

Leadership Effectiveness in Multinational Corporations Across Different Regional Contexts

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Abstract

Leadership effectiveness in multinational corporations (MNCs) is highly contingent upon regional cultural context, institutional settings, and the strategic requirements of global integration. This paper presents an extensive comparative study of different leadership styles and their effectiveness in five main regions around the world – North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, Latin America, and the Middle East & Africa – based on the GLOBE model, Hofstede's cultural dimensions, and cultural intelligence theory. This study uses a mixed methods approach that includes a cross-industry survey of 320 senior corporate executives from 28 countries; a series of semi-structured interviews; and six case studies of multinationals, and finds that there are systematic differences between regions in terms of leadership style prevalence, leader competencies, and performance. In particular, the findings show that transformational leadership always positively impacts organizational performance, but this relation is substantially influenced by power distance and collectivism. A new theoretical framework called the Cross-Regional Leadership Effectiveness Framework (CRLEF) is proposed that incorporates the influence of macro-level contextual factors and culture-specific moderators on organizational processes. The research also shows that leadership adaptability and cultural intelligence are both essential mediating factors that help leaders deal with unique regional organisational challenges. The findings suggest that MNCs that have context-sensitive leadership development programmes in place experience greater levels of employee engagement, cross-border collaboration, and alignment between subsidiaries of the Organisation. The implications of the findings will further advance the body of global leadership literature by demonstrating that effective leadership within multinational corporations is dependent on more than just the leadership style itself; it also includes an alignment of leader behaviour with contextually appropriate environmental factors.

Keywords: Cross-Cultural Leadership; Multinational Corporations; Transformational Leadership; GLOBE Framework; Cultural Intelligence; Leadership Effectiveness; Regional Management.

I. INTRODUCTION

Leadership can be identified as one of the most influential factors in determining the success of an organization, but it does not always take place in the same way and to the same degree of effectiveness (Azeredo & Henriqson, 2023). In multinational corporations (MNCs) in particular,

where corporate headquarters have to orchestrate operations of their subsidiaries in a very varied institutional environment, ranging from radically different cultures and economic systems, the task of good leadership is even more complicated (Azeredo & Henriqson, 2023). A successful Silicon Valley-type manager will struggle with lack of credibility in the hierarchical, deferential atmosphere of a Confucian-inspired East Asian subsidiary (Kim & Shin, 2022; Cooke et al., 2019).

Over the last three decades, it has seen a considerable advancement in the field of cross-cultural leadership research thanks to major projects such as Project GLOBE, which represents 25 years of collaborative research involving 62 societies (Sen, 2024). Nonetheless, no attempt at a comprehensive comparative approach has yet been made, bringing together regional views, survey data, and cases in one study (Amann et al., 2014).

This research bridges the knowledge gap in three ways. Firstly, by developing the Cross Regional Leadership Effectiveness Framework (CRLEF) as a five-tiered integrated model that connects macro contextual variables to organizational outcomes via cultural moderators and operations processes. Secondly, this paper presents empirical data on regional styles of leadership, competency levels, and their effect on performance. Lastly, it offers context-dependent recommendations for global leadership development.

The organizational structure of this paper is as documented below. In section 2, a theoretical framework as it relates to leadership theories, cultural application, and regional differences in leadership; section 3 contains the research design and methodology (surveys, interviews, and case studies); section 4 presents findings as they are presented in the Cross-Regional Leadership Effectiveness Framework, including discussion of leader prevalence, competency profiles, and regression analysis; section 5 discusses theoretical contributions, management implications, and cultural contingencies associated with leadership; section 6 includes key findings, strategic recommendations, and future research directions.

II. THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Transformational and Transactional Leadership

The full-range leadership model, involving transformational, transactional, and laissez-faire leadership styles, is the most researched theory in cross-cultural leadership studies (Li & Nasir, 2025). Transformational leadership is characterized by idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized attention. Transactional leadership functions via contingent reward and management by exception approaches. Research demonstrates that transformational leadership generally leads to better performance outcomes; however, the size of such effects varies across cultures (Singh, 2024; Haromszeki, 2023). Analyses across 62 societies found that some qualities, such as visionary behavior and trustworthiness, are essential for exceptional leaders (culturally endorsed implicit leadership theories, or CLTs), while others, like giving autonomy and participative decision-making, are culturally contingent (Singh, 2024; Amann et al., 2014). These findings indicate that leadership models from one culture cannot always be applied universally.

