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## IS CULTURAL SENSITIVITY REQUIRED BY POTENTIAL LEADERS: EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION FOR SALES FUNCTION IN IT SECTOR

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### ABSTRACT

*Cultural sensitivity means being aware that cultural differences and similarities exist and have an effect on values, learning and behavior of an individual. The aim of this study is twofold, first aim is to develop the concept of cultural sensitivity and chalking out its various dimensions. And second aim is to further utilize these dimensions via questionnaire to investigate the extent to which the various dimensions of cultural sensitivity are important to the leaders in sales function, w.r.t. IT sector. After the literature review two questionnaires are adopted from Harris(2004) and Blake and Mouton for Cultural sensitivity and potential leadership respectively. The empirical setting is sales people from first and middle level of management in IT sector across few selected companies. This study proposes a model of the concept as multi-dimensional. Cultural sensitivity is perceived as a competence, held by a person responsible for sales in the export markets experience is viewed as essential to advance a salesperson's cultural sensitivity. The dimensions, and thus the variables composing cultural sensitivity are thus as follows: international experience, country experience, open-mindedness, adaptive business style, and ongoing business expenditure. Growth in the service sector industry internationally has imposed dealings between people from different cultures. As culture relates to norms, values and customs of people it generates behavioral differentiation. This result in expectations during service encounters, this difference has to be understood by IT professionals in order to build the modules for interaction. Cultural differences matter in leadership and the most effective leaders embrace them.*

### KEYWORDS

Cultural-sensitivity, sales, leadership, IT.

### 1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Culture, for the purposes of this paper, is defined as "the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from others" (Hofstede, 2001, p.9). When values are widely shared by a group of people, they are provided with a common mechanism by which they can share understandings and interpretations of their world, and establish what is important and clarify priorities (Wild & Henderson, 1997). Learning does not occur in isolation. Psychologists and educationists (Vygotsky, 1978, Lefrancois, 1994) indicate the powerful influence of culture on human development.

1.2 Companies often employ foreign workers and court foreign parties as their operations go global and they take advantage of new markets in other countries. This makes cultural sensitivity in business more important than ever. An ignorance of a country's cultural norms can offend important clients, alienate employees in other countries and even lead to a reduction of product or service sales. The idea of more effective cross-cultural capabilities is captured in many terms similar to cultural competence. Cultural knowledge, cultural awareness, and cultural sensitivity all convey the idea of improving cross-cultural capacity, as illustrated in the following definitions:

**1.2.1 Cultural Knowledge:** Familiarization with selected cultural characteristics, history, values, belief systems, and behaviors of the members of another ethnic group (Adams, 1995).

**1.2.2 Cultural Awareness** developing sensitivity and understanding of another ethnic group. This usually involves internal changes in terms of attitudes and values. Awareness and sensitivity also refer to the qualities of openness and flexibility that people develop in relation to others. Cultural awareness must be supplemented with cultural knowledge(Adams, 1995).

**1.2.3 Cultural Sensitivity** Knowing that cultural differences as well as similarities exist, without assigning values, i.e., better or worse, right or wrong, to those cultural differences (National Maternal and Child Health Center on Cultural Competency, 1997).

**1.2.4 Cultural competence**, is defined as a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that come together in a system, agency, or among professionals and enables that system, agency, or those professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Cross, Bazron, Dennis, & Isaacs, 1989). Operationally defined, cultural competence is the integration and transformation of knowledge about individuals and groups of people into specific standards, policies, practices, and attitudes used in appropriate cultural settings to increase the quality of health care; thereby producing better health outcomes (Davis, 1997). Cultural competency emphasizes the idea of effectively operating in different cultural contexts. Knowledge, sensitivity, and awareness do not include this concept. "This is beyond awareness or sensitivity," says Marva Benjamin of the Georgetown Technical Assistance Center for Children's Mental Health.

