



# Leadership in global business environment through a vision creation process

Vision creation  
process

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Few works have dealt with the impact of a corporation's country of origin on the perception of the qualities and behaviour expected of its leaders. This paper seeks to focus on these aspects with special attention to the specific nature of the Japanese leadership style. The choice of Japan was conditioned neither by the author's admiration for this country, nor by his admiration for their unusual determination to attain perfection, but mainly by the position that Japanese corporations occupy in the global economy. The main objective of the work is to analyze the nature of the vision creation process.

**Design/methodology/approach** – The research project incorporated surveys of and interviews with 2,000 of the world's largest corporations (the Forbes Global 2000 database (2006 version)).

**Findings** – Japanese corporations' leaders more frequently opt for giving their subordinates a free hand in shaping their own visions than leaders of the other researched corporations. However, in nearly all the cases it was mentioned that the proposed assumptions must be coherent with the vision envisaged by top management.

**Originality/value** – The paper attempts to examine the phenomenon of leadership from the perspective of corporate business. The work deals with the problem of the impact of the corporation's country of origin on the perception of the expected qualities and behaviours of its leaders.

**Keywords** Leadership, International business, Globalization, Japan, Objectives

**Paper type** Research paper

## 1. Introduction

Various analyses of some factors that have contributed to the success or failure of economic organisations, institutions and even of whole social structures usually lead to those persons that are their heads. Regardless of the character, specificity, organisation type, the results gained are primarily owed to these leaders. A clever observer while looking at children's way of acting and while studying their behaviours is able to comment correctly on their character, views, hierarchy of values as well as on the rules adopted and behaviour reinforced at their home. Likewise, from observing employees' ways of conduct one can infer a great deal about persons representing the top management, responsible for the creation of the vision and organisational culture. I have had the opportunity to see the functioning of various companies on all the continents and I have always found it fascinating how the personality, qualifications possessed and values shared by leaders influence their current activity and the long-term expansion of their companies. Also, my many years of interest and the bountiful research conducted in the area of building quality in a total dimension have tempted me to write on the problems of the kind of leadership that forms one of the pillars of total quality management (TQM).

This subject appears to be especially interesting also due to its holistic character. It is pursued by various economists, political scientists, sociologists, psychologists and



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even by philosophers. When studying the subject literature[1]. I came across only scarce fragments covering the issue and these do not provide enough knowledge on the leadership in the corporate business environment.

Very rare are the works dealing with the problem of the impact of the corporation's country of origin on the perception of the expected qualities and behaviours of its leaders. Therefore, I decided to focus on these aspects with special attention paid to the specific nature of the Japanese leadership style. The choice of Japan was conditioned neither by my admiration of this country nor by my admiration of their unusual determination in achieving perfection, but mainly by the position that Japanese corporations occupy in the global economy. If compared by numbers, these corporations constitute the second largest group of economic entities on the Forbes Global 2,000 list. It seems to be a paradoxical phenomenon that with the clearly established strong position of Japanese corporations the subject literature concentrates primarily on qualities, behaviours and competences of European and American leaders of the white race and representing upper social layers. One does not have to be an outstanding expert in Japanese culture to state that their hierarchy of values, commitment, and attitude towards work differ substantially from the standards coined in the countries with their cultures rooted in Ancient Greece, Rome or in the Old and New Testament. This problem was aptly commented on by a scientist from New Zealand, S. McKenna, in the pages of *Leadership & Organization Development Journal*. The point was that transnational corporations, especially American ones, while stimulating economic development in various parts of the world assume the universal character of their own vision of leadership. McKenna was critical about this American way of thinking and emphasised that those organisations aspiring to the position of really global organisations definitely need to see and distinguish the cultural and organisational context of a different approach to business as such (McKenna, 1998).

To conclude, let me quote the words of G. Colvin, taken from the foreword of the latest special report on leadership published by *The Fortune*. I find these words probably the best justification of the usefulness of the research:

Your rivals can copy each of your competitive advantages with one exception. The world's best companies realise that no matter what business you're in, their real business is building leaders (Colvin, 2007).

