



# GLOBAL LEADERSHIP COMPETENCES FOR THE FUTURE

## GLOBAL LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The purpose of the study was to obtain a better understanding of global leadership behavior as it is practiced in international organizations. In order to address this issue, a range of qualitative interviews were conducted with managers working in a global context, their peers, subordinates, and superiors. The study rendered the following results:

- Successful global leaders balance between two types of leadership behavior, here labeled alignment-oriented global leadership and diversity-oriented global leadership. Since both approaches hold advantages and disadvantages and are similar in some respects while different in others it is the global leader's ability to shift between the two, rather than being committed to only one type of leadership, that renders successful organizational results.
- Alignment-oriented global leadership behavior is committed to the implementation of general rules and common structures across national and intra-organizational boundaries. Furthermore, on the inter-personal level the alignment-oriented leader abides to the organizational culture rather than the local-national culture. This type of behavior has the advantage of unifying diverse parts of the organization. The alignment-oriented leader is perceived by peers and subordinates to be 'true' to his/her personality. However, this more rigid type of behavior is also perceived as inflexible to local concerns and cultures, and hinders organizational adaptation to the diverse environments in which the firm operates.
- Diversity-oriented global leadership behavior on the organizational level is committed to continuously adjusting the different parts of the firm to the local contexts. In consequence, peers and subordinates report that this type of leadership behavior allows them to be included in the organization on their own terms. The behavior of diversity-oriented leaders is described as being curious and flexible when emerged in different cultural and organizational settings. However, this behavior is described as being inconsistent. Additionally, the focus on local rather than global concerns is reported to damage the cohesiveness of the organization.

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## RESEARCH DESIGN

### RESEARCH PROJECT

This research study was carried out as part of the project 'Global Leadership Competences for the Future', which is a joint venture between DI – the Confederation of Danish Industry, Copenhagen Business School, and a number of internationally operating Danish companies. The project is sponsored by The Danish Industry Foundation and is scheduled to end in 2015. The purpose of the project is to *identify, develop, and contribute to the implementation of* global leadership competences in Danish corporations. The present research activity was carried out by the 'International Management Team' located at Department of Business Administration, Aarhus University. It focuses on "global leadership behavior", i.e. the *actual* behavior that successful global leaders display.

### DATA

#### DATA COLLECTION

Five global leaders have been interviewed along with their superiors, peers, and subordinates. The study is based on a 360 degree technique in order to cover the perception of global leadership behavior from the perspectives of both the individual leader as well as the perspectives of the people surrounding the leader. 360 degree feedback or appraisal technique is a tool used for leadership development based on feedback from a manager's surroundings in order to gain a more objective measure compared to tools based only on peer or self-assessment.

#### DATA ANALYSIS

The transcribed data set was imported into Nvivo®. The coding scheme was developed deductively from the interview grid and inductively from the answers of the participants. Codes were then combined into higher-order codes so as to create aggregated categories. These aggregated categories were then assembled under main themes in order to organize the write-up of the results. These main themes constitute the core of this report. Interview material is quoted to illustrate our analyses.

#### ANONYMITY AND DISCLAIMER

Names of the informants who participated in the study are kept anonymous; however, reference will be made to the informant's organizational role (e.g. global leader, CEO, etc.). Disclaimer: The

content of this report solely presents the interpretation, perception, and analysis of the members of the 'International Management Team' and not the individual companies involved in the study or DI.

## CONTACT

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## RESEARCH RESULTS

Results of this study show that global leaders must be able to balance between two types of global leadership behavior – alignment-oriented vs. diversity-oriented global leadership. Some leaders tend to focus on general global characteristics and through their alignment-oriented behavior emphasize global rules and general leadership styles. Conversely, others apply a high degree of sensitivity towards variation at the individual or organizational level. These more diversity-oriented leaders treat people differently depending on their personal and cultural backgrounds and handle teams differently depending on group composition. At the organizational level, this type of leader seeks to apply and change rules in accordance with the local context. As such, global leaders use different approaches to solve their leadership tasks and can be characterized according to a) how much emphasis they place on applying global rules and general leadership principles, and b) how much emphasis they place on individual or organizational specificities.

