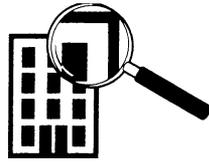


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## RESEARCH IN ACTION

### *Corporate Culture and Organizational Effectiveness:*

# Is Asia Different From the Rest of the World?

DANIEL R. DENISON    STEPHANIE HAALAND    PAULO GOELZER

One of the most difficult challenges for the field of international management is the application of theories and models developed in one part of the world to understand phenomena that occur in another part of the world. Much of the early concern about this issue concentrated on the relevance of American theories abroad. But more recently, the same problem has been faced by Japanese theories of quality control and knowledge creation; or by European theories of joint ventures or organizational design. The goal of these efforts is to develop a useful general frame of reference, but also allow for the needed sensitivity to local variation.

Some of the biggest challenges for developing theories with cross-cultural relevance

come in the area of organizational studies. Differences in behavior, work values, and culture have been studied by many researchers in many different countries. Several frameworks have proven useful for understanding cultural differences (e.g., Trompenaars and Hofstede) and have helped to establish some relatively universal dimensions (e.g., individualism, power distance) that can be useful in understanding differences across national cultures. But few researchers have attempted to understand the impacts these behavioral differences have in different national contexts.

The logic of cross-cultural comparison and validation has been discussed at length by several authors. In most areas of the literature, however, the biggest challenge is the

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almost total absence of comparative data. Our literature review found very few studies that offered a comparison of the effectiveness of organizations across several countries that could be linked to differences in organizational culture, work values, and behavior. The evidence global leaders need in order to understand the impact of the organizational cultures they are creating is usually unavailable.

This paper takes a bold but risky approach to these challenges by examining the link between organizational culture and effectiveness with two separate studies. The first study examines this link with data from 230 organizations in Europe, North America or Asia, and reveals a surprising level of similarity in the results across these regions. The second study examines the same topic using data from 218 organizations from seven countries: Canada, Australia, Brazil, U.S.A., Japan, Jamaica, and South Africa. The second study focuses on samples of supermarkets that were part of an independent cooperative operating in a similar fashion in each country. The results show a high level of similarity in five of the countries, but a divergent pattern of findings from Japan and Jamaica. These two studies constitute a preliminary and exploratory step rather than a comprehensive study, but they do illustrate that a general theory about organizational culture can be applied in multiple contexts, with results that highlight both similarities and differences across regions.

The paper begins by describing a model of organizational culture used in this study and discusses some of the research, conducted primarily in the U.S.A., that has established a link between culture and effectiveness. We then pose several general research questions that guided our study. After that, we describe our samples, the data collection and analysis strategies, and report our results for both of the studies. Our discussion at the end of this paper summarizes our findings, reflects upon their implications for cross-national research and then considers some of the approaches that might facilitate future research in this area.

## **CORPORATE CULTURE AND ORGANIZATIONAL EFFECTIVENESS**

A number of scholars have developed integrative frameworks of organizational culture, but little consensus exists with regard to a general theory. Since culture is a complex phenomenon ranging from underlying beliefs and assumptions to visible structures and practices, healthy skepticism also exists as to whether organizational culture can actually be “measured” in a comparative sense. Research on the link between organizational culture and effectiveness is also limited by lack of agreement about the appropriate measures of effectiveness. Despite these challenges, better understanding of this topic remains critical to the development of organizational studies.

The current literature has its roots in the early 1980s and focused attention on the strategic importance of organizational culture. Kotter and Heskett expanded on this by exploring the importance of adaptability and the “fit” between an organization and its environment. This paper applies the culture framework developed by Denison and his colleagues. This stream of research has developed an explicit model of organizational culture and effectiveness and a validated method of measurement. Using data from 764 organizations, Denison and colleagues showed that four different cultural traits (mission, consistency, adaptability and involvement) were related to different criteria of effectiveness. Their research found that the traits of mission and consistency were the best predictors of profitability, the traits of involvement and adaptability were the best predictors of innovation, and the traits of adaptability and mission were the best predictors of sales growth. Later research has linked the elements of the model to differences in customer satisfaction in two industries, and others have presented an application of this model to foreign-owned firms operating in Russia.