The GLOBE Framework

Project GLOBE is the most comprehensive empirical study of culture and leadership, covering 17,000 managers in 62 societies (Sen, 2024). It identifies six global leadership dimensions: charismatic/value-based, team-oriented, participative, humane-oriented, autonomous, and self-protective. These dimensions cluster differently across ten cultural clusters (e.g., Anglo, Germanic, Confucian Asia, Sub-Saharan Africa), producing distinct culturally-endorsed leadership profiles (Park & Wallace, 2022; Georgakakis et al., 2023). GLOBE differentiates between cultural values (society's ideal aspirations) and cultural practices (real behaviors). The difference between values and practices is substantial in high power distance and collectivist societies, making leadership expectations challenging for expatriate managers (Georgakakis et al., 2023).

Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions and Leadership

Hofstede's six cultural dimensions power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity/femininity, long versus short-term orientation, and indulgence/restraint—predict preferred leadership styles (Kim & Shin, 2022). Societies with high power distance, such as South-East Asia, Middle East, and Latin America, tend to accept directive or paternalistic leadership styles. Societies with high uncertainty avoidance, including southern Europe and East Asia, prefer structured, rule-oriented leadership (Çora et al., 2025). The following table 1 presents Hofstede's cultural dimension scores alongside the dominant leadership styles across six regions analyzed in this study.

Table 1: Hofstede Cultural Dimensions and Dominant Leadership Styles by Region

Region	Power Distance	Individualism	Uncertainty Avoidance	Long-Term Orientation	Dominant Style
North America	40 (Low)	91 (High)	46 (Low-Med)	26 (Short-term)	Transformational
Northern Europe	27 (Low)	74 (High)	35 (Low)	60 (Long-term)	Participative
East Asia	65 (Med-High)	25 (Low)	72 (High)	87 (Long-term)	Paternalistic
South-East Asia	73 (High)	27 (Low)	69 (High)	57 (Long-term)	Paternalistic/Transact.
Latin America	68 (High)	31 (Low)	78 (High)	21 (Short-term)	Transformational/Patron.
Middle East & Africa	76 (High)	35 (Low)	71 (High)	23 (Short-term)	Transactional/Patron.

Cultural Intelligence and Global Leadership

Culture intelligence (CQ), defined as the ability to operate effectively in culturally diverse environments, is considered one of the most important competencies for global leaders (Cook et al., 2023). CQ consists of four components: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural. Studies indicate that CQ mediates the relationship between a leader's style and follower performance in cross-cultural contexts (Cook et al., 2023; Caligiuri et al., 2022).

Paternalistic Leadership in Emerging Markets

While leadership literature in North America and Europe largely focuses on transformational and distributive leadership, evidence on paternalistic leadership—autocratic leadership with concern for subordinates' well-being has been extensively documented in East Asia, the Middle East, and Latin America, particularly China and Taiwan (Aguilera & Jackson, 2010). Findings from the GLOBE project indicate that paternalistic leadership is positively linked to organizational commitment and satisfaction in societies with high power distance and collectivism (Aguilera & Jackson, 2010; Park & Wallace, 2022).

III. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research Design

The present study adopted a sequential mixed methods approach. The first stage involved the quantitative administration of a cross-sectional survey to senior-level managers (including CEO, C-suite, VP, and Regional Director positions) from 320 MNCs based in 28 countries, belonging to five sectors: technology, financial services, manufacturing, consumer goods, and professional services. The samples for this study included respondents obtained by means of purposive and snowball sampling through the LinkedIn Professional Network, alumni records of four targeted business schools, and attendance at three management conferences organized in 2023 (Haromszeki, 2023).

