

Modes of Subsidiary Leadership Adjustment in a Cross-Cultural Context

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Abstract

Though the adjustment of leadership approaches is held to be essential in cross-cultural contexts, virtually no *empirical* research has studied this. This paper explores modes of cross-cultural leadership adjustment, through field interviews with expatriate subsidiary leaders all working in Thailand, complemented by an online survey. Nicholson's (1984) theory of work role transitions was used as the theoretical foundation. 80% to explore work role requirements (consisting of role discretion and novelty of job demands) as potential predictors of modes of cross-cultural leadership adjustment. The results show that a majority of expatriate executives made adjustment to their leadership approaches and tried to change Thai employees, showing the *exploration* mode of adjustment, and that role requirements, characteristics of Thai employees, and local hierarchy system, as well as leaders' perceptions, all influenced expatriate leaders' modes of adjustment.

Introduction

To lead foreign subsidiaries effectively and to motivate host employees to achieve organizational goals, expatriate leaders have to adjust their leadership approaches to suit the environment of host countries (House et al., 2004; Hofstede, 1980). Most studies on cross-cultural leadership, however, have focused on the impact of leaders' own cultural values on their leadership styles (see, e.g., Almond et al., 2005), while research on expatriate adjustment has mainly focused on the *degree* of work and life adjustment of expatriate middle managers and professionals, but neglected the *mode* of leadership adjustment of senior managers (Black, Mendenhall and Oddou, 1991; Shay and Baack, 2004). No studies, as far as we are aware, have *empirically* examined cross-cultural leadership adjustment (CLA) in terms of the modes (i.e. patterns) in which expatriate leaders adjust their leadership approaches and/or their task content when working in foreign subsidiaries. Festing and Maletzky (2011)'s comprehensive review highlighted that leadership adjustment has been neglected, and that the 'results of current conceptual and empirical research do not allow one to draw adequate conclusions regarding the adjustment of leadership behaviour' (p.190).

It is thus still not clear whether expatriate leaders adjust their leadership approaches to address the characteristics of local employees or whether they change local conditions to meet their requirements when leading cross-culturally. The present study has two objectives: 1) to explore the modes of leadership adjustment of expatriate leaders and 2) to investigate the factors influencing the modes of CLA. We first explored CLA through analysing the qualitative data collected from senior expatriate managers working in MNCs in Thailand. We

then, based on Nicholson's (1984) theory of work role transitions (WRT), deductively examine whether role requirements predict modes of CLA. This approach aimed to provide rich exploratory insights on the research issues and also examine the theoretical framework in the context of cross-cultural leadership adjustment. We explore CLA from the perspective of expatriate leaders as it has been suggested that individuals can provide unique insight into their own inner state as they experience the process of their actions directly and possess the greatest familiarity with their tasks (Jones and Nisbett, 1971). Thailand is an ideal research setting to explore the adjustment of expatriate business leaders as many MNCs are operating in Thailand and business leaders from North Americas and European are working in this context where subordinates have different cultural norms, values and beliefs from that in their home countries (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; House et al., 2004).

This paper first describes the concepts of leadership adjustment and briefly summarizes two relevant leadership theories in order to underline the importance of CLA. We then provide a review of Nicholson's WRT theory, present our predication of modes of CLA and describe the research methods, before outlining our findings and conclusions.

Discussion

Leadership Adjustment Theories

Adjustment in a cross-cultural setting is commonly regarded as a process of an individual achieving a 'fit and reduced conflict between the environmental demands and the individual's behavioural and attitudinal inclinations' (Zimmermann and Sparrow, 2007: 66). This broad definition is derived from the expatriate adjustment research which mainly focuses on (which mainly depicts) the process that expatriate managers adjust to host countries in three dimensions: general, social interactions and work/role (see e.g. Black, 1988; Shaffer et al., 1999). Although the issue of work/role adjustment is covered, no account has been provided for leadership adjustment.

