

Perceptions of Leadership in Three Professions in Cambodia

Raymond Zepp, Ph.D.

Dewey International University

Battambang, Cambodia

Email: zepp@rocketmail.com, Phone: +855 92 803 365

The five dimensions of culture set out by Hofstede (1993) are well known. His classification scheme ranked nations or regions according to five different dimensions: power distance, individuality, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and long-term orientation. He gave each nation a rating on each of the five cultural dimensions, and in doing so, he assumed that the ratings would apply more or less uniformly to all persons in the same nation.

One of the main criticisms of Hofstede's theories is that many subcultures may exist within a nation, so that it is difficult to say that an entire nation can be given an overall rating on any one cultural variable (see, e.g. McSweeney, 2002). In fact, Hofstede based many of his ratings on a questionnaire given only to IBM workers, and extrapolated his findings to the entire culture. Different ethnic groups within a nation may display quite different degrees of, say, power distance, from one another. Separate groups may value various leadership traits or behaviors quite differently from one another. Indeed, one may argue that each company or organization possesses its own corporate culture and may therefore display very company-specific results on a Hofstede questionnaire, and may perceive leadership in its own particular way.

In previous studies, significant differences in the perceptions of good and bad leaders have been observed among various cultures. (Zepp, 2009). Even Hofstede's own work ranked neighboring Asian countries differently, for example China, Hong Kong, and Taiwan, where one might expect close similarity. His rankings for these countries were as follows:

	China	Hong Kong	Taiwan
Power Distance	80	68	58
Individuality	20	25	17
Masculinity	66	57	45
Uncertainty Avoidance	40	29	69
Long-term Orientation	118	96	87

Thus, the notion of a monolithic Chinese cultural norm begins to break down even at the national level. Might the notion of a national culture break down even further if one were to examine subcultures within nations? One obvious place to look would be the subcultures of different professions within a single country. Cambodian culture is quite uniform, in the sense that 95% of the population speak the same language, Khmer, with quite small regional variations in dialect or pronunciation (CIA World Factbook, 2010). The country is also quite uniform in its religion (96.4% Theravada Buddhist), and lifestyle (78 % of the population engaged in agriculture). Thus, with most variables being equal, differences in the perception of leadership can be easily measured among professions without too much clutter from other cultural variables.

The present study examines differences in the perception of good and bad leaders among three professions in Cambodia. All subjects were ethnic Khmers who spoke Khmer as their first language. They were all Buddhists, and all resided within three provinces of northwestern Cambodia: Battambang, Pursat, and Banteay Meanchey. Thus, the sample was quite culturally uniform, with the sole exception of differences in profession.

Method of the Study

Three groups of Cambodians were studied:

1. *Provincial Leaders*. These were 75 high provincial government officials, mostly heads of departments or their deputies. A few District Heads were also included in the sample. The respondents were participants in leadership training workshops held in three contiguous provinces of northwestern Cambodia: Battambang, Pursat, and Banteay Meanchey. The participants were approximately 70% males.

2. *Teachers.* These were 80 primary and secondary teachers from schools around Battambang. The mix was roughly two-thirds primary to one-third secondary. They included a roughly even mix of rural, urban, and semi-urban school. The respondents were approximately 70% females.
3. *Farmers.* These were 32 presidents and their deputies from 16 farmers' committees in three communes of rural Battambang Province. These representatives were elected by the farmers in their communes.

On the questionnaire, the eight choices for traits or good leaders were:

- He/she was very intelligent
- He/she was a good public speaker
- He/she was dependable and consistent.
- He/she had a broad vision which he/she shared with us.
- He/she had a very friendly personality.
- He/she was honest and we could trust him/her.
- He/she was confident and sure of himself/herself.
- He/she showed persistence and determination in achieving goals.

The eight choices for behavior of good leaders were:

- He/she attended to our well-being and human needs.
- He/she appealed to our higher moral selves.
- He/she worked with us as a team.
- He/she gave very clear instructions.
- He/she treated us with respect.
- He/she invited us to share in the decision-making.
- He/she sought to improve social relationships.
- He/she challenged us to perform at our highest possible level.

The eight choices for traits of bad leaders were:

- He/she was stupid
- He/she could not express himself/herself well.
- He/she would say one thing and do the opposite.
- He/she was narrow-minded.
- He/she had an unfriendly personality.
- He/she was dishonest and deceitful.
- He/she was not confident about achieving our tasks.
- He/she did not have a strong will to succeed.

The eight choices for behaviors of bad leaders were:

- He/she was interested only in his/her own ego and self-promotion.
- He/she appealed to our selfishness.
- He/she showed no sense of teamwork.
- He/she didn't make it clear what he/she wanted us to do.
- He/she treated us like naughty children.
- He/she acted like a dictator.
- He/she feared criticism and opposition.
- He/she engaged in corruption and nepotism.

