

**Cultural Appropriateness of American Based MBA Leadership Topics,
Service Learning and Instruction Style in a Kuwait University Program**

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Abstract

This paper is based on ascertaining the impact of cross cultural difference in American and Kuwait cultures. In particular, an exploration was conducted of the cultural appropriateness of American based MBA leadership topics, service learning and instruction style in Kuwait. This study was based on experience gleaned from instructing 3 MBA classes and 2 undergraduate business classes during 2009 and 2010 at the American University of the Middle East (AUM) in Kuwait.

This University is now in its second year and assessing students' receptivity and value attribution of leadership topics, material, instruction philosophy and methods was of particular interest:

- Would the cross cultural difference prove to be transparent with no real impact? Or, would the challenges of cross cultural difference be extensive?
- If extensive difference existed, would these perceived differences then pose a barrier to student's receptivity and value attribution of the topics and material being covered?
- In addition, if the course material was perceived to be of value, would the students then try to apply the new knowledge or ideas, to their workplaces?

The classes were taught using the same critical thinking, discussion-oriented format common to many American based MBA Leadership classes.

The results of the study indicated that cultural difference exists along several dimensions and yet this difference did not negatively impact the students' receptivity to learning or attempts to apply the learning to their workplaces. It can be concluded that it is worthwhile to continue teaching using American based education processes, and values which support service as an integral part of leadership in business classes at AUM.

In my original paper dated October 2009, I explored the cultural appropriateness of American based MBA leadership topics and instruction style in Kuwait. At that time I had instructed 2 MBA classes during the winter and spring of 2009; Organization Behavior and Leadership, at the American University of the Middle East (AUM) in Kuwait. This University is now in its second year and is still in its infancy. And, although affiliated with Purdue, AUM has its own challenges as a new institution and attempting to bridge the cultural difference between an American based MBA program and Kuwait culture and traditions. I based my study on classes I had instructed that had 93 professionally employed adult students in 4 classes that were divided by gender (2 male and 2 female classes).

Since that time I have taught 3 additional classes; 2 undergraduate classes of Leadership and Character Skills, and Business Management, with 20 female students and one graduate Organization Behavior class with 30 males. Service Learning was introduced as a new topic as part the undergraduate Leadership and Character Skills class. Since the Service Learning exercise was fraught with cross cultural challenges this material has also been included in this updated paper.

Thus, this paper will cover the following topics:

- Learning evaluation
- Methodology of study
- Results of MBA study-October 2009
- Cultural difference between Kuwait and the USA
- Service Learning introduction-January 2010
- Conclusions

Originally, I described my interest in ascertaining the impact of cross cultural difference, based in American and Kuwait cultures. Assessing students' receptivity and value attribution of leadership topics, material, instruction philosophy and methods was of particular interest:

- Would the cross cultural difference prove to be transparent with no real impact? Or, would the challenges of cross cultural difference be extensive?
- If extensive difference existed, would these perceived differences then pose a barrier to student's receptivity and value attribution of the topics and material being covered?
- In addition, if the course material was perceived to be of value, would the students then try to apply the new knowledge or ideas, to their workplaces?

The classes were taught using the same critical thinking, discussion-oriented format common to many American based MBA Leadership classes. These methods and philosophy were again new phenomena for the majority of the students as well as the potential challenge of a female American professor.

Although this is a brief snapshot of students' perceptions, the following data does provide some useful information to consider for future classes at the American University of the Middle East.

