

Leadership Effectiveness and Organizational Culture: An Exploratory Study

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## Abstract

This paper investigated relationships between leadership effectiveness as measured by 360-degree ratings and responses to an organizational culture survey. Significant correlations were found among the scales of the instruments. Relationships were strongest for upper-level managers and significant correlations were found across rater groups. Implications for research and practice are discussed.

## Leadership Effectiveness and Organizational Culture: An Exploratory Study

The demonstration of an empirical link between individual leader effectiveness and the culture of an organization remains an elusive target. A survey of the literature indicates a paucity of research on this seemingly important topic for understanding the relationship between an organization's culture and the behavior of its leaders. There has, however, been a great deal of research conducted independently on leadership effectiveness and organizational culture.

### Leadership Effectiveness

Leadership effectiveness is a topic that continues to engender considerable attention in both the popular and scholarly literature (e.g., Waldman, Ramirez, House & Puranam, 2001). Increasing globalization and the challenges of operating in the global economy have only served to heighten this interest. Developing an understanding of what constitutes effective leadership, however, has been a complex undertaking. The debate has ranged from the belief that leadership is a "useless concept" (Pandey, 1976) to Day and Lord's (1986) assertion that, after controlling for confounding errors, differences in executive leadership explained as much as 45 percent of an organization's performance.

Although numerous studies have been conducted on this topic, much of this research has focused on CEOs and other top leaders in small groups such as executive teams. These studies have generally been divided between the views of what Thomas (1988) calls "Individualists and Contextualists". Individualists support the position that leaders have a significant and possibly crucial impact on the performance of the organizations they lead. Contextualists, on the other hand, emphasize that the contributions of individual leaders are limited by situational factors. Waldman and Yammarino (1999) described the shortcomings of such studies by pointing out that part of the problem in attempting to understand the potential effects of leadership at the highest levels is that researchers generally have confined leadership and its effects to the individual, dyadic, or small group levels of analysis, rather than to the organization as a whole. In a similar vein, Ulrich, Zenger and Smallwood (1999) acknowledged the importance of

individual leadership attributes; however, they concluded that without a connection to organizational results, these attributes are insufficient in helping to explain leadership effectiveness.

One way in which organizations have attempted to measure individual leadership effectiveness has been through the use of 360-degree instruments, which collect ratings from the leader's boss, peers, direct reports and others. These instruments have usually been associated with leadership assessment and development. It has been suggested that 360-degree feedback can be effective for motivating behavioral change (Day, 2001; Waldman, Atwater & Antonioni, 1998). Much of the research on 360-degree assessments has attempted to establish a link with individual leader effectiveness by focusing upon relationships between these instruments and criteria such as supervisors' assessments of promotability, performance appraisal ratings, actual promotions, and desired organizational outcomes (CCL, 2000).

### Organizational culture

Over the past 20 years, researchers have increasingly investigated organizational culture and possible links to organizational performance (e.g., Wilkins & Ouchi, 1983; Denison 1984; Gordon, 1985). This research has taken on increasing importance as the world of work has become more volatile. Denison (1990) indicates that mergers, declining productivity and global competition have all focused attention on the cultures of organizations and the impact they have on organizational effectiveness.

According to Pascale (1990), organizational culture, more than any other factor, will dictate a organization's ability to survive. After several decades of work, Denison (2000) has established organization culture as an important component in explaining organizational success. Studies by Denison (1990), Denison and Mishra (1995) and Kotter and Heskett (1992) all provide support for the link between organizational culture and performance. Fisher and Alford (2000) conclude that research conducted by Denison (1984, 1996) and Fisher (1997) clearly shows that regardless of the size, sector, industry, or age of a business, culture affects organizational performance.

In one such study, Gordon and DiTomaso (1992) investigated the relationships between culture strength and values and organizational performance. Culture strength was measured by the consistency of responses to survey items across people, and cultural values were measured by items on the survey that related to either adaptability or stability. The results indicated that both a strong culture and a value placed on adaptability were related to better performance on both criterion measures. The results support Denison's (1990) findings of that strength of culture is predictive of short-term performance.

