

# The Role of Cross-Cultural Communication in Workplace Leadership Effectiveness

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**Abstract:** In an era of globalization, cross-cultural communication is a critical determinant of leadership effectiveness. This study employs a quantitative research design to investigate this relationship, utilizing an online survey to collect data from a sample of 360 leaders with experience managing multicultural teams. The research process involved administering a structured questionnaire to assess leaders' communication skills, adaptation strategies, perceived challenges, and attitudes, alongside measuring their self-rated leadership effectiveness. Data were analyzed using statistical software (STATA) to perform descriptive, correlation, and regression analyses. The results reveal that a leader's self-rated communication skill and their use of adaptation strategies are the strongest positive predictors of effectiveness, outweighing the impact of years of experience. The study identifies active listening as the most vital skill and language barriers as the most pervasive challenge. Furthermore, demographic analysis indicates that gender and age significantly influence perceived effectiveness. The findings provide an actionable blueprint, concluding that effective cross-cultural leadership hinges less on theoretical awareness and more on cultivating core communication competencies and deploying a practical toolkit of strategies. These results have direct implications for designing targeted leadership training and refining organizational policy in a multicultural business landscape.

**Keywords:** Active Listening, Cross-Cultural Communication, Cultural Adaptation, Global Leadership, Language Barrier, Leadership Effectiveness.

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary global business environment, effective leadership requires more than strategic vision; it demands proficiency in navigating complex cross-cultural interactions. As organizations expand internationally and domestic workforces become increasingly diverse, the ability to communicate across cultures has transitioned from a desirable soft skill to a fundamental component of leadership efficacy. Leaders must now cultivate robust cross-cultural communication skills to foster collaboration, drive innovation, and maintain organizational cohesion (House et al., 2004). The interconnected nature of modern business, characterized by diverse workplaces, remote global teams, and international markets, has converged to make this competence vital for organizational success.

Despite this growing recognition, a significant challenge persists. Many leaders find it difficult to adapt their communication styles to varied cultural settings, a struggle that can lead to misunderstandings, interpersonal conflict, and a marked decline in team performance (Hofstede, 1980). As noted by experts like Patty Goodman of Northeastern University, effective cross-cultural communication is essential for conflict prevention and building productive work environments. Furthermore, organizations like the Society for Human Resource Management (SHRM) confirm that culture significantly impacts productivity, as employees from different backgrounds respond differently to management and communication styles.

While previous academic research has extensively analyzed various leadership styles (e.g., transformational, servant leadership) and communication theories (e.g., high-context vs. low-context cultures), a critical gap remains. Much of the existing scholarship is fragmented, focusing either on cultural dimensions (Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997) or broad leadership models (GLOBE Study, 2004) without systematically investigating the direct impact of cross-cultural communication on leadership effectiveness. Moreover, the prevailing literature often reflects a Western-centric perspective, overlooking the distinct leadership expectations and communication norms inherent in Asian, African, and Middle Eastern cultures (Javidan et al., 2006).

This study seeks to address these gaps by providing a focused investigation into the interplay between cross-cultural communication and leadership. The research is guided by three central questions:

- How does cross-cultural communication impact leadership effectiveness in multinational settings?
- What are the key challenges leaders face when communicating across cultures?
- What practical strategies can leaders adopt to enhance their cross-cultural communication competence?

Aligned with these questions, the study aims to analyze the relationship between communication and leadership effectiveness, identify common challenges in multicultural environments, and propose evidence-based strategies for improvement. By tackling these objectives, this research enriches the academic discourse and offers actionable insights for global managers, HR professionals, and policymakers striving to enhance intercultural collaboration and leadership performance in the workplace.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

### A. Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory

Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory offers a critical framework for understanding the complex process through which individuals and groups adjust to new cultural environments a capability of paramount importance in our globalized world. Grounded in psychology, communication studies, and anthropology, this theory conceptualizes adaptation not as a replacement of one's cultural identity, but as an evolutionary process of learning to navigate unfamiliar norms, values, and social systems (Maude, 2011). Foundational models by scholars like Berry (1997) and Kim (2001) map this often-non-linear journey, which typically progresses from initial culture shock toward the attainment of intercultural competence through sustained interaction and learning.

