

Impact of Culture on Leadership Style: The Case of Iranian Organisations

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Abstract: The relationship between leadership style and organisational culture has received much attention since the 1980s, however, it is different in different parts of the world so the relationship between leadership style and national culture also requires investigation. This paper examines the relationship between national culture and leadership style in private sector organisations. To test our hypothesis that leadership style and national culture are related, data were gathered using a questionnaire survey distributed to 900 managers of private sector organisations in Iran. Of these, 350 were completed and returned. Correlation and regression analyses were conducted using SPSS 18. The results indicate that all the dimensions of national culture have a significant relationship with transformational and transactional leadership styles whereas there were mixed relationships between national culture dimensions and the passive leadership style. The results of this study add to the understanding of leadership style and will help practitioners to select an appropriate leadership style for a given national context.

Key words: National culture • Leadership style • Iran • Private sector • Culture

INTRODUCTION

This paper addresses how national culture, in the form of Hofstede's four dimensions, affects the leadership style adopted by managers. There are countless studies of the impact of organisational culture on leadership style [1], however, although studies have implied that the leadership style implemented in any organisation is related to the national culture of the managers [2], there have been no direct empirical studies of the effect of national culture on leadership style. This paper investigates national culture in order to broaden our knowledge of it as a factor that might have an impact on the type of leadership style which is adopted.

Hofstede [3] defines culture as values, beliefs and assumptions that people learn from an early age and that distinguish one group from another one. Therefore, an understanding of the national culture of the employees of an organisation is important since national culture has an impact on employees' behaviour and

perception of the work environment. In order to be effective and achieve maximum performance from their subordinates, leaders should be able to fulfil subordinates' particular expectations [4].

The impact of national culture on leadership style is especially important in developing countries because there is a continuing debate on the transferability of management techniques and theories from the developed world [5, 6]. If managers are to learn from the experience of developed countries, there is a need to understand the relationship between national culture and leadership style so that an effective transference can be made.

Literature Review: In this study national culture is defined by Hofstede's original four dimensions of national culture [7] measured using Dorfman and Howell's scales [8] and leadership style is measured using Avolio and Bass [9] whose work is based on the transformational-transactional model.

National Culture: Hofstede [7] sees culture as a grouping of collective habits of mind and defines culture as “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one human group from another” (p. 25). He further argues that culture can be defined in terms of its values which he defines as “broad tendencies to prefer certain states of affairs over others” [10]. Hofstede used four dimensions to measure these broad tendencies and produce a profile of the national culture of each country which he studies. He was then able to categorise these profiles to produce geographical regions.

Of his four dimensions, Iran scored relatively high on uncertainty avoidance and power distance and relatively low in masculinity and individualism. These results enabled him to characterise Iran as being similar to Greece and Turkey and he placed it in the Near Eastern cluster.

On the other hand, the Global Leadership and Organizational Effectiveness (GLOBE) project placed Iran, alongside India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines and Thailand in the Southern Asia cluster. GLOBE identified this group as having a high level of power distance and group and family collectivism. According to their research, countries in this cluster have a strong orientation towards the future and towards performance. In addition, this cluster values charisma, team orientation and humane leadership [11].

In Hofstede’s findings, Iran’s high score on collectivism could indicate that Iranians are very good at team working. However, Taybe [12] argues that Iranian culture is better viewed in terms of individualism rather than collectivism since team co-operation, where members of the team are not very well known to each other from the outset, does not fit well with Iranian culture.

Also, according to Hofstede’s findings, Iran scored highly on power distance, indicating that its society accepts a highly unequal distribution of power. This characteristic could have its origins in the structure of the Iranian family and particularly ethnic minority families, where the father traditionally had ultimate power as the family leader [13]. However, according to Thiebaut [13], this effect has diminished as a result of increasing levels of education bringing about a new relationship between mothers and their children. Furthermore, Thiebaut argues that in recent years Iranians have become more individualistic, more resistant to totalitarianism and more in favour of modernity, demanding cultural, social and political change.

