Cross-culture management: an empirical examination on task and relationship orientations of Japanese and Omani working adults

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Abstract: Globalisation has increased the demand for an international group of leaders who can lead multinational corporations across cultures successfully. Understanding the leadership orientations of the international workforces becomes a necessity for these companies. This paper distinctively examines the task and relationship orientations of working adults in Japan and Oman. Through the analysis of 419 responses including 231 respondents from Japan and 188 respondents from Oman, it appears that Omani working adults are more task-oriented than Japanese working adults. Gender is not a factor in either the task or the relationship orientations of all respondents. However, there is a significant interaction in the relationship scores based on gender between the two cultures: Omani male respondents are more relationship-oriented than their Japanese counterparts while Japanese female respondents are more relationship-oriented than their Omani counterparts. In this paper, managerial implications, recommendations for future research and limitations are discussed.

Keywords: cross-culture management; gender; Japan; leadership; multinational corporations; Oman; relationships; tasks.

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1 Introduction

The interaction of culture and leadership is well established through the seminal work of Hofstede (1980). Hofstede's well-known 1980 study of IBM employees in 40 countries established four dimensions to describe a country's culture. Hofstede (1980, p.43) defined culture as "the collective mental programming that people have in common; the programming that is different from that of other groups, tribes, regions minorities or majorities, or nations". Hofstede (1980, p.57) argues that "the crucial fact about leadership is that it is a complement to subordinateship". Hofstede sees all people as

'culturally conditioned', and limited in our ability to step out of the boundaries imposed by that conditioning. Hofstede (1980, p.50) states that "theories reflect the cultural environment in which they were written". The key question here is to what degree theories developed in one country apply to another. Specifically, most leadership theories have been developed in the USA and according to Hofstede (1980), the USA is characterised by relatively small power distance and relatively low uncertainty avoidance.

The purpose of this cross-national study is threefold. First, it examines the orientations toward leadership of people in Japan and Oman. Secondly, it expands the body of knowledge of cross-cultural leadership and management and sheds more light on a unique pair of countries in the world. Finally, it provides practical implications for international and local business managers who work with these populations. The style questionnaire provided by Northouse (2007) is used. The decision to compare Japan and Oman is important for several reasons. These two countries continue to maintain an extensive relationship with one another that helps to increase and improve their economic situation. According to the Observatory of Economic Complexity (2016), Japan was among the top six export destinations of Oman with $1.44 billion and was the second largest import origin of Oman with $3.16 billion in 2015. Gani (2015) noted that large and fast growing Asian countries are playing an increasingly stronger role in terms of determining Oman's trade policy. For instance, China, Japan, and India are Oman's top three export markets for its oil. Chung (2005) stated that in this globalised economy, Japan is notorious for easily locating particular resources in foreign markets that could not be found in its domestic market. A Deutsche bank research on current issues in emerging markets found that Japan was the top export partner with $142.9 billion and the fourth largest import partner with $27.4 billion of the Gulf Cooperation Council in 2012 (Körner and Masetti, 2014). According to Mitsugu Saito, ambassador of Japan to Oman, the two countries have recently signed two historic bilateral economic agreements including the avoidance of double taxation agreement in 2014 and the bilateral investment agreement in 2015, which could further strengthen the bilateral relations (Muscat Daily, 2015). Another reason for comparing these two countries is that very little research has been conducted specifically on the relationship between both cultures and their managerial implications. Both Japan and Oman emphasise a collectivist culture so a comparative study between countries could show patterns of relationships useful to leadership. This paper can strengthen the understanding for academic scholars in this area of interest. It can also be utilised by practitioners implementing leadership orientations for working adults by uncovering cultural similarities and differences in the workplace.

2   Literature review

2.1   Japan-brief history

Japan's insular nature, together with the compactness of its main territory and the cultural homogeneity of its people, enabled the nation to remain free of outside domination until its defeat in World War II. Japan has a population of about 127 million people with its largest age group being 15–64 years representing approximately 60% of the population. It is worth noting that more than a quarter of Japanese population are 65 years of age and over (The World Factbook CIA, 2017a). The roots of Japanese culture stem deep from its

religious traditions ranging from Shinto, providing the base, to Confucianism, Daoism, Buddhism, and Christianity. These values carry into both personal and professional lives for all members of society. For most working adults, friendships gained in the workplace are the most important sources of social interactions and resources. Kimura (2012) reports that Japanese employees may be likely to suffer a feeling of dissatisfaction when they perceive their workplace as a political environment, or in other words, a work environment with high uncertainty and minimal collaboration. Beginning in the early 1970s, there has been a growth of interest in leadership developments in Japan. Morinaga and Tateno (2015) stipulate that "Misumi's performance-maintenance (PM) theory of leadership is one of the most famous behavioural approaches to leadership in Japan". According to Misumi (1984), there are two important types of behaviours. Performance behaviours include planning and identifying reasons for poor performance and direction. Maintenance behaviours include trusting one's subordinates, considering another member's private affairs, and recognising good performance (Misumi, 1984). The Japanese have always emphasised the importance of understanding the philosophical approaches to senior decision making, knowing the reasons for corporate strategy, and appreciating what type of behaviour is valued at all levels of the organisation.