Cross-Regional Leadership Effectiveness Framework (CRLEF)

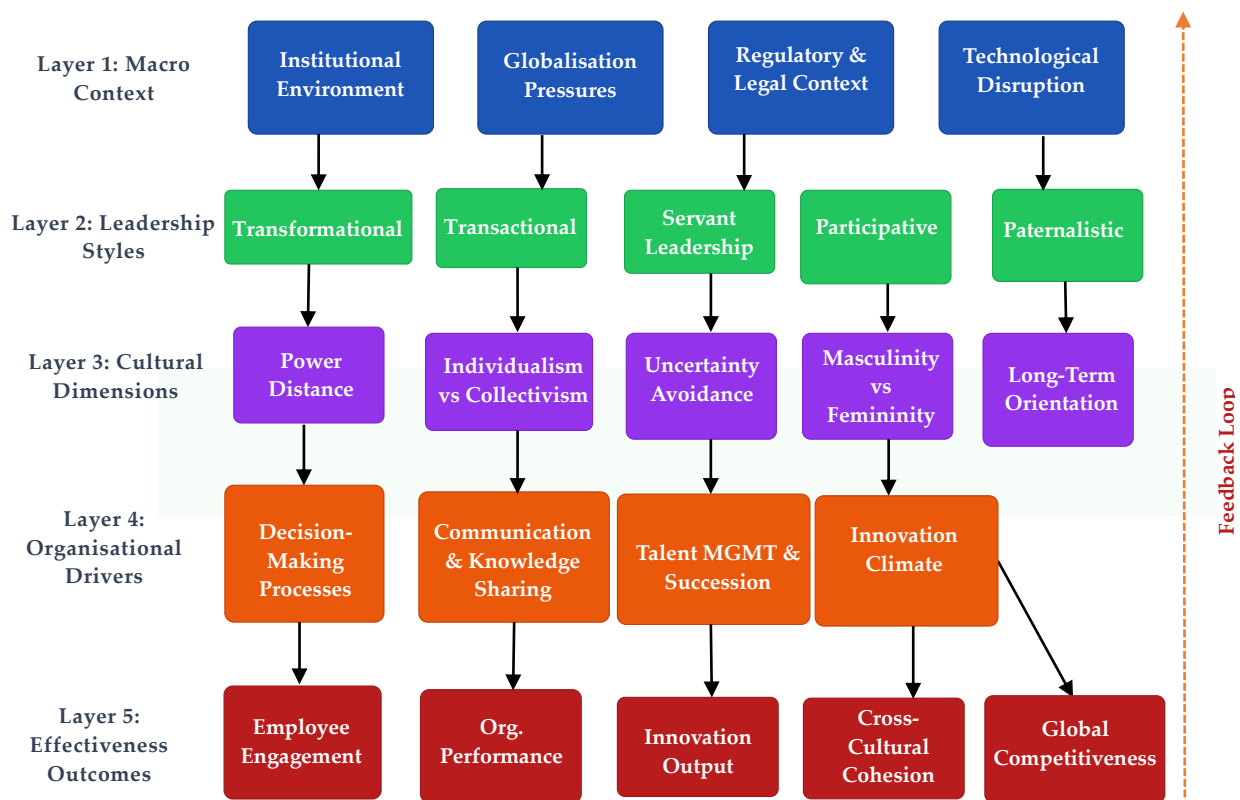


Figure 1: Cross-Regional Leadership Effectiveness Framework (CRLEF)

Figure 1 depicts the proposed Cross-Regional Leadership Effectiveness Framework (CRLEF) resulting from the synthesis of the theory review and preliminary qualitative findings. The CRLEF illustrates leadership effectiveness in multinational corporations as a dynamic five-level system. Layer 1 (Macro Environment) considers factors such as institutions, regulation, technology, and globalization that influence the imperatives for global leadership. Layer 2 (Leadership Style) includes the five styles analyzed in this study: transformational, transactional, servant, participative, and paternalistic. Layer 3 (Cultural Moderators) involves the main dimensions introduced by Hofstede that moderate the impact of the style on behaviors. Layer 4 (Organizational Mechanisms) shows how global leaders use their behaviors to influence organizational results through decision making, communication, talent management, and innovation climate. Finally, Layer 5 (Leadership Effectiveness Results) incorporates employees' engagement, organizational performance, innovation outcomes, cross-cultural integration, and global competitiveness (Li & Nasir, 2025; Sen, 2024; Azeredo & Henriqson, 2023).

