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What Makes Leadership Effective Across Organizational Cultures? A Systematic Review of Cultural Contingencies, Leader Behaviors, and Context-Sensitive Performance Mechanisms, 2017–2024

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Abstract

Leadership scholarship has repeatedly asked whether effective leadership travels across cultures, yet evidence is difficult to interpret when leader behaviors, follower expectations, national-level cultural indicators, organizational settings, and outcome measures are treated as interchangeable. This systematic review examines peer-reviewed evidence published from 2017 through 2024 to identify when leadership behaviors appear broadly useful, when their meaning or effects vary across cultural settings, and which mechanisms and contextual conditions help explain that variation. A verified screening ledger contained 54 formally assessed candidates, of which 38 were retained for synthesis. The evidence base combines cross-cultural meta-analyses, integrative reviews, measurement-validation studies, and multi-country or culturally heterogeneous organizational research. Across these designs, the literature does not support a simple choice between universal leadership prescriptions and unrestricted cultural relativism. Instead, several leader behaviors show recurring favorable associations while their interpretation, strength, or downstream outcomes vary with cultural values, follower schemas, team composition, ecological and institutional conditions, work design, and measurement choices. The review therefore develops a proposed context-sensitive synthesis in which leadership effectiveness is interpreted through the alignment among enacted behavior, follower meaning-making, relational or identity processes, and situational demands. This synthesis is intended as an organizing framework rather than a validated causal model. The review is bounded by heterogeneous designs, uneven cultural coverage, construct overlap, common-method risk, and the inability to treat country differences as direct evidence of individual cultural mechanisms.

Keywords: Cross-cultural leadership, Cultural contingencies, Leader behavior, Leadership effectiveness, Follower expectations, Contextual moderators

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Introduction

Cross-cultural leadership research increasingly indicates that societal culture can shape what followers expect from leaders, how leadership is enacted and interpreted, and which outcomes are associated with particular behaviors [1]. The central problem is therefore not to identify a single globally superior style, but to determine which relationships travel, which are contingent, and why.

That problem is multilevel. Culture is relevant to organizational behavior through individual, dyadic, team, organizational, and societal processes, and those levels cannot be treated as interchangeable [2]. Country membership can locate a study context, but it does not by itself establish the cultural values of individual followers or leaders.

National-culture frameworks remain useful for organizing comparisons, yet country-level scores can obscure within-country heterogeneity and changes in cultural meaning over time [3]. Accordingly, this review distinguishes the level at which culture is theorized from the level at which it is measured.

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Leadership may also be jointly conditioned by cultural and ecological environments rather than by culture alone [4]. Institutional arrangements, resource conditions, demographic composition, and task environments may therefore function as alternative or upstream explanations for apparent cultural differences.

Finally, leadership research often underspecifies context, weakening claims of transferability [5]. This review addresses that deficit by asking not only whether a leader behavior is associated with effectiveness, but under which cultural, relational, organizational, and methodological conditions that association can reasonably be interpreted.

Conceptual scope and review questions

The review treats culture as a family of contextual constructs rather than as a single national attribute. Country-level cultural dimensions can structure comparison, but their use requires explicit attention to construct definition, measurement level, and ecological inference [6]. Cultural values measured at the individual level are therefore not assumed equivalent to national averages, and national differences are not automatically interpreted as cultural mechanisms.

Leadership is similarly separated into enacted behavior, follower perception, and attributed effectiveness. Implicit leadership and followership theories show that leadership information is filtered through expectations about what leaders and followers should be [7]. A behavior can thus be evaluated differently without the behavior itself changing.

Follower characteristics and cultural values may also condition leadership effects [8]. The review therefore asks: Which leader behaviors show recurring cross-cultural associations with performance or attitudinal outcomes? Which cultural or contextual conditions alter those relationships? Through which interpretive, identity, coordination, or affective mechanisms might effects arise? Where do level-of-analysis, measurement, design, or transferability limits prevent stronger conclusions?