In the following, the overall characteristics of the two types of global leadership behavior are delineated, and subsequently exemplified through two central global leadership themes, i.e. the implementation of a corporate culture and distance management. Finally, we outline the relevance of the study for global managers and summarize the advantages and disadvantages with the two types of global leadership approaches in a 'ready-to-use' table.

### ALIGNMENT-ORIENTED GLOBAL LEADERSHIP

Global leaders with alignment-oriented leadership behavior argue that differences between various countries and cultures tend to be overexaggerated. In that sense, global leadership is perceived to be similar to local leadership. According to this view general and universal leadership principles are applicable to most situations and can be used across cultural divides. As noted by a global leader: *"We are not that unique in Denmark ...I wouldn't say we do something special. Know your staff, know yourself, make it happen"*. Also, these leaders did not see global complexity as being significantly different from local complexity:

"You can within one country have much more complexity due to different tasks so I would not make the global dimension the only thing making it more complex...people coming from Texas actually believe that Grenaa is much closer to Texas than Washington is because that's also in the countryside in the US" (Global leader).

Global leaders who applied the alignment-oriented leadership approach would emphasize the necessity of global control through clear and measurable performance targets: *"We are very*

*metric based ... so the more you can stuff into KPI's, the easier it is to keep track. Having meaningful KPI's makes it easier to focus on where we have our issues".* Additionally, alignment-oriented leaders would underscore the necessity for an all-encompassing cross-national organizational culture: *"It is more like a company DNA and more a company than a geographical culture".*

Alignment-oriented global leaders would also favor global rules and procedures as it would enable a common organizational interaction style that all employees knew how to use and communicate with. One company used a 'toolbox' consisting of around 80 different procedures for handling different situations. Global leaders would be trained in these tools and procedures and use them across the entire global organization. This type of behavior would, according to a superior of a global leader, increase and optimize organizational focus compared to 'wasting' time and energy inventing new procedures to every given situation:

"Every leader is trained in what the tools are, and when we are looking at for instance the strategy plan, we are looking at where we need to improve – just like a carpenter uses his tools. The toolbox has been developed by people in the organization, that's why it's dynamic and there are no external consultants involved" (CEO).

The focus on general structures and strategies fostered a specific corporate culture that was upheld through the recruitment and retaining of global leaders and subordinates with similar mindsets: *"When I hire people reporting to me, we spend quite a lot of time looking at their personal profile – testing people and making an assessment to really understand the profile and evaluate if they fit in the right way".*

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***"If you always switch, and one day you do this and the next day you do something totally different, they won't trust you. You must always communicate in the same way" (Global leader)***

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The alignment-oriented leadership approach also had an impact on how the global leaders preferred to communicate with others, underlining the importance of being consistent and recognizable in their leadership behavior: *"I think it's important to have some sort of consistency so that people can read you and understand you – it is also that they can still identify me".* Thus, they would be critical towards changing behavior according to circumstances or people. As described by a global leader:

"If you always switch, and one day you do this and next day you do something totally different, they won't trust you. You must always do and communicate the same way and be honest, then it will give you a benefit. Always tell people they can actually do more than they think they can" (Global leader).

In sum, global leaders with an alignment-oriented approach applied a generic leadership behavior oriented towards the implementation of general rules and principles. This would be supplemented by the promotion of a strong cross-national corporate culture aimed at superseding the local-culture differences. On the personal level, the global leader would strive for consistency, and thus not change behavior when faced with different situations and people.

### **DIVERSITY-ORIENTED GLOBAL LEADERSHIP**

Some global leaders would apply a specific and locally oriented leadership style focusing on the adjustment of organizational structures and rules to the local contexts. Thus, the diversity-oriented global leader would display sensitivity towards cultural differences at all levels of the organization. Additionally, these leaders would perceive global leadership to be radically different from local leadership, and would emphasize the added complexity stemming from the multiple local cultural contexts encompassed by the organization. Interestingly, however, the diversity-oriented leaders would see this type of complexity as an organizational strength rather than a challenge. Thus, through their behavior they would seek to bring these cultural differences to light and for everyone to see. In that way, they embrace and utilize the existing diversity to strengthen the company:

"The main differences are the number of dimensions, the scope, and the fact that in global leadership you have to embrace all the cultural differences, the market differences, and who the competitors are. All jobs that have to do with research, development, sales and marketing, HR, and finances in our company are global and we export ninety-nine percent – in all aspects think as a global leader. Proactively seek and understand the differences and perspectives that affect your decisions and solutions. It has to fit into environments that are very different" (CEO).

