation is performed. Understanding the cultural representations of formalization, skill development, collective work, and decision-making appeared to be crucial to effective delegation in Madagascar. This result suggests that managers should adapt the way that they empower their teams based on the conditions and forms of delegation prevailing in local cultures.

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1. Introduction

Delegation is widely acknowledged to be a crucial aspect of effective leadership that often proves particularly challenging in a cross-cultural context. Research that examines the use of delegation across cultures remains scarce. As Pellegrini and Scandura noted, “*still, research has yet to examine delegation in a cross-cultural context*” (2006, p. 264). In addition, much of the literature discusses the presence or absence of managerial delegation, although delegation is a complex and multi-faceted process (Yukl & Fu, 1999). The “*how*” of delegation across cultures remains under investigated. This paper addresses this theoretical gap and examines its practical implications. Its purpose is to examine the extent to which culture determines the conditions under which delegation is deemed acceptable.

This paper builds on the contingency approach to global leadership. For the past several decades, research efforts have increasingly been directed at understanding the role of leadership across cultures. Many cross-cultural leadership studies have attempted to define a global leadership style (Javidan & Teagarden, 2011; Mendenhall, 2007). The contingency approach instead analyzes leadership-style variations across cultures while highlighting cultural contingencies and questioning the transferability of practices from one culture to another. The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research program (Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, Dastmalchian, &

House, 2012; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) is one of the most influential studies in this area of research. Although most leadership attributes and behaviors were found to vary significantly across cultures, this study also identified some key characteristics of an efficient leadership style that are universally endorsed.

Our research is based on a study of relationships between French expatriates and Malagasy employees of a French non-governmental organization (NGO). Contrasting expectations with regard to delegation were observed across the two samples. This discrepancy is interpreted in light of Malagasy and French national cultures. This research enhances our understanding of cross-cultural leadership in two ways. First, it provides insight into leadership processes in a country with a very different culture than Western countries, where most of the research on leadership and delegation has been conducted. Madagascar has not been included in the sample population of most cross-cultural research (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). Second, it demonstrates that the effectiveness of delegation is contingent on national culture. Although this is in line with extant research (e.g., Pellegrini & Scandura, 2006), it shows that this cultural contingency might be better understood in terms of how delegation is implemented, rather than whether it should be implemented or not. Overall, the results of this study have both practical and theoretical implications.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly review existing research on leadership with a focus on delegation issues and introduce our conceptualization of culture. Next, we introduce the empirical background of this study and the methodology. Then, we analyze and compare the views about delegation across French and Malagasy culture. Finally, the implications of this study are discussed.

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2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Leadership and delegation: a contingency approach

The cross-cultural leadership literature can be divided into two categories: (1) studies that consider culture to be a moderator of the relationship between leadership and employees' outcomes, (2) studies that focus on variations in leadership styles, practices and preferences across countries. Culture is therefore expected to account for a significant variance in leadership (Van Emmerik, Euwema, & Wendt, 2008; Zander & Romani, 2004). We now briefly review these two categories, with a focus on delegation issues.

Delegation occurs when a manager gives subordinates the authority and responsibility for making and implementing decisions (Bass, 2008; Yukl & Fu, 1999). Delegation is central to participative leadership. Different studies in the first of the two aforementioned categories have shown that the outcomes of participative leadership depend on employees' cultural values (Lam, Chen, & Schaubroeck, 2002; Zhang, Wang, & Fleenor, 2011). The rationale for this moderating effect of culture is that people will respond differently to various leadership styles according to their culturally contingent prototype of an effective leader. For instance, Robert, Probst, Martocchio, Drasgow, and Lawler (2000) found that empowerment was negatively associated with satisfaction in India, a high power distance cultural setting. Similarly, Hui, Au, and Fock (2004) demonstrated that employees' willingness to accept and exercise discretionary power depends on the cultural value of power distance, which, in turn, moderates the effect of empowerment on job satisfaction. Pellegrini and Scandura (2006) suggested that delegation might not be an effective management practice in the Turkish business context with respect to job satisfaction. Given that Turkey ranks high on measures of uncertainty avoidance, employees may be reluctant to deal with the ambiguity of being delegated a challenging task and prefer to be told what to do.