Materials and Methods

A systematic-review design was used to integrate evidence on cultural contingencies, leader behaviors, and context-sensitive leadership outcomes published from 2017 through 2024. The review was organized around predefined domains covering cultural constructs, leadership behaviors, mechanisms, outcomes, contextual moderators, contradictions, and methodological boundaries. Candidate records were screened for direct claim relevance rather than topical mention alone. Methodological appraisal treated research design, estimation, aggregation, measurement, and causal identification as distinct concerns because leadership studies can generate misleading inferences when these are conflated [9]. Meta-analyses, reviews, measurement-validation studies, and primary organizational studies were retained for different evidential roles; they were not treated as interchangeable units of causal evidence. Synthesis was qualitative and integrative rather than meta-analytic, and no pooled effect estimate was calculated.

Review protocol and eligibility criteria

Eligible records were peer-reviewed journal articles published from 2017 through 2024, located in journals screened as Q1 in a relevant management or psychology category, and supported by a verifiable DOI. Inclusion required direct relevance to at least one review domain: cultural conceptualization or measurement; leader behavior; follower interpretation; mechanism; performance or attitudinal outcome; contextual moderator; level-of-analysis problem; contradiction; methodological limitation; or transferability boundary.

Records were excluded when they fell outside the publication window, lacked adequate bibliographic verification, duplicated a retained version, addressed leadership without meaningful cultural relevance, addressed culture without a leadership mechanism, or required inference beyond the examined country, sector, workforce, organizational level, or outcome. Redundant sources were deprioritized when more direct cross-cultural or leader-specific evidence supported the same analytical role. The evidence cutoff was 31 December 2024. Search and verification were executed on 18 August 2026; that execution date was retained rather than retrospectively backdated.

Information sources and search strategy

Searches were conducted through DOI-indexed publisher and scholarly web interfaces, supplemented by journal-level quartile checks. Because cross-cultural leadership uses heterogeneous terminology, search sensitivity was built through concept blocks rather than reliance on a single title phrase. Search combinations covered cross-cultural leadership and effectiveness; transformational, transactional, servant, authentic, paternalistic, charismatic, humble, and destructive leadership; implicit leadership and followership theories; identity processes; multicultural and multinational teams; cultural values and dimensions; work design; contextual moderators; measurement; common-method bias; theory; and methodological limitations.

The substantive search boundary was peer-reviewed journal evidence published during 2017–2024 with DOI verification. The interfaces used did not expose a stable, reproducible raw-result total, so such totals were not estimated. Duplicate

publisher or repository mirrors were collapsed before formal candidate logging. The reproducible search and eligibility logic is specified in **Table 1**.

Table 1. Search and eligibility rules used to construct the cross-cultural leadership evidence base

Protocol component	Applied specification	Screening use	
Review scope	Culture, leader behavior, mechanisms, outcomes, moderators, contradictions, boundaries	Direct relevance required	Keeps the corpus analytically focused
Sources	DOI-indexed publisher/scholarly web interfaces; journal quartile checks	Metadata and DOI verified	Supports traceability
Search concepts	Leadership families, cultural values, follower expectations, identity, multinational teams, context, methods	Combined as concept blocks	Captures heterogeneous terminology
Evidence boundary	Peer-reviewed journal articles, 2017–2024	Outside-window or non-journal records excluded	Preserves defined period
Language/visibility	No separate language exclusion logged; retrieval depended on indexed interfaces	Multilingual completeness not assumed	Makes discoverability limits explicit
Fit and redundancy	Culture and leadership had to be analytically linked	Adjacent, overlapping, narrower, or weak-transferability records excluded	Protects claim fit
Count rule	Only formally logged candidates counted	Raw hits and unrecorded duplicate totals not reconstructed	Prevents fabricated counts

Study selection and screening

Fifty-four unique candidates entered the formal screening ledger. Each was assessed for publication window, journal and DOI eligibility, directness to the review questions, redundancy, cultural relevance, leadership relevance, level-of-analysis fit, and the scope of claims it could legitimately support. Sixteen candidates were excluded and 38 were retained. The exclusions were traceable to four grouped reasons derived from the screening ledger: overlap or redundancy (n=4), insufficient cultural/domain fit (n=6), scope, context, or level mismatch (n=5), and incomplete bibliographic verification (n=1).

The process did not generate a defensible numeric total for raw search results or pre-ledger duplicate mirrors, and those values were not reconstructed. The workflow likewise did not support a separate report-retrieval count. **Figure 1** therefore reports only verified selection operations and distinguishes uncounted identification activities from the formally counted candidate set.