Several leadership theories have been developed over the past few decades, including two that are relevant to leadership adjustment: situational leadership theory (SLT) and the culturally-endorsed implicit theories of leadership (CLTs). SLT proposes that leaders should modify their leadership approach according to the task-relevant maturity of their followers. An optimal leadership style (defined as specific combinations of leader task and relationship behaviours) should match the levels of subordinate maturity (defined as a combination of follower commitment and competence). So, for subordinates of very low-level maturity, leaders are advised to adopt a 'telling' approach; on the other hand, for subordinates of very high maturity, a 'delegating' approach is recommended. While SLT considers the characteristics of followers, the culturally-endorsed implicit theories of leadership (referred to as CLTs in House et al., 2004) go further and consider leadership in intercultural settings. CLTs were developed by House and his colleagues (see, e.g., House & Aditya, 1997; House et al., 2004) which assert that beliefs about leadership are shared among individuals of the same culture, and that expectations regarding the best way to lead are culturally endorsed, thus 'expected, accepted, and effective leader behaviour varies by cultures' (House & Aditya, 1997: 454). CLT suggests that leaders need to adjust their behaviour to adhere to followers' cultural expectations in order to be effective. Although both SLT and CLTs emphasise the importance of adjusting leadership approaches to address the characteristics of followers, empirical research examining whether leaders do so and the way they adjust, particularly in a cross-cultural setting, is virtually non-existent. Our study fills this void by exploring expatriate leadership adjustment among leaders all experiencing a different cultural setting.

Theory of Work Role Transitions

Nicholson's (1984) theory of work role transitions is one of the first theories to explain work roles and adjustment and is seen as a theoretical exemplar that provides 'a codification of theoretical ideas on the topic of work role transitions' (Black et al., 1991: 299). It is widely cited in empirical research on job relocation (Munton and West, 1995), international transfer (Shay and Baack, 2004; Black, 1988), career transition (Haynie and Shepherd, 2011), role and identity (Ibarra, 1999; Chreim, Williams and Hinings, 2007), and entering new jobs (Ashforth and Saks, 1995). However, relevant to the present research, the extant research on international transfer has mainly focused on the *degree* of adjustment but neglected its *mode* (Black et al., 1991). The present study focuses on the role transition of business executives in a cross-cultural context and explores their modes of CLA.

A work role transition is defined as 'any change in employment status and any major change in job content' (Nicholson, 1984: 173). It can be brought about through a wide range of events including entering a new job, promotion, domestic job transfer, international transfer, and company reorganization (Nicholson, 1984; Black, 1988). Nicholson (1984) describes transitions as involving a change in two dimensions: personal development and role development. Personal development involves 'reactive change in the individual, ranging from minor alterations in daily routines and habits, to major developments in relationships and self-image' (Nicholson and West, 1988: 105). Thus, personal development entails a change in an individual's attributes such as values, attitudes, behaviours, identity, skills and leadership. Applied this to expatriate leaders, this dimension involves a change in the way they lead host country subordinates i.e. leadership adjustment. Role development, on the other hand, involves an individual proactively trying to 'change role requirements so that they better match his or her needs, abilities, and identity', which may include changing 'task objectives, methods, materials, scheduling, and...the interpersonal relationships integral to role performance' (Nicholson, 1984: 175). Thus, role development entails individuals actively trying to change the task content. Applied this to expatriate leaders, whose key task is leading subordinates in the organisation, this dimension involves them trying to change host country subordinates and how subordinates perform their jobs i.e. subordinate change.

Modes of adjustment Combining dimensions, Nicholson proposes four adjustment modes:

- 1) *Replication* (low personal development, low role development), where the individual makes few changes in either him or herself or the role requirements. The outcomes of this mode of adjustment replicate and maintain existing personal attributes and behaviours and organizational routines. In this study, this mode is shown when expatriate leaders make few leadership adjustments and make little change to their subordinates (see Figure 1).
- 2) *Absorption* (high personal development, low role development), where the individual modifies his or her attitudes and behaviours but makes little change to the task content. In this study, this would be shown when expatriate leaders modify their leadership approaches but make few changes to their subordinates.
- 3) *Determination* (low personal development, high role development), where the individual actively changes the task content but makes few changes to him or herself. In this study, this mode is shown when expatriate leaders actively change their subordinates but make little leadership adjustment.
- 4) *Exploration* (high personal development, high role development), where the individual makes changes to both him or herself and the task content. In this study, it is shown when expatriate leaders change both their leadership approaches and the subordinates.