The diversity-oriented leaders favored an interactive 'bottom-up' strategy process involving local entities mainly to ensure ownership and in that way a smoother implementation: "*[...] build strategy together so it's not that it's a top-down process but also a bottom-up process that ends up in specific activity planning which is then build and rooted within the local organization whether they are domestic or off site*". Also, this type of global leader would, as a means to ensure corporate



effectiveness, seek to accommodate his/her behavior to the personal relationships held to subordinates, peers, and superiors rather than following organizational rules and procedures:

"I involve myself personally very much in this – relationships answer everything. When we are around, we get a common understanding of the issues by having good discussions. And like in all good communication, if you feel that you are part of the solution then you also work hard on it" (Global leader).

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*"He is able to adapt his leadership style to the situation. You have to work differently with engineers and with Marketing if we go to different places like China or India" (CEO)*

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For the diversity-oriented leaders, social relations were perceived as the very core of what global leadership is all about. As noted by this global leader: *"Every time I talk to a person I try to ask how they are and that is very important. If you do it in the right context and you always do it then they will know that you're not doing it just because you need to, but because you actually care"*. In particular, these global leaders would emphasize trust and honesty:

"As a global leader you should have an honest interest in people. It's important that people are interested not only in their own life but in what's happening around them. You can be aware of it but it's hard to train that skill. It has an impact on how I select people. Business is actually not that different, forget about all the fancy things – it's the human beings in both ends who need to make things happen" (Global leader).

Consequently, these leaders would have to master the difficult balance of adjusting their leadership behavior according to the people they were engaging with without losing their credibility. As mentioned by a superior about one of the global leaders:

"He is able to adapt his leadership style to the situation. You have to work differently with engineers and with Marketing if we go to different places like China or India. He's bright enough and personally able to adapt to the situation. He also has the ability to engage on a deep level" (CEO).

The approach to global leadership by these individuals was anchored in a deeply-rooted idea of understanding local differences: *"We need to acknowledge cultural difference without losing sight of our own cultural background. I am globally oriented but I think there is no common global mindset – everybody will always react from where they come from"* (Global leader).

To summarize, the diversity-oriented leaders continuously sought to adjust their leadership behavior according to people and situations within the organization. This way of leading was also reflected on an organizational level where corporate strategies were developed from below and personal relationships and differences took precedence over general rules and procedures.

#### COMPARING THE TWO GLOBAL LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

In comparison, the two approaches each possess advantages and disadvantages and the leadership styles are in some respects in opposition to each other. The advantage of having an alignment-oriented leadership style is the emphasis on corporate cohesion. The commonality of rules and standardized procedures facilitates a strong corporate culture and a common understanding across the global organization. In some aspects it also signals unity and equality across individuals, groups, and organizational units. The disadvantage is the lack of adaptation to local contexts and cultural differences. The limited organizational flexibility might result in a decoupling between the local units and the headquarters. This could, contrary to the intention of the alignment-oriented global leaders, actually fragment the organization. Also, local employees potentially feel alienated from the dominating corporate culture as it might be perceived as cultural ignorance or even lack of respect. Conversely, the global leaders with specific and locally oriented leadership styles were able to adjust their rules and behavior to accommodate local context and thus utilize the advantages of diversity in the organization. The disadvantage of this approach is that the leadership style may be perceived as inconsistent by subordinates and as costly and ineffective by superiors as the global leaders continuously have to adapt and change their leadership style according to the situation and context.

Therefore the most crucial behavioral challenge for the global leader is to balance, on the one hand, the need for global rules and procedures to ensure internal cohesion and economies of scale and, on the other hand, adapt the same structures and procedures to the local context to reap the benefits of diversity and local knowledge.