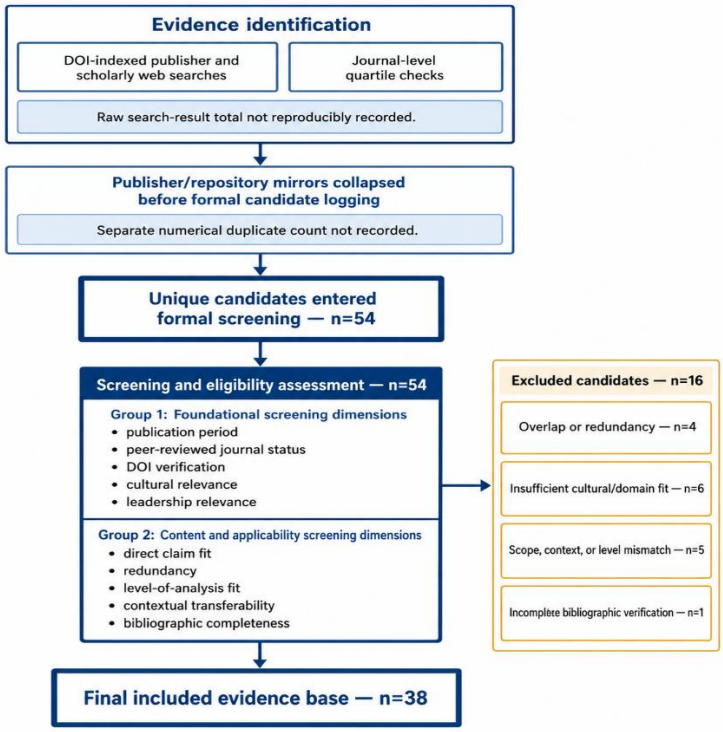

Figure 1. Cross-cultural leadership evidence-base selection through screening, eligibility assessment, and inclusion

Data extraction and coding

A structured extraction scheme was applied to preserve the distinctions needed for cross-cultural interpretation. For each retained source, coding recorded article type and design, country or region, organizational setting, sample or unit of analysis where reported, level of analysis, theoretical lens, focal leadership and cultural constructs, definitions or operationalizations, measurement source, analytical method, mechanism, mediator or moderator, comparator, temporal design, robustness strategy, main finding or theoretical position, uncertainty, stated limitation, and transferability boundary. Missing fields were recorded as not reported or not applicable rather than inferred.

Coding also separated the claim a source could support from claims it could not support. This was especially important for country-level evidence, follower ratings, style labels, and mediation or moderation analyses. Methodological concerns identified in leadership research—including aggregation, estimation, construct treatment, and causal inference—were used as interpretive safeguards rather than as reasons to discard every nonexperimental study [9].

Quality and relevance assessment

Quality assessment was claim-specific rather than based on a single study hierarchy. Meta-analyses were judged primarily for the scope and comparability of the evidence they synthesized; reviews for conceptual coverage and argument discipline; validation studies for measurement comparability; and primary studies for design, operationalization, analytic fit, and the match between data and inference.

Particular attention was given to common-method processes because leadership and outcome variables are often measured from overlapping respondents or within the same survey context. Such processes can inflate, attenuate, or otherwise distort observed associations, and statistical or procedural remedies do not automatically remove the problem [10]. The review therefore distinguished enacted leader behavior from follower perceptions, country context from individually measured cultural values, association from mediation or moderation evidence, and theoretical mechanism from demonstrated causal process.

Synthesis strategy

Synthesis proceeded by relationship rather than by counting nominal leadership styles. Leadership-style categories often overlap conceptually and empirically, making it unsafe to interpret each label as a distinct mechanism [11]. Accordingly, the review first retained authors' original construct labels, then compared evidence at four analytically separate layers: enacted or attributed leader behavior; cultural or contextual condition; mediating or interpretive process; and performance or attitudinal outcome.

The synthesis also distinguished empirical regularities from theoretical explanation. Leadership theory is most informative when it specifies mechanisms, boundary conditions, and testable relations rather than attaching causal meaning to an observed association [12]. Evidence was therefore interpreted as supporting, qualifying, contradicting, or leaving unresolved a relationship. Cross-country heterogeneity was not treated automatically as evidence of cultural causation, and a nonsignificant cultural moderator was not interpreted as proof of universality. The integrative framework developed later is consequently a proposed organization of the evidence, not an empirically validated model.