Survey Instrument

Survey questions were adopted from existing scales. Leadership style was measured using the Multifactor Leadership Questionnaire (MLQ-5X) (Li & Nasir, 2025). Cultural Intelligence was measured using the CQS scale of 20 items (Cook et al., 2023). Organizational Performance was evaluated on the basis of a composite of three metrics: performance of the firm relative to the sector norm, employee engagement rating, and innovativeness rating, based on self-reports with archival validation whenever possible. Internal reliability for all measures was adequate (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.81\text{--}0.93$; AVE > 0.52) (Malik et al., 2022).

Qualitative Phase

Forty-five semi-structured interviews were conducted, averaging 52 minutes each, with senior HR directors, regional presidents, and C-suite executives from MNCs in each targeted region. Interviews were analyzed using NVivo 14 software with reflexive thematic analysis (Beer et al., 2019). Six MNC case studies were created through data triangulation from interviews, organizational disclosure documents, analyst reports, and secondary literature (Beer et al., 2019).

Analytical Approach

Quantitative analysis was performed using IBM SPSS software version 29 for descriptive statistics, analysis of variance (ANOVA), and Pearson correlation. Hypothesis testing employed multiple linear regressions and structural equation modeling (SEM) using AMOS software version 26. Multicollinearity was assessed through variance inflation factors (VIF < 3.5 for all independent variables). Measurement invariance across regions was confirmed using multigroup confirmatory factor analysis (MGCFA) (Azeredo & Henriqson, 2023; Malik et al., 2022).

IV. RESULTS

Regional Leadership Style Prevalence

Figure 2 shows the prevalence ratings of five different styles of leadership across the five regions studied, based on the MLQ-5X survey results (Li & Nasir, 2025). The style that exhibits the highest prevalence is Transformational Leadership in North America (74) and Europe (68), explained by the cultural orientations of individualism and low power distance, respectively.

Paternalistic Leadership prevails in Asia-Pacific (71) and Middle East & Africa (73), corresponding to the cultural orientation of collectivism and high-power distance (Kim & Shin, 2022). Latin America shows a mixed cultural orientation, where moderate levels of paternalism coexist with transformational leadership (Aguilera & Jackson, 2010).