Figure 1. Role discretion and novelty of subordinate characteristics as predictors of modes of cross-cultural leadership adjustment, derived from Nicholson (1984)

		Novelty of subordinate characteristics	
		Low	High
Role discretion	High	<i>Determination:</i> Low leadership adjustment High subordinate change	<i>Exploration:</i> High leadership adjustment High subordinate change
	Low	<i>Replication:</i> Low leadership adjustment Low subordinate change	<i>Absorption:</i> High leadership adjustment Low subordinate change

Predictors of modes of adjustment Nicholson proposes that the four modes of adjustment can be predicted by work role requirements. Two aspects of role requirements are predicted to influence adjustment: role discretion and the novelty of job demands. Role discretion is the individual's capacity to change the task content (e.g. work goals, management practices, and interpersonal communications). High discretion roles provide an individual with significant opportunities to modify the task content, whereas low discretion roles allow little autonomy to change the task content. The theory proposes that high discretion roles will result in the determination or exploration mode of adjustment, while low discretion roles will result in replication or absorption: role discretion will thus be positively related to task content change.

The second aspect of role requirements, the novelty of job demands, is defined as 'the degree to which the role permits the exercise of prior knowledge, practiced skills, and established habits' (Nicholson, 1984: 178). High novelty refers to low similarity between the new role and previous held roles. The degree of novelty will determine the degree of change in an individual's attributes: high novelty puts an individual under great pressure to make personal changes. The theory proposes that high novelty will result in the absorption or exploration mode of adjustment, whereas low novelty will result in replication or determination; that is, novelty of job demands will be positively related to personal change. In the next section, we apply the two aspects of role requirements to our study to explore modes of CLA.

Prediction of Modes of Cross-Cultural Leadership Adjustment

Based on the theory of WRT, we expect to find that the expatriate executives in our study will make a high level of leadership adjustment and a high level of subordinate change—corresponding to the mode of exploration (see the top right quadrant in figure 1). In other words, we expect to find that they will significantly modify their leadership approaches and actively try to change their subordinates. The predictions are based on two grounds: first, the expatriate executives are in top positions in the Thai subsidiaries and have high role discretion. The degree of discretion is argued to be directly related to an individual's position

in the organisational hierarchy (Jaques, 1976). A role with high discretion, it is suggested by WRT, will lead the expatriates to change their subordinates.

Second, the expatriate executives face the task of leading Thai subordinates whose cultural characteristics and work behaviour are significantly different from that in our executives' native countries. Thailand is categorised as a collectivist, feminine country, high on power distance and uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede, Hofstede and Minkov, 2010; House et al., 2004), these cultural characteristics are significantly different from the individualistic and low power distance traits found in the countries (e.g. USA, UK, Australia, Germany) where most of our expatriates come from (ibid). The high cultural differences between Thai employees and the employees in the native countries of the expatriates (i.e. novelty of subordinate characteristics), it is suggested by WRT, will lead the expatriates to change their leadership approaches. The following hypothesis was thus tested in this study:

H1. Senior expatriate business leaders will significantly adjust their leadership approach and actively trying to change their host country subordinates—showing the exploration mode of adjustment, when leading subordinates whose cultural characteristics are significantly different from that in the expatriates' home countries.

Method

We adopted a qualitative methodology and collected data through two approaches: 1) semi-structured interviews with expatriate executives; and 2) a qualitative on-line survey of senior expatriate managers. The qualitative research design was adopted in order to gain a deep understanding of expatriate leaders' experiences of leadership adjustment when working in a different cultural setting. Research participants included 176 senior expatriate managers; among these, 13 were interviewed and 163 completed the online survey. The interviews were carried out with four American, five British and four Japanese CEOs working in Bangkok, Thailand. They had been recruited from two sources: the Marketing Association of Thailand (MAT) and LinkedIn, an online professional social network. The expatriates who completed the on-line survey were contacted through LinkedIn. We used LinkedIn to compile our sampling frame as a readily compiled contact list of senior expatriate managers was not available. LinkedIn is the largest business-oriented professional networking platform on the Internet, with over 313 million users in more than 200 countries as of October 2014 (LinkedIn, 2014). It allows users to create professional profiles; through these, we were able to view the people's demographic (e.g. gender, education) and work information (e.g. occupation, job role, job level, work experience, country where they worked, industry sector, year of service) and to select our samples. Over 80% of participants were male, covering 20 different nationalities, drawn from an extensive range of sectors.