Results and Discussion

The retained evidence produced three broad findings. First, favorable leadership-outcome associations recur across more than one cultural setting, but recurrence does not imply identical meaning, magnitude, or mechanism. Second, cultural contingency is relationship-specific: some cultural variables moderate particular leader-behavior–outcome links, whereas others are weak or operationalization-dependent. Third, contextual conditions beyond societal culture matter, including follower schemas, team composition, work design, status processes, virtual interaction, and institutions.

The review therefore found more support for conditional portability than for either strict universality or strict cultural specificity. Some behaviors appear portable because they address recurrent coordination, support, identity, or communication needs, yet their reception can be culturally filtered. Behaviors fitting local authority or relational norms can also produce different outcomes under different tasks or organizational arrangements.

Descriptive characteristics of the evidence base

The evidence base was methodologically heterogeneous. It included cross-cultural meta-analyses, theoretical and integrative reviews, measurement-validation studies, prospective multi-country synthesis, and primary studies of culturally heterogeneous or multinational organizational settings. A direct cross-cultural meta-analysis of transformational and transactional leadership illustrates the value of testing competing cultural-congruence and compensation explanations rather than assuming one cross-national pattern [13].

The unit of analysis also varied. Some studies compared country-level moderators; others examined individually measured cultural values, follower perceptions, dyadic or team processes, top-management diversity, or network relationships. Outcomes ranged from task performance and engagement to citizenship, innovation, creative behavior, and leadership evaluation. This heterogeneity expands conceptual coverage but limits simple aggregation. The corpus is therefore better understood as clusters of differently designed tests.

Table 2. Concentration and sparsity across the cross-cultural leadership evidence landscape

Evidence stratum	Cultural/ context unit	Leadership focus	Outcome emphasis	Evidence architecture	Concentration	Principal limitation
Cross-country style effects	Country/ dimension	Transformational/transactional	Performance, innovation, engagement	Meta-analytic	Concentrated	Country difference may exceed measured culture
Positive relational leadership	Country/ values	Servant/authentic	Attitudes, behavior	Meta-analytic/global	Concentrated	Construct overlap; portability
Authority configurations	Cultural setting	Paternalistic behavior	Follower responses	Comparative synthesis	Moderate	Components differ
Identity and expectations	Followers/ groups	Prototypicality/identity	Evaluation, creativity	Meta-analysis/validation	Moderate	Perception may differ from behavior
Multinational teams	Team heterogeneity	Multicultural/gap-bridging	Communication, engagement	Multi-study/field	Emerging	Team-specific transferability
Destructive/stereotype processes	Values/status context	Destructive leadership/evaluation	Performance, advancement	Primary multi-study	Sparse	Context specificity

Note. Concentration is a qualitative characterization of the retained evidence, not an effect-size ranking or exhaustive study count.

Cultural dimensions and leadership effectiveness

Country differences in leadership–engagement relationships demonstrate heterogeneity, but such differences do not identify national culture as the sole cause [14]. Global servant-leadership evidence instead suggests that some aspects can have broad relevance while other relationships remain culturally contingent [15]. Meta-analytic evidence likewise indicates that cultural factors moderate selected consequences of servant leadership [16], while authentic-leadership antecedents and outcomes show cross-cultural heterogeneity [17].

Leader emotional intelligence provides a related example: associations with subordinate performance outcomes can be observed cross-culturally, yet their interpretation remains bounded by measurement and cultural context [18]. Paternalistic leadership further resists treatment as a unitary style because benevolence and authority have different relationships with outcomes [19], and their configuration varies across cultural settings [20]. More narrowly, uncertainty avoidance has been identified as a moderator of the transformational leadership–innovation relationship [21]. Tests of transformational leadership across many countries also show why cultural moderation should be examined rather than presumed [22].

Leader behaviors across cultural contexts

Behavioral evidence suggests that cross-cultural effectiveness depends partly on what leaders do and partly on how those actions are socially interpreted. Leadership can relate to creative behavior through identification processes across cultural settings, making group attachment a plausible bridge between leader behavior and innovation [23]. Leaders with multicultural experience may communicate and lead more effectively particularly in multinational teams, indicating a capability whose value depends on team composition [24]. Virtual charismatic signaling has also been examined prospectively across five countries, offering a stronger test of cross-context robustness than single-country replication alone [25].