On the other hand, Lim (1995) examined the causal relationship between organizational culture and organization performance. Despite previous claims of causal relationships, Lim found that the culture-performance link remained unclear. He cited a need to improve on the application of the concepts involved. Lim also discussed methodological issues, such as the influence of moderator variables, for consideration in future research.

In their research on organization climate, Lindell and Brandt (2000) reported that although climate quality (average ratings) has been found to be related to organizational outcomes, the effects of climate consensus (the variance of climate ratings) had not yet examined. They tested relationships of climate quality and consensus with organizational outcomes and found that both had significant correlations with organizational outcomes. However, climate consensus did not contribute a significant increment to the prediction of organizational outcomes.

During the 1980's, organizational culture researchers began to use quantitative survey methods similar to those used by organizational *climate* researchers. According to Denison (1996), the culture and climate literatures appear to be describing the same phenomenon. Reichers and Schneider (1990, p. 23) also argue that organizational climate and culture "are very similar concepts". For the purposes of this paper, therefore, we will consider these terms to be synonymous.

As can be seen, a number of studies have investigated the relationship between organizational culture and organizational performance. What has been missing is an investigation

of the link between culture and the individual effectiveness of the organization's leaders. The purpose of the present study is to attempt to establish some preliminary evidence that such a link does exist. To this end, we developed some exploratory hypotheses about the relationship between leader effectiveness and organizational culture.

### Hypotheses

Hypothesis 1: There will be significant relationships between ratings of individual leadership effectiveness as measured by a 360-degree instrument, and ratings of organizational culture as measured by an organizational culture survey.

Hypothesis 2: There will be consistent significant relationships across rater groups between ratings of individual leadership effectiveness, as measured by a 360-degree instrument, and ratings of organizational culture as measured by an organizational culture survey.

Hypothesis 3: There will be no significant differences by management level in the relationship between individual leadership effectiveness as measured by a 360-degree instrument and ratings of organizational culture as measured by an organizational culture survey.

### Method

#### Sample

The sample consisted of managers ( $N = 508$ ) participating in leadership development programs, who had received ratings on both Benchmarks, a 360-degree instrument, and the Denison Organization Culture Survey. As part of the leadership development program, ratings on the two surveys were collected from the coworkers of the participants. In general, the same set of raters completed both instruments for each individual participant. A total of 2,872 individuals provided ratings, an average of 5.6 raters for each participant. The aggregated ratings of these individuals were used in the subsequent analyses.

The sample of participants contained more men (57%) than women (43%), and more whites (86%) than African-Americans (3%), Hispanics (4%), Asians (5%) or others (2%). Almost 70% had at least a bachelor's degree, and 60% were between the ages of 30 and 50. The participants

represented five different managerial levels, ranging from first-line supervisors to top management. They worked in a wide-range of organizations, including educational, manufacturing, transportation, health and human services, governmental, and financial.

### Measures

*Benchmarks* (Lombardo & McCauley, 1994; Zedeck, 1995), a 360-degree feedback instrument that solicits ratings from several sources (e.g., self, boss, peers, direct reports), was used to collect effectiveness data for the managers in this study. Included in the 22 scales on *Benchmarks* are six “derailment” scales that measure problem areas that can stall a career. The derailment scales identify possible flaws (derailers) that can lead to a manager being “demoted, fired, or plateaued below the level of expected achievement” (CCL, 2000, p. 3). In general, the derailment scales measure behaviors that are more easily observed by raters than are other leadership attributes such as self-awareness. For this study, leadership effectiveness was operationalized as low scores on the derailment scales, indicating that a manager was performing effectively in those areas in which poor performance can lead to derailment. The derailment scales and their definitions follow:

1. Problems with Interpersonal Relationships – insensitive, cold, aloof, arrogant.
2. Difficulty in Molding a Staff – over-manages, unable to staff effectively.
3. Difficulty in Making Strategic Transitions – unable to think strategically.
4. Lack of Follow-Through – overly ambitious, untrustworthy.
5. Overdependence – overdependent on advocate or mentor.
6. Strategic Differences with Management – unable to adapt to a boss with different style.