In contemporary multicultural organizations, this theory provides indispensable insights for leadership. The modern leader's effectiveness is fundamentally linked to their ability to facilitate this adaptation process within their teams. This goes beyond managing surface-level diversity to actively reducing cultural friction and creating inclusive environments that harness the "productive synergy" of different perspectives. Recent research by Fitzsimmons et al. (2021) on multicultural leadership reinforces this, emphasizing that leaders must create psychological safety for cultural adaptation to flourish. The core mechanism for successful adaptation remains the cultivation of communication competence through active social participation (Maude, 2011), which aligns with what contemporary scholars' term "cultural agility" the capacity to quickly and effectively adapt one's communication and behavior across cultural contexts (Caligiuri, 2012; Lee & Kartika, 2024). This integrated approach enables leaders and team members alike to interact more effectively in cross-cultural situations, transforming potential cultural barriers into organizational assets.

### B. Leadership

Leadership, fundamentally defined as the capacity to influence and motivate a collective toward shared objectives (Robbins & Judge, 2015), must be distinguished from mere formal authority. True leadership transcends managerial titles, relying instead on the ability to inspire and guide through a compelling vision. The pivotal mechanism that translates this abstract vision into practical reality is communication. A leader's effectiveness is therefore critically dependent on their communication proficiency across key functions: aligning teams by clarifying roles and objectives, resolving conflicts through facilitated dialogue, and motivating stakeholders via active listening to foster engagement and ownership. Conversely, communication failures can directly erode trust, create misunderstandings, and diminish organizational efficiency.

This leadership dynamic is profoundly complicated in globalized contexts, where navigating multicultural environments is the norm. While foundational models like Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions explain how deeply-held societal values shape workplace behavior and expectations, contemporary research provides more dynamic tools for leadership. Recent studies, such as that by Lee & Kartika (2024), directly link Cultural Intelligence (CQ) to leadership success in multinational settings, offering an evidence-based framework that moves beyond mere cultural mapping. This modern understanding posits that effective global leadership necessitates a move away from universal approaches toward culturally adaptive strategies. Leaders must therefore tailor their communication and influence tactics by acknowledging diverse viewpoints, a practice that builds trust, enhances collaboration, and ultimately drives the achievement of common objectives in a complex global landscape.

### C. Cross-Cultural Communication

Cross-cultural communication encompasses the complex process of exchanging information across diverse cultural backgrounds, requiring profound understanding of how cultural systems comprising symbols, beliefs, values, and behavioral norms (Hall, 1976) shape perception, interpretation, and responses. This discipline fundamentally involves the mutual adaptation of communication styles to foster understanding and engagement in an increasingly globalized world where intercultural interaction is inevitable. These interactions are complicated by fundamental cultural distinctions, such as the contrast between individualistic societies that prioritize independent self-concepts and interdependent cultures where identity is embedded within social relationships and obligations. These foundational differences in self-construal influence cognitive patterns and create communication barriers that often transcend linguistic challenges alone, as identical expressions may carry substantially different meanings across cultural contexts.

The workplace represents a crucial domain where these dynamics manifest with significant consequences. As organizations expand globally, effective cross-cultural communication becomes imperative for organizational success, where breakdowns in verbal and non-verbal communication can lead to substantial operational challenges. Contemporary research reinforces that mere cultural awareness is insufficient; developing cultural agility—the capability to function effectively across various cultural contexts has emerged as an essential competency (Caligiuri, 2012). This aligns with findings that cultural intelligence (CQ) significantly predicts leadership effectiveness in multinational settings (Lee & Kartika, 2024). For employees, particularly expatriates and global team members, this necessitates comprehensive preparation, targeted training, and access to resources that build practical communication skills. Ultimately, transforming cultural challenges into collaborative synergies requires organizational investment in developing workforce capabilities that extend beyond basic cultural awareness to cultivate genuine cultural agility and communication competence.