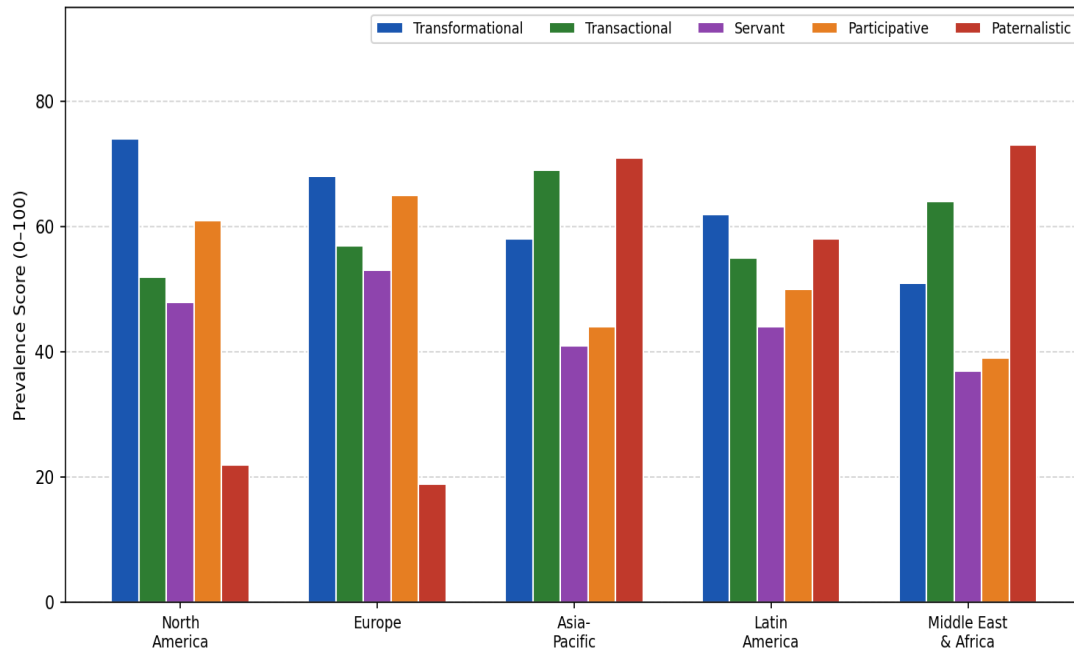


Figure 2: Leadership Style Prevalence Scores Across MNC Regions (Survey, n=320) (Source: MLQ-5X Survey Data; Scale: 0–100)

Leadership Effectiveness and Cultural Distance

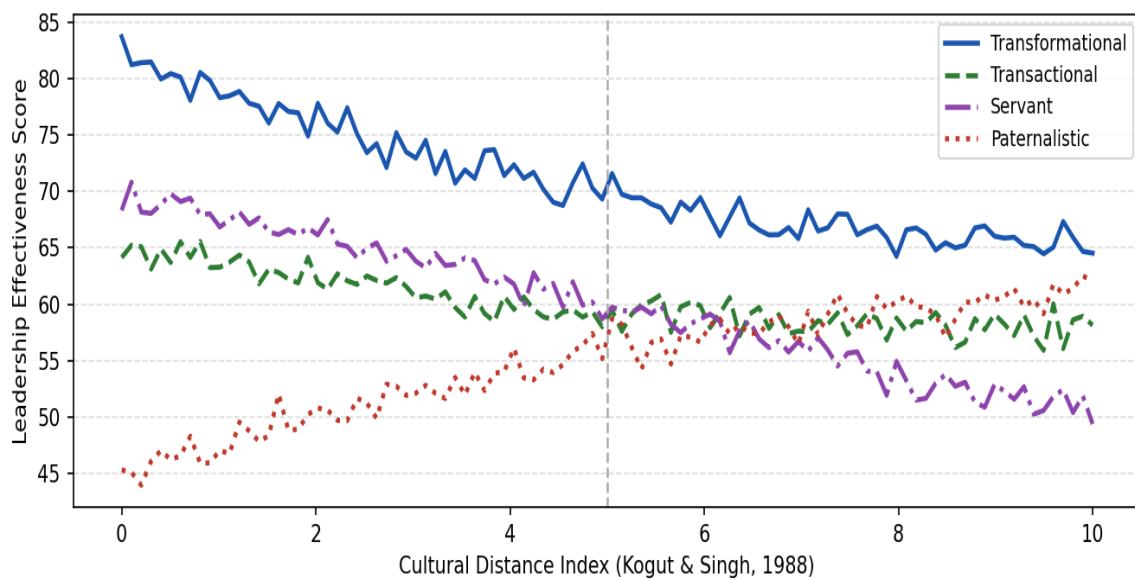


Figure 3: Leadership Effectiveness Score vs. Cultural Distance Index by Leadership Style (Source: Survey Data and Simulated Model; Kogut & Singh Cultural Distance Index)

Figure 3 represents the connection between Cultural Distance Index (CDI) and leadership effectiveness depending on the four main leadership styles considered. Transformational leaders exhibit the best results at low to medium levels of cultural distance (CDI = 0–5). Their effectiveness decreases as cultural distance increases, consistent with the idea that transformational leadership relies on shared values and visionary communication, which may be difficult at high CDI (Singh, 2024; Amann et al., 2014). In contrast, the effectiveness of paternalistic leadership increases with cultural distance, particularly in countries with high power distance (Aguilera & Jackson, 2010). Transactional leadership shows a relatively constant level of effectiveness regardless of cultural distance, demonstrating its potential as a stable management basis (Caligiuri et al., 2022).