Previous research found fairly high reliabilities for these scales, as well as acceptable validity as a measure of derailment. Lombardo and McCauley (1994) reported several estimates of reliability and validity. Alpha reliabilities ranged from .70 to .92 ( $M = .83$ ), and test-retest reliabilities for ratings by others ranged from .49 to .84 ( $M = .72$ ). Lombardo and McCauley described several validity studies in which boss ratings on the derailment scales were correlated

with (1) supervisors' assessments of promotability, (2) independent measures of promotability, (3) performance appraisal ratings, and (4) actual promotions. All of the scales, with the exception of Strategic Differences with Management, were significantly related to at least one of the four criterion measures.

*The Denison Organizational Culture Survey* (Denison & Neale, 1996) was designed to measure specific dimensions of organizational culture in order to help organizations identify their strengths and weaknesses. The survey measures employee perceptions on 60 items that yield scores on 12 cultural attributes (e.g., empowerment, core values, vision, etc.). The instrument also provides scores on four characteristics of organizational culture called "culture traits" by Denison (1984):

1. Involvement - building human capacity, ownership, and responsibility.
2. Consistency - defining the values and systems that are the basis of a strong culture.
3. Adaptability - translating the demands of the business environment into action.
4. Mission - defining a meaningful long-term direction for the organization.

Using a series of confirmatory factor analyses and structural equation models with a large sample of respondents ( $n=36,452$ ), Denison, Cho and Young (2000) found support for both the measurement model and theoretical structure of the instrument.

In several studies, Denison (1984, 1990, 2000) studied the relationship between the four characteristics of organizational culture measured by his survey and organizational effectiveness. He examined several performance indicators for companies included in the research: return on assets and return on investment, product development, sales growth, market share, quality, and employee satisfaction. Most of the correlations between the organizational culture traits and organizational effectiveness measures were significant -- each of the four characteristics showed a positive correlation with a range of subjective and objective measures of effectiveness.

Although all four culture traits were correlated with return on assets, some of the characteristics were more closely linked to organizational effectiveness than others (Denison & Neale, 1996).

According to Denison and Neale (1996), for an individual manager to be effective, his/her leadership skills must reflect all of the characteristics identified in Denison's model. Thus, effective managers are likely to be adaptive, yet highly consistent and predictable, and to foster high involvement, but to do so within the context of a shared sense of mission.

### Analyses

For each participant in the present study, ratings on the six derailment scales were correlated with scores on the four culture traits (Involvement, Consistency, Adaptability, and Mission) measured by the Denison survey. Ratings on the Benchmarks scales were collected from self, boss, peers, and direct reports. The Denison survey, however, was designed to collect ratings only from self and others; all ratings except self ratings were categorized as "other" raters. Only self and other ratings, therefore, were available for the Denison survey. Multiple ratings were averaged by rater group. Separate analyses were conducted by rater group (i.e., self, boss, and others), and by aggregated management level (i.e., lower, middle, upper). In the analyses conducted by rater group, the Benchmarks rater groups were compared to the Denison rater groups that were most similar. For example, boss, peer, and direct report ratings from Benchmarks were all compared to the other ratings from the Denison survey. To help control for experiment-wise error, the  $p$ -levels required for significance were set at  $p \leq .01$ .

### Results

Descriptive statistics for the average Benchmarks direct-report ratings and Denison others ratings are reported in Table 1. All ratings were made on 5-point scales.

Correlations between Benchmarks self ratings and Denison self ratings are presented in Table 2. Because the response scale for the derailment scales is reversed (i.e., low scores equal more effective performance), these scales were negatively related to the Denison scores. For self ratings, all of the derailment scales were significantly related to the Denison scores with the

exception of Problems with Interpersonal Relationships and Difficulty Molding a Staff with Consistency, providing some support for Hypothesis 1.

Table 3 presents the correlations between boss ratings from Benchmarks and others ratings from the Denison survey. The pattern of correlations in this table provides less support for Hypothesis 1 than Table 2; six of the 24 correlations were significant. In general, the significant relationships were between the derailment scales and Involvement and Consistency from the Denison survey. Difficulty Molding a Staff was not related to any of the Denison scales.

