



# Distinct leadership styles and differential effectiveness across culture: An analysis of South African business leaders

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**Orientation:** While some deem business leadership practices as universal, others judge them to be specific to a cultural context, arguing that certain leadership styles are specific to, for example, those from an African or a Western cultural background.

**Research purpose:** The goal of the research was to assess whether the leadership styles of South African leaders differ based on cultural background and whether the effectiveness of these leadership styles is judged differently by subordinates.

**Motivation for the study:** South Africa is sometimes presented as country divided across cultural lines. This research was motivated by the need to assess the extent of this divide and the impact thereof on perceived effectiveness.

**Research approach and method:** A cross-sectional survey was collected from 1140 respondents across 19 organisations. Leadership styles and leader effectiveness was measured, and race was used as a proxy to cultural background. Mean scores on leadership styles and leadership effectiveness were calculated per race and mean score differences were tested.

**Main findings:** The result of this study suggest that leaders in South Africa are perceived to behave similarly in terms of their leadership styles and the effectiveness thereof. Thus, those African and Western cultural backgrounds act similarly, and the outcomes (effectiveness) was comparable.

**Managerial implications and value add:** The cultural divide within the context of leadership styles and effectiveness is small in South Africa, and the results supports the notion that organisations and leaders should set aside culturally based stereotypes when engaging in leadership issues.

**Keywords:** Leadership styles, leader effectiveness, culture, Full Range Leadership Theory, South Africa.

## Introduction

This research forms part of a larger project to define African business leadership, with two questions to be answered: (1) 'do African and Western leaders use different leadership styles?' and (2) 'is the perceived effectiveness of a specific leadership style dependent on whether the leader is African or Western?'

Leadership styles and effectiveness, based on cultural background, have long been a subject of investigation and have attracted much research interest. The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) study is a perfect example of this work, leading to articles such as 'Strategic leadership across cultures: The GLOBE study of CEO leadership behaviour and effectiveness in 24 countries' (House, Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, & De Luque, 2014). This research builds on the GLOBE research and endeavours to investigate how leadership styles and their effectiveness differ across cultures. However, unlike the GLOBE studies, which focus on measuring cultural dimensions, this research focuses on leadership behaviours and assumes that culture is embedded in race. This assumption of culture being embedded in race is not only politically correct but is also not inconceivable, as previous editions of the GLOBE study differentiated between black people and white people in their reporting (GLOBE, 2020 cited in Javidan, Bullough Cotton, Dastmalchian, Dorfman & Egri, 2020).

As a result of this assumption, both the empirical research and organisational fields persist in trying to explain what makes an effective leader, both in general and within the business

environment (Lerutla & Steyn, 2017). The continued research aimed at understanding the extent to which leadership behaviours can be influenced by cultural values is notable (Areiqata, Hamdanb, Zamil, & El-Horani, 2021). Researchers argue that 'leadership drives culture, culture drives leadership' (Tkeshelashvili, 2009, p. 116), and leaders are socialised to internalise the cultural values and practices of the culture they grow up in – they learn, over time, desirable and undesirable modes of behaviour (Tkeshelashvili, 2009, p. 116).

## Literature review

African leadership and the full-range leadership theory (FRLT) form the basis of this research. However, given the interconnection of leadership and culture, the literature review is preceded by a high-level overview of the dominant cultural typologies, these being Hofstede's and the GLOBE research. All literature presented is used to substantiate the set hypotheses.