1.3 Reason behind choosing sales function in IT sector is very candid.IT sector experiences very high attrition due to many causes related to organization and individual. But the truth still remains that IT sector has become the backbone of all businesses ranging from stationery to food to customer care to banking to name any thing .And at the same time one requires leadership in the sales function of IT in order to survive better than the competitor. This sector requires working in a culturally diverse setting and hence is the need for cultural sensitivity to be high here. Until leaders are not culturally sensitive , chances are rare that this will be followed at lower levels.

1.4 Objectives in dealing with cultural differences effectively, can be defined as:

**1.4.1 Culture versus Individual:** being able to identify whether perceived differences are actually attributable to the individual or have a cultural merit.

**1.4.2 Customer Service:** is not culturally neutral. Creating an insight in the cultural aspects of service (internal & external) will assist in a more effective approach towards those customers.

**1.4.3 Motivational drives:** different cultures have different motivations. Wrongly used they can actually de-motivate a person, correctly used they can lead to higher productivity as desired.

**1.4.4 Tools:** supply participants with tools to actively and constructively approach the different issues in their work environments.

**1.4.5 Relationship building:** within different cultures there is a complete different meaning of the word "relationship". When these relationships take shape in a positive and constructive way they will lead to: (see next item)

**1.4.6 Mutual Trust:** one of the most fundamental issues when doing cross-cultural business.

**1.4.7 Enhanced Awareness:** of the "other culture" but even more important awareness of one's own cultural biases (towards the "other culture").

**1.4.8 Cultural Sensitivity:** the ability to identify the cultural aspects in everyday working situations .Insight into intercultural communication and management skills Enhancement on the effectiveness of working in multi-cultural teams.

1.5 Exploring culturally sensitive factors in each of these aspects reveals an effective and viable way to address the issues of the influence of culture. The dimensions are as follows:

**1.5.1 Knowledge Dimension**, which is related to the knowledge that is to be gained from learning objects, and the knowledge context that may differ between learners in different cultural backgrounds.

Factors	Description and Cultural Sensitivity
Learning Content	The topic to be taught in the learning object Culturally sensitive issues included in the learning object, e.g., race, class, religion, gender, etc.
Prior Knowledge	The knowledge related to the topic that learners(potential leaders) should have beforehand in learning through the learning object Special knowledge involved in the learning object that may be not familiar to learners in other cultures

**1.5.2 Pedagogy Dimension**, which refers to the pedagogical issues that determine methods to collect information about module building that are built into the learning objects and may be considered as having cultural preferences.

**1.5.3 Access Dimension**, which is related to all aspects providing appropriate expression of the contents, accessible interface, and interactive channel between leaders and the followers.

**1.5.4 Technology Dimension**, which refers to technologies that are utilised to facilitate learning which include technical media used to develop learning objects and the technological context that may differ between learners and their cultural backgrounds. Each dimension contains some culturally sensitive factors that may affect leadership in terms of cultural adaptability and flexibility.

## 2. REVIEW OF LITERATUTRE

**2.1** It was found that none what so ever work has been done so far in this direction for IT sector. Hospitality and Tourism are only the much talked about sector. But if we pay attention, it is the IT sector which is the backbone of all other sectors today and it is this sector which requires understanding the culturally diverse part. Especially the potential leaders must understand this in order to serve various demographics better. Knowing the dimensions of culture will help in gathering the dimensions of cultural sensitivity.

Hofstede's four dimensions of culture will come handy.

### 2.1.1 POWER DISTANCE

Power distance is the societal desire for hierarchy. Expressed more eloquently, Hofstede (1984b) defines it as: Power distance is the extent to which the members of a society accept that power in institutions and organizations is distributed unequally....People in Large Power Distance societies accept a hierarchical order in which everybody has a place which needs no further justification. People in Small Power Distance societies strive for power equalization and demand justification for power inequalities among people when they occur.