The Denison model is based on four cultural traits of effective organizations that are described below. Suggested references

are included in the subsequent bibliography section.

### **Involvement**

Effective organizations empower their people, build their organizations around teams, and develop human capability at all levels. Executives, managers, and employees are committed to their work and feel that they own a piece of the organization. People at all levels feel that they have at least some input into decisions that will affect their work, and that their work is directly connected to the goals of the organization.

### **Consistency**

Organizations also tend to be effective because they have “strong” cultures that are highly consistent, well coordinated, and well integrated. Behavior is rooted in a set of core values, and leaders and followers are skilled at reaching agreement even when there are diverse points of view. This type of consistency is a powerful source of stability and internal integration that results from a common mindset and a high degree of conformity.

### **Adaptability**

Ironically, organizations that are well integrated are often the most difficult ones to change. Internal integration and external adaptation can often be at odds. Adaptable organizations are driven by their customers, take risks and learn from their mistakes, and have capability and experience at creating change. They are continuously changing the system so that they are improving the organizations’ collective abilities to provide value for their customers.

### **Mission**

Successful organizations have a clear sense of purpose and direction that defines organizational goals and strategic objectives and expresses a vision of how the organization will look in the future. When an organization’s

underlying mission changes, changes also occur in other aspects of the organization’s culture.

Like many contemporary models of leadership and organizational effectiveness, this model focuses on the contradictions that occur as organizations try to achieve internal integration and external adaptation. For example, organizations that are market-focused and opportunistic often have problems with internal integration. On the other hand, organizations that are well-integrated and over-controlled usually have a hard time adapting to their environment. Organizations with a top-down vision often find it difficult to focus on the empowerment and the “bottom-up” dynamics needed to implement that vision. At the same time, organizations with strong participation often have difficulty establishing direction. Effective organizations are those that are able to resolve these contradictions without relying on simple trade-offs.