Measurement portability remains essential. Identity leadership has been validated across 20 countries, illustrating that constructs should be tested for cross-cultural comparability rather than assumed equivalent [26]. Leader group prototypicality provides a social-identity route through which followers may grant influence [27]. Expressed humility, meanwhile, is multidimensional and should not be collapsed into a generic "positive leadership" category [28]. In multinational teams, cultural gap-bridging behaviors are associated with subordinate engagement through team-related processes [29].

Mechanisms linking leadership to outcomes

The review identifies interpretation, identification, coordination, and affective response as recurring mechanism families, but the evidence does not justify treating them as a single causal chain. Cultural values can moderate the relationship between destructive leadership and follower task performance through expectation-based processes grounded in implicit leadership

theory [30]. This illustrates a broader distinction: the same observed behavior may be interpreted against different leader prototypes without implying that harmful behavior becomes beneficial or acceptable.

Identification provides another route. Cross-cultural work linking leadership, identification, and creativity supports an interpretive bridge between leader behavior and innovative action [23]. Group prototypicality similarly indicates that perceived embodiment of group identity can shape leadership responses [27]. In multinational teams, gap-bridging behavior points toward a coordination mechanism in which leaders help members navigate culturally patterned differences [29]. These mechanisms can coexist, compete, or operate at different levels.

Contextual moderators and boundary conditions

Culture is only one layer of context. Nationality diversity can shape leadership and inequality processes in multinational teams, meaning that team composition may alter who acquires influence and how leadership is distributed [31]. At a higher organizational level, cultural diversity within top-management teams has heterogeneous consequences that depend on process and context; those findings cannot be transferred directly to frontline leader–follower relationships [32]. Work design is another co-determinant because culture shapes how job characteristics relate to employee outcomes, potentially changing the environment within which leadership is experienced [33]. Leader affect likewise requires attention to expression, perception, situational events, and methodological design rather than a simple positive-versus-negative rule [34].

These boundaries complicate apparently inconsistent cultural findings. Transformational-leadership effects cannot be summarized as uniformly culture-free or uniformly culture-bound [13, 21, 22]. Team structure, tasks, follower composition, institutions, virtual interaction, and measurement can also alter the observed relationship.

Table 3. Culture–behavior contingencies shaping leadership outcomes

Cultural or contextual condition	Leader behavior	Mechanism implicated	Outcome pattern	Qualitative evidence pattern	Transferability limit
Uncertainty avoidance	Transformational behavior	Change/innovation cues	Innovation varies	Moderated	Outcome-specific
Relational/authority norms	Servant/paternalistic behavior	Support/authority interpretation	Component-dependent	Contingent	Separate components
Group identity salience	Identity/prototypical behavior	Identification/legitimacy	Favorable responses	Recurring	Group boundaries matter
Multinational heterogeneity	Multicultural/gap-bridging	Communication/coordination	Engagement advantages	Context-sensitive	Multinational teams
Virtual cross-country interaction	Charismatic signaling	Signaling/attribution	Cross-country response	Prospective	Channel-specific
Work/task/affective context	Behavior and affect	Appraisal/resources	Variable outcomes	Conditional	Culture not isolated

Note. Patterns are qualitative syntheses. They do not imply identical effect sizes, causal identification, or universal transferability.

Contradictions and underdeveloped areas

Several tensions remain unresolved. Apparent cross-cultural generalizability can coexist with significant contextual moderation because a behavior may show the same average direction while varying in magnitude, interpretation, or mechanism. Conversely, weak moderation can result from genuinely portable behavior, restricted cultural range, coarse country proxies, or measurement non-equivalence. Construct overlap further complicates comparisons when different leadership labels contain similar supportive, inspirational, or relational behaviors.

Leadership evaluation presents another contradiction. Evidence on the underrepresentation of East Asian leaders in the United States indicates that perceived creativity can contribute to leadership stereotypes and advancement judgments [35]. Such findings caution against treating leadership emergence or evaluation as direct measures of behavioral effectiveness.

Evidence remains thinner on longitudinal cultural change, within-country heterogeneity, cross-level interactions, null cases, and direct mechanism comparisons.