### 2.1.2 UNCERTAINTY AVOIDANCE

The Uncertainty Avoidance Index addresses a society's tolerance of ambiguity and uncertainty. Questions on the survey that deal with uncertainty avoidance address rule orientation, employment stability, and stress. Specifically, Hofstede finds that those who seek to avoid uncertainty endorse responses consistent with the ideas that rules are made to be followed, people should stay with organizations for a lifetime, and that because of its uncertainty, life is stressful. Conversely, "uncertainty-accepting cultures are more tolerant of behavior and opinions that differ from their own; they try to have as few rules as possible, and on the philosophical and religious level, they are relativist.

Though having no data, Hofstede (1984c) speculates that uncertainty avoidance will impact a culture's choice of games. Hofstede believes that uncertainty avoidance impacts the meaning of time and the desire for precision and punctuality. Specifically,...more Uncertainty Avoiding traditional societies like Mexico are more hurried than less Uncertainty Avoiding societies where meditation is important (like India)...among the Uncertainty Avoiding developed countries, precision and punctuality come more naturally than among the less Uncertainty Avoiding ones. The success of a country like Japan in the precision industries is supported by the strong Uncertainty Avoidance in its culture (1984b, p. 95). Such an orientation surely would impact expectations as well as expressions of service in the buyer-seller transaction.

### 2.1.3 INDIVIDUALISM

According to Hofstede, Individualism stands for a preference for a loosely knit social framework in society wherein individuals are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate family only. Its opposite, Collectivism, stands for a preference for a tightly knit social framework in which individuals can expect their relatives, clan, or other in-group to look after them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty....I relates to people's self-concept: 'I' or 'we.' (1984b, p. 83) .If everybody does his or her own thing, the economy grows less quickly than it would if at least some individuals worked for collective purposes. (Hofstede & Bond, 1988, p. 14).

This dimension is probably the most obviously relevant to leadership; however there are still possible applications. Such statements suggest that in a collectivist culture, once a relationship is established between a vendor and a client, then the vendor can expect a higher loyalty from the client.

### 2.1.4 MASCULINITY

As stated previously, the masculinity dimension measures the preference for sex-role distinctions to be made between men and women in a particular culture. Specifically, "the factor score...on this factor has been used as the basis for a country Masculinity Index (MAS) which measures to what extent HERMES respondents in a country (of both sexes) tend to endorse goals usually more popular among men (high MAS) or among women (low MAS)" (p. 176, 1984a) Hofstede states.

**2. 2** Let us consider an example of two cultural differences here. (Analogical with my paper)Asian versus Western Culture In studying the influence of culture on consumer perceptions of service encounters Matilla (1999) points out with relation to hotel industry that because first-class hotel services are delivered by people, cultural factors are likely to mediate the hotel customers' attitude toward the service component of their hotel experience. As service styles in Asia are more people oriented compared to the West, where efficiency of service delivery is highly valued, Asian consumers even for low cost services expect a relatively high level of service (cited in Matilla 1999). A Western consumer will not mind an impersonal service if it is efficient and timesaving where-as an Asian consumer places primary emphasis on the quality of interpersonal relationships and the quality of interaction between employee and customer (Matilla 1999). In reporting the service experiences of culturally diverse consumers in multicultural society of Australia, Barker and Hartel (2004) state that on the basis of service provider behaviour (both verbal and non-verbal), culturally diverse customers perceive they are the recipients of inequitable service and consequently experience low levels of satisfaction. The cultural background strongly influences consumer behavior. Reisinger and Turner (1999) suggest that at consumption stage of buyer behaviour Japanese tourists have experienced problems with Australian service provisions. The Japanese complained about a lack of professional service in restaurants, poor organization of tours, lack of sophisticated packaging, lack of good manners by service staff and slow service. All this lead to that Gold Coast region, the major holiday destination for Japanese tourists, starting losing it appeal as a preferred tourist destination for Japanese honeymooners in favor of Hawaii (Reisinger and Turner 1999). This explains and supports the importance of cultural sensitivity and cross cultural service encounters. **This must give the leaders a heads up about what kind of application software should be developed and what information should be asked for.**