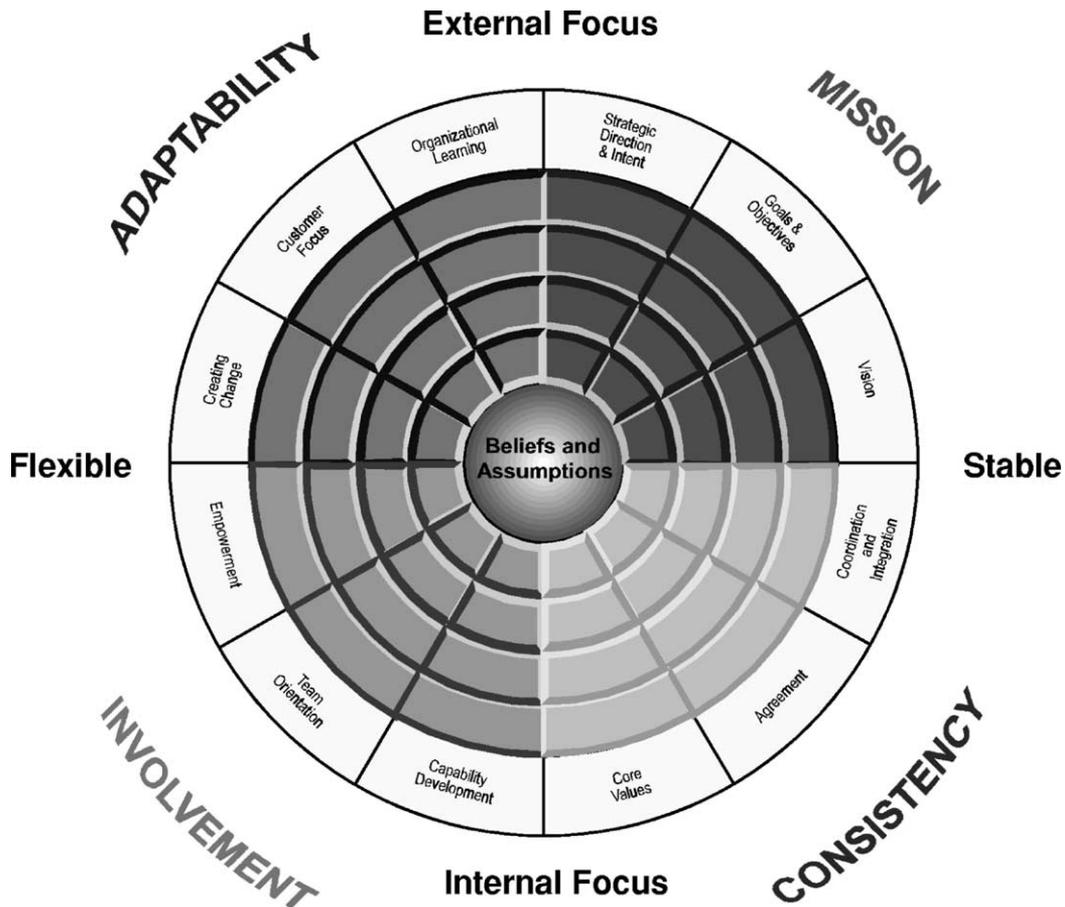
At the core of this model are underlying beliefs and assumptions. The “deeper” levels of organizational culture are typically quite unique to each firm and are thus difficult to measure and harder to generalize about. They are often best understood from a qualitative perspective. Nonetheless, they provide the foundation from which behavior and action spring. The four traits of organizational culture presented by Denison and Mishra have been expanded upon to include three sub-dimensions for each trait, for a total of 12 dimensions. This version of the model is presented in Fig. 1.

This model is often used as part of a diagnostic process to profile specific organizations in order to highlight the strengths and weaknesses of their cultures and to suggest ways in which the organization’s culture may influence its effectiveness. The following example helps illustrate the application of the model.

### **Example of a Japanese Consumer Electronics Company**

This section of the paper illustrates the application of the culture model by presenting a