Table 4. Contradictions requiring resolution in cross-cultural leadership research

Contested relationship	Evidence pattern A	Evidence pattern B	Likely source of divergence	Unresolved theoretical issue	Priority evidence needed
Positive-leadership portability	Favorable associations recur	Strength/meaning varies	Measure, outcome, overlap	Portable behavior vs	Invariance + mechanism tests

				contingent meaning	
Transformational leadership	Broad relevance	Specific moderation	Moderator/outcome choice	Congruence vs compensation	Preregistered comparisons
Paternalistic leadership	Benevolence may relate favorably	Authority differs	Component configuration	Label vs behavior bundle	Longitudinal component tests
Country difference as culture	Cross-national heterogeneity	Context alternatives	Institutions/ecology/work	Cultural increment	Multilevel comparisons
Perception and effectiveness	Evaluations predict outcomes	Stereotypes shape ratings	Attribution/status	Perception vs behavior	Observation + outcomes
Mechanism claims	Mediation reported	Temporal order uncertain	Cross-sectional/common-source designs	Association vs cause	Longitudinal/event tests

Integrative cross-cultural leadership framework

The review proposes a framework that treats leadership effectiveness as a conditional translation problem rather than a property of a style. Leadership theory benefits from specifying mechanisms, levels, and testable relationships rather than accumulating labels [36]. The proposed framework therefore begins with enacted leader behavior, separates it from follower interpretation, and then distinguishes mechanism activation—such as identification, coordination, signaling, support, or affect—from the observed outcome. Cultural values and expectations can influence interpretation, while team composition, work design, ecology, institutions, and task conditions can alter both mechanism and outcome.

This architecture accommodates evidence that positive-leadership constructs show recurring favorable associations while remaining culturally contingent in particular relationships [15-17]. It also recognizes that measurement comparability, group prototypicality, and cultural gap-bridging processes make group context part of the translation from leadership to response [26-29].

Two implications follow. First, portability should be assessed at the behavior–mechanism–outcome relationship, not at the style label alone. Second, observed cross-cultural differences should trigger competing explanations rather than automatic cultural attribution. The framework is explicitly proposed: the reviewed literature supports its component distinctions, but their ordering, interactions, and comparative explanatory power require direct empirical testing.

The proposed architecture and its evidential boundaries are summarized in **Figure 2.**