I. Learning Evaluation

Perhaps part of my interest in cultural difference and learning application, is due to a strong industry orientation with over 20 years experience as both a self-employed Organization Development consultant, and as an employee (Director of HR Training and Development) in Fortune 500 companies. I have focused on the cultural relevance of learning and development, and positive behavior change in the workplace and used Donald Kirkpatrick's evaluation model for assessing learner's views of subject matter relevance. The Kirkpatrick model is described below:

Donald Kirkpatrick's (1994) Four Levels of Evaluation



Kirkpatrick's Four-Level model is contingent on each successive evaluation level providing information to drive behavior forward to the next level. End of class industry and academic evaluations primarily tend to focus on Level 1 (assessing reactions) and Level 2 (assessing learning). I wanted to learn if the students had considered learning transfer, or Level 3, as described in the Kirkpatrick model. I also wanted to get the student's viewpoints on the following questions:

QUESTIONS

1. Did the students find the material covered in class worthwhile?
2. Was the material of enough interest and significance to them that they would consider application of the concepts and behavior change at the workplace (Level 3 above)?
3. Was the fact that the material was presented in a much different format (student centered learning requiring preparation for class and active, critical thinking/discussion) of significant enough cultural difference to actually prove to be a deterrence to learning?
4. Would the fact that a sizable majority of the students who work in public organizations, versus the smaller group that work in more innovative private industry, appreciate and accept "newer" forms of leadership. Or, might they attribute a negative value to the material, based on their beliefs that the material was not applicable?

II. METHODOLOGY

In order to ascertain answers to the questions described above, students were asked to write comments (a representative sample follows) and mark one, or more,

of 8 possible responses (below) for each of the top 15 leadership topics and articles covered in class as being:

- Important
- Highly important
- Thought about application to work
- Attempted to use
- Using successfully
- Not very important
- Not applicable to Kuwaiti business culture
- Not applicable to my organization

The 15 Leadership topics and articles selected were some of the more significant topics covered in class, and drawn from chapters in the text and Harvard Business articles:

Daft, R. (2008). *The Leadership Experience* and 5 Harvard Business articles (see table, below)

| | | |
|--|---|--|
| Personal Characteristics of Leaders | Theory X Theory Y | "Defining Leadership Code"-Dave Ulrich, Smallwood, Sweetman-(HBR) |
| Autocratic vs. Democratic Leadership | Emotional Intelligence | "Seasoned Executive's Decision Making Style" –Ken Brousseau (HBR) and in class inventory |
| Leadership Grid | Love/Fear Based Leadership | "Moments of Greatness"-Robert E. Quinn(HBR) |
| Situational Leadership- Hersey Blanchard model | Active Listening-- in class exercise | "Level 5 Leadership"-Jim Collins |
| Decision Making-Vroom model | Transactional vs. transformational Leadership | "Social Intelligence"-Daniel Goleman & Boyatzis |

III. Results of MBA Study-October 2009

The following information is summarized from the data gathered from the classes:

THEMES

Most Important Topics

There was consensus (from three of the four classes summarized responses) on the top three topics studied as being the *most important*:

- Emotional Intelligence
- Social Intelligence
- Personal Characteristics of Leaders

Least Important Topics

Two classes selected as the *least important*:

- Level 5 Leadership

The third class selected as the *least important*:

- Love versus Fear Based Leadership
- Vroom Decision Making.

Overall Responses of Important and Highly Important

In addition, the students commented and marked the 15 topics and articles overall as "Important and "Highly Important." Very few students marked the topics and articles as "Not Very Important."

SURPRISES

Cultural Applicability

There were minimal responses of "Not being Applicable to Kuwaiti Business Culture" or "Not Applicable to my Organization."

Application to Work

The relatively high degree of positive responses concerning the application of the material to their workplace was interesting to note. Students could select if they:

- "Had thought about applying the material covered in the topics"
- "Were attempting to use the concepts"
- "Were using the leadership concepts successfully"

When the answers to these 3 areas (listed above) were totaled it was found that the following concepts were of enough interest and/or value to constitute a Level 3 evaluation (Kirkpatrick). Or, in other words, students indicated they were moving beyond just "reaction" (Level 1) and "learning" (Level 2) to thinking about and actually "applying" (Level 3) the leadership concepts. The highest topics selected were:

- "Autocratic vs. Democratic Leadership", the highest rated in the Men's Wednesday class (13 out of 20 students)
- "Active Listening", the highest rated in the Women's Tuesday class (12 out of 16 students)
- "Personal Characteristics of Leaders", the highest rated in the Men's Monday class (12 out of 14 students)