2.2 Oman-brief history

Oman is situated in the eastern corner of the Arabian Peninsula. It is bordered by the Arabian Sea, Gulf of Oman, and the Persian Gulf (The World Factbook CIA, 2017b). This ideal location on the Musandam peninsula helps the country prosper and dominate the region through its trade by sea. The population is about 3.3 million people with largest age group being 15–54 years representing approximately 62% of the population. According to The World Factbook CIA (2017b), "Oman's moderate, independent foreign policy has sought to maintain good relations with its neighbours and to avoid external entanglements". Oman is culturally diverse with over seven ethnic groups that make up approximately five different dialects of languages spoken in the country. The official language is Arabic. Muslim is the official religion which accounts for 85.9%. It includes a majority of Ibadhi Muslims and a lesser numbers of Sunni and Shia Muslims (The World Factbook CIA, 2017b). Islam contributes a great influence and impacts most Omani lives and practices. The tribal structure and group arrangements continue to dominate a fundamental role in the lives of all members of the country. Al-Hamadi et al. (2007) report the tribe and the family are the second top authorities after Islam in formulating the culture of the country and organisations to a great extent.

Lefebvre (2010) stipulates that Oman has been shaped by three critical factors that will continue to motivate and constrain the actions of any future leadership group:

1 strategic location

2 the post-petroleum economy

3 the Ibadhi culture of 'conservatism and tolerance'.

Other factors that contribute and influence leadership centres on the diverse and heterogeneous culture of the Omani population. Mujtaba et al. (2010) identify Oman as being a high context culture with extensive informal networks among family, friends,

colleagues and close personal relationships. Omani companies have a strong vertical hierarchy with decisions being made from the top-down by the most senior member.

2.3   Cultural comparison between Japan and Oman

Figure 1 shows a comparison of the cultural dimensions of Japan and Oman based on Hofstede's (2011) four dimensions and Al-Twaijri and Al-Muhaiza (1996). Their scores on power distance, uncertainty avoidance and individualism are similar. Oman has a slightly higher power distance score than Japan (60 compared to 54), which indicates high power distance in both cultures. Oman also has a slightly higher individualism score than Japan (52 compared to 46), which indicates that its culture is more individualistic than Japanese culture. Both Japan and Oman score high on uncertainty avoidance (92 and 72 respectively). Japan is known for its lifetime employment and seniority-based performance incentives, which is a common characteristic of most high uncertainty avoidance culture. So is Oman [Al-Twaijri and Al-Muhaiza (1996), p.129]. However, there is surprisingly a significant difference in the masculinity dimension. Japan with a high score of 95 has an extremely high masculine culture which emphasises competition and assertiveness (Nguyen et al., 2013a). On the opposite, Oman with a low score of 12 has a highly feminine culture, which is an exception among Arab countries where the scores fall in the middle of the scale (Nguyen et al., 2013b). Omani culture is "highly feminine perhaps partially due to the role of more women in the workplace and, furthermore, this is expected since people's religious socialisation in Islam teaches them to be cooperative and live in a caring manner toward one's neighbours and others in the community" (Mujtaba et al., 2010).

Figure 1   Japan's cultural dimensions in comparison with Oman (see online version for colours)
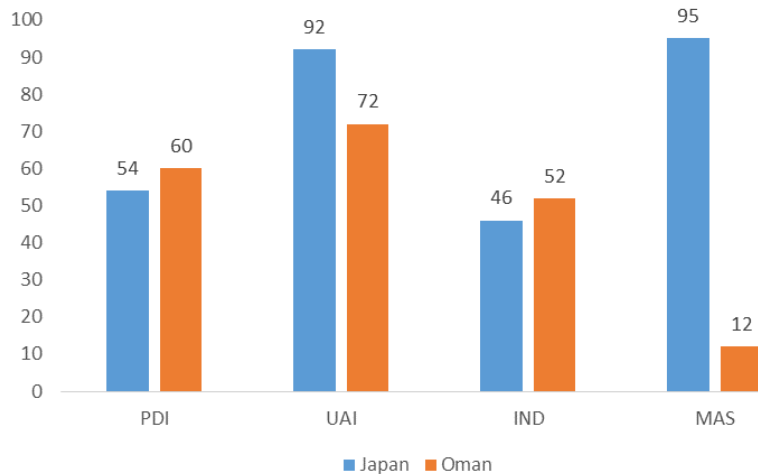
2.4   Task and relationship orientations