### Hofstede cultural framework and the GLOBE cultural dimensions

While in the employ of one of the leading conglomerates (International Business Machines [IBM]), Geert Hofstede conducted a survey among employees in more than 72 countries between 1968 and 1973 to understand the cultural orientation of people in different countries (Hofstede, Hofstede, & Minkov, 2010). His extensive and evolving research findings led to the development of a framework with five cultural dimensions. The original five dimensions of Hofstede's framework (1980) are power distance, uncertainty avoidance, masculinity–femininity, individualism–collectivism and long-term orientation (LTO), which was added as the last dimension (Minkov & Hofstede, 2012). *Power distance* describes the extent to which inequalities are accepted among the people of a society, with people in countries high in power distance more likely to accept and expect differences in power among them, whereas in countries with low power distance, people expect that the differences in power should be minimised. *Uncertainty avoidance* reflects the extent to which people in a society try to avoid situations that do not provide certainty; the *masculinity–femininity* dimension reflects how societies distribute roles based on gender; the *individualism–collectivism* dimension describes the extent to which individuals in a society are either integrated into groups or encouraged to be independent; *long-term orientation* refers to the extent to which a community or society embrace long-term and futuristic commitments, as opposed to commitments that are short-term focused, thereby differentiating societies that are able to embrace change more rapidly than the others.

Although Hofstede's framework has been challenged for various reasons, including the validity and representativeness of his data (Baskerville, 2003; Javidan, House, Dorfman, Hanges, & De Luque, 2006; Minkov, 2018), his work continues to be referenced to this day (Areiqata et al., 2021; Gallego-

Álvarez & Pucheta-Martínez, 2021; Kaasa, 2021; Olatunji, Makhosazana, & Vezi-Magigaba, 2021; Olowookere, Agoha, Omonijo, Odukoya, & Elegbeleye, 2021). The various disciplines that reference his work include cross-cultural management (Beugelsdijk, Kostova, Kunst, Spadafora, & Van Essen, 2018; Klasing, 2013), country-level culture (Beugelsdijk, Kostova, & Roth, 2017) and international business (Kirkman, Lowe, & Gibson, 2006).

The GLOBE research focuses on the interplay between culture and leadership effectiveness, based on extensive work conducted in 951 organisations in 62 countries (Hoppe & Eckert, 2012; House et al., 2014). This research provides a view of (1) how cultures are different from or similar to one another in their perceptions and expectations of leadership effectiveness and (2) the definition or perception of what constitutes an outstanding leader. Six of the nine GLOBE cultural dimensions were built on the work of Hofstede House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman and Gupta (2004), while some of the scales the GLOBE used to measure cross-cultural differences (uncertainty avoidance, power distance, individualism) are designed to reflect the same constructs as Hofstede's dimensions. The GLOBE initially presented nine dimensions, which were later refined and reduced to six, all of them describing how leadership is expected or experienced across different cultures (House et al., 2014). The six dimensions are *charismatic* or *value-based*, *team-oriented*, *self-protective*, *participative*, *humane-oriented* and *autonomous* (House et al., 2014).

According to the GLOBE study, cultural similarity is greatest among societies that constitute a cluster, while cultural difference increases the further the clusters are apart (Center for Creative Leadership, 2012). For example, the countries from the sub-Saharan region in Africa (Nigeria, Zambia, Namibia, Zimbabwe and South-Africa<sup>1</sup>) constituted a cluster and as a result, more cultural similarities would be seen in these societies. This African cluster, for example, would practice leadership differently from countries in parts of the Global North, such as Eastern Europe (e.g. Russia, Poland, Georgia, Greece, Hungary, Albania, Slovenia). It was also recognised that different cultures conceptualise outstanding leaders differently, and this difference is because of cultural upbringing and expectations about what entails good leadership (Center for Creative Leadership, 2012). To that end, there is acknowledgement that the location and culture within which leadership occurs provides important context for consideration on leadership discourse (Eyong, 2017).

Hofstede and the GLOBE cultural research both proved to be similar in the conceptualisation of the cultural dimensions.