IV. Cultural Difference between Kuwait and the USA

Selection Rationale for Top Three Topics

It was interesting to note that the topics that are the most recent and somewhat "out of the box" thinking on Leadership; Social Intelligence and Emotional Intelligence were rated so highly by the students. And yet Hofstede's (1980) work

on cultural difference between the Arab World (of which he included Kuwait) and US culture might also indicate some basis for the Arab students' ability to appreciate the importance of these topics which are often viewed, in my US industry experience, as "soft" leadership topics. In fact, when I worked at Intel University, at Intel Corporation, my attempts in 2007 to include Emotional Intelligence as part of the core learning curricula were summarily dismissed—even after sharing data on the impact of productivity and employee engagement!

Hofstede has continued to refine his work on five cultural dimensions for measuring cultural difference. Four of these five dimensions (the fifth dimension of Long term Orientation was not included below) are useful to consider in this analysis:

- Achievement versus nurturance orientation-the degree that people value assertiveness, competitiveness and materialism (achievement) versus relationships and well-being of others (nurturing)
- Large power distance-the degree that people accept an unequal distribution of power in society
- Individualism versus collective concern for groups-the degree that people value independence and personal uniqueness
- Uncertainty Avoidance-the degree that people tolerate ambiguity (low) or feel threatened by uncertainty (high uncertainty avoidance)

1. Achievement versus Nurturance

Americans rank Achievement higher (62 out of 100) on Hofstede's Achievement vs. Nurturance scale than the Arab World (52 out of 100). Americans view achievement in a more favorable light than nurturance.

2. Large Power Distance

Americans rank Power Distance (40 out of 100) low while the Arab World ranks Large Power Distance much higher (80 out of 100). In the Arab World this would indicate inequality of power and privilege within the society and relative acceptance of this situation.

3. Individualism vs. Collectivism

Americans also rank Individualism (91 out of possible 100) versus collective concern for the group much higher than the Arab world (38 out of 100). The world average is 64. This infers that members of the Arab World would tend to have a strong commitment to the "group" (family, work, societal, etc.) to which they belong.

4. Uncertainty Avoidance

Americans rank Uncertainty Avoidance much lower (46 out of 100) than the Arab World (68 out of 100). This high score in the Arab World would manifest itself in strict rules and policies; in attempts to control the unpredictable.

The cultural impact of these findings (above) may explain some of the results from the study but only partially, and require more in depth study before any definite conclusions might be drawn. However, one might conjecture that since the basis of emotional and social intelligence has to do with the human side of interactions, beyond task and individual achievement, it might be inferred that students with a cultural framework that values nurturance and concern for the group might also appreciate the impact of high emotional intelligence and social intelligence.

In contradiction, Hofstede's work would indicate that leaders would not necessarily need to be concerned about the emotional state of their employees, based on the Large Power Distance in the Arab World, so this conclusion (above) does not necessarily fit with Hofstede's conclusions! Perhaps since the majority of the students are not yet in leader roles the high power distance phenomena might not have had such a strong impact on their assessment.

One last surprise was the overall very positive comments of how important the majority of the students found the leadership material, especially since most of these MBA students are concentrating in Finance and Accounting not Human Resources and Management.

VERBATIM RESPONSES

General themes and Likert scale results from questionnaire (noted by each class)

A. Women's class –Tuesday (16 respondents)

"I think personal characteristics, social intelligence and emotional intelligence are very important to build my personality and to guide my attitude officially and socially"

"Usually in Kuwaiti government sectors all the theories are not applicable because the change is IMPOSSIBLE"

"All of the leadership topics presented in this class are critical skills that enabled all of us to tap into our inner leader potential and identify the patterns we portray and the skills or topics that need be taken further and developed in order to prepare us for taking our future giant steps. Thank you Dr. Terry for making this course interesting, enlightening and a pleasure to attend."