Leaders' behaviours are the centre of the behavioural approach to leadership. Daft (2008) believes that effective leadership depends on how leaders adopt appropriate behaviours and these behaviours can be learned (Daft, 2008). Mujtaba et al. (2010) posit that

leadership is a key ingredient for management success and when leaders are effective, their employees and colleagues are highly motivated, committed, and high performing. The two broadly defined categories of leadership identified in this study involve task-oriented behaviours, often referred to as initiating structure and relationship-oriented behaviour, often referred to as consideration (Fleishman, 1953; Halpin and Winer, 1957; Yukl et al., 2002; Yukl, 2012).

A key seminal study conducted on leadership behaviour was conducted by a group of researchers at Ohio State University in the 1940s. The study isolates two factors for leadership behaviour prevalent in all leaders: consideration (relationship-oriented) and initiating structure (task-oriented). Consideration is the degree to which a leader shows concern and respect for followers, looks out for their welfare, and expresses appreciation and support. Initiating structure is the degree to which a leader defines and organises his role and the roles of followers, is oriented toward goal attainment, and establishes well-defined patterns and channels of communication (Fleishman, 1953; Judge et al., 2004; Mujtaba et al., 2010). In theory, consideration associates with follower satisfaction so leaders tend to have characteristics of empathy. On the other hand, initiating structure is more suited towards performance so leadership focus is directed towards effectiveness.

Cowsill and Grint (2008) find that for those involved in the Ohio State University work, the task and relationship alternative merely represented the extreme ends of a continuum: managers or leaders could exhibit strong forms of both behaviours or weak forms of both, but another study at the University of Michigan a short time after that complements this work and indicates that task and relationship behaviours were actually alternatives – managers or leaders were either relationship-focused or task-focused. The University of Michigan studies identify two similar leadership behaviours: employee centred and production centred; but these leadership behaviours received far less attention (Nguyen et al., 2013b). More specifically, leaders who took into consideration the welfare of their employees to help boost morale and enjoy their work perform consideration behaviours. Conversely, leaders could also engage in initiating structure when they ensure work has been completed in an effective and efficient manner.

Judge et al. (2004) stipulate that the relationship between consideration and initiating structure is not always "empirically independent as stated and implied". There are circumstances and situations where the relationship between consideration and initiating structure vary depending on the measure used. Their research highlights consideration is more strongly related to follower satisfaction, whereas initiating structure is slightly more strongly related to criteria that reflect leader performance. However, their research also uncovers that consideration does show a strong relationship to leader effectiveness as well. Mujtaba et al. (2010) determined that initiating structure and consideration are not mutually exclusive behaviours and therefore leaders can be high on both, low on both, or high on one and low on the other. Yukl (2012) also stated that research on effective leaders suggest that they use complementary behaviours woven together into a complex tapestry, and the whole is greater than the sum of the parts.

3 Study methodology and analysis

This study used Northouse's (2007) style questionnaire, which has been used extensively, to examine the task and relationship scores of Japanese and Omani working adults. This instrument includes ten items for task scores and ten items for relationship scores. Each

item is assessed with a five-point Likert scale from 1 to 5. A low score of 1 indicates 'strongly disagree' and a high score of 5 indicates 'strongly agree'. The scoring description is presented in Table 1.

Below are the specific hypotheses for this study:

H1   Japanese and Omani respondents have significantly different task scores.

H2   There is a significant difference in the task scores between males and females.

H3   There is a significant interaction between gender and country in the task scores.

H4   Japanese and Omani respondents have significantly different relationship scores.

H5   There is a significant difference in the relationship scores between males and females.

H6   There is a significant interaction between gender and country in the relationship scores.

Table 1   Task and relationship score interpretations

Scores	Descriptions
45–50	Very high range
40–44	High range
35–39	Moderately high range
30–34	Moderately low range
25–29	Low range
10–24	Very low range

This study used a convenience sampling procedure for data collection. The target respondents were Japanese and Omani adults who can speak and understand English well. The English version was used to ensure its validity. Overall, 231 fully answered questionnaires were received from Japanese respondents and 188 fully answered questionnaires were received from Omani respondents. Altogether, there were 419 fully answered surveys that were used for data analysis.