### D. Theoretical Frameworks

This study's theoretical foundation integrates established cultural frameworks with contemporary leadership theory. While Hofstede's (1980) cultural dimensions and Trompenaars' complementary models provide essential structures for understanding how deeply-held values shape workplace behavior and communication norms, recent developments like the tightness-looseness theory (Gelfand et al., 2020) offer more dynamic tools for analyzing cultural friction. These cultural frameworks align with contingency leadership perspectives (Robbins & Judge, 2015; Fiedler; House) that reject universal leadership formulas, instead emphasizing adaptability to situational contexts—a premise this study extends specifically to the cultural dimensions of leadership situations, arguing that effective cross-cultural leadership requires style adaptation to different cultural configurations.

### E. Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework synthesizes these theories into a clear causal model for the research. It posits that cross-cultural communication operationalized through a leader's skills, strategies, attitudes, and the challenges they face acts as a key independent variable. This variable directly influences the dependent variable, leadership effectiveness. The framework proposes that a leader's ability to navigate cultural dimensions (Hofstede, Trompenaars) and facilitate adaptation (Cross-Cultural Adaptation Theory) directly impacts their success in motivating and guiding their team (Robbins & Judge). Demographic factors like gender, age, and experience are included as control variables to isolate the unique effect of communication on leadership outcomes.



**Figure 1: Conceptual Framework**

### III. DATA AND RESEARCH DESIGN

#### A. Data Collection

A structured questionnaire will be used to collect data in this study. The questionnaire will be conducted online, gathering responses from different leaders. Participants were chosen for their experience in managing multicultural teams and their knowledge of cross-cultural communication methods.

#### B. Research Design

A survey involving 360 leaders from various cultural backgrounds was carried out to evaluate how cross-cultural communication influences leadership. This survey featured questions about the pros and cons of cross-cultural communication, the challenges encountered, and the effectiveness of different communication strategies.

#### C. Data Analysis

The survey data was analyzed with statistical software (STATA) to uncover trends, correlations, and key findings. The analysis featured descriptive statistics, correlation analysis, and regression analysis to evaluate how cross-cultural communication influences leadership effectiveness.

#### D. Empirical Model

$$\text{Leadership Effectiveness}_i = \beta_0 + \beta_1 \text{Comm\_Agree}_i + \beta_2 \text{Comm\_Adv}_i + \beta_3 \text{Comm\_Chal}_i + \beta_4 \text{Comm\_Strat}_i + \beta_5 \text{Comm\_Skill}_i + \beta_6 \text{Gender}_i + \beta_7 \text{Age}_i + \beta_8 \text{Lead\_Exp}_i + \beta_9 \text{Sector}_i + \epsilon_i$$

This empirical model examines the effect of cross-cultural communication on leadership effectiveness in the workplace. Leadership effectiveness (lead\_rate) is the dependent variable, while cross-cultural communication dimensions agreement, perceived advantages, challenges, strategies, and self-rated skills serve as independent variables. Demographic characteristics such as gender, age, leadership experience, and sector are included as control variables to reduce bias. Each coefficient ( $\beta$ ) estimates the marginal impact of a predictor on leadership effectiveness, holding other factors constant. The error term ( $\epsilon$ ) captures unobserved influences. This model tests whether cross-cultural communication significantly predicts leadership practices beyond demographic differences.

### IV. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis investigates the relationship between cross-cultural communication and leadership effectiveness. The key finding is that an individual's self-rated communication skill is the single strongest predictor of their leadership effectiveness. Furthermore, the use of communication strategies and a positive attitude towards communication's importance also significantly boost leadership ratings. Demographic factors like gender and age also play a statistically significant role.

### A. Demographics

The sample included 60% female and 40% male participants, aged between 25 and 50 years with different leadership experience.