“Emotional intelligence and social intelligence enable leaders to motivate and influence followers—it is successfully used because many leaders recognize the importance of these aspects”

“Leadership Grid is important because every leader should know where he/she stands in the Grid and what they need to do to improve.”

“All of the above concepts are valuable and can lead to magical changes with the organization provided the suitable application is taken into consideration (i.e. when to use, what, with whom and to what extent).”

Out of 15 topics and articles this class selected the following as *most and least important* and which they *attempted to use* at work

| Highest Importance | Least Importance | Attempted to Use at Work |
|---|--------------------|--------------------------|
| Emotional Intelligence | Level 5 Leadership | Active Listening |
| Social Intelligence | | |
| Transactional vs. transformational Leadership | | |
| Love/Fear Based Leadership | | |
| Personal Characteristics of Leadership | | |

B. Women’s Class–Sunday (18 respondents)

“In Kuwaiti business culture most recognize autocratic leadership and this style affects negatively the life and work style in Kuwait, so many will get opportunities due to their power or authority not because of their professionalism.”

“I would like to learn more about emotional intelligence and how to develop it in myself.”

“Overall I am attempting to use what I have learned, practiced and discussed through my leadership class. One area of concern was mainly why these theories were not applied either in Kuwait or my organization. The reason is because where I work it seems to be more into managing than feeling or sensing the goodness of leadership.”

“I really enjoyed the class of emotional intelligence and the class of love/fear based leadership because I think these two facts are very important in any organization, using your emotions and love with fear will make you realize the difference between other cases you face in any organization.”

C. Men's Class Wednesday (20 respondents)

"Overall, in my organization as a family owned company we need to have good leadership, decision making and to recognize characteristics and personality to make the most of it. As I am offered to be an executive manager I need to take leadership seriously."

"Moments of greatness is really effective in motivating people in my workplace"

"The topics of this course are very informative and I liked them a lot."

"I intend to develop and use emotional and social intelligence more often"

"Emotional intelligence is one of the most important skills leaders should have."

Out of 15 topics and articles this class selected the following as *most and least important* and which they *attempted to use at work*

| Highest Importance | Least Importance | Attempted to Use at Work |
|--|-----------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Personal Characteristics of Leadership | Vroom Decision making | Autocratic vs. Democratic Leadership |
| Emotional Intelligence | Level 5 Leadership | Personal Characteristics of Leaders |
| Social Intelligence | | |
| Situational Leadership | | |

D. Men's Class Monday (16 respondents)

"Not material to study, it's a way of thinking, living and a target a person should clearly think about....the role of you as a leader is more than you expect-it's about changing people and shaping the society."

"A man/woman in leaders' position are not ROBOTS they need to know, learn and teach each other how to be up and down (leader role) according to the situation"

"Overall all these topics improved our knowledge in leadership and help us upgrade ourselves and change our behavior to be more effective leaders."

"Listening is very important to understand what the subject is saying and important to obtain a good image. Those who listen carefully always seem wise...I'm not good at listening however, I still interrupt people indicating that I still have to work on this skill."

"I think the best topics were about how to improve our leadership skills, what methods to use and how we can observe our changes."

“Really useful topic I will follow it in my career to be something in the future—hope to be a leader and really great subject for all of us.”

“It is important to consult, facilitate and delegate and most importantly decide”

“Many important items are not used in my company but when I have a chance of being an important leader I will use them.”

Out of 15 topics and articles this class selected the following as *most and least important* and which they *attempted to use at work*

| Highest Importance | Least Importance | Attempted to Use at Work |
|--|----------------------------|-------------------------------------|
| Personal Characteristics of Leadership | Love/Fear Based Leadership | Personal Characteristics of Leaders |
| Social Intelligence | | Situational Leadership |
| Autocratic vs. Democratic Leadership | | |
| Emotional Intelligence | | |
| Level 5 Leadership | | |
| Situational Leadership | | |

Summary

This brief analysis (above) provided some answers to the 4 questions I had presented at the beginning of this paper. However, this analysis is simplistic and does not constitute an in-depth analysis. Nevertheless, with these limitations in mind, this exercise did indicate some useful information for cross cultural instruction in an MBA program in Kuwait in relation to the 4 initial questions:

1. *Did the students find the material covered in class worthwhile?*

Based on the positive comments and high marks they gave most of the 15 topics it would appear that the students did find the material worthwhile.

