



Our Thinking Series:

Is There Any Such Thing As Asian Leadership?

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To be effective as global leaders means understanding how culture, personality and behaviour interact to make us who we are. Psychologists have argued that there is a link between a country's culture and the personality of its citizens. Here we look at eight Asian nations and their citizens' personality traits, and draw conclusions on how these traits affect the way people work.

What is Personality?

What makes us who we are? The personality assessment test known as Facet5 suggests that a person's personality can be defined by five unique factors:

WILL: This factor looks at how people promote and defend their own ideas. The focus is on personal beliefs and values. At the core of Will are determination, confrontation and independence.

People who score low on Will are usually more accepting, accommodating, flexible and peaceable. They have no desire to direct or impose their will on others.

ENERGY: People who score high in Energy (extroverts) are energetic, active and enthusiastic. They are also gregarious, competitive, fun-loving and sociable. They are optimistic, spontaneous and excited about new ventures.

Low scores in Energy (introverts) are quieter, more reserved and private. They keep to themselves and take time to get to know others, but make strong long-term friendships. In addition, they avoid social events and may seem distant and aloof to others.

AFFECTION: People with high scores in Affection are genuinely positive about others. These people tend to be warm, supportive, responsive, sympathetic and understanding. They are generally open-minded and receptive to new ideas. They are selfless and will sacrifice their own interests for others. They are also loyal and trusting, but may be seen as naive by more 'worldly' people.

People who have low scores in Affection are more pragmatic and business-like. They are quick to seize opportunities, are task-focused and do not get confused by alternatives. Some may see them as cynical and unsympathetic.

CONTROL: Those people with high scores in Control like order, structure and planning. Duty and responsibility are cornerstones of their lives, and they become disillusioned if others do not share their views about behaviour and standards. They are conscientious, loyal and ethical, and can be relied upon to apply themselves consistently.

People with low scores in Control are more easy-going and laid-back. They tend to live for the moment and take things as they come. They are uncritical and liberal in their views and may seem casual, un-planned and even unreliable.

EMOTIONALITY: High scores in Emotionality are associated with a tendency to overreact and to have low self-confidence and anxiety. Furthermore, people with high Emotionality scores tend to be more cautious and have a heightened awareness of risk and natural vigilance. People with high Emotionality can be more perceptive of logical errors and can often provide a brake to other employees' overconfidence and impetuosity.

People with low Emotionality are generally confident, optimistic and relaxed. They can under-react to events and may seem to be unaware of risk.

The Distinct Profiles of Asian Nations

Using data from over 14,000 people from eight Asian nations and regions, Facet5 analysed these countries' 'national character' – their citizen's 'typical' personality. The figure above shows the position of China, Hong Kong, Indonesia, Japan, Malaysia, Singapore, South Korea and Thailand on each of the five Facet5 factors, alongside the global and Asian mean.

WILL: Asian scores are generally on or below the global average. Within this group, Japan, South Korea and Hong Kong score lowest. China, Singapore and Indonesia are closer to the mean. From this we can infer that people from most Asian nations are less outspoken and more accepting than their Western counterparts.