## 2. The research methodology

The author commenced the conceptualisation of the research project with a thorough and vast analysis of literature on leadership, especially with the purpose of identifying the already realised and the current scientific and research projects covering the issue of leadership in the corporate world.

The first objective was to define the research scope. It was assumed that the largest world corporations would be researched but it was necessary to select their operation and decide on the number of subjects. Having analyzed the available material, one of the most large-scale lists – Forbes Global 2,000 for 2006 including 2,000 of the world's largest corporations – was chosen.

Since it was necessary to consult the research methodology with other researchers, especially the basic research tool – the questionnaire – it was decided that prior to the main research a pilot study would be carried out. Also, the assumptions of this

research instrument were to be discussed with some corporate leaders. To meet this objective, the author visited a few economic organisations, associations and institutions in the USA, Japan, and Hong Kong.

The main part of the research was realised at the turn of the year 2006 and 2007 and it comprised two parts. The first consisted in sending by mail the questionnaires to the chairmen of these two thousand biggest corporations included in the population of the researched group. After the passage of two months' time the representatives of those corporations that had not replied were invited again to participate in the research, this time in an on-line version (precisely the same questionnaire but in its electronic form). It needs to be stressed that the questionnaire had been translated into two languages – English and Japanese. The idea of preparing the two language versions of the questionnaire followed from the fact of receiving a very low questionnaire response rate from the Japanese corporations group during the former survey performed by the author in the fields of managerial innovation diffusion and knowledge management. This time, due to the support of JUSE and the Japanese version, it was possible to obtain as many as 57 correctly completed questionnaires (the questionnaire response rate was 17.6 per cent). Although the two language versions were sent to these Japanese corporations, all the replies included only the Japanese one. This fact clearly proved the rightness of the preparation of the Japanese version of the research questionnaire.

Altogether 222 questionnaires were answered and sent back and 68 were returned by post due to delivery problems (such as an incorrect address, liquidation or acquisition, change of location). A further 44 corporate representatives informed that they refused to participate in the research because their CEOs were too busy or it was their company's policy not to participate in any scientific research. The questionnaire response rate at the level of 11.1 per cent allows the author to state that the obtained answers provided precious information deepening the possessed knowledge in the area of leadership in corporate business.

### 3. Corporate leadership and the research outcome

The discussion that is being held in various publications on the mutual relations between management and leadership has urged me to attempt to define some areas of management activity that are considered by corporate heads as most essential. I took Kotter's model of the managing and leading function as the basis for the analysis and the model was discussed in more detail in the first chapter. The obtained indications allow me to state explicitly that the majority of activities that gained better results are qualified by Kotter as leadership functions. The highest indication in the whole of the researched population was obtained by "communicating objectives" – 56.31 per cent – and only slightly exceeded "creating visions" – 54.95 per cent. The third level by its essentiality was "inspiring and motivating activity" – 41.44 per cent. The only activity included in the leadership functions that was practically marginalised was "satisfying subordinates' needs" – 3.15 per cent. The reason for this low estimate is surely an incorrect interpretation of Kotter's thought included in "satisfying subordinates' needs". With a large measure of certainty it may be supposed that the majority of top corporate management regarded the included suggestions too directly. For persons accustomed to using the support of a team of assistants dealing with everything – starting from preparation of coffee and ending with complex reports – satisfying

needs boils down to handling various everyday work aspects. This view is incorrect since this type of activity should be understood more widely. Satisfying needs is not about preparation of coffee or analyzing some data, but first of all it is about creating some ground for satisfying higher order needs – professional development, increasing qualifications, promotions, increasing competences, etc. It is hard to understand that corporate leaders could have marginalised such a key aspect. Out of the leadership functions the highest marks were ascribed to “resources allocation” – 25.23 per cent – and “creating structures” – 20.27 per cent. Despite the fact that they constitute an important everyday aspect in the work of all CEOs, they are ranked only in the sixth and seventh position among their most essential activities exceeding merely four other activities included in the leadership functions. Generally, specific activities included in the leadership functions received quite low scores and the lowest ones were given to: setting timetables – 5.41 per cent, undertaking corrective actions – 6.31 per cent, and establishing rules and procedures – 7.66 per cent. Such indications clearly depict that in the specific corporate business these activities do not fall into the range of top management work or, if they do, they are of little importance only. It may be assumed that going down the corporate organisational ladder – from the CEO and the board level to the level of middle and lower management – the essentiality of specific activities would be valued differently.

