

The relationship between inspiring leaders and their learning styles in Iran

Summary

This research is conducted on the premise that leadership quality is learnable and transferable. Its primary purpose is to investigate the relationship between inspiring leadership and learning styles in a non-western country. The results show that six key characteristics of inspiring leaders in Iran are: belief in followers, participative leadership, do as say, interpersonal skills, and building trust and recognition. We submitted a revised version of Kolb's Learning Style Inventory questionnaire to the inspiring leaders in our study and found that 'accommodating' was the dominant learning style, followed by 'assimilating' and 'converging'. We concluded that culture-specific factors, respondents' personal and educational background, and type of work affect leaders' behaviours and their preferred learning styles.

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Experiential learning and leadership

Over the last fifty years, many researchers have found that learning affects leadership. For example, learning theorists, such as Dewey, Lewin and Kolb, suggest that people's cognitive ability and learning styles are correlated with leadership quality. Kolb (1984) in his seminal work sets out four distinct learning styles, which are based on a four-stage learning cycle: 1) Concrete Experience (feeling), 2) Reflective Observation (watching), 3) Abstract Conceptualization (thinking), and 4) Active Experimentation (doing). He used this learning cycle to derive four learning styles: 1) Diverging, 2) Assimilation, 3) Converging, and 4) Accommodating. Table 1 shows the construction of Kolb's learning style in terms of a two-by-two matrix:

Table 1: A matrix of Kolb's learning styles

Learning Orientation	Doing (AE)	Watching (RO)
Feeling (CE)	Accommodating	Diverging
Thinking (AC)	Converging	Assimilating

Kolb's learning style model allows a person to be oriented according to the preferred method. From an organisational perspective, the model may be used in selecting individuals to match predefined characteristics or competencies required for different types of jobs, including managerial and leadership jobs (Sims, 1983; Shirazi, 2000).

Leadership research in Iran

ALI SHIRAZI AND
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Leadership research in Iran, as a field of enquiry, is relatively new, sparse and fragmented. Many, if not most, leadership research programmes in Iran are centred on leadership styles in educational settings. Case study is the dominant form of research in manufacturing and service sectors. Although the lack of systematic study of leadership is not uncommon in most developing countries (Chen and Vestor, 1996), it should be a key area of research in Iran for two reasons. First, leadership is a fundamental concept in the political and spiritual life of Iranians. Second, leadership research in Iran has the potential to produce some unconventional and therefore interesting results.

Western leadership models

For example, Mirsepasi and Shekari (2003) in the search of the relationship between organisational culture and effective leadership style found that this relationship is not strong enough to justify the validity of western leadership models in Iran. The study identified a new leadership style, called 'camouflage style', which is greatly influenced by the political culture of organisations in the country, particularly in public organisations in which the only way to survive and to advance is to adhere to dominant political ideology and/or to know powerful people.

This finding supports Handy's 'Theory of Cultural Propriety'. Handy (1997) argues that we should find suitable approaches when applying general principles in different situations. Similarly, Hofstede (1980) compares Japan and Iran in their adoption of western styles of leadership and argues that:

attempts to transfer leadership skills, which do not take the values of subordinates into account, have little chance of success.

Another source of leadership literature in Iran is the writings of western researchers and authors (Forbis, 1980; Hofstede, 1980), and Iranian academics and analysts living abroad (Javidan, 1996; Dastmalchian et al, 2001). Hofstede (1980), in an attempt to identify differences in the way

people in different countries perceive and interpret their world, compared 50 countries in terms of four fundamental dimensions: individualism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity. Interestingly, Iran scored in the middle range of all four dimensions; a unique ranking among the countries under study that may suggest that the national culture conditions Iranians to think and behave in moderation.

In a similar research project, Javidan and House (2001) found that Iran scored the highest among 62 countries on in-group collectivism; the importance of being a member of a family and a close group of friends.

Research methodology

In understanding the learning styles of inspiring leaders, two steps were taken. First we designed a 37-item Inspiring Leadership Survey Questionnaire (ILSQ) that included six variables: 1) belief in followers, 2) encouraging followers' participation, 3) walk the talk, 4) interpersonal skills, 5) building trust, and 6) recognition. Cronbach's alpha test showed that the ILSQ has very good internal consistency reliability.

The instrument was submitted to a sample of employees in a large power generation company to rate their boss. The individuals with the highest scores on the ILSQ were selected as our target population and invited to participate in our study.

Second, we used a Learning Style Inventory Questionnaire (LSIQ), based on Kolb's model (Lamberski, 2002) and submitted it to our target population. The average respondent was male (84%), 43.5 years old, with a postgraduate degree. LSIQ's items were divided into two groups, each relating to an individual's preference for abstractness over concreteness (AC-CE) and action over reflection (AE-RO). Respondents were asked to divide a score of 10 between two elements of each dimension so that the sum of scores added up to 10.