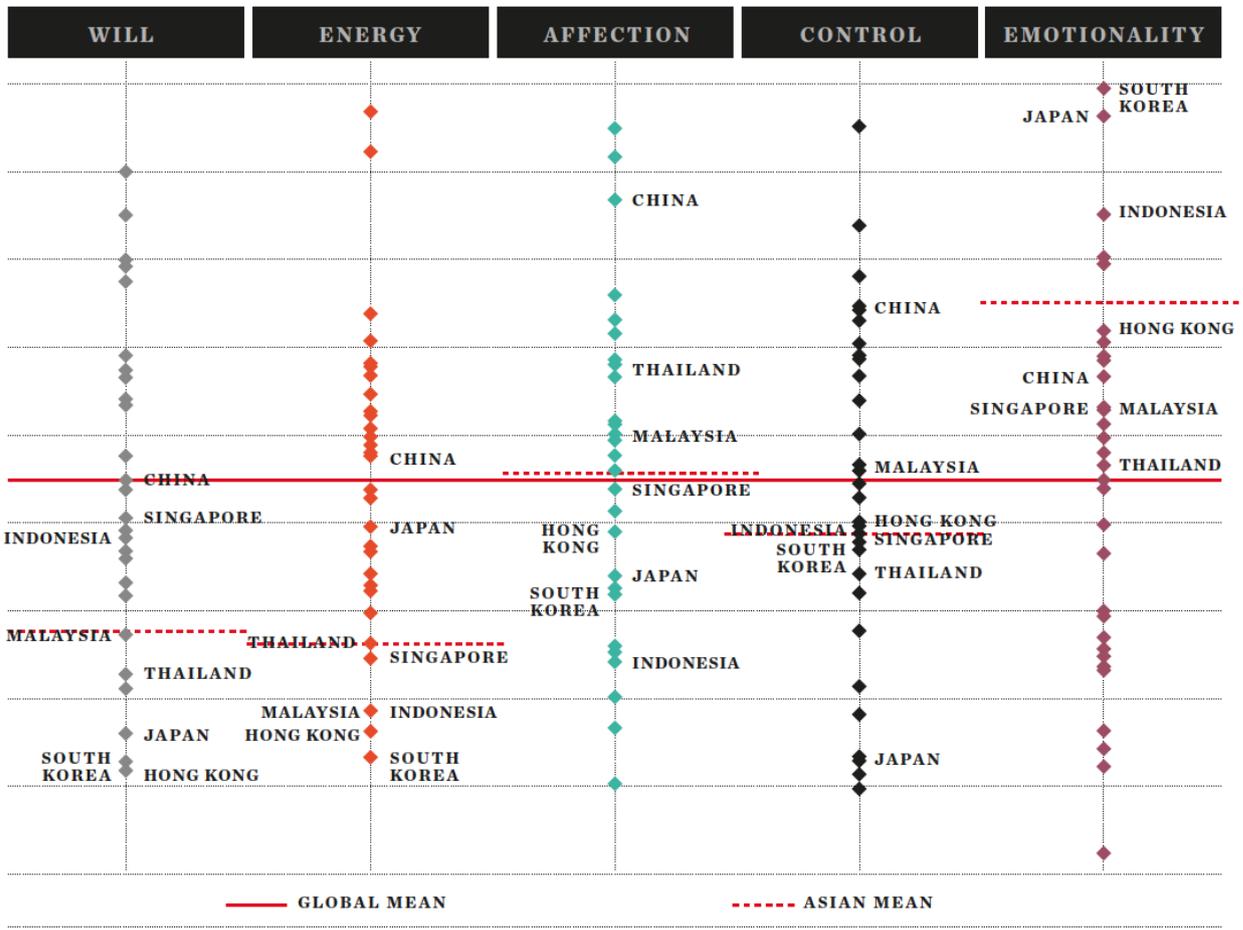
Compared to the global mean, Asians may show less independent initiative and prefer to have clear instructions on what to do, but may be more willing to listen to others and less argumentative. They look for consensus to get a decision and prefer to share responsibilities within the team. Asians are also more likely to accept and respect decisions made by more senior people.

ENERGY: Generally, people from the Asian nations covered are more introverted than the global average. They are more private, take time to get to know others and prefer to think a problem through before speaking. They maintain strong relationships, but with much smaller groups. They are more comfortable working within their specialised area and where their skills and achievements will be recognised.

Conversely, Westerners are more self-promoting, which, in many Asian nations, can be seen as showing off. This can lead to some negativity, with Chinese business management author Mo Shao Kun describing Western leaders as "peacocks" that only display an outward appearance of grandeur.

AFFECTION: When it comes to Affection, there seems to be a greater spread across the eight Asian countries. People in Indonesia, Japan and South Korea appear tough-minded and pragmatic, while Thai and Chinese people seem to be more focused on relationships and harmony. Thai and Chinese are also more comfortable with uncertainty and expect the world to be complex and ambiguous.

RANKING OF COUNTRIES BY FACET5 PERSONALITY TRAIT



Source: Facet5

In contrast, people in Japan, South Korea and Indonesia may have more focused interests. Opportunities are seen from a personal perspective and business discussions may be more pragmatic. Business can be a slow affair in China and Thailand as trust is built, but in Japan and South Korea business may be more direct.

“It is widely understood that people from different cultures do things differently but how do such behavioural traits influence leadership in the East versus in Western markets?”

CONTROL: While most Asian nations are similar to the global norm, two are different. China is significantly more traditional, structured and rule-bound. Here, business is based on formal process and step-by-step analysis. People have specific roles and decision-making is hierarchical.