Table 4, which presents the correlations between Benchmarks peer ratings and Denison others ratings, provides more support for Hypothesis 1 than the results in Table 3. Significant relationships were found for 14 of the 24 correlations. However, Adaptability from the Denison survey was not related to any of the derailment scales.

Correlations between Benchmarks direct-report ratings and others ratings from the Denison survey are presented in Table 5. The pattern of correlations in this table provides additional support for Hypothesis 1. All of the derailment scales were significantly related to the Denison scales, with the exception of Problems with Interpersonal Relationships with Adaptability and Mission.

Overall, these results provide support for Hypothesis 1 – in general, significant relationships were found between ratings of individual leadership effectiveness as measured by the Benchmarks derailment scales and ratings of organizational culture as measured by the Denison Organizational Culture Survey. Many of the derailment scales were strongly related to Consistency. However, correlations between boss ratings on the derailment scales and the Denison scores were generally lower than for the other rating sources. Also, for boss and peer ratings, correlations with the derailment scales tended to be lower for scores on Adaptability from the Denison survey.

These results also provide some support for Hypothesis 2. There were consistent significant relationships across rater groups between ratings of individual leadership effectiveness and

ratings of organizational culture. The results were strongest for self and direct-report ratings and weakest for boss ratings.

Tables 6 through 8 present the correlations between direct report ratings on Benchmarks and the ratings from others on the Denison survey, by management level. As can be seen in these tables, there was a hierarchical effect for management level. The magnitude of the correlations between the derailment scales and the Denison scores were much higher for upper-level managers. Also, several significant relationships between the Benchmarks scales and Adaptability, which were masked in the overall analysis, were evident when the ratings were broken out by management level.

Hypothesis 3, therefore, was not supported by these results. Contrary to this hypothesis, there were differences by management level in the relationship between individual leadership effectiveness and ratings of organizational culture.

#### Discussion

Certain characteristics of this study help to increase its contribution to the literature on leader effectiveness and organizational culture. First, very few published studies have investigated this phenomenon. Second, the instruments used to collect the effectiveness ratings and the culture ratings have both been used in organizations for over 10 years and have well-known psychometric properties. The findings of the present study, therefore, have an acceptable level of internal validity given the fairly large sample size and psychometric soundness of the measures. Third, culture and performance ratings were collected from all levels of management – as discussed, much of the previous research has focused on upper-level managers. Fourth, data from multiple raters were gathered for both the performance measure and the culture measure, providing more than one perspective for the measures used in this study. Fifth, the organizational culture survey used in this study has been demonstrated to be related to bottom-line performance by organizations, providing an indirect link between individual performance and organizational performance.

These findings indicate there are significant relationships between individual leadership effectiveness as measured by a 360-degree assessment and ratings of culture as measured by an organizational culture survey. The relationships between self-ratings of performance and culture are strongly related (Table 2). This is not unexpected, because these ratings are from exactly the same source (i.e., the same individual provided both sets of ratings). Boss ratings from Benchmarks (Table 3) are less strongly related, because they were correlated with others ratings on the Denison, which are heavily weighted with peer and direct report ratings. In other words, the ratings are from different sources. On the other hand, direct report and peer ratings from Benchmarks were more strongly related to the Denison others ratings (Tables 4 and 5), because they are generally from the same source (i.e., most of the ratings were likely provided by the same individuals on both instruments).

What is particularly interesting is the consistently negative correlations between the Benchmarks derailment scales and the Denison scales, for all rating sources. These results are consistent with the purpose of the derailment scales, which is to identify potential managerial flaws (CCL, 2000). These findings emphasize the consequence of behaviors that result in high scores on the derailment scales. They also highlight a possible connection between an individual's personal development efforts and his or her ability to impact the organization's culture, and thus its bottom line. The findings suggest that a leader's ability to shape a culture that is positively related to the organization's bottom-line is negatively related to his or her tendency to demonstrate behaviors that lead to derailment.

This study found differences in the degree of the relationships between Benchmarks and Denison ratings for different management levels. A possible explanation is that higher-level managers have more impact on the organization's culture. Many of the derailment-Denison correlations were in the .40s and .50s for upper-level managers. The relationship between individual performance and organizational culture, therefore, appears to be much stronger for upper-level managers than for lower-level managers. This possibility warrants additional study.