The results showed good internal consistency reliability, as found in other studies (Weirstra and DeJong, 2002; Curry, 1987).

Results

For the preferred learning styles of the six inspiring leaders in our sample, we added respondents' scores assigned to four learning orientation: Concrete Experience (A), Abstract Conceptualisation (B), Active Experimentation (C) and Reflective Observation (D). The total score for each learning orientation was calculated (Table 2).

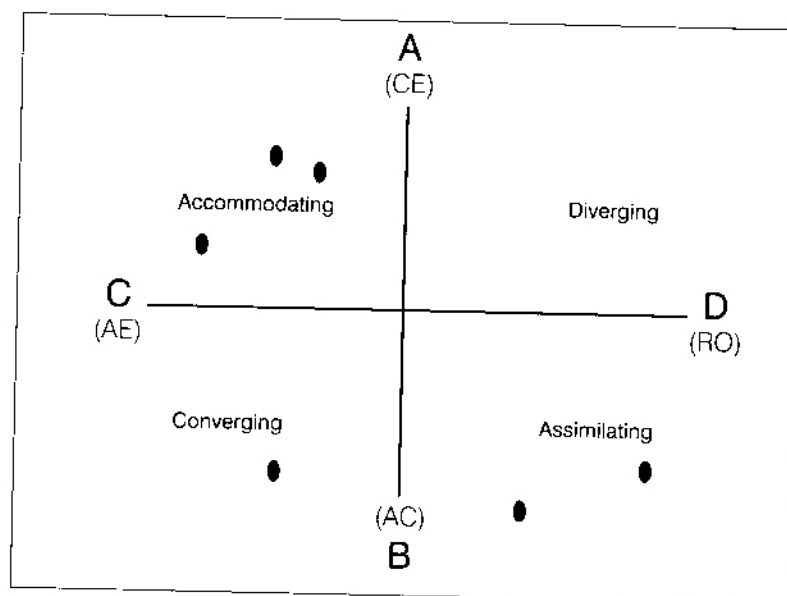
THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN INSPIRING
LEADERS AND THEIR
LEARNING STYLES
IN IRAN

Table 2: Learning orientation and preferred learning styles

Leader	A	B	C	D	Orientation	Learning Style
1	41	19	46	16	AC	Accommodating
2	29	31	31	29	BD	Assimilating
3	36	24	44	16	AC	Accommodating
4	37	23	37	23	AC	Accommodating
5	27	33	29	31	BD	Assimilating
6	28	42	36	24	BC	Converging

We then compared A and B scores and C and D scores separately. We chose the higher score between each pair and located the respondent's preferred learning style on an AB-CD axis (Figure 1).

Figure 1: Kolb's four learning orientations and styles



Our results showed that there was a meaningful difference between leaders' 'belief in followers' ($\alpha=0.027<0.05$) and leaders' 'do as say' ($\alpha=0.033<0.05$) and their preferred learning styles.

Discussion

Our research methodology, based on judgmental sampling and case study, limits us to generalise the results. The current research, however, is unique in its kind, as to our knowledge, no other study to this time has explored Iranian leaders' preferred learning styles. The results showed significant agreements with existing research findings in leadership and learning styles literature. For example, the findings showed that our sample of inspiring leaders encourage participation (Department of Trade and Industry, 2003; Bilchik, 2001; Ghani, 1994), have good interpersonal skills (Adair, 2005; Ghezelbash, 1995) and empathise with employees (Goffee and Jones, 2000). Furthermore, the results showed that 'accommodating' is a dominant learning style among our sample of inspiring leaders (Kolb, 1984; Sims, 1983).

THE RELATIONSHIP
BETWEEN INSPIRING
LEADERS AND THEIR
LEARNING STYLES
IN IRAN

Conclusion

Our study revealed some interesting results that may be related to Iranians' cultural characteristics or respondents' personal background. For example, we believe that Iranian employees' attraction to leaders who are credible and trustworthy is primarily due to a succession of ineffective regimes and rulers. In fact, untrustworthy and unaccountable leaders have been the main cause of many upheavals and two revolutions in Iran over the last two centuries.

Our sample population of leaders mainly came from a technical background, particularly engineering. People with a science and technology background tend to be logical and analytical and therefore prefer an 'assimilating' learning style (Kolb, 1984). Therefore, it may not come as a surprise that one third of our leaders prefer an 'assimilating' style of learning. Those leaders who preferred an 'accommodating' learning style held positions in personnel and training; jobs that require a high degree of human interaction and teamwork. It is interesting to note that the engineers who had obtained a postgraduate degree in management (eg. MBA) preferred an 'accommodating' learning style. This may suggest that leadership can be learned, and formal education and training is an effective way to alter people's attitudes and behaviour and to prepare them for a leadership role.

ALI SHIRAZI AND
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Further reading

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