Table 2   Descriptive statistics (N = 419)

		Country		Total
		Japan	Oman	
Age	17–25	9	100	109
	26–34	67	88	155
	35–44	104	0	104
	45 and older	51	0	51
Gender	Male	166	116	282
	Female	65	72	137

Table 2 shows a comparison of age and gender in the two samples. The Omani sample included many more younger adults than the Japanese sample. Particularly, no respondent in the Omani sample was older than 34 years of age whereas the majority of the Japanese respondents were older than 34 years of age (67.1%). There were only nine Japanese respondents who were in the age range of 17–25 while 100 Omani respondents

were from this age range. Altogether, most people were in the 26–34 age range (37%), followed by 17–25 age range (26%), 35–44 (24.8%), and 45 and older age range (12.2%). The Japanese sample had 166 male respondents (71.9%) and 65 female respondents (28.1%) while the Omani sample had 116 male respondents (61.7%) and 72 female respondents (38.3%). Altogether, there were more male respondents (67.3%) than female respondents (32.7%).

4 Results

4.1 Task orientation scores

As presented in Table 3, the average scores of Japanese respondents for task orientation fell in the 'moderately high range' (M = 35.76), while the average scores of Omani respondents for task orientation fell in the 'high range' (M = 39.68). This difference was statistically significant (F = 27.709, p = 0.000), as shown in Table 4. Therefore, Hypothesis 1 was supported. There was a statistically significant difference between the average task orientation scores of Japanese and Omani. Omani respondents appeared to be more task-oriented than Japanese respondents.

Table 3   Descriptive statistics

Country	Gender	Mean	Std. deviation	N
Dependent variable: Task_Scores				
Japan	Male	36.3133	7.32936	166
	Female	34.3385	6.75064	65
	Total	35.7576	7.21183	231
Oman	Male	39.5690	8.55491	116
	Female	39.8472	9.19225	72
	Total	39.6755	8.78112	188
Total	Male	37.6525	8.00443	282
	Female	37.2336	8.55455	137
	Total	37.5155	8.18048	419

Table 4   Tests of between-subjects effects

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Non-cent. parameter	Observed power[b]
Corrected model	1,776.617[a]	3	592.206	9.382	0.000	28.145	0.997
Intercept	512,778.961	1	512,778.961	8,123.492	0.000	8,123.492	1.000
Country	1,749.066	1	1,749.066	27.709	0.000	27.709	1.000
Gender	65.536	1	65.536	1.038	0.309	1.038	0.174
Country* gender	115.583	1	115.583	1.831	0.177	1.831	0.271
Error	26,196.032	415	63.123				
Total	617,679.000	419					
Corrected total	27,972.649	418					

Notes: [a]R-squared = 0.064 (adjusted R-squared = 0.057).
    [b]Computed using alpha = 0.05.

Also seen in Table 3, the average task scores of both male and female respondents fell in 'moderately high range' though male respondents scored slightly higher (M = 37.65) than female respondents (M = 37.23). There was no statistically significant difference between these two mean scores (F = 1.038, p = 0.309), as shown in Table 4. Therefore, Hypothesis 2 was not supported. The task score of male respondents was not significantly different than that of female respondents.

Table 4 also showed no significant interaction between country and gender (F = 1.831, p = 0.177). Therefore, Hypothesis 3 was not supported. A meaningful explanation of a statistically significant difference between groups or an interaction between variables is through the observed power value. As Table 4 reported, there would be only 17.4% chance of finding a significant difference between the mean scores for task orientation of males and females and 27.1% chance of finding a significant interaction between country and gender on task scores in this sample.

4.2   Relationship orientation scores

As presented in Table 5, the average scores of Japanese respondents for relationship orientation fell in the 'moderately high range' (M = 38.79), while the average scores of Omani respondents for relationship orientation fell in the 'high range' (M = 39.85). This difference was not statistically significant (F = 1.613, p = 0.205), as shown in Table 6. Therefore, Hypothesis 4 was not supported. There was no statistically significant difference between the average relationship orientation scores of Japanese and Omani even though Omani respondents seemed to be more relationship-oriented than Japanese respondents. Also seen in Table 5, the average relationship scores of both male and female respondents fell in 'high range' though male respondents scored slightly lower (M = 39.22) than female respondents (M = 39.37). There was no statistically significant difference between these two mean scores (F = 0.000, p = 0.985), as shown in Table 6. Therefore, Hypothesis 5 was not supported. The relationship score of male respondents was not significantly different than that of female respondents. Table 6 also showed no significant interaction between country and gender (F = 0.392, p = 0.532). Therefore, Hypothesis 6 was not supported.