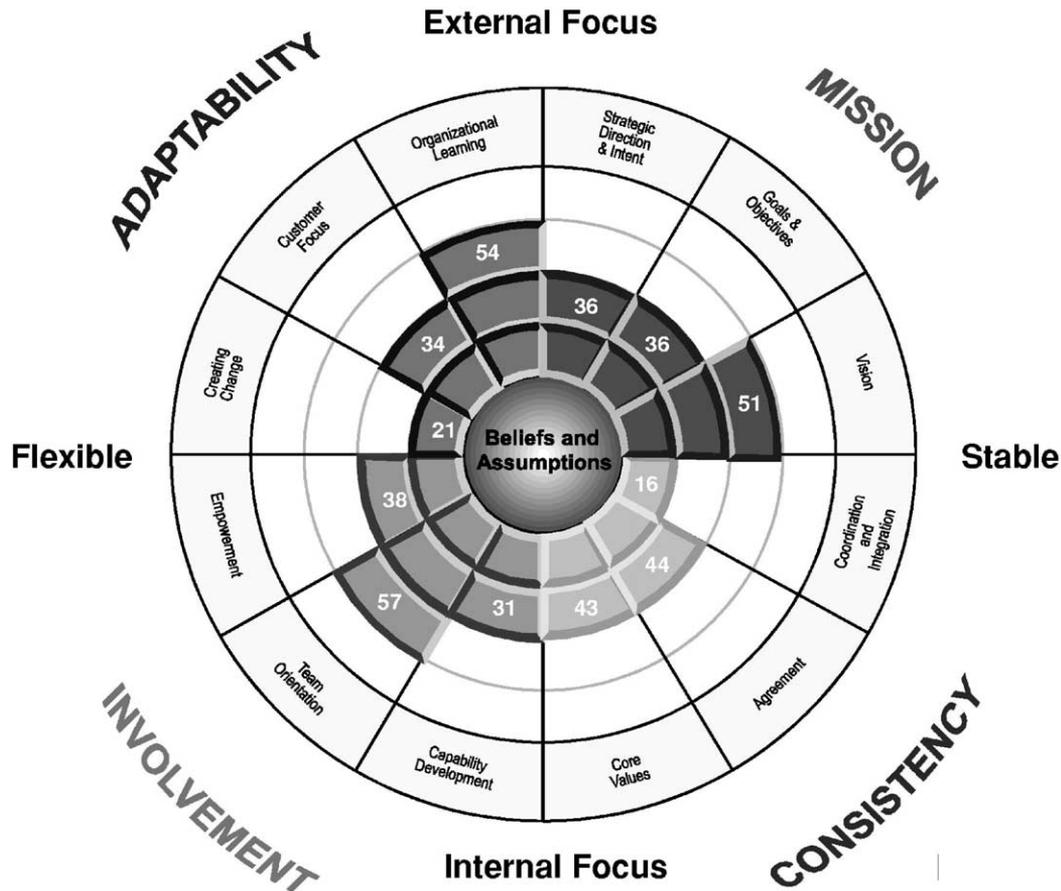
**FIGURE 1 THE DENISON ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE MODEL**



brief example of the globalization of a major Japanese consumer electronics company. Like most, this company began by designing and producing their products in Japan, and developing extensive sales organizations and dealer networks in Europe, the U.S.A., and other markets. As the company evolved through the 1980s and 1990s, they gradually moved some low-end production out of Japan, primarily to other, lower-cost production locations in Asia. The strength of the company's products and technology, and their established global brands and marketing presence allowed them to continue successfully throughout the 1990s despite the decline in the Japanese economy.

By the late 1990s, however, they began to consider a different model of globalization. Growing emphasis on the Internet in business and consumer applications led to increasing demand for their products to be integrated with more general information technology solutions. Selling discrete products ("boxes") was still the core of their business, but they experienced growing demand for both integration and for the customization of their products to meet the needs of local and regional markets. These changes led the company to begin planning that the next stage of their evolution would involve the creation of more fully-integrated operations in each of the major geographic

**FIGURE 2 PROFILE OF a JAPANESE CONSUMER ELECTRONICS COMPANY**



regions. Research and product development, as well as production, needed to be established in each of the regions outside of Japan.

The culture profile for a top management sample of this organization is presented in Fig. 2. The data for this profile came from a survey of 75 executives who were two to three levels from the top of the organization, represented all geographic regions, and included both expats and locals. Each of the 12 indexes are measured by five survey items, using a five-point Likert scale, which are averaged to produce an index score. The results are presented here in terms of percentile scores, indicating the percentage of organizations in the benchmark database of

over 700 organizations that scored lower than the organization being profiled.

Examination of this culture profile reveals some key organizational issues. Overall, the highest scores are only slightly above average, pointing to the many challenges that face management. Two of the indexes, creating change (21st percentile) and coordination and integration (16th percentile) are particularly low, pointing to the challenges the organization faces in reacting to the demands in the marketplace. When both adaptability and consistency scores are low, this usually points to an organization that is struggling with the logic of their value chain or trying to reinvent their value chain.

Both are true in this case. Another area that presents a major challenge is capability development (31st percentile). Creating a more fully integrated organization in each major region of the world will require a significant change in the competencies and capabilities of executives and employees. In the past, investment in career development was primarily targeted at Japanese employees who were on foreign assignment.