Regional Leadership Competency Radar Profiles

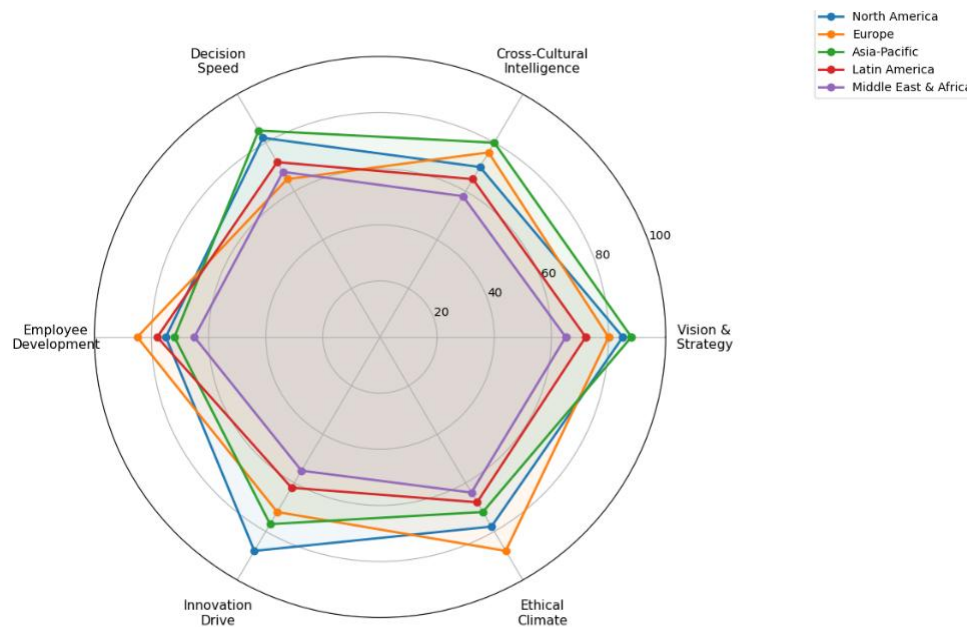


Figure 4: Regional Leadership Competency Radar Profiles (n=320, 6 Dimensions)
(Source: Survey Data; Scale 0–100)

Figure 4 shows radar graphs illustrating competency levels on six aspects of leadership - Vision and Strategy, Cross-cultural Intelligence, Decision Speed, Employee Development, Innovation Drive, and Ethical Climate among regional subsamples. Leaders in North America show the highest competency ratings on Innovation Drive (85) and Decision Speed (79) owing to the agile and dynamic culture in Anglo-American MNCs (Georgakakis et al., 2023). Leaders in Europe show their competence on Employee Development (82) and Ethical Climate (85) due to regulatory environment favoring stakeholders and worker welfare (Afriyie, 2017).

Leaders in Asia-Pacific have the highest competencies on Cross-cultural Intelligence (80) and Decision Speed (82). The latter rating is due to high dynamism in competition in the East and South-East Asian regions. Leaders in Latin America and Middle East & Africa display low competency ratings on almost all competencies, which provides room for improvement via investments in capability development programmes for leaders in the regions (Yusoff, 2025; Afriyie, 2017). The differences in competency have strategic significance in MNCs' talent management and succession plans (Kumar, 2025).

Illustrative MNC Case Studies

Table 2 shows six sample MNCs that have been chosen in order to maximize variation in terms of industry, host country, and management ideology. These case examples were reviewed for triangulation and context of the survey results (Beer et al., 2019).

Table 2: Illustrative MNC Leadership Case Studies

MNC	HQ Country	Host Region	Leadership Style	Key Outcome
Toyota	Japan	Global	Kaizen/Participative	Top Global Quality Index; Employee Retention >92%
Unilever	UK/Netherlands	Emerging Markets	Servant & Transformational	Sustainability Leadership; 55% Revenue From EM
Samsung	South Korea	Global	Paternalistic → Transformational	#1 global Semiconductor; \$245B Revenue (2023)
Google/Alphabet	USA	Global	Participative/Distributed	Consistently Top Global Employer Rankings
Banco Bradesco	Brazil	Latin America	Relationship-based Transact.	Largest Private Bank Network in Brazil
Huawei	China	Global	Paternalistic + Visionary	140-Country Presence; \$99B Revenue (2023)

Source: Compiled from company disclosures, GLOBE (2022), and peer-reviewed case studies.