The questionnaire was given to the 75 provincial leaders, the 80 teachers, and the 32 farmers in the Cambodian language, Khmer. They were asked to think of a person they considered an outstanding leader and to rank the top three traits that contributed to that person's leadership qualities. They were also asked to rank the top three behaviors that contributed to that person's leadership qualities. On the reverse side of the questionnaire, they were asked to think of a particularly bad leader, and to rank the top three traits and the top three behaviors that contributed to that person's bad leadership. Analysis of the results was done in two phases. First, the numbers of first choices, second choices, and third choices were tabulated to see which traits and behaviors were mentioned most often. Second, in order to put a more quantitative touch to the data, each trait or behavior was given a score depending on the ranking of the respondents, in the following manner: a first choice was awarded 3 points, a second choice 2 points, and a third choice 1 point, and no mention 0 points. In this way, it was possible to calculate a mean score for each trait and behavior. The various traits and behaviors could then be compared as to which ones had higher mean scores than others.

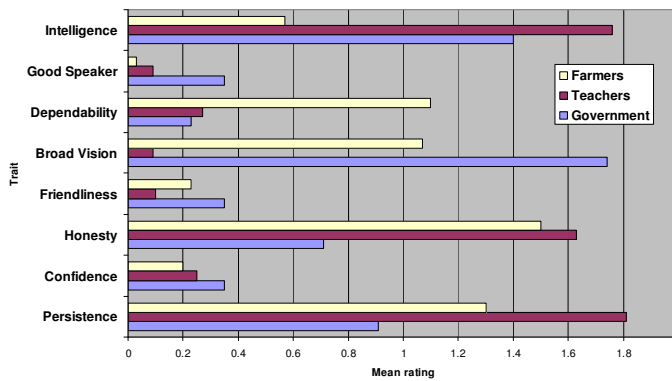
Results

Traits of Good Leaders

The percentages of respondents giving number one, two, and three rankings to the various traits, along with the mean scores for each trait, were calculated as described above. The mean scores for the three groups were as follows:

	Government	Teachers	Farmers
Persistence	0.91	1.81	1.3
Confidence	0.35	0.25	0.2
Honesty	0.71	1.63	1.5
Friendliness	0.35	0.1	0.23
Broad Vision	1.74	0.09	1.07
Dependability	0.23	0.27	1.1
Good Speaker	0.35	0.09	0.03
Intelligence	1.4	1.76	0.57

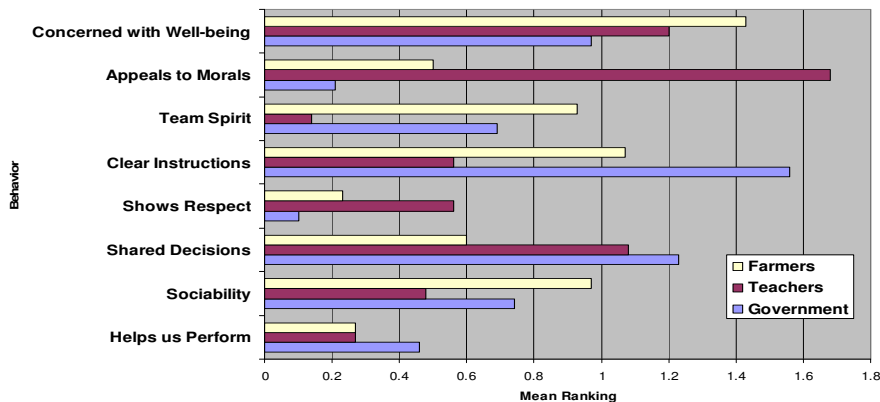
Traits of Good Leaders



Behaviors of Good Leaders

	Government	Teachers	Farmers
Helps us Perform	0.46	0.27	0.27
Sociability	0.74	0.48	0.97
Shared Decisions	1.23	1.08	0.6
Shows Respect	0.1	0.56	0.23
Clear Instructions	1.56	0.56	1.07
Team Spirit	0.69	0.14	0.93
Appeals to Morals	0.21	1.68	0.5
Concerned with Well-being	0.97	1.2	1.43