As our brief example shows, this approach was useful in helping to highlight several key cultural issues that are critical to the company's future evolution. The survey and model has been translated into 14 languages and used with organizations in over 30 countries. In practice, the model has worked well in many different national contexts. As we noted in our literature review, a number of studies have examined the empirical link between culture and effectiveness in North America, but very few have attempted to examine this link across cultures. That is the purpose of this paper.

## EXPLORING CROSS-CULTURAL DIFFERENCES

This study explores one basic research question: *Are there cross-cultural differences in the relationship between organizational culture and effectiveness?* The general research question has many facets, but in this paper, we focus on whether the pattern identified in the original research in North America is similar to the pattern in other parts of the world, and whether there are distinctive patterns that are unique to specific countries. This question also requires us to see whether the culture data itself varies significantly across different regions of the world. A final question concerns the explanation for the pattern of findings—which factors account for the observed differences or similarities? These are the general research questions that guided the research presented in this chapter.

The sample for the first study reported in this chapter was drawn from the archive of

organizations that have completed the *Denison Organizational Culture Survey* over the past five years. The sample comprised 36,820 individuals from 230 organizations drawn from different industries, and including organizations of all sizes and stages of growth. In order to be part of the study, firms had to have at least 25 respondents from a representative population of employees in the firm. On average, the response rate for each of these organizations was around 60 percent, from internal samples that varied from management teams to a complete census of the organization. The majority of companies in the sample are based in North America. Eight of the companies are based in Asia, and 34 are from Europe/Middle East/Africa (EMEA). Global companies headquartered in all regions typically have many respondents from outside of the region.

Of the companies in this sample, 48 percent are listed in the Forbes Global 1,000 List for 2001. Approximately 20 percent are from the consumer cyclical industry—including automotive sales and dealerships, home building companies, publishing, and retail. Another 13 percent come from the consumer staples industry, including restaurants, beverage manufacturers, personal care products, food, and tobacco sectors. Companies in the technology sector account for 13 percent of the companies in this sample, and the health care sector, basic materials sector, and financials sector each account for 11 percent. Seven percent of the companies come from the capital goods sector, 3 percent each from the utilities sector and the communications sector, and 1 percent from the transportation sector. The remaining 7 percent come from public or non-profit organizations such as schools and government agencies.

The sample for the second study reported in this chapter included 2,162 employees of independently-owned local grocery stores within seven countries. The number of participants and stores per country are as follows: 749 respondents from 92 stores in Australia, 326 respondents were from 17 stores in Brazil, 197 respondents from 13 stores in Canada, 306 respondents from 18 stores in Jamaica, 96

respondents from 20 stores in Japan, 185 respondents from 20 stores in South African, and 255 respondents from 38 stores in the United States. All respondents were full-time employees with positions ranging from non-management to management to store owner.

In total, 6,736 surveys were mailed out worldwide. Total response rate was 42 percent, but 658 of the surveys could not be used because respondents didn't complete enough of the questions or could not be linked back to the appropriate store. This resulted in a usable response rate of 32 percent.

The stores participating in this study are part of the International Grocers Alliance (IGA). IGA, headquartered in Chicago, IL, was founded in 1926 and today is a global alliance of more than 4,000 licensed stores, with aggregate annual sales of \$21 billion. IGA currently has operations in 40 countries, commonwealths, and territories. Retailers who choose to join IGA, a voluntary non-profit supermarket network, acquire the size and strength to compete in the marketplace, while maintaining their flexibility and autonomy as small business operators. IGA is owned by a set of wholesalers and retailers. The system is made up of supermarkets affiliated with IGA wholesalers and distributors in each country. There are two types of affiliation that supermarkets may have with IGA: (1) as a corporate store, where the wholesaler is the owner of the store, or (2) through a "sponsorship," where the owner-operator joins the IGA system as a licensed store.