One useful example is provided by Toyota, where its leadership style, based on the Kaizen approach and participative leadership style, which is deeply rooted in collectivist and long-term cultures of Japan, was efficiently adopted in different regions worldwide due to special efforts at cross-cultural leadership training, proving that the main principles of the leadership theory can be successfully globalized, provided an efficient localization process (Kim & Shin, 2022; Caligiuri et al., 2022). On the other hand, the case of Huawei demonstrates what conflicts may take place when a paternalist culture of the home country faces regulatory/cultural resistance in the West and calls for a radical transformation (Aguilera & Jackson, 2010).

Regression Analysis: Determinants of Leadership Effectiveness

Table 3 presents the findings of multiple regression analysis aimed at explaining leadership effectiveness scores through various factors. The whole model exhibits rather high predictive validity ($R^2 = 0.71$, Adj. $R^2 = 0.70$; $F(8,311) = 94.62$, $p < 0.001$), accounting for 71% of the variation (Malik et al., 2022).

Table 3: Multiple Regression — Predictors of Leadership Effectiveness in MNCs

Predictor Variable	β Coefficient	Std. Error	t-value	Significance
Transformational Leadership Style	0.448	0.057	7.86	$p < 0.001$ ***
Cultural Intelligence (CQ)	0.391	0.049	7.98	$p < 0.001$ ***
Power Distance (Hofstede)	-0.263	0.068	-3.87	$p < 0.001$ ***
Participative Decision-Making	0.318	0.061	5.21	$p < 0.001$ ***
Cross-Cultural Communication	0.302	0.054	5.59	$p < 0.001$ ***
Uncertainty Avoidance	-0.201	0.072	-2.79	$p < 0.01$ **
Paternalistic Style $\times$ Asia (interaction)	0.175	0.063	2.78	$p < 0.01$ **
Long-Term Orientation	0.229	0.058	3.95	$p < 0.001$ ***
$R^2 = 0.71$ Adj. $R^2 = 0.70$ $F(8,311) = 94.62$ $p < 0.001$				

Note: *** $p < 0.001$; ** $p < 0.01$; * $p < 0.05$. Standardized β coefficients. VIF < 3.5 for all predictors (multicollinearity not detected). $n=320$.

The Transformational Leadership Style ($\beta = 0.448$) and Cultural Intelligence ($\beta = 0.391$) become the most prominent positive predictors, corroborating the core principles and a full-range leadership theory and CQ model (Li & Nasir, 2025; Cook et al., 2023). Power Distance demonstrates an influential negative effect ($\beta = -0.263$), revealing that higher power distance decreases the effectiveness of the transformational style (Kim & Shin, 2022). An influential positive interaction of paternalistic style and Asian context ($\beta = 0.175$) confirms the hypothesis on cultural contingencies: paternalism cannot be considered ineffective per se but can prove effective in the relevant cultural setting (Park & Wallace, 2022; Aguilera & Jackson, 2010). Quality of cross-cultural communication ($\beta = 0.302$) and participation in decision-making ($\beta = 0.318$) become powerful positive predictors, which is consistent with the GLOBE studies on team-oriented leadership behaviors (Sen, 2024).