Other interesting conclusions may be drawn from the comparison of the views of Japanese top management and the other groups (see Table I). As regards the opinions on the importance of communicating objectives and creating visions, they appear quite concurrent; however, in other cases significant differences can be spotted. Especially divergent views are expressed in the cases of setting the strategy, inspiring and motivating activity. In the light of the research done, it can be stated that the activities named by more than a half of corporate representatives as important were found by the Japanese managers as the ones of little importance or, simply, completely unimportant. While setting the strategy gained merely 3.45 per cent of indications among the Japanese corporations, in remaining corporations it received 50 per cent of indications and reached the third position. Searching for the explanation for this situation, some hints can be found in the existing divergence in other areas of activity: in looking for commitment, explaining the general assumptions of their vision, setting the action plan and developing stimuli and incentives. Each of these areas received nearly twice as much among the Japanese corporations’ representatives, if compared with the group of remaining businesses. Such results shed a different light on the role of Japanese leaders if compared with other leaders. Their domain is primarily the creation of vision and communicating objectives and as concerns decisions on selecting resources and methods of realising objectives they are empowered to employees and the only assistance on the part of Japanese leaders seems to be providing some support and implementing suitable incentives. The rightness of the above conclusions can be additionally proved by a common application of solutions that employ a wide consultancy of strategies, including for instance *Hoshin Kanri*, thanks to which the effects are not dependent on management only but are practically discussed on all the levels of the organisation. The analysis of other spheres covered by the research indicates the occurrence of numerous vital differences between Japanese corporate leaders and the leaders of the giants of world business[2].

Activity	Total Percentage of indications	Corporation total without Japanese indications	Japanese Percentage of indications
Setting directions for employees	56.31	56.71	55.17
Communicating objectives	18.02	15.24	25.86
Searching for commitment	16.67	20.12	6.90
Teams and coalitions building	54.95	54.27	56.90
Assigning tasks	19.82	14.63	34.48
Developing visions	37.84	50.00	3.45
Explaining general vision assumptions	41.44	51.22	13.79
Inspiring and encouraging to undertake activity	29.28	26.66	31.03
Empowering	3.15	3.66	1.72
Satisfying subordinates' needs	20.27	20.73	18.97
Developing structure	8.11	9.78	3.45
Assigning positions	7.66	8.54	5.17
Setting rules and procedures	13.96	10.37	24.14
Developing action plan	5.41	6.71	1.72
Setting timetables	25.23	25.00	25.86
Allocating resources	15.77	12.20	25.86
Developing incentives	13.96	12.80	17.24
Generating creative solutions	6.31	8.54	0.00
Undertaking corrective action			

**Source:** Based on the outcome of the research done by the author

**Table I.**  
Importance evaluation of specific top management activity areas in the opinion of leaders of the Forbes Global 2000 world's largest corporations

Summarising the analysis of specific activities of management it can be explicitly stated that according to the opinions of the leaders of the largest corporations they find the most essential the activities included in leadership functions. Obviously, Kotter's views on the basis of which this analysis was made may be viewed as controversial. However, this does not change the fact that in the case of top management it is purposeful to develop primarily skills and character attributes that enable a better fulfilment of the duties ascribed to leaders.

#### 4. Vision creating, means of transfer, stimuli, scope of influence

It was helpful in the analysis of the further researched problems to consider the number of people present in the scope of a leader's influence, both direct and indirect. The research outcome indicates that in most cases there are below 50 employees – 62.62 per cent under the direct influence of top management representatives. The majority of the world's largest corporations' leaders (53.88 per cent) indirectly influence over 10,000 persons (Table II).