Data Collection

Interviews. We started by conducting individual, face-to face semi-structured interviews with 13 expatriates. These exploratory interviews were conducted to explore the expatriates' adjustment behaviours and to guide the design of the subsequent on-line survey. Semi-structured interviews allow flexibility and maximum exploration of the research issues. Expatriates were asked about their views on the characteristics of Thai employees, business systems and culture, their leadership approaches, and whether or not the host culture, employees and environment influence their leadership approach. They were also asked whether they needed to adjust their leadership approaches and/or change Thai employees and

work practices. Also, if they had needed to adjust, they were asked what had led to that need and what they had done to adjust. The interviews were conducted in English, and lasted between 35 and 66 minutes. All the interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed.

Online qualitative survey. Drawing on the exploratory interviews and WRT, we designed an on-line survey aimed at probing more widely and deeply into the leaders' modes of adjustment and into the factors that influenced them. The survey consisted of three sets of open-ended questions designed to gain insights into expatriate leaders' viewpoints and experiences that could not otherwise be extracted from responses to closed-ended questions. The first set of questions was designed to explore the expatriate leaders' approach in leading Thai subordinates and to investigate whether local employees, culture and business practices influenced their approach. The second and third were designed to investigate whether the expatriates adjusted their leadership approach or whether they changed (or tried to change) their subordinates and/or the subsidiary's work practices. The online survey connected with senior expatriate managers via over 1500 LinkedIn invitations to take part in the research, with acceptances from 934 senior expatriates. The total number of completed survey forms was 163 (excluding 12 invalid incomplete ones) yielding a response rate of 17.5%. Each respondent provided an average of 1.5 pages of Qualtrics report (text), generating a total of 245 pages from the 163 respondents. An inductive data analysis process allowed the identification of the themes that were present in the data, avoiding the imposition of the theoretical constructs proposed by the WRT theory. Subsequently, based on the theory of WRT, we deductively analysed how role discretion and novelty of employee characteristics influenced modes of CLA.

Findings

Characteristics of Thai Employees Found Problematic to MNC Subsidiary Leaders

Inexpressiveness: Almost all of the leaders pointed out that a major characteristic of Thai employees was that they were inexpressive, unwilling to speak their minds, and preferred to keep things to themselves. This was a challenge for the expatriates as they were unable to understand the viewpoints of their subordinates and the reasoning behind Thai managers' decisions. This inexpressiveness was thought to be the result of a combination of hierarchy, religious belief and face-saving (Jingjit and Fotaki, 2011; Siengthi and Bechter, 2004). Due to the hierarchical management tradition, they found it difficult to draw out Thai opinions at meetings, particularly from junior staff. Compared with employees in their native countries, over two-third of the expatriates stated that Thais had more respect for organizational authority and were more hierarchical. One Japanese interviewee said:

The gap between senior management and employees is too wide [...] They [workers] feel they are too small and too inferior to associate with the senior managers so they [workers] tend not to speak up. By not speaking up, they tend to widen the gap further.

(Japanese Executive, 35-39 years old, Automotive manufacturing)

Many respondents believed that Buddhism profoundly influenced the way Thais worked and their interaction with management: over 90% of the population being Buddhist. The *Karma* Buddhist dogma was perceived as an explanation for how certain aspects of one's present experience are consequences of previous acts, even in former existences, creating an incentive to accept their fates rather than questioning leaders (Keyes, 1989: 122). One British expatriate stated that employees were unwilling to tell management about any problems in order to save face, as they felt that if they said there was something wrong, it reflected badly on themselves. Such unwillingness to tell management about problems

increased their severity. Thais' unwillingness to speak up was similarly to save their own and others' 'faces':

One, they don't want to embarrass themselves. Two, they don't want to show off because they might make somebody else look bad. (American Executive, 55-59 years old, Banking sector)

Non-confrontation: Another major characteristic mentioned by the expatriates was Thais' non-confrontational trait. It is considered as mainly being the result of *Kreng Jai* which is part of the Thai cultural values and refers to 'the desire to be self-effacing, respectful, humble and considerate; a wish to avoid embarrassing others' (Siengthai and Vadhanasindhu, 1991: 234). *Kreng Jai* made Thais very friendly, warm-hearted, non-confrontational and very considerate about what they said to other people. They tended to say only nice things and not criticize others directly. Most expatriates thought that it would save time and be beneficial if Thais were more direct, open, assertive and forthcoming, and did not believe it was offensive to express critical views. Several expatriates observed that Thais were less confrontational than people in their home countries. One British respondent said:

There is no culture of confrontation, so expressing contrary opinions to a member of the group, especially if that member is older, is very rare. This means that ideas are not fully challenged, and substandard decisions can be taken.