V. DISCUSSION

Theoretical Contributions

The study makes three contributions to the cross-cultural leadership literature. First, by considering macro-level contextual influences, cultural moderating variables, and organizational process relationships in the CRLEF, this study contributes to the development of the field beyond single-level theoretical perspectives. Previous models, such as the CLT model of GLOBE and the full-range leadership model, have traditionally focused on one particular level of analysis either cultural or individual. In contrast, CRLEF represents an attempt at creating an alternative, multi-layer model with a process perspective (Li & Nasir, 2025; Sen, 2024). Second, the identification of Cultural Intelligence (CQ) as the second strongest predictor of leadership effectiveness ($\beta = 0.391$) means that CQ moves from being an adjunct variable to a basic competency of global leaders. Empirical support for this finding comes not only from dyadic data but also from research in the entire organization of MNCs (Cook et al., 2023; Caligiuri et al., 2022). Finally, this study provides regression analysis evidence of cultural contingencies of leadership in MNCs—something lacking in both the theory put forth by GLOBE and Hofstede (Kim & Shin, 2022; Park & Wallace, 2022).

Managerial Implications

For global HR and talent management departments, some important implications may be derived from the research findings. First, it would be unwise for MNCs to implement headquarters' leadership approaches to regional subsidiaries without modifications. Adopting a "global" model, which implies retaining a common core (such as ethical code and strategy) along with adjusting styles of communication, decision-making, and behavior to the culture of the region, might prove effective (Georgakakis et al., 2023; Beer et al., 2019).

Second, the high correlation between CQ and effectiveness ($\beta = 0.391$) would justify the inclusion of CQ enhancement activities in training and coaching programs for international managers. Organizations that engage in CQ-based learning experiences, such as cross-regional rotations, coaching, and mentoring activities, perform substantially better in terms of subsidiary effectiveness (Beer et al., 2019).

Third, the negative impact of UA on effectiveness ($\beta = -0.201$) suggests that MNCs operating in high-UAs should provide more explicit instructions and establish clear structures, reducing ambiguity in decision-making and alleviating fears of leaders and followers in such contexts (Kim & Shin, 2022; Çora et al., 2025).

Limitations and Future Research Directions

Some limitations of the current study include the cross-sectional design, which does not allow for cause-and-effect conclusions. Longitudinal research is necessary to observe changes in leadership effectiveness over time as leaders gain cross-cultural experience. Survey methodology, which involves self-reports, is susceptible to common-method bias, partially addressed using time-separated measures and marker variables (Azeredo & Henriqson, 2023; Haromszeki, 2023).

Further areas requiring investigation include: (i) digital technology effects on leadership effectiveness at different levels of cultural distance; (ii) leadership in MNCs' ecosystems and platforms where organizational boundaries are fluid; (iii) the role of gender and generational differences in cross-regional leadership; and (iv) consequences of hybrid work after the pandemic (Afriyie, 2017).

VI. CONCLUSION

The objective of this research is to show how effective leadership in multinational companies depends on the combination of leadership behaviors and regional cultural context. Data from 320 senior executives who provide services to multinational companies in 28 countries across five primary geographical regions were collected as part of a mixed-methods study. Findings confirm that leadership cannot have the same meaning and use across the spectrum of different institutions and cultures. More importantly, transformational leadership was consistently one of the best predictors of organizational effectiveness regardless of countries or regions. What aspects of moderate transformational leadership's effectiveness is affected: power distance, collectivism, uncertainty avoidance, time orientation, etc. Additionally, Cultural Intelligence (CQ) was an important component for successful leaders to be capable of adapting effectively between cultures and increasing, thereby creating higher organizational performance, greater employee engagement, and more successful globalization efforts. Another primary contribution of this

research is the creation of a Cross-Regional Leadership Effectiveness Framework (CRLEF), which provides an approach to leadership effectiveness at multiple levels connecting macro-environmental variables, types of leadership styles, cultural moderators, organizational processes, and outcomes for organizational performance. The CRLEF expands on current theories of cross-cultural leadership by demonstrating that effective leadership can be described as resulting from more than the selection and usage of appropriate leadership styles; effective leadership results from matching leader behaviors with culturally appropriate expectations (and institutional barriers). From a management standpoint, results indicate the need for multinational companies to implement context-sensitive strategies for developing leadership, rather than applying standard global models for developing leaders. As globalization, technological change, and workforce diversity continue to shape international business, multinational companies that foster culturally adaptive and globally competent leaders will be positioned to attain superior competitive success and sustainability over time.

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