Table 5   Descriptive statistics

Dependent variable: relationship_scores				
Country	*Gender*	*Mean*	*Std. deviation*	*N*
Japan	Male	38.6627	5.45122	166
	Female	39.1231	6.06349	65
	Total	38.7922	5.62062	231
Oman	Male	40.0172	8.27462	116
	Female	39.5833	7.65957	72
	Total	39.8511	8.02664	188
Total	Male	39.2199	6.77613	282
	Female	39.3650	6.92701	137
	Total	39.2673	6.81787	419

Table 6 Tests of between-subjects effects

Source	Type III sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.	Non-cent. parameter	Observed power[b]
Corrected model	134.473[a]	3	44.824	0.964	0.410	2.892	0.263
Intercept	564,012.122	1	564,012.122	12,130.494	0.000	12,130.494	1.000
Country	74.995	1	74.995	1.613	0.205	1.613	0.245
Gender	0.016	1	.016	0.000	0.985	0.000	0.050
Country* gender	18.212	1	18.212	0.392	0.532	0.392	0.096
Error	19,295.589	415	46.495				
Total	665,495.000	419					
Corrected total	19,430.062	418					

Notes: [a]R-squared = .007 (adjusted R-squared = 0.000).
[b]Computed using alpha = 0.05.

5 Implications, limitations, and recommendations

It was hypothesised that there were significant differences in the task scores and in the relationship scores of Japanese and Omani working adults. However, this study only found a significant difference in the task scores between Japanese and Omani respondents. Omani working adults appeared to be more task-oriented than their Japanese counterparts. For the relationship behaviour, there was no statistically significant difference even though Omani respondents scored slightly higher than Japanese respondents. Gender was not a significant factor in the differences of both task and relationship behaviours of Japanese and Omani respondents. Finally, there were no statistically significant interactions between gender and country in both task and relationship behaviours of the respondents.

This study showed that Japanese and Omani working adults are similar in their orientation toward the relationship behaviours. With scores falling in the moderately high to high range, they seem to like relationship-oriented leadership. Global leaders and practitioners should keep this in mind and adopt appropriate actions and behaviours that show caring, respect, trust and appreciation of their employees (McShane and Von Glinow, 2002; Nguyen et al., 2012). They should pay attention to the needs and opinions of their employees, make them feel great at work, and maintain good relationship with them (Nguyen et al., 2013b). The results of this study also revealed that Japanese and Omani working adults expected task-oriented leadership behaviour as well with scores falling in the moderately high to high range. However, Omani respondents appeared to be more serious on task-oriented behaviours than Japanese respondents. Global leaders and practitioners should certainly focus more on objectives and performance when dealing with Omani workforce. They should provide a clear vision and direction, articulate the business plans, provide details for work activities, work with the employees closely and motivate them to get the jobs done. The findings of this study supported Blake and Mouton's (1964) managerial grid approach by showing that people can demonstrate both high task-oriented and high relationship-oriented leadership behaviours, which is the 'team management'. This approach helps leaders accomplish

goals by having committed employees who are interdependent but working together toward a 'common stake' that results in a trustful and respectful relationship (Blake and Mouton, 1964).

Like many other empirical studies, this paper contains some limitations. First, it targeted a general adult population from various industries in Japan and Oman. Future studies should extend the comparison to more specific populations and consider a wide range of demographic variables such as age, education, and government work experience. Secondly, having a small sample size that included only working adults who can speak fluent English in both countries prevents further generalisation of the results. Future studies should include both English speaking and non-English speaking adults from these countries and the questionnaire should be translated into local languages to encourage more non-English speaking people to participate. Finally, this study only compared two countries, Japan and Oman. Future studies should examine many other countries from different continents in order to have a better understanding of the task and relationship orientations of employees across the globe.

6   Conclusions

The field of cross-culture management requires us to continuously examine how culture impacts business theories and practices, as well as organisational and managerial effectiveness. This study served this purpose by shedding light on the similarities and differences in the task and relationship-oriented leadership behaviours of Japanese and Omani working adults. Global business leaders and practitioners can use our findings to adopt the appropriate leadership behaviours when leading these two workforces to achieve effectiveness. Academicians, students and the like can gain some insights and observe more empirical evidence on the behaviour approach to leadership across cultures.

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