Countries selected to participate in this study contained a minimum of 15 IGA-affiliated stores. All stores in Brazil and Jamaica were surveyed because a smaller number of total stores exist in these two countries. In Canada, Australia, and South Africa, supermarkets were randomly selected to participate in the study. In the United States and Japan, surveys were sent directly to a sample of high and low performing stores. The U.S. sample was chosen from a balanced sample of stores with high and low ratings on an annual store assessment processed by an independent third party inspector. In Japan, an independent "retail counselor" identified high

and low performing stores. Stores in Japan were surveyed in Japanese, and stores in Brazil were surveyed in Portuguese. All other stores were surveyed in English.

The survey items for this study were taken from The *Denison Organizational Culture Survey*. This survey measures twelve indices of organizational culture using five questions each for a total of 60 questions. All items used a five-point Likert scale with response categories ranging from strongly disagree to strongly agree. These twelve indices are used to measure the four main cultural traits defined by the model—involvement, consistency, adaptability, and mission. The survey also assesses employees' perceptions of store performance on variables including: sales growth, profitability, quality of products and services, employee satisfaction, and overall organizational performance. All measures were aggregated to the organizational level for this analysis. A complete listing of all items used in this available from the authors.

## RESULTS

The results from both studies are reported in the same way. First, we report the simple associations between the 12 indexes of organizational culture and ratings of overall effectiveness. Next, we examine whether there are significant differences in scores from each of the countries and regions.

### Denison Organizational Culture Database

The relationships between the 12 culture indices and performance for the three regions, North America, Asia, and Europe, Mid-East, Africa (EMEA) are presented in [Table 1](#). All correlations between overall performance and culture indices were significant for North America and EMEA. None of the correlations were significant for the Asian companies. Similar results were also found for four other subjective indicators of performance: sales growth, profitability, quality, and employee satisfaction.

**TABLE 1 CORRELATIONS BETWEEN DIMENSIONS OF CORPORATE CULTURE AND OVERALL EFFECTIVENESS BY REGION**

	NORTH AMERICA	ASIA	EMEA
Empowerment	.65*	.57	.60*
Team orientation	.61*	.71	.53*
Capability development	.70*	.48	.50*
Core values	.61*	.65	.69*
Agreement	.58*	.62	.73*
Coordination and integration	.69*	.62	.74*
Creating change	.48*	.87	.68*
Customer focus	.36*	.19	.62*
Organizational learning	.50*	.82	.52*
Strategic direction and intent	.55*	.66	.79*
Goals and objectives	.60*	.54	.62*
Vision	.53*	.71	.67*
Number of organizations	169	7	34

\*  $p < .05$ .

**TABLE 2 AVERAGE CULTURE TRAIT SCORES BY REGION**

CULTURE TRAIT	REGION		
	NORTH AMERICA	ASIA	EMEA
Mission	3.32	3.39	3.35
Adaptability	3.25	3.28	3.26
Involvement	3.43	3.42	3.45
Consistency	3.28	3.21	3.26

We also tested to see if there were differences between the culture scores for the three regions. Interestingly enough, the three regions did not differ significantly from each other on any of the four organizational culture traits measured in this study. The mean scores for each region are presented in Table 2 and show that the differences are very small. The Asian companies in the sample had slightly stronger scores on mission compared with companies from North America or EMEA, and slightly lower scores on consis-