**2.3** Cross cultural sensitivity and employee performance and business success- Any international service trade whether hotels or other services usually will involve service encounters and dealings with consumers from different cultures. Ignorance of core cultural sensitive values often leads to erroneous belief resulting in unhappy customers and lost business. It becomes painful when it doesn't need to be. Sizoo (et al 2005) point out the fact that intercultural sensitivity which is an attitude that enables an individual to interact effectively with people from different cultures is a skill that can be measured and learned. Research indicates that cross culturally sensitive employees provide their foreign customers better service. They are able to adjust their serving styles to meet the needs of their foreign customers. Such an act is extremely beneficial for any hotel as such employees are able to generate more revenue for the hotel through their impression on hotel guests and suggestive selling. Many American firms fail to take advantage of cross-cultural training even if it is made available (Lee-Ross 2005). Likewise hospitality industry is failing to account appropriately for cross-cultural understanding in management training programmes and subsequent initiatives. Ritz-Carlton hotel group experienced difficulties when they tried to introduce a western-style total quality management system in their Hong Kong hotel due to Chinese cultural value 'Guanxi' ( see Lee-Ross 2005).



**2.4** Gannon and Poon (1997, p. 431) employ Gudykunst and Hammer's (1983) two-dimensional matrix: didactic vs. experiential, and culture-general vs. culture-specific, to categorise cross-cultural training methods. Bennett (1986) classifies different cross-cultural training approaches by way of a three-dimensional model: the nature of the training goals (cognitive, affective or behavioural), the nature of the content (culture-general or culture-specific), and the nature of the process (intellectual or experiential).

**2.5** Previous research has shown that the ability of a firm to break down cultural barriers and establish close business relationships with partners is a major factor for success in international business marketing (Ford 1984). Unless exporters are sensitive to the cultural aspects of buyer-seller relationships, it is very difficult to build long-term high quality relationships. In spite of the important role of cultural sensitivity in doing business in foreign countries, LaBahn and Harich (1997) noted that little systematic empirical research has been conducted on how cultural differences combine with theories of relationship marketing in an international business setting. In addition, Patterson et al. (1998) point out that the large number of international business partnership studies in Western countries needs to be supplemented with other studies encompassing firms from different countries. This study attempted to bridge this gap by investigating the impact of two cultural factors, i.e., cultural sensitivity and ethnocentrism, on relationship quality between developing-based exporters and their foreign importers. Also, it explored the relationship between relationship quality and its outcome, i.e., export performance. The paper is organised as follows: (1) relationship quality, (2) the model, (3) the method, (4) the results, and (5) conclusions, implications, and limitations.

**2.6** There is a general agreement that cultural sensitivity entails awareness, cultural understanding, and reduction of cultural bias (LaBahn and Harich 1997). It is defined as a firm's learning and adaptation to its exchange partner's national business practices (LaBahn and Harich 1997). It is noted that little systematic empirical research has been undertaken on how cultural differences combine with theories of relationship marketing in the international business setting (LaBahn and Harich 1997) and, further, few attempts have been made to explore the relationship between cultural sensitivity and relationship quality.

**2.7** Developed by internationally renowned business scholar, Manfred F.R. Ket de Vries, the Global Executive Leadership Inventory measures twelve competencies in the following dimensions: Visioning, Empowering, Energizing, Designing and Aligning, Rewarding and Feedback, Team Building, Outside Orientation, Global Mindset, Tenacity, Emotional Intelligence, Life Balance, Resilience to Stress which can be used to understand the score of a sensitive leader.

