Admired Leadership Attributes: A Cross-cultural Comparison of Respected Leaders

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Abstract:

The major goal of this study was to explore the perception of admired leadership characteristics of people in Korea, Japan, Canada, and the United States. Based on previous scholarly findings, a list of leadership characteristics was constructed and distributed to 2,000 employees in four countries. Among the 1,405 returned questionnaires, 1,363 were included in the analysis. Findings of the present study show meaningful differences in cultural tendencies of judging admired leaders. The present study suggests that future studies should consider including more leadership traits and exploring various other factors as main themes to study gender, geographical locations, length of employment, and degree of interactions in organizations.

Introduction:

Because of the increasing importance of leadership in political, commercial, educational, social, and international situations, the proliferation of books, commentaries, and research articles concerning leadership topics have been produced. However, cultural differences in leadership perceptions have attracted little attention by researchers who are interested in the subject. Studies have focused on the communication perspective of leadership (Mumby, 2013), gender diversity and leadership (Keyton,2002; Hawkins, 1995), functions of leadership (Lucas,2012), and theories of leadership (Andrews & Herschel, 1996; Gamble & Gamble 2010).

The application of the term "leadership" to our everyday lives often brings to mind power, responsibilities, success, effectiveness, efficiency, decisions, and other positive and sometimes negative feelings about behavior. These terms often surface because leadership is a system of relationships through which individuals inspire followers to demonstrate desired behaviors (Hollander&Offerman,1990). With the complexity of human relationships in different organizational settings, different concepts of leadership as well as the definitions of effective leaders are easily found in the academic literature. Actually, more than 35,000 definitions of leadership have been presented by scholars in their studies (Dubrin, 2000).

Kouzes and Posner (1993) conducted a study to explore peoples' perception of admired characteristics of leaders in organizations.With this study of more than fifteen thousand respondents, the authors found twenty most desirable leadership attributes people think leaders should possess. In their comparison of leadership characteristics study of 1987 and 1993, honesty was selected as the most admired characteristic of leaders followed by such qualities as forward looking, inspiring, competent, and fair minded. Another study on leadership traits concluded that admired leadership is associated with intelligence, self confidence, determination, integrity, and sociability (Northouse, 1997). Because people in different cultures develop different human relationships based on cultural tendencies, it would be desirable to examine how people of different cultures rank the admired characteristics of leaders based on individualism collectivism cultural dimension.

Leadership Studies:

Leadership is one of the most studied organizational and political human relationship issues. When people gather to accomplish goals, whether they are in profit oriented settings, non-profit oriented charitable works, government services, or political activities, they assume that leaders play a major role in the success or failure of organizations. For example, the death of Apple CEO Steve Jobs brought much concerns for the future of the Apple Company (Mumby, 2013). When Starbucks founder Howard Schulz was considering opening stores in Japan, market researchers strongly warned him to be cautious of the Japanese peoples' style of coffee consumption (Eisenberg & Goodall Jr., 2004). If Schulz had followed this advice, the world wide popularity of Starbucks today would not have been on the list of his accomplishments as a leader. On the other hand, the corruption and ethical violations of Enron led the company into bankruptcy (Eisenberg & Goodall Jr., 2004) Moreover, Arthur Anderson, the world's largest accounting firm, contributed to Enron's collapse (Cheney et al., 2004) due to deceptive accounting practices.Therefore, the leadership skills of CEOs can lead an organization to financial prosperity or financial exigency.

Scholars and researchers who study political and organizational phenomena have produced a number of articles and reports on leadership. The first group of study was on the leadership traits that leaders are born, not made. This idea suggests that leaders possess certain characteristics that are associated with the success of leaders. Studies on leadership style offer a different idea compared to leadership traits. This concept focuses on what leaders do rather than the characteristics they possess. The situational approach is another well known proposal about leadership studies. As Fiedler's contingency theory suggests, some leaders are people-oriented, while others are task-oriented and effective leadership is not based on the traits or styles but depended on the situations the leaders are facing (Fiedler, 1979). Yet another approach to the study by scholars was to examine how functional members emerge as leaders as they promote the achievement of organizational goals. Researchers have studied more approaches to the study of leadership as modern organizations became more complex and diverse.