In the same vein, different studies in the second category have shown that participative leadership is far from being universally endorsed. For instance, GLOBE research suggests that high power distance and uncertainty avoidance cultures are less inclined to endorse participative leadership (House et al., 2004). Similarly, Wendt, Euwema, and Van Emmerik (2009) found cultural individualism to be negatively related to supportive leadership. In the second category, different studies have also focused on leadership prototypes across cultures. These studies show that delegation is not universally acknowledged as an ideal leader's behavior. For instance, Romero (2004) demonstrated that in a traditional Latin-American context, delegation is not commonly expected from a leader (a similar result can be found in Dorfman & Howell, 1997). Conversely, Hoppe and Baghat (2007), as part of the GLOBE project, suggest that the ideal leader in the United States is someone who encourages participation through delegation. Beyond these few examples of studies that develop knowledge on leadership prototype variation across cultures, some other studies have researched the influence of different cultural dimensions on the inclination to delegate or expect delegation (Hofstede, 2001). Looking at actual managers' behavior, Offermann and Hellmann (1997) found that managers from high uncertainty avoidance countries tended to delegate less than those from low uncertainty avoidance countries. The rationale for this result is that leaders from high uncertainty avoidance cultures are more likely to find ways to keep their units under control in an attempt to make their working environment more certain. Their findings also indicate that power distance influences the inclination to delegate because this cultural dimension is associated with a tendency for leaders to autocratically retain power (similar results can be found in Van de Vliert & Smith, 2004).

Traditionally, delegation was conceptualized by characteristics of the subordinates and the manager–subordinate relationship (Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998; Yukl & Fu, 1999). Our succinct review also suggests that the use of delegation is far from being a universal leadership behavior. In our literature review, the question is primarily addressed in terms of the presence or absence of managerial delegation. However, delegation is a complex and multi-faceted process (Yukl & Fu, 1999). The forms of delegation across cultures remain underinvestigated. The remainder of the paper addresses this question.

2.2. National cultures

To date, most cross-cultural leadership researchers have considered culture drawing upon the comparative work of Hofstede (2001). Using this perspective, culture is a shared system of values that determines individual preferences and attitudes. In this paper, we adopt an interpretative approach to culture (D'Iribarne, 2009; Primecz, Romani, & Sackmann, 2011). In this approach, culture is the shared context of meaning (i.e., a set of references with which actors give meaning to their experiences). Sharing a culture means using the same symbolic categories to make sense of reality and not attaching value to the same reality. Although such sense-making patterns are a strong constraining force, especially regarding legitimate ways of coping with social interactions within organizations, they do not affect attitudes in a deterministic manner. For instance, in the United States, social relations are mainly conceived as contracts. Individuals can still disagree on whether a given action respects their contract while sharing the same definition for the concept of a contract (Chevrier, 2009).

Culture is relatively stable due to its deep structure. Indeed, it appears that in any society, an opposition was formed between a dominant peril (i.e., a basic concern that makes people uneasy or even anxious) and paths to salvation that enable people to avert this fear (D'Iribarne, 2009). This fear marks all social existence and, particularly, the life of an organization because many events taking place in organizations are likely to revive these fears. This opposition between situations that inspire fear and paths to salvation is based upon idiosyncratic references, which are implicit and unconscious. In a given society, this opposition is highlighted by a network of real or mythical figures and narratives. The vocabulary in use in a society also reflects the categories at work in this opposition.

The French cultural example, which we borrow from D'Iribarne (2009, pp. 314–315), illustrates this definition of culture. In French society, the basic fear is servility (i.e., the experience of being bent by fear or by interest). A specific vocabulary is associated with this experience: “to yield”, “to submit”, “to lower oneself”, “to crawl”, “to reveal oneself to be spineless”. The path to salvation is resistance, in the name of something great, over fear and petty interests; this path is associated with expressions such as “to face” and to “stand up to”. Courage is opposed to cowardice, an idea that is well expressed in expressions such as “all is lost except honor” or “honor is safe”. Thus, many French myths glorify resistance, from Vercingétorix to Jean Moulin, via Jeanne d'Arc. This opposition between the unworthiness of servility and the nobleness of resistance is far from being universal. For example, some other societies are much more concerned with chaos (China) or impurity (India).

Culture represents a framework for individual and collective action. Management practices are culturally rooted. Hierarchical relations will be interpreted in the light of cultural dominant peril. For instance, in the French context, one can intuitively understand how the implicit reference to servility will help individuals to determine whether a relationship is acceptable. This does not

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