

Chapter 66

Modern Leadership in Singaporean and Thai Organizational Contexts

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ABSTRACT

This study compares leadership traits among leaders from Singaporean and Thai organizations. It also investigates leadership styles in different cultural settings with a focus on organizational change. Data was collected by means of a series of structured in-depth interviews with leaders from a Singaporean multi-national corporation in the retail sector and leaders from a public organization in Thailand. Comparative analysis elicited the key categories of organizational culture, leadership styles and change strategies. The study demonstrates differences and similarities among Thai and Singaporean leaders with regard to leadership behaviours. Being direct, strong and knowledgeable are important for leaders who lead organization in the process of change in Thailand. Singaporean leaders, on the other hand, need to be flexible, decisive and approachable when changes are introduced to the organization. Thai staff may show unusually high deference (greng jai) towards those of senior status in the organization. Singaporean staff, however, may prefer to have an open discussion with their senior in the process of change. The results also imply, in order that organizational transition in Singaporean and Thai contexts occur as smoothly as possible, all aspects of change must be shared with staff of all levels and open for discussion.

1. INTRODUCTION

Scholars in management tend to have various views on leadership styles across culture. Previous studies (i.e. Shahin and Wright, 2004; Jogulu and Wood, 2008; Bunchapattanasakda and Wong, 2010) confirm that different leader behaviours and actions are interpreted and evaluated differently depending on their cultural environment, and are due to variations in people's ideas of the ideal leader. Previous studies (i.e.

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Jogulu, 2010; Cuong and Swierczek, 2008) tried to identify the links among culture, personality and leadership traits and generalise a set of traits in all organizational contexts. This view, however, is seen as outdated and old-fashioned view to the world of international management (Roach, 2009).

As the greatest beneficiary of globalisation, Singapore and Thailand continue to take a significant cue from the broader global environment. Both countries diverse and continues to change socially and culturally. Having established that, studies in leadership in both countries are limited. A number of research studies in both countries focus on Western-style leadership in the national context, without providing comparative frameworks among South East Asian countries. Many important issues can best be examined from an international-comparative perspective (Darlington and Scott, 2002). From the academic perspective, learning and comparing leadership styles and traits have been well researched in North American, Australian and European contexts. However, only little recent research has been done within the South East Asian context (Cuong and Swierczek, 2008).

Due to the scarce of comparative research in leadership, this study investigates and compares the cultural and organizational contexts of leadership in Thailand and Singapore. The paper examines how leaders behave in the process of change in the Thai and Singaporean cultural contexts. By investigating culturally-linked leadership styles, this qualitative study contributes to the understanding of culture, leaders and leadership styles.

Previous leadership studies in Asian contexts (i.e. Retna and Ng, 2009; Pimpa and Moore, 2010; Jogulu, 2010) have concentrated on the leaders, including their traits, actions, styles and philosophies, and the acceptance and appropriateness thereof for various leadership styles. Increasing numbers of management studies reveal that different leadership traits, behaviours and actions are interpreted and evaluated differently depending on their cultural environment and context (Retna and Ng, 2009). With the rise of Singapore and Thailand in the regional and global arena, it is important to understand cultural-specific leadership behaviours and styles that may be depend upon the national Singaporean and Thai cultural contexts.

2. LEADERSHIP AND PERSONAL TRAITS

Early studies in 1990's (i.e. House and Podsakoff, 1994; Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991) tended to focus on the 'great man/great woman' idea. This theory focuses on life situations, backgrounds and personalities of the leader that form his/her leadership styles. Over time, studies expanded this approach to consider samples of recognized leaders (e.g. Kirkpatrick and Locke, 1991). Though research has not always found clear causal links between a given trait and leadership efficacy (Bass, 1985; Burns, 1978), trait-based thinking still dominates both leadership scholarship and corporate leadership literature.

Kirkpractick and Locke (1991) were among leadership scholars who investigate the relationship between traits and leadership. They proposed six traits that distinguish great leaders from non-leaders. The six key traits include drive, the desire to lead, honesty/integrity, self-confidence, cognitive ability, and knowledge of the business. They also proposed that charisma, creativity, originality and flexibility are three traits with less clear-cut evidence of their importance to leadership. This point is well-supported by Kim, Dansereau, and Kim (2002). They also proposed that more research must be conducted to identify relationship among traits, leadership, change and organizational contexts.

Among the key leadership theories that relate traits to leadership concept, the comparison of transformational and transactional leadership is well-received by academics and practitioners. Burns (1978)

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