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## ***Will This Work Here?***

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For a long time, many people have operated from the assumption that there must exist a single best way of leading and that good leadership looks the same in all situations. Because we worked from that premise, we put enormous energy into both seeking out that one best way, as well as training people to lead in supposed best styles. These efforts created a generation of would-be organizational leaders who believe that a single best style should guide leadership, and popular authors and trainers perpetuate this way of thinking.

However, to understand the leadership process, one must first understand that the situation and the context really matter. For example, in our rapidly diversifying and globalizing work world, one must consider national and cultural differences when weighing the applicability of leadership approaches in a cross-cultural context. We must bear in mind that researchers have already identified significant national and cultural differences in work-related attitudes and values; generally clustered by language, religion, geography and level of economic development. This is really important, because many of the dominant leadership theories were developed in North America or Europe, by Americans and Europeans, studying Americans and Europeans. So, we must always ask whether we may fairly generalize a given leadership approach cross-culturally. This is not to say that we must assume that American or European leadership approaches do not apply to other cultures or societies.

In fact, the good news is that ongoing research indicates that, while cultural differences certainly impact leadership theory and practice, the basic functions of leadership appear to be universal, even though leaders would perform those functions differently in each cultural context. At the bottom line, leadership involves a situation requiring change and people who are willing to make that change happen. What we must remember though, is that, when it comes to leadership, the situation matters and is indeed a major element of the leadership environment.

Leadership represents a process, in which people influence other people, and we know that people's attitudes about influence, and how to go about influencing others, differ substantially by culture. As we might expect, since people regard influence differently across cultures, the effectiveness

of specific influence tactics varies by culture as well. So, while one might effectively influence others using rational persuasion and by collaborating and consulting with people in many cultures, other common influence tactics such as gift giving, socializing and exerting pressure may prove effective in some places while failing miserably in others.

Work related values vary across cultures as well, and I believe that students of leadership must consider one very important concern when applying American and European leadership concepts cross-culturally. The United States represents what may be the most individualistic culture in the world, followed by the Germanic and Nordic societies. So, many leadership approaches focus on the individual leader and their personality traits, style, behavior, and charisma. Consequently, as one might expect, much of the leadership training conducted in the fire service advances a traditional, leader-centric model. However, contemporary leadership research makes clear that people's understanding of what constitutes effective leadership is changing, and people have shifted their view of effective leadership from traditional and individualistic approaches toward more collective or collaborative ones, leaving those traditional approaches inconsistent with the emerging understanding of leadership.

Two things seem pretty clear. First, all leadership contexts are distinct and variations across cultures will impact the effectiveness of any leadership approach and determine just how would-be leaders will lead in a given context. Cultural differences might include people's values, needs and expectations for leadership. Second, while essential functions of leadership such as fostering teamwork, aligning tasks and goals, and maintaining morale seem universally applicable across cultures, the values and expectations of the culture influence just how a person performs those functions. Work related values influence people's expectations for leadership and how they respond to attempts at leadership. Whenever, importing or exporting a leadership approach cross-culturally one should ask "Will this work here?" We should not assume that American and European leadership approaches do not apply to other cultures and societies, but we should not assume that they do either. It is O.K. to be a skeptical consumer of leadership knowledge.

## ***Biography***

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