

Leadership Style Variations across Cultures: Overview of GLOBE Research Findings

Cornelius N. Grove, Ed.D., GROVEWELL LLC

GLOBE is the acronym for “Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness,” a 62-nation, 11-year study involving 170 researchers worldwide. The GLOBE Project was introduced in my first article (click [here](#)). In this second article, I will overview GLOBE’s specific findings about how leadership and leaders' styles vary among nations and cultures.

This article begins with a brief overview of the GLOBE team's guiding theory and its research and data-analysis process.

Implicit Leadership Theory

In planning the investigation they would soon carry out, the GLOBE team was influenced by findings from a respected body of previous research, often referred to as “implicit leadership theory.” This theory holds that individuals gradually develop, beginning as young children, a set of beliefs about the behaviors and characteristics of leaders. For most individuals, details of his or her belief-set, or theory, are out of conscious awareness, i.e., they are “implicit.”

A key element of implicit leadership theory is that leadership is in the eye of the beholder. That is, “leader” is a term applied by observers (think of them as followers, at least potentially) to someone whose behaviors and characteristics match the observers’ implicit belief-set.

Existing research-based leadership theory further holds that people in an interacting group – in a team, organization, community, or society – all share implicit leadership theories that are similar. This occurs because people in groups share a great deal, including their environment, past history, recent experiences, common challenges, systems of reward, philosophic or religious beliefs, core values -- this list could go on and on. It would be quite astonishing if they did not also share a system of beliefs about leaders.

What the GLOBE Researchers Set Out to Demonstrate

The GLOBE researchers set out to demonstrate, empirically, that possessing an implicit leadership theory is true of *groups* as well as of individuals. The researchers’ main hypothesis was that each organizational or societal culture will be associated with a specific set of beliefs

about leadership. Put another way, the researchers wanted to show that societal and organizational culture influences the kind of leadership found to be acceptable and effective by people within that culture. *This fundamental hypothesis was confirmed by their 11-year investigation.*

But that wasn't the only hypothesis about leadership that the research team hoped to demonstrate. They expected that any individual's implicit leadership theory would include beliefs about *unacceptable and ineffective leadership* as well as beliefs about acceptable and effective leadership. So another question was: Are both the positive *and the negative* attributes of leadership shared by the members of a culture?

Now we come to the question that probably supplied the strongest motivation to many of the researchers. GLOBE would be a *worldwide* investigation that looked at leaders and leadership in dozens of widely separated groups. To what extent are positive, and negative, attributes of leadership similar across many different cultural groups? And to what extent do the belief-sets of widely separated groups differ? These questions became answerable once the research data had been collected.

How the Research Team Proceeded

As explained in my introductory article, the GLOBE team identified a large number of "attributes" that are viewed everywhere as being responsible to at least some extent for a leader's effectiveness or lack of effectiveness. Examples of these attributes are "orderly," "bossy," "decisive," "evasive," "sincere," and "micromanager."

After data had been collected from 17,300 middle managers in the 62 societal cultures, it became possible to statistically assign many of the attributes to 21 "primary leadership dimensions"; to see a list of these in my first article, click [here](#).

Statistical procedures also enabled these 21 primary dimensions to be further consolidated into six key "culturally endorsed leadership theory dimensions" or "CLTs." (See Note 3 in my first article about the various names given to these six.) The dimensions reflect the essential ways in which middle managers worldwide distinguish between effective and ineffective leadership.

Finally, as suggested above, the data also permitted the researchers to answer questions about which leadership attributes are universally regarded as positive and negative, and which differ from one societal culture to another.

This diagram is best reviewed from the bottom (raw data) towards the top (theories).