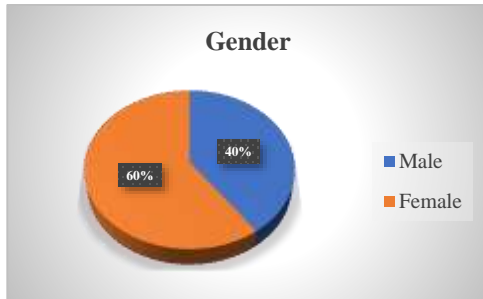


Figure 2: Gender

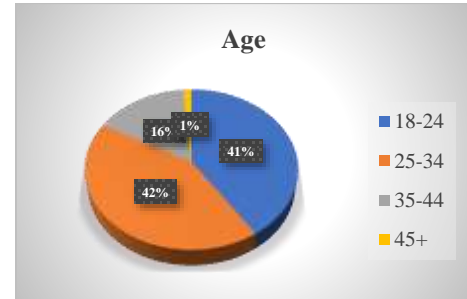


Figure 3: Age

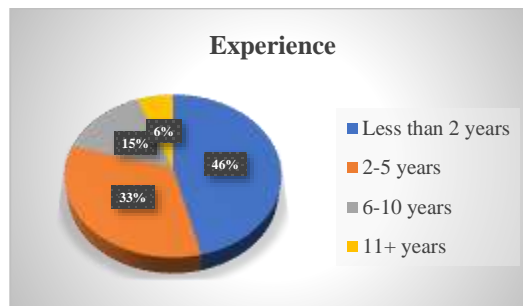


Figure 4: Experience

### B. Factors Influencing Cross-Culture Communication

Cross-cultural communication in leadership presents a dual-edged sword, offering significant advantages alongside inherent challenges. On one hand, it unlocks superior creativity, innovation, and problem-solving by integrating diverse perspectives, while also fostering a more inclusive culture that boosts employee engagement, satisfaction, and retention. Conversely, these benefits are counterbalanced by the risk of misinterpretation and conflict due to language barriers and differing communication styles, which can erode team cohesion. Furthermore, navigating clashing cultural values and norms can escalate conflicts and damage morale, while the very process of incorporating diverse viewpoints often adds layers of complexity that can slow down decision-making and hinder consensus.

The survey findings indicated that 75% of leaders believe cross-cultural communication enhances creativity and innovation, with 60% noting improvements in employee engagement and satisfaction. Nonetheless, 50% of leaders highlighted miscommunication and cultural conflicts as major obstacles.

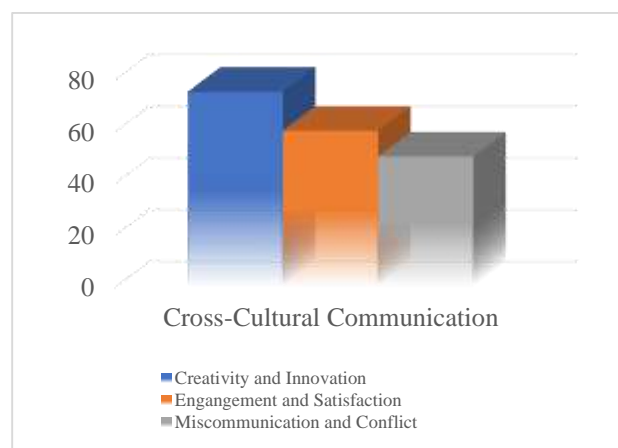


Figure 5: Factors Influencing Cross-Culture Communication

### C. Descriptive Analysis

**Table 1: Descriptive Statistics**

Variable	Obs	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min	Max
gender	360	.503	.501	0	1
age	360	1.158	1.012	0	3
lead exp	360	1.758	1.074	0	3
sector	360	11.522	5.324	0	21
lead rate	360	3.686	1.339	1	5
comm agree	360	1.817	1.506	0	4
comm adv	360	14.042	8.365	0	28
comm chal	360	18.269	11.024	0	39
lead freq	360	2.978	1.178	1	5
comm strat	360	24.508	13.753	0	51
comm skill	360	3.161	1.274	1	5
lead imp	360	61.544	37.223	0	127

Based on a robust sample of 360 diverse leaders, the survey data reveals that respondents generally perceived themselves as effective leaders, with an average self-rating of 3.69 on a scale of 1 of 5. Their average self-rating for cross-cultural communication skill was slightly lower at 3.16, while they demonstrated a moderate to high level of agreement that such communication improves leadership outcomes. The variation in demographics across the sample strengthens the validity of the subsequent analysis.