Conversely, Japanese national culture appears individualistic, non-traditional and willing to challenge hierarchy. Based off Facet5 findings, we would expect Japanese business discussions to be unpredictable with multiple entry points. Although this may seem contrary to stereotypes about Japan, it echoes a 2007 study that showed Japan scored lowest out of 56 nations on Conscientiousness, a construct very similar to Control.

What does it mean for Asia?

The above results indicate that key personality differences do exist between Asian nations and the Western world. Compared to Western nations most Asian countries have lower scores on Will and Energy and higher scores on Emotionality. This would suggest Asians are less stubborn and assertive and more reflective and private than Westerners, but are also less self-confident and sure of themselves.

How do these differences in personality affect the work environment? Let's look at three aspects of business and see how they might be viewed and implemented differently in Asia and the West.

Transformational Leadership

In the West, transformational leadership – that is, a leader's ability to inspire their followers to achieve lasting positive change – has emerged as a highly influential business concept. Transformational leaders are capable of 'transforming' organisational performance. They create a vision that people can relate to, an intellectually stimulating working environment, and treat people as individuals.

Based on the Facet5 personality assessment test, transformational leaders have higher Will and Energy, and less Control. They are charismatic, enthusiastic, self-promoting, individualistic, assertive, outspoken and direct. However, Asian nations score lower on these attributes. Asian leaders tend to be more modest, quiet and self-deprecating. They take time to think and come to conclusions. This appears to be the antithesis of the idealised Western transformational leader. Many studies link transformational leadership to higher corporate performance. If Asian leaders are largely not transformational material, will Asian-led organisations be overshadowed by their Western rivals?

Most studies on transformational leadership and its positive effect on organisational performance are Western. There are disputes over whether transformational leadership works across all cultures. In a 2005 article, Gretchen Spreitzer, Professor of Management and Organizations at the Ross School of Business at the University of Michigan, argued that Taiwan was a more traditional society than most Western countries. Consequently, Taiwanese leaders were more focused on creating group harmony than on individual task performance. As group harmony is often discouraged in transformational leadership, which focuses on challenging and pushing for change, transformational leaders were found to be less effective in Taiwan.

For Asian organisations to develop transformational leaders requires different processes to the ones used in the West. Asian transformational leaders should be visionary without seeming arrogant, assertive while still reflective, and direct while remaining modest.



Conflict Resolution

The ultimate objective of conflict resolution is to get a 'win-win' situation. However, different personality types take different approaches to conflict resolution. Westerners generally score higher on Will, which tends to make them more assertive – they focus on their needs, desired outcomes and agenda, while in contrast Asians usually have higher Affection, which makes them more cooperative – they focus on others' needs and mutual relationships. This invites opposing conflict-resolution approaches.

To resolve conflict, assertive people state their position and defend it strongly, while more cooperative people listen and try to accommodate the other's position. This can lead to negative perceptions being formed as Westerners can appear rude and dogmatic to Asians, while Asians can seem evasive and lacking clarity to Westerners. Similarly, Western goals are writ large and are obvious, while Asian objectives can be less clear, complicated and ambiguous.

Team Building

Team building is seen by most organisations as a highly valuable concept. Much of the theory behind successfully building teams is underpinned by the work of American psychologists Joseph Luft and Harrington Ingham. Through personal feedback and open discussion, Luft and Ingham aimed to help the individual understand both themselves and their relationships with others.

However, people with lower Will are cautious about giving feedback, and open disclosure is easier for more socially confident, outgoing types. A colleague of ours at Facet5 has delivered numerous training and team-building events for Asian organisations. He argues that there is less openness and sharing in Asian teams, while feedback is more about efficiencies of the group as a whole. Asian teams tend to ask "what do we need to do to improve" rather than "what do I need to do". They then commit to improving the team.

Both Western and Asian organisations can benefit from team building but should take different approaches to it. Team building can be involved, participative and focused on the individual for Westerners, and formalised, practical and focused on the team for Asians.

Conclusion

The notion that leadership in Asia is different from leadership in the West is not new. Research increasingly demonstrates how Asian leadership differs from the West. Perhaps business needs to accept multiple styles to suit multiple environments and situations. In an increasingly globalised environment, one-size-fits-all leadership programmes will become inappropriate and obsolete.

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