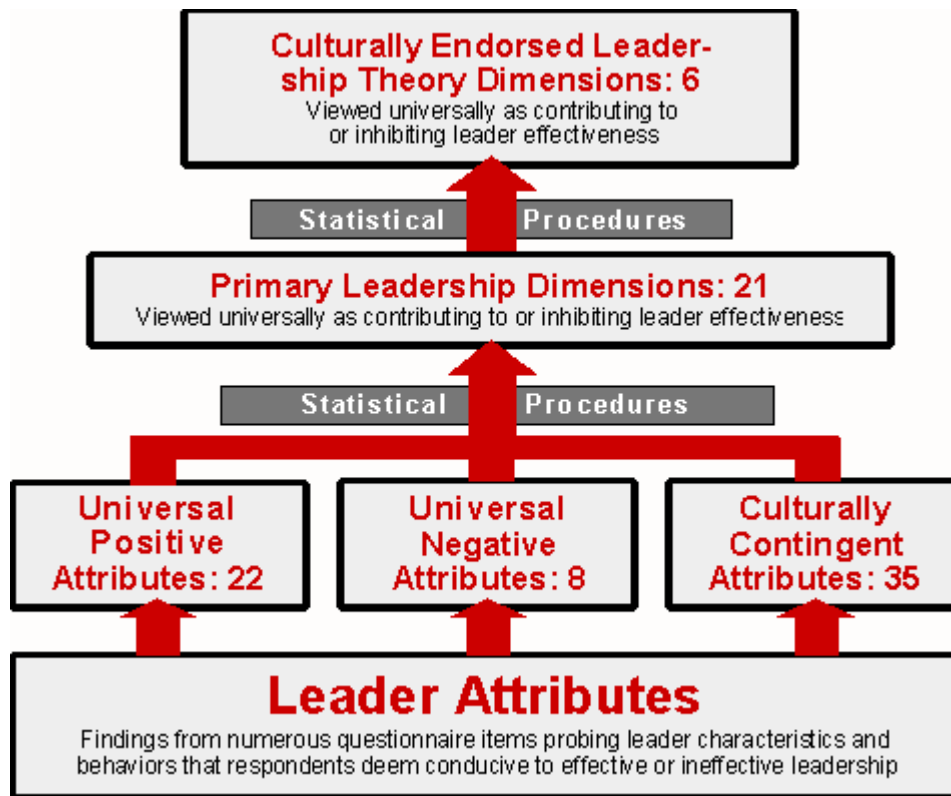


Figure 1: How the Research Team Proceeded

Leadership Attributes: Universals and “Culturally Contingent”

Before we explore the six culturally endorsed leadership dimensions, let’s return to the “attributes,” the many characteristics and behaviors that might be responsible for a leader’s effectiveness or lack of it. Recall from my introductory article that the researchers imposed upon themselves very stringent requirements for saying that any attribute is “universally” agreed upon as positive or negative.

UNIVERSAL POSITIVES: The researchers were able to identify **22** attributes that are universally regarded as positive, i.e., as contributing to outstanding leadership. Few readers will be surprised by any attribute on this list – “trustworthy,” “motive arouser,” and “excellence oriented” are among the 22.

What is more significant is that, of these 22 attributes, 13 were found to have a strong statistical relationship with just three of the “primary leadership dimensions.”

The primary leadership dimension “charismatic/inspirational” had six linked attributes. It thus emerges as the most strongly endorsed contributor, worldwide, to acceptable and effective leadership. Leaders viewed as charismatic/inspirational are positive, dynamic, encouraging, motivating, and confidence-building.

The primary dimension “team integrator” had four linked attributes, and so is also endorsed worldwide as a strong contributor to good leadership. Communicative, informed, and coordinator are how this type of leader is perceived.

Finally, the primary dimension “integrity” had three linked attributes, and is another strong contributor to good leadership. Such leaders are trustworthy, just, and honest [p. 677, including Table 21.2].

Keep in mind that a critical question remains unanswered. How does a leader in this or that society *actually demonstrate* -- actually behave in a way that conveys -- qualities such as “charismatic/- inspirational” and “integrity”? Depending on location, what does he or she *actually do* day after day that leads to his or her being recognized as a “team integrator”?

UNIVERSAL NEGATIVES: The researchers were able to identify **8** attributes that are universally regarded as negative, i.e., as inhibiting good leadership. Again, few readers are likely to be surprised that this list includes items such as “irritable” and “dictatorial.” The primary leadership dimensions “self-protective” and “malevolent” were each linked to two of the 8 attributes [p. 678, including Table 21.3].