### EXAMPLE 1: SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TWO LEADERSHIP APPROACHES

The aim of the two example sections of the report is to provide a deeper empirical and managerial insight into some of the similarities and differences between the two global leadership approaches. In this chapter we take a closer look at the similarities. It is argued that even though the two leadership approaches differ in relation to *how* they are practiced in the organization, there are also similarities. In particular, in the *way* that the global leaders rationalize about their behavior and the consequences this type of rationalization has for the leader's ability to include perspectives that differ from the commonly held values that dominate the organization. In other words, they often have similar aims but different approaches to reach the aims.

#### ALIGNMENT-ORIENTED LEADERS' RATIONALIZATION ABOUT CORPORATE CULTURE

The alignment-oriented leader would argue for the implementation of an all-encompassing culture as a means to improve communication. This type of leader rationalized that the implementation of rules and procedures would be a means to enhance coherence across the corporation:

"It's not easy; make sure you have some common shared values. Make sure people are meeting physically once in a while. Create a yearly global sales day. That way people will know that the guy out there is no different from me – we have met once or twice. Make sure you are using the same infrastructures, same kind of reporting tools, same IT solutions, same frameworks" (Global leader).

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*The alignment-oriented leader would rationalize that the implementation of general rules and an all-encompassing culture would lead to increased communication.*

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The emphasis on a shared global corporate culture would be reflected in the recruitment strategy and based on the employee's acceptance of the prevailing values of the organization. Thus, the alignment-oriented global leader would actively surround him/herself with people who shared a similar mindset:

"For me a global mindset is when you think as a global company not as a local company. If you look into us we try to drive a company mindset. I try to say that we need to have the same understanding of what we are going to deliver and how we are going to deliver it, because we have to have the same mindset on how we interact in

our business. So we do it in the same way if we are in Sweden, Holland, or Denmark” (Global leader).

The tendency for global leaders to reinforce a particular value, in this case an emphasis of the global over the local, tended to exclude viewpoints that differed from the commonly held norms in the organization. This would be reflected in the interviews where peers, subordinates, and superiors would be inclined to praise the leaders’ ability to be alignment-oriented and global in his/her mindset.

In sum, the alignment-oriented leader tend not only to ignore and downplay cultural specificities in search for a global orientation but also to reproduce the commonly held organizational value through recruitment, retention, and promotion of personnel.

#### **DIVERSITY-ORIENTED LEADERS’ RATIONALIZATION OF CULTURAL DIVERSITY**

Diversity-oriented global leaders rationalized that locally-oriented leadership that embraced differences was important. Thus, they would argue that a commonly held mindset was not worth pursuing: *“I am globally oriented but I think there is no common global mindset – everybody will always react from where they come from”* (Global leader). Hence, a global leader might as well accept that it was not possible to be fully global and then be conscious about one’s locally embedded values. In line with this, the generally held value among such leaders was that cultural diversity would have positive effects on the organization, and thus corporate values highlighting the importance of embracing differences were dispersed throughout the organization:

“Yes, I promote cultural diversity. First of all, when we encourage that people from different places and not only Copenhagen can relocate to different sites to get that chance to get the right people connected; and also to embrace the advantages of having people with different cultures” (Global leader).

Values emphasizing heterogeneity rather than homogeneity would also be reflected in the recruitment and retention of personnel: *“We are looking for people who from a natural aspect think broadly. If there are people from different backgrounds, you get interesting and better solutions”*.

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*The diversity-oriented leader would rationalize that diversity would lead to increased communication between organizational units.*

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Promoting diversity was seen as a benefit in terms of increased respect and understanding between different organizational units but also as an improved ability to generate novel solutions.

Employees surrounding the diversity-oriented global leader would not criticize him/her for not being global enough. Rather they would tend to praise his/hers ability to adapt to the local context. Thus, critical concerns about the lack of common procedures and a global mindset would not commonly be raised against diversity-oriented global leaders.

To summarize, while the diversity-oriented global leader sought to be a proponent of diversity, there was a tendency for this leadership type, through the recruitment and retention of personnel, to exclude people that would challenge their commonly held value, i.e. that the local was more important than the global.