### 3. NEED/IMPORTANCE OF THE STUDY

**3.1** Culture can include how people live, role expectations, child rearing practices, attitudes about time or money, definition of achievement, concepts of beauty, art, music, food, and a host of other things. Nonetheless, culture is only one element of who a person is. Once we have got the dimensions of cultural sensitivity and their relation with potential leaders, now the results can be used for career planning and succession planning. Also, retrospectively the output can be used as input in recruiting or promoting people for middle level and first level leaders.

**3.2** The literature review tells us that while global leaders across the world display similar patterns of leadership behavior, there are significant differences in some behavior that can be attributed to cultural origins, and which have implications for leadership effectiveness. "Is there a great global leader who could parachute in and be effective anywhere? We find that that's not so." "In some cultures, some particular traits of leadership are stronger. But it's not possible to have a person who is strong in everything. There are differences depending upon where you come from, and differences manifest themselves because of culture."

### 4. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

**4.1** Is Knowledge of Cultural sensitivity truly playing a role in deciding who are the potential leaders in sales function w.r.t. IT sector?

### 5. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

**5.1** To explain the concept of cultural sensitivity and find out its dimensions.

**5.2** To investigate the extent to which the various dimensions of cultural sensitivity are important to the potential leaders in sales function of IT sector.

**5.3** To build a conceptual model with the dimensions and relating it to potential leadership.

### 6. HYPOTHESES

H<sub>1</sub> Cultural sensitivity is required by potential leaders in sales function of IT sector to be the leaders.

### 7. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

**7.1** A world class IT organization may assess its own status of cultural sensitivity by asking the following questions:

**7.1.1** Does the way of doing business in your organization suffer severely from cultural lag?

**7.1.2** Does the organization seek to understand the culture of customers, employees and suppliers?

**7.1.3** Do the project managers utilize cultural analysis and insights in terms of their own management style and public relations?

**7.1.4** Do the project managers realize the value of cultural differences and promote cultural synergy? (adapted from Harris 2004)

**7.2** Sample Size 120 (first and middle level managers from IT sector)

**7.3** Organizations approached HCL, WIPRO, Naggaro Software, Nucleus Software.

**7.4** Sampling Method- Convenience Sampling.

**7.5** Tool used- Blake and Mouton questionnaire for potential leadership and Harris(2004) to check culturally sensitive .

### 8. RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS-THE CONCEPTUAL MODEL FORMULATED

**8.1** Global business leaders must adapt their behavior to the country in which they are doing business or risk being perceived as ineffective and unable to handle complexity, change and ambiguity. And since by and large the IT people are supposed to deal with all cultures so they need to be high here.

**8.2** With different cultures placing different relative value on certain leadership behaviors and styles, cultural sensitivity and a holistic approach to people are necessary qualities for executives working across cultures.

**8.3** Countries high on uncertainty avoidance would like to play it safe with more time allowed for pilot testing hence a leader dealing with such countries' projects should not rush up things rather be meticulous with his team mates.

**8.4** Cultural differences matter in leadership and the most effective leaders embrace them.

**8.5** Cultural Sensitivity and Employees-As globalization has companies frequently outsourcing work or recruiting global professionals from a range of countries, many firms have instituted cultural sensitivity training and expanded the range of languages into which their sales aids and brochures are translated. A failure to appreciate cultural differences like language and traditions can alienate foreign employees and, in the case of materials not translated into their language, actually prevent them from doing their jobs.

**8.6** Understand that people from different racial and ethnic groups and other cultural subgroups are usually best served by persons who are a part of or in tune with their culture.