CULTURALLY CONTINGENT ATTRIBUTES: An especially relevant finding of the GLOBE Project was that **35** leadership attributes are “culturally contingent.” This means that each of these attributes is viewed in some societies as promoting good leadership, while in other societies the very same attribute is thought to impede good leadership.

What was the GLOBE team’s technical definition of a culturally contingent attribute? Recall from my introduction (click [here](#)) that respondents assessed every attribute on a 1-to-7 scale, with 1 meaning “greatly inhibits” and 7 meaning “greatly contributes to” outstanding leadership. Attributes deemed to be “culturally contingent” yielded, from the 62 societies, average scores that ranged *above and below* the midpoint on that scale, 4.

The most stunning example is the attribute “cunning,” which had an average score of 1.26 from one society and of 6.38 from another society! All of the other 60 societies yielded average scores for “cunning” that fell between those two extremes.

Another surprising example is the attribute “sensitive,” which to many readers – and to me! – sounds like something we would find on the list of universal positives. But we would be wrong. The range for “sensitive” was from 1.96 to 6.35.

Here are a few others. “Evasive” fell all across a continuum between the *inhibits* score of 1.52 and the *contributes* score of 5.67. “Class conscious” ranged from 2.53 to 6.09. “Ruler” came in between 1.66 and 5.20; “provocateur” between 1.38 and 6.00. The researchers themselves say that it is “striking” (p. 679) that the attribute “risk taker” scored between 2.14 and 5.96 [Table 21.4, p. 679].

In these 35 items we have empirical evidence that there is significant variation around the world in the demonstration and perception of outstanding business leadership.

Leadership Dimensions: Culturally Endorsed Leadership Theory

An outcome of the GLOBE Project of which the researchers are obviously proud is the set of six “culturally endorsed leadership theory dimensions,” or “CLTs.” These six represent the ultimate result of the team’s statistical grouping of leadership attributes into common dimensions (see Figure 1). As the research report’s authors write: “These dimensions are summary indices of the characteristics, skills, and abilities culturally perceived to contribute to, or inhibit, outstanding leadership. They can be thought of as being somewhat similar to what laypersons refer to as leadership styles...” [p. 675. Quotes under the six subheadings below, unless otherwise attributed, are also from this page.] The six CLTs are:

CHARISMATIC / VALUE-BASED: This dimension receives the most attention from the book’s authors because it captures under one heading what many business people worldwide commonly associate with outstanding leadership. The authors explain that this CLT dimension “reflects the ability to inspire, to motivate, and to expect high performance outcomes from others on the basis of firmly held core values.” The authors also hint that charismatic/value-based leadership might bear similarities to what others have called “transformational leadership” [pp. 61, 65].

Charisma is said to be “the power to inspire devotion and commitment for the group’s goals” [p. 500] and to “produce power through infectious qualities of leadership and influence, involving a leader’s aura, dynamism, and persuasiveness” [p. 515].

This CLT dimension is statistically linked to the largest number of primary leadership dimensions, including an exceptionally strong association with “charismatic/inspirational,” a very strong association with “charismatic/visionary,” and associations as well with “charismatic/self-sacrifice,” “integrity,” “decisive,” and “performance oriented.”

Across all 62 societal cultures, the charismatic/value-based CLT dimension is rated on the 1-to-7 scale from a low of 4.5 to a high of 6.5, meaning that all cultures see this dimension as

substantially contributing to outstanding leadership. At the level of the 10 societal clusters, the Anglo cluster most positively associated charismatic/value-based with outstanding leadership. The Middle East cluster least associated it with outstanding leadership – yet the mean for this cluster was 5.35, well above the 4.00 mid-point.

TEAM ORIENTED: This CLT also receives considerable attention in the book because it emerges in second place in terms of capturing what a many business people worldwide commonly associate with outstanding leadership. It is described as emphasizing “effective team building and implementation of a common purpose or goal among team members.”