### African culture and leadership typologies

Since the launch of GLOBE, Western leadership paradigms that have long been embedded in leadership practice globally

1. South Africa was classified as 'South Africa – Black'.

are being questioned (Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Eyong, 2017). It has been observed that the global leadership practices of the 18th and 20th centuries were influenced by Eurocentric theories and narratives that do not reflect the indigenous dimensions and contexts that are critically important to understanding leadership (Eyong, 2017; Wanasika, Howell, Littrell, & Dorfman, 2011) outside Eurocentric perspectives. As a result, there has been a growing movement suggesting that leadership should be understood within the context in which it is practised (Avolio, Walumbwa, & Weber, 2009; Humphreys, Zhao, Ingram, Gladstone, & Basham, 2010; Jones, Lefoe, Harvey, & Ryland, 2012; Muchiri, 2011; Posner, 2012). This emerging research, along with the current interest in understanding the role of culture and context in leader effectiveness, presents diverse findings, thus further widening the gap on the definition of leadership – especially leadership in the African context (Lerutla & Steyn, 2017).

Africa, as a region, has drawn interest in leadership research, given the dynamic nature and uniqueness of the continent (Lerutla & Steyn, 2017). Researchers (e.g. Bolden & Kirk, 2009; Chasi & Levy, 2016; Chatbury, Beaty, & Kriek, 2011; Littrell & Nkomo, 2005) argued that Africa has its own values and practices and that these should be integral to the definition of leadership and its implementation on the continent. For example, Bolden and Kirk (2009) argued that Africans aspire to leadership based on humanity, a leadership that is inclusive and that values individual differences, along with a desire to serve others. They argue that there is a pattern unique to Africa, which can be associated with the belief system and philosophical principles of *ubuntu* – a term that represents African humanism and that is often translated as ‘I am because we are’. *Ubuntu* is a fundamental philosophy that governs existence and social relations in sub-Saharan Africa (Mangaliso, 2001; Mbigi, 2000; Wanasika et al., 2011). It is premised on respect for the dignity of people, reciprocity in social relations and a desire for tolerance and forgiveness.

In other research, Gumede (2017) took the position that African leadership is grounded on Afrocentric histories, philosophies, epistemologies and other pan-Africanist ideologies within the evolving African cultures. Metz (2018:p. 42) also talked about an Afro-communal ethic type of leadership, unique to Africa, based on the belief that ‘one should relate communally and enable others to commune’. Afro-communal leadership is associated with servant leadership, although not in a way understood in the Western context; servant leadership is distinguished as leaders’ interest in meeting the needs of others, with emphasis placed on communal relationships (Metz, 2018). In his address to a group of leaders, Khoza (2012) linked leadership in Africa to humanness and further argued that the human style of leadership generated by African humanism puts people first.

In his research, Mbigi (2000) has pinpointed five core values associated with African leaders: respect for the dignity of

others, group solidarity, teamwork, service to others and the spirit of harmony and interdependence. These values have been validated in other research findings. For example, in a study conducted by Flotman and Grobler (2020), it was established that servant leadership has an impact on organisational behaviour within the South African and African context. Muller, Smith and Lillah’s (2019) study found that the *ubuntu* values of solidarity and servant leadership had a significant and positive influence on employee engagement and organisational performance. Molose, Goldman and Thomas’s (2018) research outcomes indicated that the *ubuntu* collective values of compassion, group solidarity, respect and dignity for all are beneficial to workplace commitment and performance. In their study, they recommend that *ubuntu* should be incorporated in management approaches to facilitate workforce commitment and team performance. The GLOBE findings also reported that sub-Saharan respondents mostly supported aspects such as human-oriented, charismatic and/or value-based and team-oriented leadership (Hoppe & Eckert, 2012).

### Full-range theory of leadership

The FRLT originated from the work of James Burns in 1978, which posited that leaders are either transformational or transactional, thereby positioning the two styles as being at opposite ends of a continuum (Burns, 1978). Following extensive research by Bass (1990), this original work was expanded to argue that the best leaders are both transformational and transactional. With further research, Avolio and Bass (2005) posited that to achieve organisation success, a paradigm shift was required to understand the overall role that leaders play in influencing followers to go beyond self-interest for the greater good of the entities with which they are associated (Khan, Nawaz, & Khan, 2016). The crux of their argument was that leadership is neither transactional nor transformational but rather that it happens on a continuum. The leadership constructs that form the core of the FRLT are the transactional, transformational and laissez-fair styles (Avolio, Bass, & Jung, 1999; Bass & Avolio, 1994), which are briefly outlined in the following paragraphs.