The transactional approach explored the relationship between leaders and followers rather than diagnosing particular actions or traits of leaders. For example, Graen and Ginsburgh (1977) argued that a leader establishes a unique relationship and communication exchange with his/her subordinates that will lead to a level of performance and satisfaction. More recent attempt to the study of leadership is the attributional concept. The key notion of this approach describes how interpersonal judgments are used in developing causal explanations and justifications for other peoples' behavior or attitudes in organizational settings. Rather than focusing on leader qualities or behaviors, this approach is a way to see the process of how leaders use their judgments about subordinates' performance. Thus, the attributional and transactional approaches are on a same level in that both concepts emphasize the qualities of leader communication.

James Burns (1978) introduced additional approaches to the leadership that brought about a great deal of leadership discussions. He argued that leadership is a process of generating significant changes while producing an inspiring vision. Because this was a fairly new introduction to the leadership study, scholars are still examining how influential this leadership approach could be for the followers' responses and performance in the organizations. The most recently discussed leadership study is the constitutive approach. Scholars of this theory (e.g., Liden & Maslyn, 1998; Lee, 2001) argue that objective categorization of leadership traits or situations are not an accurate measure to find effective leadership styles. With various possible situations in organizations, effective leaders are the ones who can manage meanings, persuade others, and frame situations while actively negotiate their relationships with subordinates.

With the introduction of the traits approach in leadership study, scholars have tried to view leadership from various perspectives. They have suggested, described, and argued that there are other ways to view this phenomenon. Those varieties of leadership approaches, however, seem to have one aspect in common. They can be effective only when leadership traits and personalities exist. Communication skills, sociability,

a keen sense of judgment, persuasion, the management of meanings, and the ability to function are a few characteristics of effective leaders that are mentioned by scholars in diverse leadership studies. The appropriate traits of leaders can be seen as the foundation of all leadership approaches, including their success and failure in organizations.

Culture and Leadership Characteristics:

Interrelationships between people of the United States and many countries in East Asia have increased significantly in social, political, and commercial activities. For example, American companies and corporations conduct business in East Asia, American troops are stationed in Korea and Japan, and American or Canadian employees work in famous companies in Eastern countries. In addition, thousands of Asian people come to the United States each year and work with American managers and leaders in companies.

When working with people of diverse cultural backgrounds, leaders should utilize effective communication skills. To maximize the efforts and skills of employees with different cultures, the role of a leader is one of the most important keys for success in a company. To maintain a high level of productivity, a leader should develop global and multicultural visions (Chen and Starosta, 1998) and use cultural differences among employees and markets as a resource (Rhinesmith, 1991), while knowing the fact that leaders are not born to be leaders in a global economy (Miller, 2012). Said differently, leaders can become great leaders and move an organization into the future when they embrace true multiculturalism and diversity no matter the race, class, gender, religion, culture, and sexual orientation of individuals.

Self confidence, honesty, and integrity have been highly praised as necessary leadership characteristics, but they may not be enough to guide culturally diverse people in a contemporary global society. Leaders in a worldly intertwined market need to understand the significance of and promote diversity issues. Effective leaders in the global market also need adaptability, foreign language skills, and ease of other cultures (Margolis, 2010). What is even more important is acknowledging people's perceptions of effective and admired leaders by culture or nation. One important trait of an admired leader in various cultures may not have the same weight of importance from one culture to another. For example, people of collectivistic cultures might believe supportive leaders are more admirable than confident leaders while people of individualistic cultures might present opposite views. Knowing that could prepare leaders and their subordinates to work better with one another in organizations.

One of the two major goals of the present study was to revisit the history and the variety of leadership approaches in the past. To examine extant research between the 1980s and early 2010s, the second goal was to formulate a comparison study to investigate the following research question:

> **RQ:** Do people of Korea and Japan present different admired leadership characteristics than the people of Canada and the United States?