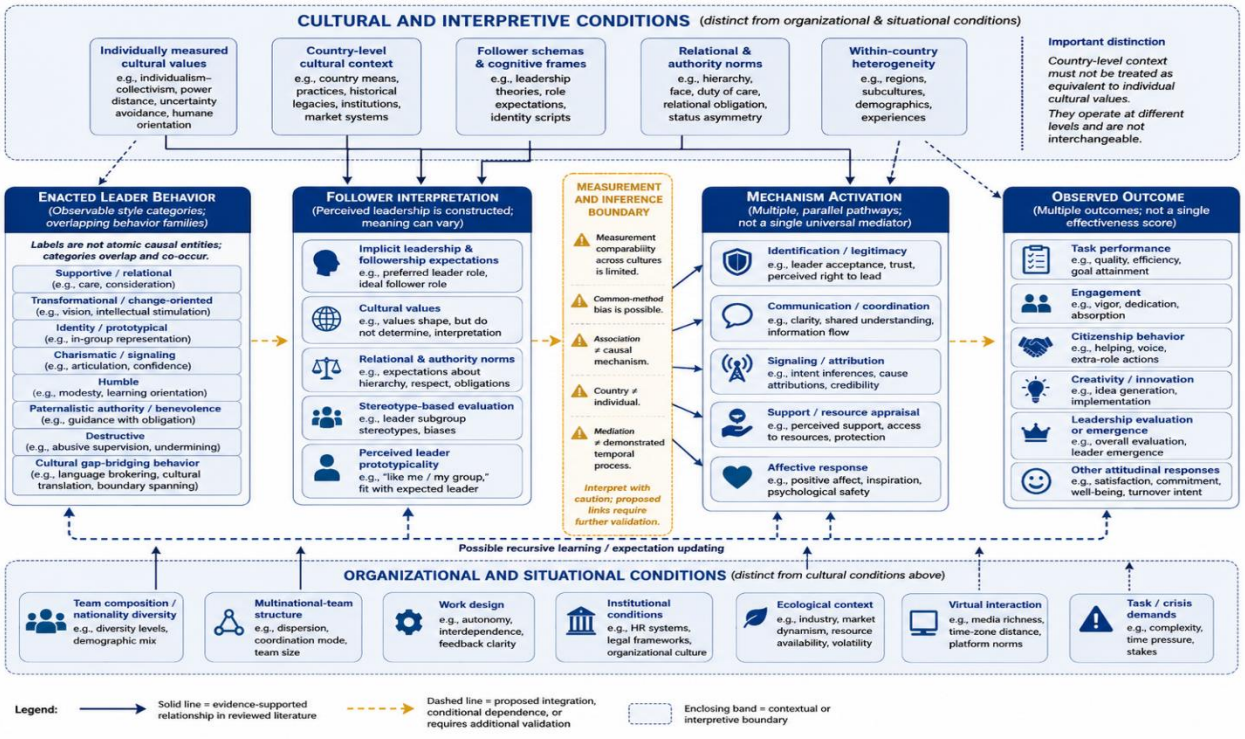

Figure 2. Behavioral portability depends on culturally filtered meaning and context-sensitive mechanisms

Research agenda

Future research should move from country comparison toward designs capable of discriminating mechanisms. Longitudinal and event-based studies can establish whether changes in leader behavior precede shifts in follower interpretation, identity, coordination, and outcomes. Multilevel designs should measure individual cultural values separately from country context and model teams and organizations rather than treating observations as independent. Comparative studies should also test whether institutional conditions, work design, language, status, or ecological pressures explain variance otherwise attributed to culture.

High-contingency settings provide particularly useful tests because leadership demands change rapidly under uncertainty. Crisis-leadership scholarship illustrates the importance of temporal pressure, changing information, and situational demands [37]. Future studies should therefore compare routine and disrupted conditions rather than generalizing from either alone. Strong tests of the proposed framework would preregister competing cultural and contextual explanations, establish measurement comparability, include null or adverse outcomes, and compare mediation models against alternatives.

Implications for leadership theory and practice

Leadership theory should shift from asking which named style "works" in a culture toward specifying which behaviors are interpreted through which mechanisms under which conditions. This preserves useful generalization while avoiding cultural determinism. It also makes levels of analysis explicit: follower values, team composition, organizational arrangements, and societal context can inform different claims.

For practice, the synthesis favors context diagnosis over style prescription. Leaders operating across cultures should examine follower expectations, communication demands, identity boundaries, task structure, and institutional constraints before assuming that a behavior will carry the same meaning elsewhere. Network approaches reinforce the view that leadership is relational and distributed through patterns of influence rather than reducible to formal position [38]. These implications are guidance for assessment and adaptation, not evidence that a particular cross-cultural leadership intervention is implementation-ready or universally effective.

Review limitations

The review is bounded by its 2017–2024 publication window, Q1 journal criterion, DOI requirement, and dependence on records discoverable through the scholarly interfaces used. Relevant work in other journals, books, languages, or poorly indexed sources may therefore be absent. Evidence is heterogeneous in construct definition, cultural measurement, outcomes, and design. Context under-specification remains a general limitation in leadership research [5], while methodological errors can compromise aggregation and causal interpretation [9]. Common-source measurement introduces an additional risk when leader perceptions and outcomes come from overlapping respondents [10].

The evidence cutoff was 31 December 2024, but search and verification were executed on 18 August 2026. The review should therefore be understood as a retrospective synthesis of the specified evidence period rather than as a search completed contemporaneously in 2024. Finally, qualitative evidence concentration and the proposed integrative framework are interpretive products of this review; neither constitutes a pooled effect estimate or independent empirical validation.

Conclusion

Effective leadership across organizational cultures is best understood neither as culturally invariant nor as wholly culture-specific. The reviewed evidence indicates that some leader behaviors have recurring value across settings, while their interpretation, strength, mechanism, and outcomes can depend on follower expectations, cultural values, team composition, work design, institutions, and other contextual conditions. The principal contribution of this review is a proposed separation of enacted behavior, culturally filtered interpretation, mechanism activation, and outcome, with explicit boundaries between individual, team, organizational, and societal inference. This architecture converts "Does this style work across cultures?" into a more testable question about which behavior–mechanism–outcome relationships travel, under what conditions, and with what evidence. Its usefulness remains contingent on stronger multilevel, longitudinal, comparative, and measurement-equivalent research.

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