### Transactional leadership

The theory of transactional leadership (TSL) is premised on the idea that leader–follower relationships are based on transactional exchanges between leaders and subordinates (Bass & Stogdill, 1990). This style of leadership is focused on input, output and reward for achieving what is expected of employees (Burns, 1978). There are three components associated with TSL:

- contingent reward – where the task-oriented leader uses rewards for the fulfilment of tasks and where this is seen as the leader providing positive feedback
- management-by-exception (active) – in which the leader looks for deviations from rules and standards
- management-by-exception (passive) – where a leader intervenes only when errors are detected or where

standards are being violated (Avolio & Bass, 2005; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Rowald & Scholtz, 2009).

Management-by-exception (passive) is often separately presented as laissez-fair leadership and will be presented similarly in this research. This leadership style is focused on managerial and supervisory roles in relation to performance and leverages rewards and recognition to promote compliance from the followers (Avolio & Bass (2005) Khan et al., 2016). With this leadership style, there is a tendency to focus on the differences between the leader and followers; the maintenance of the status quo, rather than changing the future; finding faults and deviations in followers' work; and placing emphasis on getting specific tasks completed (Bass, 1990; Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013).

Research revealed a contradictory relationship between TSL and job performance. While some studies have reported that transactional leaders leverage rewards to entice employee performance (Humphreys, 2001; Mahdinezhad, Suandi, Silong, & Omar, 2013; Shah & Hamid, 2015; Voon, Lo, Ngui, & Ayob, 2011; Wegner, 2004) and that TSL style has a significant and positive effect on improving employee performance (Sundi, 2013), other studies have reported a negative correlation between TSL and employee performance (MacKenzie, Podsakoff, & Rich, 2001; Parry & Proctor-Thomson, 2002) and a non-positive correlation with organisational commitment (Lee, 2005). In other studies, TSL has been found to have a positive and significant relationship with employee motivation (Chaudhry & Javed, 2012). Further research has reported that TSL drives stability and maintenance of the status quo, because such leaders will set goals for their followers and reward them for what is expected (Xenikou, 2017).

The application of TSL seems most appropriate in organisations where performance reward is valued, such as in the financial services industries. For example, banking organisations have been linked positively to the use of TSL style (Alabduljader, 2012; Shah & Hamid, 2015). It is also found to be beneficial in environments where compliance with rules and regulations is critical (Clarke, 2013).

### Transformational leadership

Transformational leadership (TFL) is grounded on the principle of a leader's ability to inspire and stimulate others to achieve extraordinary outcomes (Avolio & Bass, 2005; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Bass, Avolio, Jung, & Berson, 2003; Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013). This type of leadership is associated with a focus on delivering for the greater good, its ability to raise the followers' motivation and morality for the good of the organisation, and its ability to yield superior social dividends (Khan, et al., 2016; Van Linden & Fertman, 1998). Those demonstrating TFL can identify the need for change and to gain the agreement and commitment of others in pursuing and driving that change (Louw, Muriithi, & Radloff, 2017). Transformational leaders give a very high priority to their relationships with their followers and demonstrate individualised consideration in meeting their

needs for empowerment, achievement, enhanced self-efficacy and personal growth (Ndlovu, Ngirandi, Setati, & Zhuwao, 2018; Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013).