Systematic measures of cultural differences would help us to determine specific admired leadership attributes by culture and, thus, generally clarify work related values of leadership perceptions of people from different countries. Moreover, when leaders understand and adjust leadership patterns to people of different cultures, it could be a positive factor for job satisfaction and work performance for both leaders and subordinates.

Method:

This study was designed to collect, compare, and analyze information on how people of different cultures would select what constituted admired leadership attributes. Following the demographic information section,

the questionnaire included 24 characteristics and a space to include any traits respondents thought important that were not listed as possible selections. Twenty four selected characteristics referred to the leadership literature of Kouzes and Posner (1993), Northouse (1997), and other articles on leadership that listed or mentioned them as desirable traits. Because a main goal of the study was to measure the cultural differences of people in four countries that could draw some meaningful interpretations, one research question was constructed.

Respondents:

Four companies and three government organizations each in Korea, Japan, Canada, and the United States were selected on the basis of size and geographical locations. The selection of organizations was made after completion of a written proposal and explanation of the present study. Participation confirmation of each organization was made after telephone conversations with people in charge of participating divisions or departments of each organization. All participating organizations had more than 200 employees. The largest organization in the study was a subdivision company of Samsung Electronics in Korea with approximately 6,000 employees. All participating organizations are located in cities of more than 500, 000 in populations. Two thousand questionnaires were sent to the four countries and 1,405 copies were completed and returned. The number of copies sent to each organization was decided based on the request of the distributors. Forty two questionnaires were excluded from the study that did not indicate some of the demographic information such as age, gender, and the length of employment at the current organizations.

For the remaining 1,363 participants (N = 927, males; N = 436, females), the number of participants representing private organizations and government offices varied. In Korea, there were 297 participants from private organizations and 116 from government offices (N = 297, males; N = 116, females). In Japan, there were 184 respondents in private organizations and 94 from government offices (N = 184, males; N = 94, females). Japan is the only country in the present study that included two hospitals. In Canada, 286 participants completed the questionnaire. Two hundred four respondents were from private companies and 82 were from government offices including two offices of the Department of Motor Bureaus (N = 162, males; N = 124, females).In the United States, respondents included 149 participants in private organizations including one private university and 237 respondents from government offices including two state universities (N =202, males; N = 184, females).

Of the organizational respondents who participated in this study, 981 participants (72%) have college degrees in various fields of study. Three most popular fields of study are in the social sciences (N = 379), natural sciences (N = 298), and engineering (N = 211). Ninety three remaining participants indicated different academic majors. The youngest participant in the present study was a Japanese female (18 years old) interning at a company before high school graduation. The oldest one was a Canadian male (63.6 years old) in a government office of Toronto, Canada.

Procedure:

Unlike some academic studies that use lengthy questionnaires, the present study used a short simple questionnaire to collect responses. Respondents read a list of admired characteristics of leaders and selected what they thought admired leadership attributes were. Because there were four countries that participated in this study, it could not be presumed that all participants would share the same meaning of words used in the questionnaire. To minimize any language issues for two Asian countries, the list of words was written in English and then translated into Korean and Japanese. It was a necessary step to make sure that respondents were offered with clear meanings of words in the questionnaire. Rather than using a questionnaire in one language in a cross cultural study and hoping people in the two Asian countries would have proficiency in that language, the questionnaire was translated into the local languages, which proved to be effective (Gudykunst et al., 1992; Ting-Toomey et al., 1991) and has been utilized by researchers (e.g., Ayyash-Abdo,

2001; Smth et al., 1998). To improve translation fidelity in the questionnaire, the back translation technique (Brislin, 1980) and modification procedures were done by native speakers of Korean, Japanese, and English.

Had online procedures been used, there would not be any guarantee of an adequate return rate of the questionnaire. Therefore, paper questionnaires were mailed to directors at the organizations and government offices with paid return envelopes. Since interactions among participants could obstruct respondents to accurately present their thoughts, directors were asked to instruct the participants not to interact and ask for other people's ideas while completing the questionnaire. Twenty four possible admired characteristics were included in the questionnaire and respondents were asked to select as many characteristics as they believe constituted an admired characteristics of an effective leaders.