### D. Regression Analysis

The model is statistically significant (Prob > F = 0.000), meaning it's highly unlikely that these results are due to random chance. The R-squared = 0.170 indicates that the model explains 17% of the variation in leadership effectiveness. This is a modest but meaningful effect, especially in social science research, leaving room for other unmeasured factors (e.g., personality, specific industry challenges).

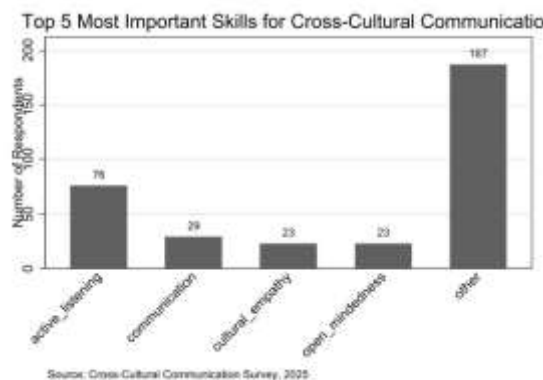
**Table 2: Linear Regression Analysis**

lead_rate	Coef.	St.Err.	t-value	p-value	[95% Conf	Interval]	Sig
comm_agree	.088	.044	1.99	.048	.001	.175	**
comm_adv	.001	.008	0.14	.89	-.015	.017	
comm_chal	-.003	.006	-0.50	.618	-.015	.009	
comm_strat	.014	.005	3.00	.003	.005	.024	***
comm_skill	.323	.052	6.25	0	.222	.425	***
lead_exp	-.094	.063	-1.49	.138	-.219	.03	
sector	.009	.012	0.72	.474	-.016	.033	
gender	.302	.132	2.28	.023	.041	.562	**
age	-.212	.067	-3.17	.002	-.344	-.081	***
Constant	2.346	.334	7.01	0	1.688	3.004	***
Mean dependent var	3.686		SD dependent var	1.339			
R-squared	0.170		Number of obs	360			
F-test	7.944		Prob > F	0.000			
Akaike crit. (AIC)	1183.829		Bayesian crit. (BIC)	1222.690			

\*\*\*  $p < .01$ , \*\*  $p < .05$ , \*  $p < .1$

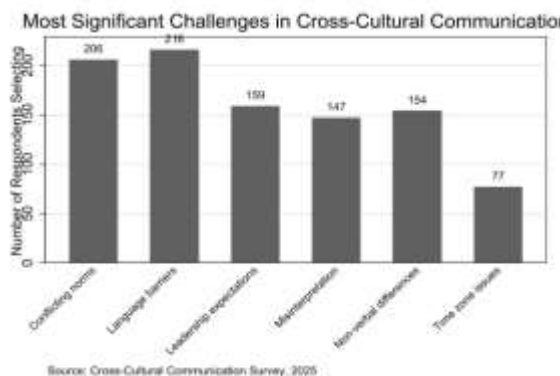
The analysis reveals that a leader's self-rated cross-cultural communication skill is the single strongest predictor of their effectiveness, showing a significant positive impact. Furthermore, the active use of communication strategies and a positive mindset toward the value of cross-cultural communication also substantially boost leadership outcomes. Interestingly,

demographic factors play a role; the model suggests that female leaders received higher effectiveness ratings on average, while older age was associated with lower ratings, potentially indicating that younger leaders may be more adept or proactive in today's diverse global environment.



**Figure 6: Skills for Cross-Culture Communication**

Among the spectrum of essential soft skills, Active Listening emerges as uniquely foundational. The study's data indicates that the capacity to be a skilled receiver of information holds greater weight for leadership effectiveness than any specific technique for transmitting it. This finding underscores that success in cross-cultural environments is predicated first and foremost on the ability to listen attentively, process, and genuinely comprehend others' perspectives. This competency so significantly overshadows other skills that it must be considered the cornerstone of effective cross-cultural communication. This aligns with the work of Lisak & Erez (2020), who found that individuals who emerge as leaders in diverse teams are often those who possess "global characteristics" such as cultural empathy and openness traits that are fundamentally cultivated and expressed through superior listening.