According to Bass and Avolio (1994), transformational leaders are charismatic, inspirational, visionary, intellectually stimulating and considerate of individual needs. There are four underlying dimensions associated with TFL style:

- *Idealised influence* refers to the charismatic attributes, such as perceived confidence, trustworthiness and power; leaders who are centred on values have a strong moral compass and display ethical behaviour in driving higher-order purpose. Idealised influence enables a leader to instil pride, trust and respect in followers, causing the followers to identify and emulate their behaviour.
- *Inspirational motivation* refers to the leaders' ability to energise their followers by demonstrating an optimistic view of the future and inspiring them towards the achievement of the vision. They challenge followers with high standards and provide encouragement and meaning for what needs to be done.
- *Intellectual stimulation* refers to the leaders' ability to challenge followers to think differently about problems and to find innovative and creative ways of resolving challenges. This attribute encourages proactive thinking and inspires the creation of new ideas.
- *Individualised consideration* refers to the degree to which the leader attends to the needs of everyone and where they provide the necessary mentorship or coaching needed towards the fulfilment of an individual's personal career goals (Abasilim, 2013; Avolio & Bass, 2005; Bass & Avolio, 1990, 1994).

Overall, transformational leaders are charismatic in behaviour, demonstrate morality in their actions, are congruent and ethical and demonstrate the ability to delegate, to coach and to provide feedback to their teams (Barbuto, 2005; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Odumeru & Ifeanyi, 2013; Xenikou, 2017). Furthermore, they are experienced as being futuristic and inspirational, and they demonstrate the ability to stimulate creativity and innovation (Ndlovu et al., 2018; Yukl, 2002), they create excitement at work through their ability to motivate and inspire others to achieve greater goals and lastly, they demonstrate empathy and nurture one-on-one relationships with subordinates.

Transformational leadership has become the most frequently researched theory over the past two decades, and it has thus developed into a cornerstone of modern research on leadership, with more than 30% of empirical articles published referencing this leadership style (Abasilim, 2013; Northouse, 2016). Transformational leadership is deemed to be the most appropriate style of leadership in contemporary organisations and the most ideal form of organisational leadership (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Robbins & Judge, 2013; Wang, Oh, Courtright, & Colbert, 2011), echoing the argument made by Bass and Avolio (1990).

Research indicates that TFL increases followers' satisfaction with their work and followers' job performance (Judge & Piccolo, 2004; Wang et al., 2011). Other research has suggested that using a TFL style creates a work climate where subordinates feel enthusiastic about their work and where they improve results not only for the organisation but also for themselves (Haque & Aston, 2016). Transformational leadership has also been linked with building employee trust in organisational change capacity, relative to other leadership styles (Yasir, Imran, Irshad, Mohamad, & Khan, 2016).

A study conducted by Guhr, Lebek and Breitner (2019) emphasised in its findings the importance of TFL, as this type of leadership style directly influences employees to go the extra mile in achieving organisational outputs. It is mostly found that employees are more effective with the TFL style relative to the other leadership styles (Khumalo, 2019). In addition, TFL is associated with inspirational motivation and increased employee commitment to an organisation (Block, 2003; Eliyana & Muzakki, 2019; Haque & Aston, 2016; Ledimo, 2014).

The application of TFL seems most appropriate in organisations where a collaborative culture is encouraged and where leadership takes precedence over management, such as in nonprofit organisations (Bass & Riggio, 2006; Freeborough & Patterson, 2015). It is also found beneficial in situations that encourage innovation and organisational improvement, such as in small and medium enterprises (Khan, Rao, Usman, & Afzal, 2017) where employees are encouraged to be creative in developing solutions that are responsive to the needs of different contexts and clients (Vera & Crossan, 2004). It has also been reported as most used by sales managers in the automotive industry (Gautam & Enslin, 2019).

### Laissez-faire leadership

In general, the laissez-faire leadership (LFL) style remains an under-studied form of leadership (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2020; Tosunoglu & Ekmekci, 2016), possibly because of what it is perceived to be or experienced as. This leadership style is considered the most troublesome, passive and ineffective form of leadership (Tosunoglu & Ekmekci, 2016). It is defined as avoidance and abdication of responsibilities (Bass & Bass, 2008) and is considered the least effective form of leadership or management (Bass & Bass, 2008). Laissez-faire is deemed to be a nonleadership approach, in contrast to the more active forms of transformational and TSL (Greiman, 2009; Robert & Vandenberghe, 2020). Behaviours associated with this type of leadership include avoiding making decisions, abdication of responsibility and avoidance of the use of authority (Avolio & Bass, 2005; Northouse, 2016).