Analyzing the issue of influence it is worth taking into account the territorial range of most of the surveyed economic subjects. They usually operate globally with their affiliates on all the continents, employ workers of different race, religion, hierarchy of values and convictions. Studying various leadership concepts it can be easily noticed that most of them assume as their starting point a direct contact with the customer. Even the latest trends based on resonance and emotional intelligence, due to their specific character, are conditioned by direct relationships. It is hard to talk about the diffusion of resonance while using e-mail or film spots emitted through the intranet. The earlier recorded interviews are frequently professionally prepared and in this way deprived of their emotional authenticity. Besides, taking into consideration the fact that activities in the sphere of communicating objectives were found by respondents as most crucial of all leadership activities, a question arises here automatically on the most frequently used methods of direct and indirect vision transfer.

The research results show that leaders in the largest corporations tend to use all available forms of indirect contact with their subordinates. For obvious reasons meetings constitute the most common form: nearly 65 per cent of respondents say they use them for vision transfers. However, it must be stressed that the meeting form due to its character does not enable leaders to reach a vast number of employees. Top management representatives usually use meetings with their staff to transfer not only

Number of employees under a leader's direct influence	Total Percentage of indications	Corporations	
		total without Japanese	Japanese
		Percentage of indications	Percentage of indications
Up to 9	12.62	8.23	25.00
10-49	50.00	49.37	51.79
50-99	13.08	12.03	16.07
100-249	9.35	10.76	5.36
250 and above	14.95	19.62	1.79

**Table II.**

Number of employees under a leader's direct influence as viewed by leaders of the Forbes Global 2000 world's largest corporations

**Source:** Based on the outcome of the research done by the author

the content of the assumptions that are being created but also find it an opportunity to transfer positive emotions that accompany them. In spite of the fact that we are living in the epoch of advanced communication forms, the obtained indications clearly depict the superior position of indirect contacts over direct ones. Indirect communication methods such as the internet or corporate newsletters, which are less time consuming as concerns leaders' tense timetables, received lower scores than staff meetings did. The comparison of this information to a large degree confirms the views presented by Goleman, Boyatzis and McKee. What is noticeable here is the fact that there is no difference of views expressed by Japanese leaders and other top management representatives covered by the research. Some considerable differences occur in the evaluation of occasional meetings and cyclical visits in affiliates. The responses show that Japanese leaders decidedly prefer to transfer visions during occasional meetings, while other leaders prefer to do this during cyclical meetings. It may result from a specific Japanese culture which treats such meetings as very prestigious[3]. Therefore, using this dimension of direct communication provides a more effective absorption of such essential information. The indirect transfer method evaluation, in turn, does not indicate the existence of any major differences.

Although the majority of the world's largest corporations are TNCs and many of them can be categorised as global subjects, in the vision transfer process they apply unified solutions explicitly understood to all staff. Sometimes they do not take into account any existing cultural differences. Merely 10 per cent of respondents pointed out that their vision is subject to modification depending on the group it is addressed to. What is interesting, Japanese corporations which have been growing under the influence of such a specific and different culture, permeated with Zen philosophy, Confucianism, and the Bushido code, show a tendency, and it is not weaker than in other organisations, to create solutions that consider differences in this area.

Such an attitude must result from a high evaluation of the Japanese organisational culture and the conviction of its superiority that is shared not only by Japanese leaders but also by ordinary workers. It is worth quoting here certain words that are so typical for the Japanese way of thinking said in 1929 by one of the most outstanding industrialists Konosuke Matsushita. According to Matsushita we devote our strength to the development of our nation and its industry hoping that the coronation of our efforts will be the improvement of living conditions for all our citizens. Gaining profits is not our primary objective. We will be searching for ways that will enable us to become most useful for our society (De Mente, 2006). Matsushita claimed that he had created his vision just when he understood that a private company is not merely a private matter of its owners since the company works for the benefit of its suppliers, customers and the whole branch. In 1946 after Japan's military defeat Matsushita modified his words putting even more emphasis on social aspects. He stressed the social responsibility of Japanese industrialists and demanded that it should not be limited to the Japanese society only but should influence the improvement of living conditions all over the world (De Mente, 2006).

Returning to the conclusions drawn from the whole population data analysis – there is another noticeable trend of creating unified solutions. On the one hand, such an approach seems suitable since it puts many potentially controversial and awkward problems out of the vision scope; on the other hand, there is some risk that excessive

unification will limit employees' inclinations and abilities to identify fully with the assumptions of the vision.