**Figure 7: Challenges for Cross-Culture Communication**

The most immediate and identifiable barrier to effective cross-cultural communication remains language itself, encompassing challenges related to accent, fluency, and vocabulary. However, the data reveals that the most profound and complex obstacles are rooted in the "softer" cultural dimensions. These include deeply ingrained values, divergent expectations of leadership authority, and nuanced differences in non-verbal cues, which collectively constitute a more significant managerial challenge than language alone. This aligns with contemporary cultural frameworks, such as Gelfand's (2020) concept of "tight" versus "loose" cultures, which provides a lens for understanding how societal norms and tolerance for deviance shape communication and behavior. While pragmatic issues like coordinating across time zones were noted as a secondary challenge by a minority of respondents, they are overshadowed by these deeper cultural divides.

## E. Discussions

The findings from this study collectively underscore the paramount importance of cross-cultural communication as a determinant of leadership efficacy. Our results both confirm and extend existing theoretical frameworks by pinpointing the specific mechanisms through which communication influences leadership outcomes in multicultural settings. This study's

findings confirm that cross-cultural communication is a decisive determinant of leadership effectiveness, with a leader's self-rated communication skill being the strongest predictor. This empirically validates and extends theories like Cultural Intelligence (CQ) (Earley & Ang, 2003), suggesting that the behavioral capacity to adapt communication is more critical than the cultural context itself. The identification of active listening as the most vital skill provides a practical mechanism for leaders to overcome language barriers and build trust in real-time (Itzhakov & Weinstein, 2022), moving beyond theoretical awareness to actionable competence. It acts as a real-time feedback mechanism, allowing leaders to detect and correct misunderstandings that stem from differing cultural frames of reference, thereby building the trust that Shapiro et al. (2021) identify as essential for global virtual teams.

Furthermore, the research refines contingency leadership theories by showing that adaptation in multicultural settings requires a tangible "toolkit" of communication strategies, giving practical weight to the concept of "cultural agility" (Caligiuri, 2012). A key challenge to conventional wisdom is the finding that leadership experience is not a significant predictor of effectiveness, indicating that communicative adaptability can outweigh tenure. Ultimately, the study demonstrates that effective cross-cultural communication is not merely a performance enhancer but a fundamental necessity to prevent the performance decline caused by cultural conflict (Mor, Morris, & Joh, 2023).

## V. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, this study establishes cross-cultural communication as a decisive factor for leadership effectiveness in today's globalized organizational environment. While it presents powerful opportunities to drive creativity, innovation, and employee engagement through diverse perspectives, it simultaneously introduces significant challenges including misunderstandings, cultural conflicts, and complex decision-making dynamics. Our findings affirm that leaders who adapt their communication styles and strategies to diverse cultural contexts are substantially more likely to succeed. The research demonstrates that effective leadership directly connects to creating inclusive environments that prevent cultural conflicts, providing theoretical backbone for cultural awareness programs and inclusive leadership practices (Mor, Morris, & Joh, 2023).

For organizations to thrive, they must reframe cultural diversity from an operational hurdle into a strategic asset, actively leveraging differences as catalysts for growth and competitive advantage. A proactive and structured approach is essential, beginning with investments in targeted training programs that enhance leaders' practical cross-cultural communication skills beyond theoretical awareness. Training should aim to build what Fitzsimmons et al. (2021) term 'multicultural leadership,' integrating cultural intelligence (Lee & Kartika, 2024) with inclusive communication practices. Organizations should implement cultural awareness initiatives such as immersion experiences and mentorship programs, while establishing robust conflict resolution mechanisms. Leaders must adopt clear communication strategies using simple language, adapted non-verbal cues, and active feedback solicitation.

Despite its contributions, this study acknowledges limitations that present opportunities for future research. The reliance on self-reported data and cross-sectional design constrains causal interpretation, while the sample primarily represents formal organizational leaders. Future research should employ longitudinal designs to track communication skill development and its impact on career progression, investigate specific training methodologies that effectively translate cultural awareness into practical behaviors, and conduct comparative studies across industry sectors to identify context-specific communication challenges. Such research will further refine our understanding of how communication competence drives leadership success in an increasingly interconnected global business environment, ultimately helping organizations develop the multicultural leadership capabilities needed for sustainable competitive advantage.

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