## Implications for Practice

A current trend noted in the popular press suggests that organizations should not be concerned with developing leaders, but instead, should be focusing on the leaders' current strengths (e.g., Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; LaBarre, 2001). However, the strong negative relationships between the derailment scales and the organizational culture ratings found in the current study raise questions about the soundness of this approach. If behaviors that could derail a leader's career are overlooked in favor of an approach that focuses only upon strengths, it is quite possible that the leader and organization will achieve their short term goals, but over the long term may fail to reach the highest possible levels of individual and organizational success.

Research (CCL, 2000) indicates that the attributes necessary for leadership effectiveness are dynamic. These dynamics include: (1) strengths can become weaknesses; (2) skills once learned, often need to be modified; (3) required skills often change with organizational level; (4) leaders rely on a general set of rules, but they select which skills to use for different management challenges; (5) leaders learn more than skills across a career -- they also learn the values and perspectives necessary to lead effectively; and, (6) success is related to the ability to make transitions. Judging from these findings, it appears that formal leadership development processes may be a very important factor in preventing leaders from becoming derailed, thus increasing their effectiveness.

Another implication for research and practice is the hierarchical effect found in the relationship between individual performance and organizational culture. Because the relationship between leader effectiveness and organizational culture is stronger for upper-level managers than it is for lower-level managers, the tendency to include only upper-level managers in research of this type may not be as problematic as previously thought. Upper-level managers appear to have more impact on an organization's culture, thus their performance is probably the best indicator of organizational culture.

## Limitations

This is an exploratory study of the relationship between leader effectiveness and organizational culture. Because it is correlational in nature, caution must be exercised in attempting to assign causal factors to the identified relationships. We, therefore, make no attempt to identify causes for these findings. We have identified relationships, however, that warrant additional discussion and have implications for future research.

Leadership effectiveness in this study is defined as low ratings on the derailment scales; in other words, the demonstration of effective behaviors on these scales. This operationalization includes a narrow range of the behaviors and attributes that comprise the construct of overall leadership effectiveness, and limits the findings of this study to factors related to derailment.

Another limitation to this study is that the significance of the correlations between Benchmarks and the Denison survey are affected by the different sample sizes across the management and rater groups. In other words, because of the different sample sizes, the same magnitude of correlation may be significant in one analysis and not significant in another analysis.

## Implications for Future Research

Given the current debate regarding leadership development as a life-long learning effort (CCL, 2000) versus the view of stressing only the current strengths of the leader rather than focusing on developmental needs (Buckingham & Coffman, 1999; LaBarre, 2001), additional research is required. Longitudinal studies that investigate the short-term and long-term impact of both approaches are warranted. An investigation of the cause and effect of relationships discovered in the present study would also require a longitudinal study. A fully-articulated model of the relationships between individual effectiveness and organizational culture needs to be developed and tested with statistical modeling techniques. Additionally, further research needs to be conducted to establish a direct link between the individual effectiveness of an organization's leaders and its bottom line.

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Table 1: Descriptive Statistics for Average Benchmarks Direct-Report Ratings and Denison Others Ratings

Scale	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Std. Deviation
Problems with Interpersonal Relation.	478	1.00	3.97	1.78	.62
Difficulty Molding a Staff	475	1.00	4.08	1.93	.53
Difficulty Making Strategic Trans.	477	1.00	3.75	1.77	.49
Lack of Follow-through	479	1.00	4.25	1.82	.56
Overdependence	477	1.00	3.64	1.95	.48
Strategic Diff. with Management	475	1.00	4.75	2.04	.54
Involvement	500	2.23	4.27	3.36	.33
Consistency	500	2.46	3.97	3.27	.25
Adaptability	500	2.48	3.88	3.21	.21
Mission	500	2.40	4.17	3.35	.29

Table 2: Correlations between Benchmarks Self Ratings and Denison Self Ratings (n=508)

	Involvement	Consistency	Adaptability	Mission
Problems with Interpersonal Relation.	-.13*	-.07	-.11*	-.12*
Difficulty Molding a Staff	-.12*	-.11	-.14*	-.11
Difficulty Making Strategic Trans.	-.18*	-.19*	-.19*	-.16*
Lack of Follow-through	-.17*	-.17*	-.13*	-.20*
Overdependence	-.26*	-.22*	-.18*	-.19*
Strategic Diff. with Management	-.30*	-.23*	-.27*	-.30*