**TABLE 3 CORRELATION BETWEEN PERFORMANCE AND THE 12 INDICES BY COUNTRY**

	SOUTH AFRICA	CANADA	JAMAICA	AUSTRALIA	UNITED STATES	BRAZIL	JAPAN
Empowerment	.60*	.38	.08	.27*	.68*	.84*	.08
Team orientation	.61*	.43	-.06	.32*	.60*	.86*	.11
Capability development	.70*	-.06	.26	.23*	.56*	.81*	.14
Core values	.54*	.34	.34	.39*	.63*	.83*	.47*
Agreement	.63*	.37	.20	.34*	.54*	.78*	.28
Coordination and integration	.54*	.45	.18	.37*	.56*	.88*	.23
Creating change	.82*	.34	.00	.35*	.63*	.75*	.23
Customer focus	.45*	.06	.25	.24*	.45*	.62*	.24
Organizational learning	.12	.13	.11	.33*	.67*	.76*	-.10
Strategic direction and intent	.69*	.77*	.44	.38*	.57*	.79*	.55*
Goals and objectives	.76*	.58*	.22	.42*	.68*	.81*	.25
Vision	.45*	.43	.26	.36*	.61*	.79*	.29
Number of stores	20	13	18	92	38	17	20

\*  $p < .05$ .

**TABLE 4 RANK ORDER OF CULTURE TRAITS BY COUNTRY**

COUNTRY	CULTURE TRAIT RANK			
	MISSION	ADAPTABILITY	INVOLVEMENT	CONSISTENCY
Jamaica	1st	1st	2nd	2nd
Brazil	2nd	3rd	5th	5th
Australia	3rd	2nd	1st	1st
Canada	4th	5th	3rd	3rd
South Africa	5th	4th	4th	4th
United States	6th	6th	7th	6th
Japan	7th	7th	6th	7th

tency. Overall, however, these differences are very small.

### Grocery Stores

The relationships between the 12 cultural indices and performance ratings for each country are presented in Table 3. All 12 culture indices were significantly correlated with overall performance ratings in Australia (mean  $r = .33$ ), the United States (mean  $r = .60$ ), and Brazil (mean  $r = .79$ ). All indices except organizational learning were significantly correlated with overall performance ratings in South Africa. In Canada, however, only strategic direction and intent ( $r = .77$ ) and goals and objectives ( $r = .58$ ) were significantly correlated with overall performance ratings. For Japanese stores, only core values ( $r = .47$ ) and strategic direction and intent ( $r = .55$ ) were significantly correlated with overall performance. Finally, no significant correlations between culture indices and overall performance ratings emerged for Jamaica.

We also tested to see whether there were differences in the organizational culture ratings across countries in this second study. In general, Jamaica, Brazil and Australia received the highest scores, while Japan, U.S.A. and South Africa received the lowest scores. As shown in Table 4, these patterns were quite consistent across the four culture traits, although Brazil did depart from this pattern by having high scores on the external traits of mission and adaptability combined with relatively low scores on the internal traits of involvement and consistency. Canada

showed the opposite pattern: the internal traits of involvement and consistency received the highest scores, while the external traits of mission and adaptability received lower scores.

### DISCUSSION

The two studies reported here help us understand one of the fundamental challenges of leadership in a global environment. The first study presents a summary of a large empirical database on organizational culture and effectiveness. Despite everything that we know about the importance of cross-cultural differences, these results show a very similar pattern across these major regions of the world. The link between company culture and effectiveness appears to be both strong and consistent. In addition, the scores for the culture measures are essentially the same for the samples of organizations in each of these three regions.

How can this be? Almost every article or discussion on the topic focuses on the importance of cultural *differences*. Yet, in one of the few comparative examinations of the issue, we see almost no difference. After scratching our heads for a while, we offer several explanations for this unexpected outcome.

First, the purpose of the model used for this study was to help understand the impact that organizational culture has on organizational effectiveness. Thus, the purpose of the concepts is to build an organizational-level model that elaborates the cultural factors that

help distinguish effective and ineffective organizations. It is designed to be general enough to apply to a wide range of organizations and to predict one narrow, but important outcome. The intent of the model is quite different from those that are specifically designed to describe the differences that exist between national cultures.