**8.7** Respect the unique, culturally defined needs of various client populations.

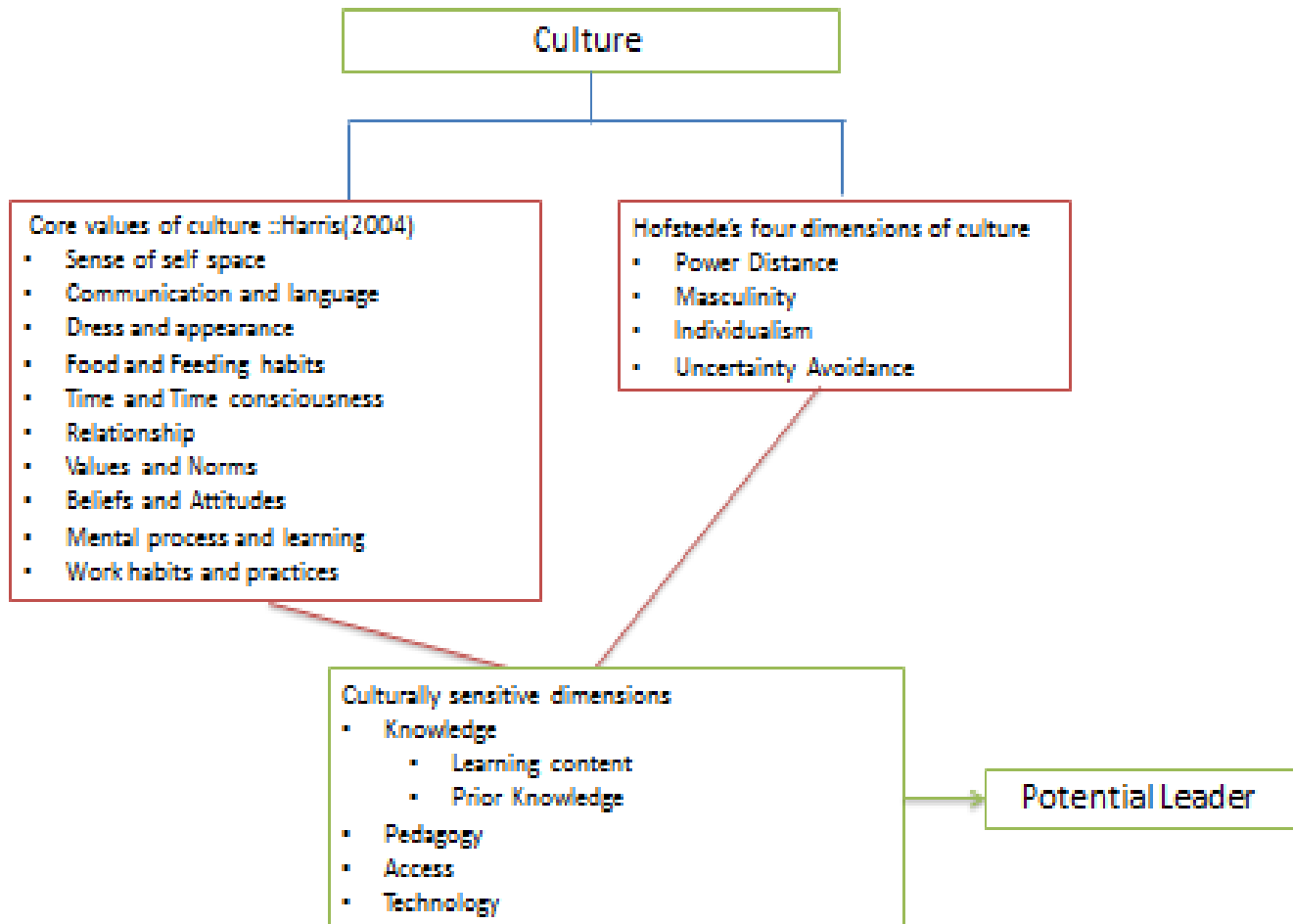
**8.8** Cultural sensitivity can play an important role on the personal level. Companies courting employees or executives from countries with other social norms or beliefs would do well to respect those beliefs. A failure to do so can lead to everything from personal offense taken to certain cultural insensitive moves (such as not taking into account a person's cultural dietary restrictions during a business lunch) to the failure to do business entirely if a company consistently offends the culture of a potential business partner.