Research indicates that laissez-faire style is associated with negative leadership (Skogstad, Hetland, Glasø, & Einarsen, 2014), a reduced level of trust in the organisation (Tosunoglu & Ekmekci, 2016), as well as erosion of trust with leaders (Breevaart & Zacher, 2019; Skogstad, Einarsen,

Torsheim, Aasland, & Hetland, 2007), and may discourage employees from investing resources and contributing to the mutual goals of the organisations (Xu, Huang, Lam, & Miao, 2012). A study conducted by Breevaart and Zacher (2019) on trust in leadership, showed that in comparison with another leadership style (TFL), trust in a leader was reduced when that leader showed a LFL style. This supports findings that LFL negatively impacts employees' trust in leaders.

Others found that it tends to undermine followers' job satisfaction, their relationship with leaders, as well as employees' perceptions of leader effectiveness (Judge & Piccolo, 2004). This leadership style is reported to have negative consequences on followers, such as higher levels of distress and in-team conflicts (Skogstad et al., 2007, 2014). In other research, Anderson and McColl-Kennedy (2005) highlighted that laissez-faire leaders are the least attentive in terms of completion of tasks and that such behaviour tends to negatively impact productivity. Chaudhry and Javed (2012) found in their studies that in comparison with TSL, the laissez-faire style is not considered relevant in boosting the motivation level of employees.

Relative to the other two leadership styles presented in the preceding paragraphs, LFL is seen as a unidimensional construct and is largely considered to be destructive leadership (Robert & Vandenberghe, 2020; Skogstad, et al., 2007; Tosunoglu & Ekmekci, 2016). It is sometimes linked to a component of TSL, which is management-by-exception (passive) – where a leader intervenes only when errors are detected or where standards are being violated (Avolio & Bass, 2005; Bass & Avolio, 1994; Rowald & Scholtz, 2009).

Some authors have argued that positive leadership behaviours, such as an empowering leadership style, can easily be perceived as the LFL style, and that this close relationship needs to be considered in describing LFL (Wong & Giessner, 2018). Similarly, Norris, Ghahremani and Lemoine (2021) argued that a conceivably positive behaviour, such as delegation, can be perceived as laissez-faire. In their argument, they conclude that this style of leadership should not be simplified as 'absence or abdication of leadership' and that acknowledgement should be given to the complexity of perceptions around leadership style based on the expectations of followers. A Nigerian study conducted by Adeniji et al. (2020) found that when comparing leadership styles on employee engagement, delegation – inferred from the laissez-faire style – had the greatest statistical significance on employee engagement, while avoidance and free reign were insignificant on employee engagement.

The LFL style would be appropriate in organisations where employees are highly skilled, knowledgeable in their areas of expertise and therefore do not require guidance. Typical environments where it will succeed, according to our assessment, will be in entrepreneurial businesses and highly professional consulting firms that sell intellectual capital.

## Hypotheses

Given the literature presented, it is reasonable to assume that there is evidence or at least a suggestion that cultural background, which seems to be linked to geographical origins (being from the West or Africa), influences the leadership behaviour displayed by individuals. Assuming this, it was hypothesised that white respondents and managers (representative of Western heritage and culture) would differ from black respondents and managers (representative of African heritage and culture) regarding their leadership behaviour. Using full-range leadership theory, the following hypotheses were formed regarding mean differences between cultural groups:

- H1: All leaders, irrespective of cultural heritage, will display equal levels of transformational leadership.
- H1a: Black leaders, more embedded in collectivism, will be more inclined to transformational leadership than their white counterparts, who are inclined to individualism, a key aspect of transactional leadership.
- H2: All leaders, irrespective of cultural heritage, will display equal levels of transactional leadership.
- H2a: White people associate with individualism and will be more inclined to transactional leadership, while African leaders will be more concerned with collectivism.
- H3: All leaders, irrespective of cultural heritage, will display equal levels of laissez-faire leadership.
- H3a: African leaders demonstrate more laissez-faire leadership than those from elsewhere in the world, as African leaders allow people to consult and often wait for consensus before they proceed – more so than other leaders.