#### **SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE TWO LEADERSHIP APPROACHES**

If we compare the two different approaches to managing corporate culture and cultural diversity, it is apparent that the alignment-oriented leader seeks to minimize or ignore cultural differences to strengthen the global corporation. Conversely, the diversity-oriented leader seeks to embrace cultural differences and even promote diversity – also to strengthen the global corporation. Yet, both types of leaders tend to rationalize in a similar manner. For example, both the alignment-oriented leader and the diversity-oriented leader were convinced that their leadership style would increase interaction. Nevertheless, it was not only their own particular leadership style that ensured interaction but rather the fact that they surrounded themselves with people who shared their values – be it an emphasis on the global over the local or vice versa. Thus, both approaches to leadership seem to have a similar challenge of lacking the ability to include viewpoints that goes against their own rationalization.

#### **EXAMPLE 2: DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO LEADERSHIP APPROACHES**

In this chapter we take a closer look at a key difference between the two approaches to global leadership that relates to how the global leaders address the issue of distance. We argue that the alignment-oriented leader seeks to reduce geographical distance by implementing rules and procedure. Conversely, the diversity-oriented leader seeks to minimize and reduce the geographical distance by building and maintaining personal and locally grounded relationships.

#### **KEEPING THE DISTANCE: ALIGNMENT-ORIENTED LEADERS' APPROACH TO OVERCOMING GEOGRAPHICAL DISTANCE**

Global leaders with an alignment-oriented approach sought to overcome leadership challenges relating to managing from a distance by using overall structures and measures. As it was

mentioned by a leader: “[...] it’s really down to the local leader and his team to achieve the KPI’s that are agreed upon”.

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### *The alignment-oriented leader implements rules and procedures to overcome the distance related challenges.*

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In consequence, these global leaders primarily communicated to and through the local general manager and thus had limited local contacts in the organization. As commented by an employee: *“He doesn’t communicate with my people. It’s going through me. I have all the Japanese customers. If he has issues about my associates in Japan, he would go through me”*. Leaders using an alignment-oriented approach made an effort to keep a certain distance between themselves and the geographical dispersed units. This was not only for functional reasons but also as an expression of trust and respect: *“We want them to use each other instead of Denmark all the time”*. Or as another global leader puts it:

“It would not be functional if they would escalate an issue from one site to me – to get down in the organization here and then back – so that’s all done directly between those involved parties” (Global leader).

Thus, the alignment-oriented leader continually sought, through the use of organizational structures and performance measures, to depersonalize his/her relationships with other people in the organization. In that manner, the geographical distance between different parts of the organization was also upheld on a personal level.

### **UP CLOSE AND PERSONAL: DIVERSITY-ORIENTED LEADERS’ APPROACH TO OVERCOMING GEOGRAPHICAL DISTANCE**

Global leaders with a diversity-oriented leadership approach emphasized close personal relationships across the global organization. As described by a global leader: *“I personally involve myself very much in this. Relationships answer everything when it comes to an old company – to build up relationships with the right people in the company.”* The emphasis on development of personal relationships was not only a personal aspiration but also one extended to the rest of the company’s employees. These leaders very actively promoted the development of personal relationships between other employees and themselves. Thereby they would get involved at the local level. As a CEO described a subordinate global leader:

“He spends a lot of time going to the factory floor, labs where products are developed, and customers. He sets an example for his people that good solutions are not found in a meeting room, you find solutions where things are happening, right there. He has a hands-on real perspective with the product program meetings. People who are in contact with him feel that he, in addition to being bright, also has that ‘I have been there and seen it with my own eyes’-perspective to him which is all the more convincing and powerful” (CEO).

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*The alignment-oriented leader builds personal contacts in the local organization to overcome geographical distance.*

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While such global leaders preferred to create personal relationships and gain access to local knowledge by spending substantial time going to the different local units, there was also an acknowledgement of the challenges of building and sustaining these relationships across a distance. As one global leader expressed it:

“If I told them something and the local managers look at them and tell them something else, I’ve really had to gain their trust so they come and let me know instead of just following the other direction because it’s difficult for me from a distance to see if they actually do what I’ve told them to do and don’t follow the other’s directions” (Global leader).