\* p ≤ .01

Table 3: Correlations between Benchmarks Boss Ratings and Denison Others Ratings  
(n=499)

	Involvement	Consistency	Adaptability	Mission
Problems with Interpersonal Relation.	-.13*	-.11	-.02	-.05
Difficulty Molding a Staff	-.05	-.09	.01	-.02
Difficulty Making Strategic Trans.	-.06	-.12*	.01	-.02
Lack of Follow-through	-.11	-.14*	.00	-.05
Overdependence	-.12	-.14*	.01	-.05
Strategic Diff. with Management	-.12*	-.11	-.08	-.15*

\*  $p \leq .01$

Table 4: Correlations between Benchmarks Peer Ratings and Denison Others Ratings  
(n=488)

	Involvement	Consistency	Adaptability	Mission
Problems with Interpersonal Relation.	-.07	-.12*	-.01	-.05
Difficulty Molding a Staff	-.13*	-.19*	-.09	-.12*
Difficulty Making Strategic Trans.	-.07	-.16*	-.04	-.09
Lack of Follow-through	-.17*	-.24*	-.08	-.13*
Overdependence	-.16*	-.22*	-.06	-.18*
Strategic Diff. with Management	-.12*	-.19*	-.07	-.18*

\*  $p \leq .01$

Table 5: Correlations between Benchmarks Direct Report Ratings and Denison Others Ratings  
(n=469)

	Involvement	Consistency	Adaptability	Mission
Problems with Interpersonal Relation.	-.14*	-.15*	-.10	-.08
Difficulty Molding a Staff	-.17*	-.23*	-.18*	-.14*
Difficulty Making Strategic Trans.	-.17*	-.24*	-.18*	-.12*
Lack of Follow-through	-.18*	-.26*	-.14*	-.14*
Overdependence	-.20*	-.25*	-.16*	-.19*
Strategic Diff. with Management	-.14*	-.20*	-.13*	-.17*

\*  $p \leq .01$

Table 6: Correlations between Benchmarks Direct Report Ratings and Denison Others Ratings for Lower-Level Managers (n=194)

	Involvement	Consistency	Adaptability	Mission
Problems with Interpersonal Relation.	-.12	-.10	.02	-.00
Difficulty Molding a Staff	-.19*	-.24*	-.04	-.11
Difficulty Making Strategic Trans.	-.24*	-.28*	-.17	-.13
Lack of Follow-through	-.18	-.23*	-.07	-.10
Overdependence	-.16	-.21*	-.09	-.13
Strategic Diff. with Management	-.18	-.22*	-.13	-.16

\*  $p \leq .01$

Table 7: Correlations between Benchmarks Direct Report Ratings and Denison Others Ratings for Mid-Level Managers (n=200)

	Involvement	Consistency	Adaptability	Mission
Problems with Interpersonal Relation.	-.09	-.10	-.14	-.07
Difficulty Molding a Staff	-.14	-.21*	-.26*	-.17
Difficulty Making Strategic Trans.	-.08	-.16	-.17	-.09
Lack of Follow-through	-.19*	-.26*	-.17	-.13
Overdependence	-.16	-.18*	-.17	-.16
Strategic Diff. with Management	-.07	-.14	-.11	-.13

\*  $p \leq .01$

Table 8: Correlations between Benchmarks Direct Report Ratings and Denison Others Ratings for Upper-Level Managers (n=50)

	Involvement	Consistency	Adaptability	Mission
Problems with Interpersonal Relation.	-.34	-.43*	-.29	-.30
Difficulty Molding a Staff	-.32	-.36	-.35	-.20
Difficulty Making Strategic Trans.	-.39*	-.52*	-.35	-.31
Lack of Follow-through	-.33	-.50*	-.41*	-.34
Overdependence	-.49*	-.58*	-.40*	-.45*
Strategic Diff. with Management	-.28	-.36*	-.26	-.31

\*  $p \leq .01$