**8.9 Cultural Sensitivity and Language** -When businesses need to sell products or produce advertisements in foreign countries, often these use the host country's own language. Being insensitive to the nuances of a foreign language can create real cultural relations problems for companies. Marketing efforts for an alcoholic beverage called "Irish Mist" ran astray in Germany because the company behind the product failed to notice that the word "Mist" in German means "manure."

**8.10** Preparing sales people to play a successful role in the global marketplace requires a shift in mindset. Specialized training helps them parlay their cultural differences into communication and negotiation advantages.

**8.11** People from different cultures have different motivational aspirations and not understanding these could prove detrimental.

**Model- Relationship of culture, cultural sensitivity and leadership potential**



**9. FINDINGS**

A culturally competent practice is better able to provide services that are consistent with client needs, in this case that of a potential leader.

**9.1** Acknowledge culture as a predominant force in shaping behaviors, values and institutions;

**9.2** Acknowledge and accept that cultural differences exist and have an impact on service delivery;

**9.3** Believe that diversity within cultures is as important as diversity between cultures;

**9.4** Recognize that concepts such as "family" and "community" are different for various cultures and event for subgroups within cultures; and hence is the expectation and way of working of different people;

**9.6** People high on the knowledge of "values and Norms", "Sense and self space" follow "country club leadership style.

**9.7** It is evident from the data gathered from Nucleus software and Nagarro Software that employees receive cross cultural training in order to be sensitive towards other cultures. This is a regular practice. Out of a combined 70 sales people, 65 agreed that products globally owe much to a deep sensitivity to cross-cultural nuances. And out of these 65 , 25 are scoring high on potential leadership scale.

**9.8** individuals high on Power Distance are found to be low on cultural sensitivity yet they score high on leadership potential scale.

**9.9** HCL also seconds the thought of people being culturally sensitive though no strong statistical evidence could be found.

**10. RECOMMENDATIONS/SUGGESTIONS**

**10.1** Cultural sensitivity training should be made compulsory, right after induction and at regular intervals as refresher training so that the touch is not missed.

**10.2** There is no clear demarcation on people and task orientation of individuals. Hence people high on task orientation should not be mistaken for being low on leadership potential.

**11. CONCLUSIONS**

Most major firms are grappling with this issue – how to have managers and leaders who are sensitive to cultural differences while also being effective employees when working abroad and hence a model of development which incorporates cultural sensitivity maximizes the likelihood of a sustainable program; implementing projects which integrate seamlessly with existing customs and culture have a greater chance of surviving a transition to local leadership and

maintaining permanency in a community. However, the appeal of Hofstede's research lies fundamentally in the fact that countries are already categorized on dimensions, not necessarily exclusive or exhaustive, but nevertheless dimensions recognized as important. Cultural differences matter in leadership and the most effective leaders embrace them. IT sector is no exception and specially the sales function, as it is this function which is dealing with people from all cultures and with a focus to get results. And hence is the need for the leaders in this function to embrace themselves with the knowledge of different cultures in order to reduce the time-wastage activities. In a globalised work environment, having a multinational team is becoming the norm. Whether a leader is "Eastern" or "Western" will influence how they interact with their employees. These differences can be stark and sometimes frustrating. Shyness might be considered rude in some cultures. Aggression might seem overwhelming to others even though it's par for the course where they come from.

Even though the behaviors are global, as a leader you should approach the individuals that you're dealing with in an individual manner and pay some attention to their cultures. Deal with your expectations of yourself, but also what their expectations are of you.

Final words: Cultural sensitivity is a must to gain an insight into by leaders in all sectors, and IT is no exception.

## 12. LIMITATIONS

12.1 The research was conducted on a small number of professionals and only in Delhi NCR region hence the results cannot be generalized.

12.2 Results could not be verified statistically.

## 13. SCOPE FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

These results can further be utilized in assessing the right match for a leadership position and also in succession planning.

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