A criticism which has been levelled at Hofstede’s study is that, since it was conducted only in IBM subsidiaries, the sample was skewed by the organisational

culture and the fact that employees would have come from only certain sections of society [8]. In order to overcome this problem, Dorfman and Howell proposed a new scale for measuring Hofstede’s dimensions which was at the level of the individual so that valid data could be gathered from any member of society [14].

The literature shows that Hofstede’s approach to national culture has been tried and tested over a long period of time and has formed a reliable basis for further study which has enriched the model. Therefore, Hofstede’s four dimensions of national culture measured using Dorfman and Howell’s scales is a good basis for the present study.

Leadership Style: Leadership always plays a significant role in the growth and development of any organization [15]. It is the leaders and managers of the firm who take most of the significant decisions which determine the success of the business [16]. Schimmoeller, [17], among others, argues that the survival of an organisation depends on the responsiveness and adaptability of its leaders in selecting a leadership style which fits the context and members’ emotion [9, 17-19]. Bass and Avolio [20] believe that any organisation, regardless of the size or industry it operates in, which needs to achieve specific objectives and ensure the motivation and satisfaction of the employees, requires effective leaders who can play their role in ensuring the achievement of the desired goals and objectives.

Among the theories of leadership that relate to effective organisational change, the most prominent is transformational-transactional theory. In a study of leadership, Burns [21] uses the transformational-transactional approach and identifies three leadership styles: the transactional where the relationship between managers and employees is based on a formal or informal contract, the transformational where managers seek to inspire employees to emotionally identify and internalise with the aims of the organisation and the laissez-faire (passive) style where managers delegate responsibility and only intervene in the case of disaster.

Burns argues that transactional leadership is based on conventional exchange relationships, similar to a formal contract between two people, in which one party, the follower, provides labour, productivity and loyalty in exchange for promised rewards, whereas, in transformational leadership the main concern of leaders is to improve followers’ consciousness level concerning the importance of work and value of the outcomes, as well

as how to achieve them. In transformational leadership, leaders try to motivate followers to exceed their self-interest in the work in order to achieve better outcomes for the sake of the mission and vision of the organisation. Leaders hope, by engaging followers emotionally, intellectually and even morally, to encourage them to develop their skills and perform beyond expectation [22]. According to Burns [21] leaders in transformational leadership engage in the process of promoting major changes in organisational attitudes in order to achieve the organisation's objectives and strategies.

On the other hand, Bass [22] argues that in transactional leadership leaders create an organisational culture based on existing rules and procedures while transformational leaders change the culture based on a new organisational vision and create new assumptions, values and norms. For example, if an organisation requires the adaptation of a new technology, the role of leaders is critical in the success of the changes required. Bass [22] based on Burns's [21] argument developed a model of transformational and transactional leadership which has gained major popularity among scholars.

In studies conducted in different industries it has been shown that the transactional style of leadership in industrial organisations is more effective than the transformational leadership style [23]. However, in service based organisations, the transformational leadership style is preferred because it enhances job satisfaction so as to encourage staff to make extra effort in order to achieve service objectives.

A third style, the *laissez-faire* (or passive) style, is usually adopted by leaders with low educational attainment and lack of management experience [24]. These leaders cannot ensure staff motivation and commitment in the professional working environment. There are some researchers who believe that passive leadership can hurt the organisation significantly [25] and that it is the least satisfactory and least effective, of the three leadership styles [9, 26]. The *laissez-faire* style of leadership results in interpersonal conflicts among the staff members, role ambiguity, role conflict and psychological distress at the workplace [26-28].

Leadership in Iran: Studies of organisational leadership style in Iran are very limited [29-33]. Generally speaking, Iran is a Muslim country and as part of the Islamic culture, employees expect their leaders to be honest, visionary and generous [21]. The national culture of Iran values moderately low uncertainty avoidance, power distance

and societal collectivism [11, 33, 31]. Charismatic leaders can help a great deal to reduce uncertainty; therefore, the preference is always given to modest, concerned and self-effacing leaders [31-33].

Furthermore, Iranian employees prefer organisational leaders who can inspire and guide them and also provide support for subordinates like a father [11, 33-34]. This approach is close to the transformational style of leadership.