(British expatriate, 45-49 years old, Branding Agency)

Poor team-working: The third major characteristic mentioned by the executives was Thais' poor team-working. Many executives stated that Thais preferred working in groups but were not good at team-working. Thai people liked 'their close network' and to 'stick to groups' because they wanted to avoid being blamed for mistakes and taking responsibility:

Thais feel more comfortable gathering around together but they do not display institutional collectivism. Thailand displays avoidance and blame, which is achieved by hiding in a group and taking no personal responsibility. I have rarely had Thai staff that will take one for the team. (British Executive, 55-59 years old, Real Estate sector)

Nevertheless expatriates praised Thai employees for their good work ethic, kindness, modesty, loyalty, creativity, intelligence, and helpfulness. They held similar views on the characteristics of Thai employees; yet some reacted differently to these same characteristics and displayed contrasting adjustment modes as will now be discussed.

Modes of Cross-cultural Leadership Adjustment

We found that 78.4 % of the expatriate managers, and indeed the over-riding majority, displayed the *exploration* mode of adjustment (i.e. they made adjustment to both their leadership approaches and their subordinates); 10.2 % displayed the *absorption* mode (i.e. they largely adjusted their leadership approaches but not the subordinates); and 11.4 % displayed the *determination* mode (i.e. they made little adjustment to their leadership approaches but actively tried to change Thai employees and the work practices). We will illustrate all three modes of adjustment.

Exploration mode of adjustment Expatriates who displayed the exploration modes of adjustment adjusted their own leadership approach but also tried to change Thai employees:

'I choose to adjust my approach...I focus more on social harmony and not upsetting or offending people. I have a less direct approach in Thailand...I have tried to change employees. I encourage them to challenge the status quo, to not be afraid to try new things, and to look at things differently.' (British expatriate, 45-49 years old, Banking)

Determination mode of adjustment Expatriates displaying the determination mode of adjustment stated that they used managerial approaches from their home country when leading people in Thailand: e.g. in terms of controls, responsibility and accountability:

My style is much more forceful I would say in terms of responsibility, accountability, straight line, whereas in Thai culture it is more loose.

(American Executive, 55-59 years old, Banking sector)

All 4 Japanese executives indicated that they maintained Japanese managerial approaches, emphasizing the importance of leadership attributes such as team cooperation, respect for each other and being accountable, and the vital importance of teaching Thais Japanese ways:

Charisma is not necessarily important in leadership. We teach the Thais "Yamaha style", the way we work. (Japanese Executive, 35-39 years old, Automotive Mfr)

I'm trying to create an atmosphere so that there's no high wall between my staff and me. I'm trying to make the atmosphere like we are family here. I'm trying to go to see the [real estate] sites with my staff and work with them directly so that there is no hierarchy. (Japanese Executive, 45-49 years old, Real Estate sector)

Absorption mode of adjustment The expatriates who did not try to change their subordinates and local work practices but adjusted their leadership stated that they recognized that, culturally, Thais behaved differently in the workplace:

I think Thais culturally would behave at the workplace differently from British and Americans would, because of that I think leadership approach is different as well... I think you have to be patient. You've got to be a lot gentler than you might otherwise be. You spend a lot more time encouraging.

(British Executive, 55-59 years old, Construction sector)

The most important thing is this understanding here that if you are the most senior person you have to act in a very different way to how you would act in the same meeting in a western environment. Ask more questions, keep your own opinions to yourself or spend more time. Make sure that you draw everyone into the meeting.

(British Executive, 50-54 years old, Automotive sector)

In summary, Thai employee traits and hierarchical organisational system thus influenced expatriates' perceptions of the need to adjust their leadership approaches and/or change their subordinates, which in turn influenced their modes of adjustment. Our results provide not only strong support for the overall prediction of the *mode* of adjustment proposed by the theory of WRT, they also provide strong support for the predicted link between high role discretion and high task content change.

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