Even though these results provide support for the usefulness of these organizational characteristics and measures for predicting the effectiveness of firms in different national contexts, we would *not* argue that the characteristics are expressed in the same way in each of these contexts. Nor would we argue that the same meaning would be attached to the same behaviors in different national contexts. On the contrary, we would take these results to mean that a concept like empowerment is important around the world, but we would not argue that this means the same behaviors would necessarily constitute empowerment in different national contexts. Thus, the model probably says much more about the presence of a desirable set of traits than it does about how those traits are expressed.

Examples help to illustrate this dilemma for all of the concepts in the model. But some of the most vivid examples concern the expression of involvement and empowerment in high power distance countries. One career ex-patriot Citibank executive told this story about taking a new job in Riyadh to help revitalize a Saudi-Pakistani joint venture bank:

*Each day, when I went in, everyone who was working in the area outside my office would stand up and salute. The first day I was honored, but it soon became annoying. One day, I left something in my car and had to go back out to get it, and then come back in. Each time they stood up and saluted! Up, down, up, down—how were we supposed to get anything done? When I told them not to stand up and salute when I came in, they obeyed, but I had hurt their feelings. They saw this as conveying respect, not subservience,*

*and were a bit insulted that their attempt to honor me had been rebuffed. It took me some time to recover. My admonition that we were “all working together as a team” was confusing to them—I was moving too far too fast. Only then did I understand the true challenge that I faced.*

Expressing regard for cultural diversity itself can also vary across cultures. A Dutchman who ran Hewlett-Packard Tech Support call centers in Amsterdam that operated in 38 languages contributed this story about visiting corporate headquarters:

*When I first went to work in California, I would describe the way that we worked in Amsterdam, by saying things like, “well the Italians did it this way, and the Germans did it that way, and the French did it their own way—what a mess,” and then we would laugh and sort things out. But before long, one of the American managers pulled me aside and said, “Stop saying that—it is offensive to all of us.” I was really confused until I realized that Europeans naturally explain everything in terms of nationality, whereas Americans rarely speak directly about national differences at work.*

Considering the results from these two studies does help to identify future targets for research. A focus on industries such as retail or hospitality that have comparable operating units in many locations and comparable measures of their performance would offer several advantages. It would offer a point of reference for understanding differences between countries, plus a way to move beyond the subjective measures of effectiveness used in the studies reported in this chapter. Choosing several multinational corporations with different national origins, but a common presence in different national contexts, would also provide an important point of comparison.

For global leaders, these studies provide an interesting point of reference for the choices they make about building their

organizations and their cultures. The findings suggest that a common perspective on organizational culture may indeed be possible in multinational corporations. Furthermore, these characteristics can be measured and tracked and appear to have a somewhat predictable impact on effectiveness. Nonetheless, the discussion of these results also emphasizes that the *way in which these traits are expressed* varies greatly across national

cultures. This additional complexity paints a clear, yet challenging picture of the challenges facing a global leader—attempting to create a common set of organizational traits that are expressed in different ways in different national contexts.



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**Daniel R. Denison** is a professor of management and organization at the International Institute for Management Development (IMD) in Lausanne Switzerland and the founder of Denison Consulting in Ann Arbor, Michigan. He is a former professor of organizational behavior and human resources management at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He is the author of *Corporate Culture and Organizational Effectiveness* (1990) and a number of articles on the link between culture and business effectiveness. ([denison@imd.ch](mailto:denison@imd.ch))

**Stephanie Haaland** is the research director at Denison Consulting in Ann Arbor Michigan. She earned her Ph.D. in industrial/organizational Psychology from Central Michigan University. She manages the research program at Denison Consulting and consults with companies that are interested in empirically demonstrating the link between organizational culture and leadership and their bottom-line business measures.

**Paulo Goelzer** is president of the IGA Institute, an educational foundation providing training in 40 countries in five languages, and oversees their international operations. He holds master's degrees in marketing and economics and is a Ph.D. candidate at Benedictine University. He previously served as an assistant professor of business strategy and marketing at Pontifical University in Brazil, as marketing director for a grocery wholesale company, and as a consultant.