2. *Was the material of enough interest and significance to them that they would consider application of many of the concepts and consider changing their behavior at the workplace (Level 3 above)?*

Many of the students indicated they had “thought about applying” to actually “applying” the material in their worksite. The response rates did not indicate this to be true for all of the topics but at least a sizable portion did consider application to

their workplace of several of the topics. Needless to say it would have been ideal to have all of the students indicate they were “already applying” the material, but perhaps given the cultural differences at some of their organizations and the novelty of the material to many of them, this may explain some of the modest scores.

3. *Was the fact that the material was presented in a much different format (student centered learning requiring preparation for class and active, critical thinking/discussion) of significant enough cultural difference to actually prove to be a deterrence to learning?*

Apparently the cultural differences did not deter students from valuing the material and in fact cultural difference may have been minimal for many students since a sizable number of the students have lived and studied in the US.

4. *Would the fact that a sizable majority of the students who work in public organizations, versus the smaller group that work in more innovative private industry, appreciate and accept “newer” forms of leadership or might they believe that since the material was not possible at their work cause them to attribute a negative value to the material?*

Several students did respond that the leadership material would not work in their organizations but they also rated the subject material as important. Some students stated that when they were in a different organization, or in a higher level in their organization, they would then be able to use the knowledge gleaned from the class.

V. Service Learning Introduction

A service learning project was selected by a team of undergraduate female students as part of their Leadership and Character Skills undergraduate class. Service learning is relatively new to Kuwait and also to AUM. The students selected a beach clean up project at a nearby location. The students were very interested in having children (relatives and siblings) accompany them so they could be part of the beach cleanup. This request seemed out of the ordinary but the young women were very interested in this part of the project, so the children were included in the project.

The preparation was well thought out, including a picture of land mines as a precaution. On occasion mines are still being found in Kuwait, left over from the Iraq invasion of 21 years ago. The students had even planned for the separation of debris for recycling purposes. Recycling is in its infancy in Kuwait as well as a “no littering” concept”; hence there was extensive litter to be collected.

The students directed the children in picking up the litter but it soon became apparent that few of the students were seriously interested in beach clean up after the initial 20 minutes! One of the students explained as I was getting increasingly frustrated that the young women were not used to physical exercise or being in the sun. In addition, most of the Kuwaiti households have servants and maids so it could be easily surmised that even the idea of picking up trash might have been a difficult concept. In each neighborhood there are men in yellow uniforms and red scarves that use a broom and dust bin to keep the streets and parking areas clean.

What was troubling was the lack of interest by most of the students in being actively involved in this project, beyond directing the children to do the clean up. It appeared the concept of "service" was not fully embraced! This apparent antipathy could be well understood in that there are many migrant workers in Kuwait to provide service. It was reported in the Kuwait Times (March 31, 2010) that Kuwait is the third highest country in the world with migrant workers, following Qatar and United Arab Emirates.

In a questionnaire that was distributed following the beach cleanup, the young women believed the beach cleanup was very successful!

VI. Conclusions

I believe it is worthwhile to continue teaching using American based education processes and values supporting service in leadership in business classes at AUM. In addition, it will be helpful to keep in mind the cultural differences when planning curricula and leading classes in Kuwait. For instance, it was enlightening to consider the service learning experience along with reviewing the high power distance phenomena in Kuwait. And, then to consider what difficulties an assignment, such as was described above, may present for Kuwaiti students. In addition, further consideration needs to include difficulties that may arise for Kuwaiti students as they learn about the prevalent concepts and practice of "servant leadership" in American leadership and management texts.

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