It must be noticed that corporate leaders are of different opinions as far as the influence of the corporation size on the vision creation process itself is concerned. Over one fourth of respondents (27.91 per cent) said that the corporation size does not affect this process. At the same time 36.28 per cent of them perceived some positive aspects and a similar percentage – 35.82 per cent was of a contrary opinion claiming that the size has a negative or even very negative influence on the vision creation problem. The considered replies allow the formulation of a statement that in fact the corporation size does not determine the issue in question.

There are some troublesome evaluations made on the vision time horizon and on the time horizon of activities undertaken by leaders in the largest world's corporations. In both cases the time horizon, as pointed out by the majority of respondents, does not exceed five years. Only less than 10 per cent stated that the vision they were creating had a time span longer than one decade. The attitudes towards the time horizon are primarily shaped by the unprecedented recent change dynamics as well as by some concerns about investors' reactions to making too exaggerated futurist assumptions. Nevertheless, the most frequently indicated time horizon of or longer than five years (51.58 per cent of answers) appears to be much too short, especially taking into account the time needed to implement breakthrough changes or major innovations.

Paradoxically, on the one hand the world of business pays much attention to transformational leadership, the assumptions of which can be found in most prestigious business magazines. On the other hand, the majority of leaders claim that their undertaken activities have a time horizon of a maximum two years. Unfortunately, application of transformational solutions, especially in corporate business, absorbs much time. Limiting the consideration of the transformation process to merely modification of specific employees' behaviour, it may be intuitively said that the time needed for carrying out this activity cannot be expressed in days or weeks, but it will definitely be months or even years of laborious work. My observations are much similar in their character to those of Kotter presented in the sixth chapter. According to Kotter, the most frequent mistake made by leaders is their too shortsighted approach in the vision formulation process.

Another problem researched was the delegation of leadership activities. As most respondents indicated (almost 85 per cent of them) delegating tasks ascribed to leaders is possible. In order to specify particular leadership activities the applied research instrument was created in accordance with the suggestions made by Kouzes and Posner presented in the fifth chapter.

Despite some concurrences noticed in the discussed areas, the obtained results made it possible to identify this huge differentiation of views expressed by leaders from Japanese corporations and from other organisations. The differentiation of perceptions is clearly seen in such areas as enabling others to undertake action and selecting methods of conduct. As for the former, only 3.45 per cent of Japanese leaders confirmed their ability to delegate a certain scope of activities, while among the remaining corporations the percentage reached as much as 75.61 per cent. As concerns the latter, none of Japanese management representatives showed his ability to delegate any tasks relating to selecting methods of conduct. In the other corporations group a possibility of delegating tasks in the area was confirmed by 34.76 per cent of respondents.



## 5. Conclusions

The world in which contemporary leaders are expected to act has been undergoing changes that have never happened in the history of human civilisation. An old truism that change is the only unchangeable thing appears to be exceptionally valid. Some of the most essential changes impacting the way of leading organisations include structural and demographic changes, globalisation, new working ethics, the role of education and science, technology and access to information, emphasis on flexibility, internal and external uncertainty resulting from ongoing changes and linking individual initiative with the organisational goals. Both organisational forms and structures are subject to permanent transformation. Because of restructuring processes and frequent financial pressure enterprises and institutions more often reduce the number of their organisational levels and trust the form of a work team. What becomes quite common is surpassing internal barriers that enable companies to create organisations without boundaries and rely on outsourcing, consultants, and contractors who take over the tasks that traditionally have been performed within the organisational structures. Many telecommuters stay in permanent touch with their co-workers deployed practically all over the world. Numerous duties are fulfilled remotely so that the boss and employees need to depend more on themselves and on the possessed knowledge resources and at the same time less on the formal structure. The ongoing demographic changes and globalisation necessitate the creation of the cooperation plane for persons not only representing different generations but also of various cultures. Nowadays, leaders must learn the ability to reach people that follow utterly different values and to unite them around common goals.