Statistical Analysis:

Because this study was not aiming to measure how demographic information could affect the results, information such as age, gender, nationality, length of work, and size of work units were not included in the analysis. Nationality of the respondents was used to confirm that no individuals of foreign countries working in another country would be included in the data of the country they reside. For example, four U.S. citizens in Korea, six U.S. citizens and one Canadian citizen in Japan, two Indian citizens in the United States were excluded from the statistical analysis.

A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to analyze the data. This method allowed the researcher to figure out the factor scores while comparing collected percentages of each characteristic presented by participants in the four countries concurrently. The twenty four items were the dependent variables (criterion variables), and each country was the independent variable (explanatory variable). A percentage for each item was the unit of analysis. To measure the significance of items by each country that can be attributed to the cultural differences, Significant F-ratios were followed with the Duncan Multiple Range test.

Some of the additional traits commented by respondents were noteworthy, but were not statistically analyzed. These items are presented in the results section and could be considered in further studies on leadership characteristics.

Results:

The findings of the present study confirmed that there are cultural differences in admired leadership characteristics by people of selected nations (see table 1). Among twenty four suggested attributes, honesty was selected as the top characteristic of leaders in all four countries. Because of the increasing lack of honesty in American businesses (Frankel, 2006), the reputation for honesty can earn leaders the respect of their subordinates and co-workers (Adler, Elmhorst, & Lucas, 2013). Although some scholars argue that "honesty is not always the best policy in intercultural business contexts" (Martin & Nakayama, 2005, p. 275),Korean and Japanese people treat honesty as a top social value(Yi,1997) and selected this characteristic as the highest characteristic of leaders.

Among the 24 characteristics, five items showed significant differences between Korean and Japanese participants. Also, there were six characteristics that indicated significant different values between Canadian and American participants. However, there were twelve items with significant different presentations between Korean and Canadian participants and fifteen items show significant differences of selection between Korean and American respondents. Moreover, the statistical analysis showed eleven value differences between Japanese and Canadian participants and thirteen significant differences between Japanese and American respondents. Because the leadership traits included in the present study were used in previous scholarly researches (e.g., Kouzes and Posner, 1993; Northouse,1997), the average reliability estimate of the items was acceptable as expected (0.93).

Table1. Characteristics of Admired Leaders (Percentage of Peoples' selection)

Characteristic	Korea	Japan	Canada	United States
Honest	81 (N = 335)	87 (N = 242)	86 (N = 246)	82 (N = 317)
Forward-looking	61 (N = 252)	54 (N = 150)	72 (N = 206)	74 (N = 286)
Inspiring	72 (N = 297)	61 (N = 170)	70 (N = 200)	71 (N = 274)
Intelligence	68 (N = 281)	78 (N = 217)	74 (N = 212)	72 (N = 278)
Competence	64 (N = 264)	74 (N = 206)	76 (N = 217)	76 (N = 293)
Self-confidence	65 (N = 268)	55 (N = 153)	79 (N = 226)	74 (N = 286)
Fair-minded	70 (N = 289)	73 (N = 203)	70 (N = 200)	68 (N = 262)
Supportive	79 (N = 326)	75 (N = 209)	55 (N = 157)	54 (N = 208)
Integrity	65 (N = 268)	70 (N = 195)	68 (N = 194)	72 (N = 278)
Broad-minded	27 (N = 112)	32 (N = 89)	37 (N = 106)	35 (N = 135)
Straightforward	45 (N = 186)	42 (N = 117)	45 (N = 129)	56 (N = 216)
Courageous	35 (N = 145)	45 (N = 125)	38 (N = 109)	42 (N = 162)
Sociability	49 (N = 202)	57 (N = 158)	38 (N = 109)	35 (N = 135)
Ethical	79 (N = 326)	70 (N = 195)	63 (N = 180)	68 (N = 262)
Cooperative	65 (N = 268)	72 (N = 200)	55 (N = 157)	45 (N = 174)
Imaginative	35 (N = 145)	45 (N = 125)	38 (N = 109)	43 (N = 166)
Caring	56 (N = 231)	55 (N = 153)	44 (N = 126)	32 (N = 124)
Enthusiastic	43 (N = 178)	42 (N = 117)	55 (N = 157)	56 (N = 216)
Mature	52 (N = 215)	50 (N = 139)	47 (N = 134)	54 (N = 208)
Determined	45 (N = 186)	41 (N = 114)	55 (N = 157)	65 (N = 251)
Ambitious	44 (N = 182)	38 (N = 106)	27 (N = 77)	33 (N = 127)
Loyal	38 (N = 157)	49 (N = 136)	22 (N = 63)	29 (N = 112)
Self-controlled	39 (N = 161)	41 (N = 114)	45 (N = 129)	22 (N = 85)
Independent	17 (N = 70)	14 (N = 39)	25 (N = 72)	32 (N = 124)
	Out of 413 total participants	Out of 278 total participants	Out of 286 total participants	Out of 386 total participants