The team oriented CLT dimension is statistically linked to five primary leadership dimensions: “collaborative team orientation,” “team integrator,” “diplomatic,” “administratively competent,” and a *reverse scored* “malevolent.”

Across all 62 societal cultures, this CLT is rated from a low of 4.7 to a high of 6.2, meaning that all cultures see team orientation as substantially contributing to outstanding leadership. At the level of the 10 societal clusters, the Latin America cluster most positively associated the team oriented CLT with outstanding leadership. Once again, the Middle East cluster least associated it with outstanding leadership – but, as before, the mean for societies in this cluster, 5.47, was above the 4.00 mid-point.

PARTICIPATIVE: This dimension “reflects the degree to which managers involve others in making and implementing decisions.” It is statistically linked with two primary leadership dimensions, both *reverse scored*: “autocratic” and “non-participative.”

Across all 62 societal cultures, “participative” is rated from a low of 4.5 to a high of 6.1, meaning that all saw it in a positive light. At the level of the 10 societal clusters, Germanic Europe yielded the highest mean score, 5.86. The Middle East gave “participative” its lowest mean score, 4.97, which nonetheless is mildly positive.

Many readers will be interested to learn that “the United States was the single culture in which participative leadership had a positive influence on employee performance. The actual *level* of participation for the United States was also the highest in all sampled countries” [p. 61; this finding attributed to a previously published study by Peter W. Dorfman].

HUMANE ORIENTED: This dimension “reflects supportive and considerate leadership, but also includes compassion and generosity.” It is associated statistically with two primary leadership dimensions, “modesty” and “humane oriented.”

Across all 62 societal cultures, the “humane oriented” CLT was rated from a low of 3.8 to a high of 5.6; that is, most viewed it moderately positively. Within the 10 societal clusters, Southern Asia gave this CLT the highest mean score, 5.38. Nordic Europe gave “humane orientated” its lowest mean score, 4.42, which is barely more positive than neutral.

SELF-PROTECTIVE: More difficult to understand than the previous four, this CLT is described thus by the authors: “From a Western perspective, this newly defined leadership dimension focuses on ensuring the safety and security of the individual or group member.” It is associated statistically with five primary leadership dimensions: “self-centered,” “status conscious,” “conflict-inducer,” “face-saver,” and “procedural.”

An alternative explanation is that self-protective leadership "is composed of items that reflect being status- and class-conscious, ritualistic, procedural, normative, secretive, evasive, indirect, self-centered, and asocial." Added is the fact that, in some societies, leaders may need to "protect themselves from acts of criticism and corruption," may want to insure "that they are not made into scapegoats for political ends," and may wish to "respond to humane considerations" [p. 555].

Across all 62 societal cultures, self-protective is rated from a low of 2.5 to a high of 4.6. At the level of the 10 societal clusters, the highest mean score is 3.83 for Southern Asia, just below the mid-point of 4.00. The authors comment (p. 702) that “...the Confucian Asia and Southern Asia clusters viewed Self-Protective leadership in an almost neutral manner (with some attributes of this factor being viewed positively, such as face saving). [It has been suggested] that the concept for Asian cultures actually reflects “group-protective” rather than “self-protective” elements....” Incidentally, the Middle East cluster also rated the self-protective CLT in an almost neutral manner. Nordic Europe, with a mean of 2.72, associated this CLT with the inhibition of good leadership.

AUTONOMOUS: Also somewhat difficult to understand, the “autonomous” CLT dimension is discussed by the authors as follows: “This newly defined leadership dimension has not previously appeared in the literature. [It] refers to independent and individualistic leadership.” It is statistically linked with only one primary leadership dimensions, also termed “autonomous.”

Across all 62 societal cultures, the “autonomous” CLT is rated from a low of 2.3 to a high of 4.7, meaning that business people in most societies believed it to moderately inhibit good leadership. At the level of the 10 societal clusters, Eastern Europe yielded the highest mean score of 4.20, closely followed by Germanic Europe at 4.16; both are barely above the scale’s neutral mid-point. Latin America ranked “autonomous” lowest at 3.51, not far below the neutral mid-point.