According to Merhrabani and Mohamad [32] an autocratic leadership style is preferable in the public sector while the transformational leadership style shows a positive influence on organizational effectiveness in private sector organisations [35]. However, according to Mehrabani and Mohamad [32] in the Iranian public sector the autocratic leadership style is more predominant as power and authority are very centralized. In a more recent study conducted by the students of the Islamic Azad University (IAU) in Iran, the results show that the transformational style of leadership is preferred by the majority of employees working in all types of organisation in Iran [34].

Summary Statements and Hypotheses: There are countless studies on the impact of organisational culture on leadership style or vice versa, however, there is lack of empirical study of the impact of national culture on leaders and leadership style chosen or implemented by them. Furthermore, in most studies, arguably almost all, national culture is taken for granted and its impact on any other concept such as leadership style and organisational effectiveness is not analysed. Therefore, based on this literature review and the above analysis and to fulfil the aim of this study, we propose these hypotheses for testing:

Hypothesis 1: There is relationship between national culture and leadership style.

Hypothesis 2: The dimensions of national culture have different relationships with different leadership styles.

Research Method and Technique

Sampling and Instrument: In order to test the hypotheses proposed for this study a deductive-quantitative-survey methodology using convenience sampling was used. The sample was drawn from the management level of private sector organisations in Iran. The level of analysis in the study is the individual level since each individual has his or her own perception of leadership style based

on the individual's national culture. The questionnaire designed for this study is divided into three parts: 1) demographic questions, 2) national culture questions based on Hofstede's national culture dimensions using Dorfman and Howell's [8] scale which has 22 questions and 3) 36 questions on leadership style which are based on the transactional transformational theory using Avolio and Bass [9] MLQ 5X scales.

For the purpose of this study data were collected from different management level of Iranian organizations. In Iran, there are strict government restrictions on collecting information from organizations, especially on matters such as culture which are felt to be sensitive, so convenience sampling was used to overcome this difficulty. Although convenience sampling inevitably produces a less representative sample than random sampling it has been seen it as justified where there are difficulties in accessing data [35]. In total 900 questionnaires sent to managers of 30 organisations in the private sector in Iran out of which 358 were returned out of which 350 were used for further analysis as 8 of them were incomplete. According to Sekaran [35] the average response rate of 35% can be considered to be satisfactory for a survey of this kind.

Method of Analysis: After finishing data collection and in order to analyse the data, the reliability of the constructs was tested using the Cronbach alpha test. Then, in the second stage of the data analysis, descriptive statistics were produced, along with exploratory factor analysis. Finally, correlation coefficients as well as regression analyses were conducted. Pearson's correlation coefficients were produced to estimate the degree of association between pairs of variables in the sample as a whole. Additionally, linear regression analysis was also employed to predict the extent to which predictor variables act as predictors of specific outcomes.

RESULTS

Descriptive Analysis: The majority of respondents in this study were from the middle and senior management levels, with 37 and 34 per cent respectively. Around 22 per cent were from the junior management level and only 7 per cent were in CEO positions. Furthermore, a slight majority of the sample was male, at 54 per cent. Around 78 per cent of the respondents were between 35 and 54 years of age, 40 per cent were between 35 and 44 years and 38 per cent were between 45 and 54 years. Almost 99 per cent of the respondents had university degrees at bachelor level or

above with 35 per cent holding a bachelor's degree, 38 per cent holding a master's degree and 26 per cent holding a doctorate. Only 1 per cent did not have any university education.

Reliability, Items Mean and Factor Loading: The table below clearly indicates that all dimensions of both national culture and leadership style were highly reliable and their values were above the recommended scale of 0.6 with scores of. 897 for masculinity (MSI),. 83 for power distance (PDI),. 744 for uncertainty avoidance (UAI) and .697 for individualism (IDVI). Furthermore, the dimensions of leadership style had values which varied from. 69 (Passive Leadership Style) to. 712 (transactional) and. 701 (transformational). In the factor loading analysis it was decided to delete those items for which the factor loading was less than. 30 as recommended by Hair *et al.* [39] and there was only one item in national culture (IDV6) where the factor loading result was lower than. 3 and therefore it was deleted from further analysis.