The gradual erosion of the western domination in business additionally increases the importance of cross-cultural leadership aspects and develops the ability to function in an unknown environment. In the past the western management worked with subordinates of various cultures and views. Presently one can see some corporations led not only by Japanese but also by Indian and Chinese people and by persons representing the Islamic world. Yet another aspect pointed out by Nahavandi (2006) is the problem of knowledge and the role of highly specialised employees, which influence the basis of the organisation's functioning. It is quite common nowadays that persons with abundant knowledge and unique competences work for enterprises as freelancers. In such situations the loyalty is shifted from the organisation, vision and leaders onto these freelancers and their profession. It is also hard to weave these persons into the organisational structure though corporations under transition can draw on their experience and considerable flexibility (Nahavandi, 2006).

The research outcome presented in the work constitutes only a snapshot of this dynamically changing world. Constant changes resulting from turbulence in the environment necessitate further research into the matter. I hope that the understanding of the persons who are closest to me and of my colleagues as well as my zeal and determination will enable me to explore the phenomenon of leadership in the corporate environment. While the world of politics "makes a great effort" to devalue the meaning and role of leadership, I am optimistic about the corporate world, which is slowly erasing the scandalous cases of Enron, Worldcom or Arthur Andersen, and express my deepest hope that it will become a benchmark for using leadership as a facilitator in a continuous transformation.

## Notes

1. The shape of the work was especially influenced by two unusually inspiring publications: Northouse (2003) and Hughes *et al.* (2006), as well as by numerous articles on leadership published by *Harvard Business Review*, which were not only my source of knowledge but primarily my inspiration.
2. Interesting information on leadership in various national cultures is provided by, among others, Rodsutti and Swierczek (2002) who surveyed 1000 transnational corporations' leaders in Thailand, or by Shahin and Wright (2004), who characterised leadership from the perspective of the Egyptian culture. Also, interesting research outcome is commented on by Boehnke *et al.* (2003).
3. An interesting example of esteem and respect that the Japanese show to occasional meetings is given in a book by De Mente (2006), who describes a ceremony of accepting a freshman to a group of scouts. To honor this event the freshman's family sent invitations to such celebrities as the President of the USA, the Japanese Emperor and the then President of Sony. The fact of inviting these celebrities from our point of view seems absolutely irrational. Therefore, very surprising is the fact that the President of Sony participated in this celebration and even delivered a speech in English. Also, the family was contacted by some representative of the Emperor who informed them that the Emperor himself could not participate in the ceremony but asked to pass his sincere congratulations on the occasion. There was no response to the invitation sent to the President of the USA (De Mente, 2006).

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## About the author

Robert Karaszewski studies empirical service organisation, total quality management, competitiveness of corporate business, marketing research and knowledge management. He

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has worked on the role of leadership in the global business environment. His research is empirical in nature emphasising both positive and normative influence of leadership on corporate level development. This empirical focus is also reflected in his MBA course on Entrepreneurship, which is designed to teach students how to apply empirical models and methods to develop organisation excellence. Karaszewski has been invited to present his research at such schools as Hong Kong Baptist University, Hang Seng School of Commerce, Aarhus University, RMIT University, VUT Brno, and various quality associations in Canada, Australia, Latvia, Thailand, Hong Kong and Poland. His papers have appeared in *The TQM Journal*, *Harvard Business Review Poland*, *Journal of Knowledge Management*, and *Quality Progress*. He is a Foundation for Polish Science Fellow, a Ministry of Science and Higher Education Fellow, the recipient of several MSHE Research Grants, and the recipient of a Warsaw Science Society grant. He is a senior member of the American Society for Quality, a member of the International Leadership Association, and the Knowledge Management Professional Society. He is on the editorial board and an *ad hoc* reviewer for several academic journals. He was announced as one of the top 15 of the most distinguished Polish young scientists by The Minister of Science and Higher Education in 2008. His teaching style and research achievements earned him the 2003 Distinguished Service Award for International Education at Dominican University and Nicolaus Copernicus University's President Award. He earned a Bachelor's and Master's degree from the Nicolaus Copernicus University of Toruń in management information systems, a PhD in total quality management and postdoctoral degree also from the Nicolaus Copernicus University. His title of professor was conferred by the President of the Republic of Poland in 2009. He joined the Brennan School of Business administration and faculty in 2000. Robert Karaszewski can be contacted at: [robkara@econ.umk.pl](mailto:robkara@econ.umk.pl)

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