

Why the Same Leadership Behavior Builds Trust in One Culture—and Erodes It in Another

The leadership principle may be sound. Its expression still has to be understood.

Consider a leader who believes strongly in candid feedback.

During a meeting, she tells an executive that his proposal is not sufficiently developed and identifies several weaknesses in front of the team. Her intention is constructive: clarity demonstrates respect, and honest feedback will help him improve.

One executive may experience that directness exactly as intended. The leader was transparent, took the work seriously, and did not hide behind vague language.

Another may experience the same intervention as a public loss of standing. The content of the feedback may be useful, but the setting makes it difficult to hear. Silence follows—not because the executive rejects the message, but because disagreement or visible emotion would intensify the discomfort.

The leader's intention did not change.

The meaning of the behavior did.

This is one of the central challenges of leading across cultures: leadership is judged not only by what the leader means, but by what other people can reasonably understand from the way that meaning is expressed.

Intention does not travel alone

Leaders often assume that positive intent will be visible to others. If the objective is to build trust, encourage development, or invite participation, the corresponding behavior should produce that result.

But behavior carries cultural meaning.

Directness can signal honesty or insensitivity. Consultation can signal inclusion or indecision. Rapid action can demonstrate accountability or disregard for relationships. Silence can indicate reflection, respect, disagreement, uncertainty, or consent.

None of these interpretations is universal.

Frameworks developed by Geert Hofstede and Erin Meyer help leaders anticipate where meanings may diverge. Differences in hierarchy, individualism, communication context, feedback, decision making, and the basis of trust influence how ordinary leadership acts are experienced.

The frameworks do not tell us exactly what a particular person will think. They help us identify what we should not assume.

Feedback: clarity for whom?

Feedback is one of the clearest examples of a leadership behavior whose meaning changes across contexts.

In cultures where direct negative feedback is common, precise criticism may be interpreted as efficient and intellectually honest. Softening the message too much can create confusion or appear evasive.

In cultures where negative feedback is communicated more indirectly, meaning is often carried through context, tone, qualification, or what remains unsaid. A message that sounds merely suggestive to an outsider may be understood locally as a serious warning.

Hierarchy adds another layer. A direct exchange between peers does not necessarily indicate that an employee will challenge a senior leader in the same way. Conversely, a hierarchical culture is not automatically indirect. Communication and authority are related, but they are not the same dimension.

The practical question is therefore not, “Should leaders be direct or indirect?”

It is:

How can I make the developmental message clear while delivering it in a form this person can receive and use?

That may require changing the setting, sequencing the conversation differently, checking understanding privately, or making implicit expectations more explicit. The standard remains honest feedback. The expression becomes more deliberate.

Trust: task first or relationship first?

Leaders also build trust through culturally different pathways.

In task-based environments, trust develops when people demonstrate competence, reliability, and consistency. Meetings move quickly to the agenda. Personal relationships may follow successful collaboration.

In relationship-based environments, the sequence is often reversed. People invest time in understanding who they are dealing with before placing confidence in what they will do. Informal conversation, meals, and personal connection are not distractions from the work. They are part of the work because they establish the basis on which commitments become credible.

A task-focused leader may interpret this investment as inefficient. A relationship-focused executive may experience the leader’s efficiency as distance or lack of interest.

Both believe they are behaving professionally.

They are building trust through different evidence.

This matters particularly in multinational and virtual teams. A leader who relies exclusively on deadlines, dashboards, and formal meetings may maintain coordination while allowing relational trust to weaken. Conversely, a leader who assumes that strong relationships make explicit accountability unnecessary may create ambiguity for colleagues who expect clear commitments.

Effective leadership often requires both—but not always in the same proportion or sequence.

Career conversations: ambition is expressed differently

Culture also shapes how executives discuss careers.

In some organizations, senior leaders expect talented executives to state their ambitions clearly: What role do you want next? How quickly do you want to progress? What scope are you seeking?

An executive who answers confidently appears self-aware and driven.

But in a context where hierarchy is more pronounced or individual self-promotion is discouraged, the same questions may create tension. Declaring interest in a superior’s role can sound presumptuous. Emphasizing personal ambition may appear disloyal to the group. An executive may expect the organization to recognize readiness rather than requiring it to be advertised.

Silence, modesty, or indirect language can then be misread as limited aspiration.

The consequences can be significant. Leaders may offer fewer opportunities to executives whose ambitions are expressed less explicitly. Those executives may conclude that the organization does not see a future for them. A cultural misunderstanding gradually becomes a career problem—and eventually a retention problem.

The solution is not to stop discussing ambition. It is to create more than one culturally credible way of revealing it.

Leaders can ask about the work an executive wants to do, the capabilities the executive wants to develop, the contribution the executive hopes to make, and the conditions under which greater responsibility would feel meaningful. They can combine direct conversation with observation, sponsorship, and dialogue over time.

A good career conversation does not merely ask for an answer. It creates the conditions in which the answer can be expressed.

Models are maps, not verdicts

Cultural frameworks become dangerous when leaders use them as fixed descriptions: Germans are direct, Japanese avoid disagreement, Americans are individualistic, Latin Americans prioritize relationships.

National culture can offer useful context, but no individual is reducible to a passport.

Professional background, generation, socioeconomic experience, organizational culture, religion, family history, and years spent abroad can reinforce or contradict national tendencies. Two executives from the same country may interpret the same leadership behavior very differently.

The purpose of a cultural model is therefore not prediction with certainty. It is disciplined curiosity.

Instead of concluding, “This person behaves this way because of their culture,” a leader can ask:

- What cultural frame might be operating here?
- What other personal or organizational factors might matter?
- What can I observe or ask before deciding?

The map improves the questions. The relationship supplies the answer.

Four capabilities in action

When a leadership behavior produces an unexpected reaction, the four intercultural capabilities provide a practical sequence.

Emotional Resilience: Manage the initial frustration or uncertainty without turning it into a judgment about attitude or competence.

Perceptual Acuity: Notice the signals surrounding the response—silence, tone, participation, who speaks, and what changes afterward.

Flexibility & Openness: Consider alternative interpretations and modify the approach rather than repeating the same behavior more forcefully.

Personal Autonomy: Preserve the underlying leadership principle while choosing a different, culturally credible way to express it.

This is adaptation in practice. It is not a performance in which leaders pretend to become someone else. It is the ability to expand their behavioral range while remaining clear about what they are trying to accomplish.

What leaders can do differently

Before transferring a familiar leadership practice into a new cultural context, leaders can take five steps:

1. **Separate the principle from the behavior.** Decide what must remain constant—honesty, accountability, inclusion, development—and what can change in its delivery.
2. **Diagnose before interpreting.** Observe how authority, disagreement, trust, and ambition are expressed in the particular team or organization.
3. **Make the implicit discussable.** Ask how people prefer to receive feedback, contribute to decisions, and discuss their future.
4. **Create more than one channel.** Combine group discussion with private conversation, explicit questions with observation, and formal processes with relationship building.
5. **Verify the effect.** Do not assume the message was understood because it was delivered clearly from the leader's perspective.

These practices do not require leaders to memorize every national profile. They require leaders to remain attentive to meaning.

Final thought

The leadership behavior that worked in one environment may not fail elsewhere because the principle is wrong.

It may fail because the behavior communicates something different.

Effective leaders preserve what matters while adapting how it is expressed. They understand that authenticity is not rigid consistency and that respect is not always demonstrated in the same way.

Leadership may be universal in purpose.

Its expression is cultural.