

A QUESTION of LEADERSHIP

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Given Asia's new interest in leadership, there is a growing demand for high-impact and ongoing leadership development programs in the region. However, leadership education providers need to be extremely careful not to impose a Western view of leadership on Asia. Although many international executive-education providers and business schools pride themselves on their students' diversity and their openness to learning from a variety of cultures, many leadership programs are still heavily predicated on an Anglo-Saxon-American view of the world.

If you don't come from the Western world, the name of the game is to adapt your culture to suit that world. Thus many M.B.A. graduates end up junking their own cultural values and overemphasizing a set of values they think are necessary for success in an international business environment.

Western leadership styles may not necessarily bring corporate success in Asia, however; and Western business schools need to take this into account. For example, former GE CEO Jack Welch's adage that leaders should always cull the bottom 10 percent from any organization would probably be anathema to many Asian organizations. In Spain, leaders are often expected to be very

precise about what needs to be done. Leaders who solicit opinions instead of issuing directions are seen as weak. But in some parts of Asia, such leaders may actually be the most effective.

People in the West sometimes refer to an Asian leadership style, but there is no single model. In Japan, for instance, a superficial look might find that a consensus-driven style appears to dominate. On digging deeper, however, one would usually



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find a leader who is orchestrating events from behind the scenes. Not understanding this, many Western companies never get to the key decision makers and thus find it hard to work with Japanese firms. In Singapore, in contrast, the leadership style tends to be very directive. Nonetheless, people are given a high degree of leeway to deliver set objectives. In other words, the management ethos may be characterized as saying: "I want you to do this. How you do it is up to you, but I want you to exhibit flair, creativity, and entrepreneurial spirit."

Asian business leader Lin Lin Sea is surprised by the directness of some members of the new generation of managers in China and Vietnam. She finds this "un-Asian" but surmises that "a new kind of internationalism is emerging. Not, as some believe, that Western pop culture is ravaging meek minds in the developing world. Rather, there is a new Asian business elite, which combines Western charisma with Eastern pride. Everything is so experimental and exciting. In terms of entrepreneurial leadership, it means that everything is possible."

Sim Wong Hoo, chairman and CEO of Creative Technologies, the first Singapore-based company to be listed on the NASDAQ stock exchange, is a good example of an entrepreneurial leader. When Sim came up with the concept of the Sound Blaster PC audiocard in 1981, he had a vision that computers could be used for entertainment. Unable to get anyone else to buy into this idea, he founded his own company, which now employs four thousand people. Comparing himself to his classmates, he says: "I wasn't the strongest technically. But I could articulate and implement the ideas that others had. Together we did very well."

It is certainly true that there is an enormous amount of untapped knowledge concerning leadership in Asian societies. However, one fundamental principle applies in Asia and elsewhere: leadership is not *one size fits all*. Most important, it is not the exclusive right of a rarefied club. All people, at all levels of an organization, have the capacity to improve and enhance their leadership skills.

Is there such a thing as an Asian, as opposed to a Western, style of leadership?

CAROLYN CHAN

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In Asia today, companies devote considerable attention to attempting to understand how charismatic leaders are born, how to identify the top leadership traits, and how to ensure that those with these traits lead everyone else.

As CCL has learned from its more than thirty years of research in this field, leadership is a set of activities that can be learned rather than a set of things a person needs to *be*. Leadership is a matter of setting direction, being clear about where you want to go, creating alignment, getting and keeping everyone on board, and facing the adaptive challenges that arise.

Leadership styles in individual Asian countries are changing. Singapore, for instance, is currently at a junction. Until recently it had a very data-driven and fairly risk-averse corporate culture, but it now realizes the need to loosen up. And following current worldwide trends, a preoccupation with IQ is giving way to a greater emphasis on EQ—emotional quotient.

Many young Asian executives, trained in Western business schools, end up being very direct, mistake aggressiveness for assertiveness, and lose powerful qualities such as the ability to maintain harmony in relationships, which is a cultural hallmark in many Asian countries. In

China, for example, you may not have a high opinion of someone, but you would not tell the person that because respect for face is much more important. According to business leaders in the region, however, things are changing.

One shift in Asia today involves privatization. Governments are attempting to redeploy some civil service scholars as entrepreneurs, a move that has many skeptics. However, given the right attributes, a



leader can lead any organization—governmental or business.

In Asia, as in many other parts of the world, the current trend is toward the discreet rather than the flashy CEO—one who does not overstate his or her personality and whose personal life can safely be examined under a microscope. There is also less of the romantic idea of a single dominating leader and a growing recognition that successful organizations are built by a strong group of connected leaders.

Each leader brings a different set of competencies. For example, some leaders are great at standing up in front of hundreds of people and giving an impassioned speech. But they

often find themselves less articulate and informed when they are cross-examined on details. To compensate for this weakness, it is sometimes necessary for them to delegate to someone who is strong in strategic planning. The interesting thing about Asia is that you can find the micro-managing style of leadership alongside the big-picture, charismatic style, which doesn't concern itself with much detail.

Despite cross-cultural differences, there are universal leadership attributes, such as trustworthiness, although different cultures may have different ways of developing trust. Besides trustworthiness, other universal attributes that people from all cultures warm to are honesty, integrity, intelligence, and optimism.

Geeta Kirpalani, who has worked in leadership roles in India, Europe, and Australia, is a strong believer in the value of combining modern Western and traditional Asian attitudes and techniques for successful leadership. Drawing on mainstream organizational behavior, yoga, and scientific concepts, she runs workshops for executive teams. "Confident, positive leaders define corporate energy, enabling others by example," says Kirpalani. "Successful organizations are able to create a cultural spirit that allows employees' talents to be nurtured and flourish in harmony with their environment. Leaders who enable their teams to create resonance within the corporate culture will find that all stakeholders achieve positive results."