Multicollinearity was detected using the tolerance and Variance Inflation Factor (VIF) tests. Multicollinearity is a phenomenon where two or more variables are highly correlated in multiple regression analysis. Tolerance is an indication of the proportional variance in the predictor that cannot be accounted for by the other predictor. According to Field [36] the tolerance value of less than. 10 needs further investigation. Also, he further argues that VIF value greater than 10 require further investigation [36, 37]. The analysis of data in this study show that both tolerances and VIF values are in the acceptable range.

Hypotheses Testing: In the first step of data analysis and in order to test Hypothesis 1 correlations analysis was conducted and the results show that there is medium to low correlation among national culture dimensions and leadership styles (Table 2). The findings of this study are consistent with the limited previous studies which indicate that there should be a relationship between national culture and leadership style and confirm what was predicted in this study. Furthermore, the results of this study confirm some of Hofstede's findings on the relationship between national culture dimensions, such as the negative correlation between power distance and individualism, or the positive relationship between uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. Moreover, all national culture dimensions show either positive or negative correlation with different leadership styles apart from masculinity which shows a relationship with the transformational leadership style. This finding was to be

Table 1: Factor Loading, Scale Mean and Cronbach alpha of Dimensions

	Construct	Measurement item	Factor loading	Scale Mean	Cronbach alpha	
National culture	Uncertainty Avoidance	UA1	0.453	5.97	0.744	
		UA2	0.706	5.78		
		UA3	0.526	5.75		
		UA4	0.761	5.81		
	Individualism Vs. Collectivism	UA5	0.834	5.73	0.697	
		IDV1	0.707	5.29		
		IDV1	0.73	5.52		
		IDV1	0.621	5.36		
		IDV1	0.696	5.34		
	Power Distance	IDV1	0.593	5.37	0.83	
		PD1	0.809	2.83		
		PD2	0.781	2.92		
		PD3	0.679	2.99		
		PD4	0.641	3.09		
		PD5	0.792	2.34		
	Masculinity Vs Femininity	PD6	0.518	3.06	0.89	
		MS1	0.766	3.98		
MS2		0.856	3.65			
MS3		0.812	3.78			
MS4		0.886	3.57			
		MS5	0.894	3		
Leadership Style	Transactional	CR1	.638	2.98	0.712	
		CR2	.515	3.25		
		CR3	.543	3.38		
		CR4	.485	3.27		
		MBEA1	.526	2.87		
		MBEA2	.487	2.93		
		MBEA3	.500	3.06		
		MBEA4	.518	3.18		
Passive Leadership Style		MBEP1	.524	2	0.69	
		MBEP2	.511	2.11		
		MBEP3	.467	2.05		
		MBEP4	.497	2.01		
	Transformational		LF1	.418	2.13	0.709
			LF2	.506	1.78	
			LF3	.486	1.67	
			LF4	.524	2.34	
			IA1	.465	4.05	
			IA2	.427	4.17	
			IA3	.486	3.49	
			IA4	.418	3.93	
			IB1	.402	3.99	
			IB2	.414	3.42	
			IB3	.453	2.78	
			IB4	.372	2.67	
		IM1	.497	3.03		
		IM2	.458	3.42		
		IM3	.520	2.87		
		IM4	.535	2.98		
		IS1	.530	2.89		
		IS2	.485	4.01		
		IS3	.426	3.65		
		IS4	.476	3.77		
		IC1	.437	4.18		
		IC2	.408	4.05		
		IC3	.465	3.79		
		IC4	.427	3.78		

Table 2: Correlation Coefficient of Constructs

	UAI	PDI	IDVI	MSI	TFLS	TLS	PLS
UAI	1						
PDI	.357**	1					
IDVI	.468**	-.229*	1				
MSI	.428**	.427*	.436**	1			
TFLS	.437**	.495**	.315**	-.051	1		
TLS	.442**	.463**	.272*	.394**	-.310**	1	
PLS	.213*	.360**	-.237*	-.251*	.369**	-.136*	1

Table 3: Regression Results for National Culture relationship with organisational Culture