In sum, the diversity-oriented global leader continuously sought to build local relationships as a means to overcome geographical distance between the units in the international organization.

#### **DIFFERENCES BETWEEN THE TWO LEADERSHIP APPROACHES**

The two leadership approaches were different in the way challenges caused by geographical distance were handled. The alignment-oriented approach was more focused on rules and structures emphasizing the use of general systems supplemented by a strong corporate culture. This enabled global leaders to maintain an overview of the entire global company without getting too much into detail. The risk might be a lack of local adjustment, and lack of trust in specific personal relationships. However, a more general trust in procedures and local unit’s abilities were expressed this way.

The diversity-oriented approach was focused on reducing geographical distance by building personal relationships throughout the company. The risk of using this approach could be the loss of oversight and getting caught in local details. Also, it would be hard to maintain such a leadership style as the company expands globally. Finally, the necessity of building trust in certain individuals could also be linked to some distrust in the local unit management and the organizations overall procedures.

## CONCLUSION

The two presented global leadership approaches reflect leadership roles rather than individual leaders. Thus, each global leader had their own individual blend of the different aspects of the two approaches. One leader might favor a strong corporate culture while at the same time acknowledging cultural differences. Another leader might emphasize global rules for governing local entities but still allow for differences in the local implementation of strategy. As such, the alignment-diversity distinction in global leadership styles should be seen as a continuum that can be applied for several dimensions, e.g. managing the organization, managing the people, and managing the self.

It is also important to acknowledge that the individual leadership style also had to fit into the company structures and that the leaders were part of a team and an organization. Hence, a certain 'spill-over' and social reproduction (similarity recruitment) affected global leadership preferences in specific units and organizations.

The choice of balance between these two leadership styles for the individual global leader also has to match the level of organizational maturity in terms of moving from being a domestic company to becoming a global company. A very mature company might already have developed a strong global corporate culture while another still has to decide on the extent to which they want to become more global in their mindset. The global leader needs to acknowledge that the globalization process in a specific company is an ongoing battle between different internal and external interests under the influence of wider globalization drivers. No matter whether the process is moving forward or backward, the global leader constantly has to navigate between these interests to make sure that a balance is reached matching the company's overall long term goals.

Thus, balance is the keyword to global leadership and neither of the two presented leadership approaches is superior in any context. The individual global leader needs to be able to balance aspects of the two approaches to succeed. Both approaches have their strengths and weaknesses.

As such, the success of the individual global leader rest on the ability to balance the two global leadership styles with the needs of the specific company at a specific point in time. One way to illustrate this delicate balance is exemplified by one of the participating global leaders:

“I think that I have managed to get a very strong team spirit and strong shared values within my team because we have actually worked a lot with cultural differences and we are aware of each other’s differences and cultural background and I also ensure that my employees are aware of their own cultural behavior” (Global leader).

### GLOBAL LEADERS ‘EASY TO USE’ TABLE

In the table below we have listed the managerial implications and the differences/similarities identified in the study when applying either a diversity-oriented or an alignment-oriented leadership approach:

		ALIGNMENT-ORIENTED GLOBAL LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR		DIVERSITY-ORIENTED GLOBAL LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR	
		ADVANTAGE	DISADVANTAGE	ADVANTAGE	DISADVANTAGE
<b>DIFFERENCES</b>	<b>MANAGING THE ORGANIZATION</b>	Common structures, procedures, and rules	Lack of adaptation to local context	Adjustment to local context	Lack of organizational cohesion
	<b>MANAGING PEOPLE AND RELATIONSHIPS</b>	Corporate culture replaces local cultures – unifying  Assimilation & selection	Lack of respect for local culture  Risk of group think	Local employees feel included on their own terms	Local dominate global considerations – decoupling of local from global
	<b>MANAGING THE SELF</b>	True to own personality  Consistency in behavior – leader branding easier	Lack of flexibility	Curiosity, flexibility, adjusting behavior	Too flexible, inconsistency in behavior
	<b>SIMILARITIES</b>	Both leadership styles ensure that the prevailing way of rationalizing is not challenged			