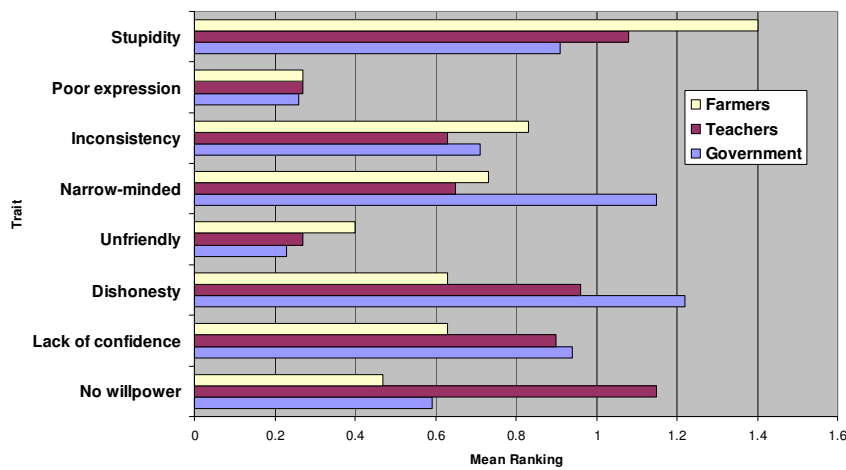
Behaviors of Good Leaders



Traits of Bad Leaders

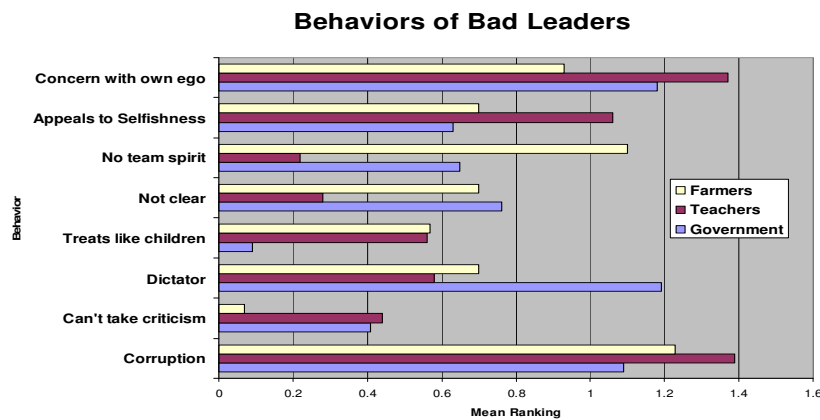
	Government	Teachers	Farmers
No willpower	0.59	1.15	0.47
Lack of confidence	0.94	0.9	0.63
Dishonesty	1.22	0.96	0.63
Unfriendly	0.23	0.27	0.4
Narrow-minded	1.15	0.65	0.73
Inconsistency	0.71	0.63	0.83
Poor expression	0.26	0.27	0.27
Stupidity	0.91	1.08	1.4

Traits of Bad Leaders



Behaviors of Bad Leaders

	Government	Teachers	Farmers
Corruption	1.09	1.39	1.23
Can't take criticism	0.41	0.44	0.07
Dictator	1.19	0.58	0.7
Treats like children	0.09	0.56	0.57
Not clear	0.76	0.28	0.7
No team spirit	0.65	0.22	1.1
Appeals to Selfishness	0.63	1.06	0.7
Concern with own ego	1.18	1.37	0.93



Discussion

The results show clearly that significant differences in the perception of leadership can exist between professions within a given national culture. This makes it extremely difficult to support Hofstede's claims that cultural dimensions can apply uniformly across nations or regions. Despite the many differences, a few similarities among the three professions can be observed. Honesty, dishonesty, corruption, and appeals to morality appear near the top of almost all the lists. Thus, it is probably safe to state rather generally that Cambodians agree that moral issues are important in assessing leadership. But even this generalization is not airtight; for example, teachers ranked "appeals to morality" by far the highest among good behaviors (mean rating 1.68), while government officials ranked it a lowly 7th at 0.21, and farmers ranked it 6th at 0.50.

The subjects were chosen so that one group (the government officials) could be considered higher leaders, while another group (the farmers) could be considered mostly followers. It can be asked whether the differences found were essentially differences between the perceptions by leaders and those by followers. Future studies might examine the perceptions of leadership by leaders and followers within the same profession. Does this finding of subcultural differences completely undermine Hofstede's theories? Not necessarily. Neither Hofstede nor anyone else is claiming that all people in a given nation have precisely the same cultural value systems. Rather, the Hofstede rankings must be taken as a national average of all its subcultures. Thus, the broad average of perceptions in China might display a higher power distance than those in India. The wide differences shown in this study only serve to underline that the national average must be taken over perhaps a much wider range of values than previously expected.

This wider variation in values lowers the predictive validity of Hofstede's generalizations. For example, if a company is selecting a leader for, say, a Chinese managerial position, Hofstede's criteria for Chinese culture might not be the best predictor of success. The nature of the profession, the region within China, or even the specific corporate culture, might all provide better grounds for selection. Another issue in the measurement of Hofstede national cultural dimensions is the nature of the sampling procedure. If the sample consists of largely teachers, for example, in one nation, and of government workers in another, then the calculation of the national average will reflect these differences in profession. Therefore, the calculation of a national average must be a carefully controlled stratified random sample, where each profession or other subculture is represented proportionally from nation to nation. This is extremely difficult to control, since so many subcultural differences cannot all be taken into account.

References

- CIA. 2010 World Factbook, (2010) <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/cb.html>
- Hofstede, Geert (1993). "Cultural constraints in management theories". *Academy of Management Executives*. Feb. 1993, p. 91.
- McSweeney, Brendan (2002) . "Hofstede's Model of National Cultural Differences and Consequences: A Triumph of Faith - A Failure of Analysis", *Human Relations*, **55**.1, 89-118.
- Zepp, Raymond, et al. (2009). "Teachers' Perceptions of Good and Bad Leaders in Seven Cultures". *Academic Leadership*, **7**:1, Feb 19, 2009.