LS Var	NC Var	Stan B Coeff	R2	Adj R2	F-Stat
Transformational	UAI	0.438**	0.479	0.468	57.422**
	IDVI	0.367**			
	PDI	0.522**			
	MSI	-0.146*			
Transactional	UAI	0.419**	0.454	0.443	55.264
	IDVI	0.222*			
	PDI	0.522**			
	MSI	0.228*			
Passive	UAI	0.127*	0.102	0.092	11.875**
	IDVI	0.137*			
	PDI	0.058			
	MSI	0.090			

**P< 0.01, *P< 0.05

expected because the purpose of transformational leadership is to motivate subordinates, which is consistent with a feminine culture.

In the second step of data analysis, regression analysis was employed to test Hypothesis 2 and the results are shown in Table 3. The relationship between the national culture dimensions and transformational leadership indicates that all the dimensions of national culture have a significant relationship with the transformational leadership style. The results indicate that all the national culture dimensions are significant predictors of the transformational leadership style: Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) (B=0.438, P<0.01), Individualism (IDV) (B=0.367, P<0.01), Power Distance (PDI) (B=0.522, P<0.01) show a positive significant relationship whereas Masculinity (MSI) (B=-0.246, P<0.01) shows a negative relationship, as was expected. The results also indicate that the R-Square is 47.9 per cent, which implies that the national culture dimensions are good predictors of transformational leadership.

Also, all the dimensions of national culture have strong positive relationships with the transactional leadership style (UAI, B=.419, P<0.01; IDVI, B=.222, P<0.05; PDI, B=.522, P<0.01; MSI, B=.228, P<0.05). In addition, the results also indicate that the

R-Square is 45.4 per cent which shows that the national culture dimensions are good predictors of the transactional leadership style. However, dimensions of national culture show either a weak relationship (UAI, B=.127, P<0.05; IDVI, B=.137, P<0.05), or no relationship (PDI, B=.058, P>.05; MSI, B=.090, P>.05) with passive leadership style. Furthermore, the results show that R-Square is 10.2 per cent, which implies that national culture dimensions are not quite a good predictor of the passive leadership style.

DISCUSSION

This study's aim was to investigate the relationship between national culture and leadership style in Iranian private sector organisations. In order to measure national culture, Hofstede's national culture dimensions (Individualism, Power Distance, Uncertainty Avoidance and Masculinity) were employed by using the Dorfman and Howell [8] instrument. In order to measure leadership style (Transformational, Transactional and Passive) the Avilio and Bass [9] instrument was employed. In order to test the hypotheses proposed for this study national culture was taken as the independent variable and leadership style taken as the dependent variables.

In general, the results from the regression analysis indicate that national culture has a significant impact on leadership style and the correlations analysis which was conducted provides extra support for a relationship between these two constructs. Furthermore, a significant finding is that the relationship between masculinity (MSI) and the transformational leadership in the regression analysis is negative whereas the correlation analysis shows no correlation between them. This result might be seen as predictable since transformational leadership requires leaders to motivate and nurture their subordinates to achieve both personal and organisational goals and this approach is the opposite of masculinity which promotes assertiveness and a performance orientation. The data indicate mixed results in the case of the relationship between national culture and passive leadership. The regression analysis shows that only two of the national culture dimensions, namely uncertainty avoidance and individualism, have a weak significant relationship with passive leadership and the other two, power distance and masculinity, show no relationship at all.

However, the correlation analysis shows that all four dimensions of national culture have a relationship with the passive leadership style. Two (UAI and PDI) have a positive significant relationship and the other two (IDVI, MSI) are negatively correlated with the passive leadership style.

CONCLUSION

This study shows the preference that managers in the sample have among the three leadership styles and how this preference is related to these managers' perception of the national culture in which they work. It shows that there is a general relationship and it shows how the relationship is different for the different dimensions of national culture. This information will be of value to scholars because it increases our understanding of both national culture and leadership style and it will also be of value to managers because it will guide them in their choice of leadership style in a given national context. This study also indicates that further studies are needed to understand how other factors, such as organisational culture, affect the relationship between national culture and leadership style.

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