Table 2 exhibits the percentages of the top five characteristics selected by respondents in each country. As collectivistic countries, Korea and Japan presented more human relationship related leadership traits such as supportive and fair-minded as two of the top five characteristics of admired leaders. On the other hand, Canada and the United States known as individualistic countries selected more achievement related traits such as self-confidence, competence, and forward-looking as admired leader attributes. "Supportive" is the second highest characteristic selected by the Korean respondents. The results were not significantly higher than that of Japanese group (F =1.33; df = 1; p = 0.05), but significantly higher than that of Canadian participants (F = 3.47; df = 1; p = 0.05) and American respondents (F = 3.16; df = 1; p = 0.05). Competence item for the United States was significantly higher than that of Korea (F =3.24; df = 1; p = 0.05) but did not show a significant difference for the Japan (F =1.24; df = 1; p = 0.5). Because the Japanese people have a stronger sense of individuality and show more competitive behavior, when compared to people of other Asian countries, this selection is consistent with the findings from previous studies (Shwalb, Shwalb. & Murata, 1991). Forward-looking item for the United States also was significantly higher than that of Korea (F = 2.38; df = 1; p = 0.05) and that of Japan (F = 3.24; df = 1; p = 0.05). Although not included in top five attributes, "caring" item for Korean participants (% = 56) was significantly higher than that of Canada (% = 44; F = 2.34; df = 1; p = 0.05) and the United States (% = 32; F = 2.36; df = 1; p = 0.05). The results indicate that Americans' emphasis on the importance of individual autonomy (Persell, 1984) and Koreans' value on in group relations (Gudykunst, Yoon, & Nishida, 1987) could be factors for variance in

the selection of this trait.

Table 2. Top Five Characteristics of Admired Leaders by Nations (Percentages of selection)

Korea	Japan	Canada	United States
Characteristics	Characteristics	Characteristics	Characteristics
Honest (81) Supportive (79)* Ethical (79)* Fair-minded (70) Intelligence (68) *Two characteristics tied in 2nd place	Honest (87) Intelligence (78) supportive (75) Competence (74) Fair-minded (73)	Honest (86) Self-confidence (79) Competence (76) Intelligence (74) Forward-looking (72)	Honest (82) Competence (76) Forward-looking (74)* Self-confidence (74)* Intelligence (72)** Integrity (72)** *Two characteristics tied in 3rd place ** Two characteristics tied at 5th place.

With the Japanese people known to hold loyalty in the highest social esteem (Samovar, Porter, & McDaniel, 2008), the percentage of Japanese respondents selecting loyalty as a leader characteristic was significantly higher than that of Korean participants ($F = 1.24$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.05$), Canadian respondents ($F = 3.82$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.05$), and American participants ($F = 3.68$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.05$). Canadian participants selected self confidence as the second highest leadership trait (79%) when this item was ranked at the tenth position of admired traits of Japanese participants (55%) and eighth for Korean respondents (65%). Because being highly confident can be seen as arrogant, modesty and humility are highly valued in the Japanese culture (Nagata, 2011). Also, because "spoken expressions of ideas and feelings are believed to upset group harmony" (Jandt, 1998, p. 152), it is understandable that Canadian participants' selection of this item was significantly higher than that of Japanese participants' ($F = 4.23$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.05$) and that of Korean respondents ($F = 3.22$; $df = 1$; $p = 0.05$).

