



## Are We Really All That Different?

By Richard Martin

I've been doing research in preparation for a course in "Intercultural Aspects of International Project Management" I will be giving this fall at the University of Quebec. This course is part of their Masters degree in Project Management. So far, I have found two tendencies in the literature on cross-cultural (or, if you prefer, intercultural) management.

On the one hand, many management gurus claim that intercultural differences can be huge and that international managers must be "culturally intelligent" (a term I like – see Thomson and Inkson, *Cultural Intelligence* – although the book itself is a bit light in content) or some other such ability. On the other hand, social researchers of various stripes, taking a scientific stance, tend to see cultural differences and similarities in more nuanced terms, with a marked tendency towards homogeneity. From what I read, research tends to show that we have a common humanity that gets expressed in myriad ways. In other words, we're all basically alike.

Here is but one example. Long-time leadership researcher Robert J. House started a major research program back in the mid-nineties called GLOBE – the Global Leadership and Organizational Behaviour Effectiveness research program. Harry Triandis, of the University of Illinois, Champagne-Urbana, has called GLOBE "the Manhattan Project linking culture and leadership." One of the key findings from surveys of mid-level managers working in three different industries in 62 countries on all continents is that they tend to prefer leaders who are charismatic and transformational. In other words, we all want our leaders to be visionary and inspirational, who set a good example, who are respectful and considerate of subordinates and others in general.

What a discovery! I'm not being facetious. Haven't we all heard someone somewhere claim that people in such and such a country, or in such and such a social class, like to be bullied, to be told what to do, to be ordered about? Now we have research from around the world that shows this patronizing belief to be essentially false.

Bernard Bass, the father of research into transformational leadership, has come to much the same conclusion from his own research and that of others. There are many cultural and organizational contingencies, but transformational-charismatic leadership is more effective globally "because the transformational leader is consistent with people's prototypes of an ideal leader."

I will write more about the theory of transformational leadership in the coming months, but suffice it to say that there is evidence that it provides a concept to underpin effective leadership in most, if not all, circumstances, whether in North America or around the world.

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