Three of the top five selections (honest, competent, and forward looking) for American participants are consistent with Kouzes and Posner's study of 1993. The remaining two traits not included in the top five items are inspiring and fair-minded. Three of six traits (two are in the same rank) in Table 2 that are not included in the Kouzes and Posner's study are self confidence, intelligence, and integrity. Interestingly, self confidence and integrity were not on Kouzes and Posner's list of twenty suggested characteristics and intelligence was listed as eighth on the list.

Participants expressed other possible admired leader characteristics not included in the present study. Three Japanese and two Canadian respondents mentioned intuition as a desirable characteristic. When people are functioning in uncertain situations, the leader's intuition could be an important factor for making right decisions for the group. Four American, three Canadian, and two Japanese respondents mentioned creativity as a possible inclusion on the list. One American participant described creativity as "think outside the box" when the group is in critical situations. That is, leaders should be able to use experience and knowledge to generate new ideas that will guide team members through uncharted territory. Four Korean respondents considered commitment as a possible addition. One participant explained that rather than giving order to subordinates, working alongside organizational members would inspire them highly, thus earning respect as leaders.

Because the list included general meanings of leadership characteristics, several participants were asking for clarity of terms used in the questionnaire. One Korean respondent thought two items were not clear. He mentioned enthusiastic and ambitious should be listed separately for the leader him/herself and the team or the organization. This comment should be considered for inclusion in future studies.

Discussion and Implications:

As nations establish more international relations in diverse contexts, people of different cultures find more opportunities to work with people in other cultures as leaders and followers. Because leadership can affect the satisfaction of groups and teams and the level of performances and consequences, leaders are required to better equip themselves when working with people of different cultures. Not only understanding cultures and individuals' characteristics are important, but also acknowledging their preferred leadership styles should be a concern for better preparations, interactions, and outcomes.

Many scholars have tried to explore, analyze, and suggest leadership styles that could fit into various organizational situations. Other writers have tried to clarify issues relating to the effectiveness of leaders. Not many researchers, however, suggest that there might be cultural differences in preferred leadership styles or traits that people of different cultures would admire with diverse perspectives. The present study attempted to test whether there were differences in perceptions of admired leadership traits by people of different cultures. On the basis of survey data from four countries, cultural differences on the issue were found. The layout of the traits by percentages of selection supported the research question that Korean and Japanese participants place different weight on suggested admired leadership characteristics than Canadian and American respondents.

The present study was conducted with people in two different organizations: private and government-related offices. As mentioned in the method section, demographic information was not included in the statistical analysis. Many factors, however, such as age, gender, occupations, length of employment, geographical locations, size of organizations should be considered for future studies on leadership attributes among cultures. If these factors are systematically studied and measured, future studies could suggest more accurate interpretations of relationship-related subjects between culture and leadership.

With the intricate state of affairs in modern organizations, certain traits, behaviors, or functions may not be sufficient explanations for the effective roles of leaders. Because behavioral patterns of leaders would be influenced by their personal characteristics, however, understanding leadership traits from the perspective of both leaders and subordinate would improve relationships, communication fidelity, and overall outcomes of organizational life.

The findings of the present study should not be generalized the entire populations of the four countries (as well as other individualistic and collectivistic societies) included in this study to describe admired leadership tendencies. Also, it would be a mistake to ascribe some of those noticeable differences of admired leadership traits only to the influence of a culture. Every culture is different, so is every individual within cultures. With more factors and square measurement in future studies, however, more objective suggestions of cultural differences in leadership traits can be obtained. Knowing the fact that most cross cultural studies tend to suggest instructive guidelines for people who interact with others from different cultures, it should be clear that these findings establish only general tendencies not as hard and fast rules to apply to a specific person from a specific culture.

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