A further six hypotheses were formed regarding the effectiveness of leadership styles and their effectiveness:

- H4: Transformational leadership will be seen as equally effective across all leaders, irrespective of the cultural group.
- H4a: African leaders displaying transformational leadership will be deemed more effective, as transformational leadership is about inspiring the group, a practice more associated with African leaders.
- H4b: Transactional leadership will be seen as equally effective across all leaders, irrespective of the cultural group.
- H4c: White leaders displaying transformational leadership will be deemed more effective, as transactional leadership is about individualisation, a practice often associated with white cultures.
- H5: All leaders who use laissez-faire leadership, regardless of their cultural background, will be deemed as ineffective.
- H5a: Black leaders who demonstrate laissez-faire leadership will be regarded as effective leaders, as laissez-faire leadership is about minimal involvement from leaders to allow for consultation – a practice more associated with African leaders.

Although these hypotheses were formulated using some literature and intuition, they will, if nothing else, stimulate debate on the matter of leadership within the African context. What will make this debate particularly interesting is that the null hypotheses will be judged using empirical processes. These processes are discussed in the method section, presented next.

## Method

### Population and sampling

The population comprised all leaders at all organisations operating in South Africa. A convenience sample was drawn from the subordinates of these leaders. The respondents were recruited by students pursuing a Master of Business Leadership (MBL) degree at the Graduate School of Business Leadership at the University of South Africa (GSBL). The students, through their respective employer organisations, gained access to the respondents. The students then acted as fellow researchers, collecting data from 1140 respondents across 19 different organisations. The respondents were selected on a random basis from the personnel records in the participating companies.

### Measurement

Demographic information was collected, consisting of the gender, race and age of the respondents, as well as of the leaders. Those identified as black were deemed to be of African heritage and those who identified as white were deemed to be of Western descent. Responses from those of Asian descent and those identified as mixed race were deleted for the comparative analyses.

The FRLT elements were assessed with the Pearce and Sims (2002) instrument, with 20 TFL items, 11 TSL items and five LFL items. Responses to the items were recorded on a five-point scale, with 'Definitely not true', 'Not true', 'Neither true nor untrue', 'True' and 'Definitely true' as options. A sample item from the TFL section is 'My leader provides a clear vision of who and what our company is'; from the TSL section, 'My leader will recommend that I am compensated well if I perform well'; and from the LFL section, 'My leader allows performance to fall below minimum standards before trying to make improvements'.

Leadership effectiveness was measured, using an instrument developed by Cicero, Pierro and Van Knippenberg (2010) and comprised four items. Items responded to a seven-point scale, ranging between 'Strongly disagree' and 'Strongly agree'. A sample item from this instrument reads as follows: 'My leader influences my level of commitment effectively'. The instrument had acceptable levels of reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha equalling 0.83 (Cicero et al., 2010). Low scores on leadership demonstrate a low level of that particular behaviour style, for both leader effectiveness and leadership style.

## Statistical analyses

IBM's Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS) was used to perform the data analysis. Demographic data were calculated, mainly focusing on identifying the cultural heritage of the respondents, as well as that of the managers they were evaluating. White respondents and managers were deemed as representative of Western heritage and black respondents and managers as representative of African heritage.

Reliability data were collected in the form of Cronbach's alpha. A value larger than 0.7 was deemed as sufficient proof of reliability (Nunnally, 1978). Cronbach's alphas were calculated for each of the subscales of the FRLT, as well as for the leadership effectiveness instrument.

Validity data were generated through exploratory factor analyses, and the results revealed a simple structure in the data (Tabachnick & Fidell, 2019), with few cross-loadings and items loading in accordance with the structure of the instrument were deemed as evidence of validity. This analysis was performed only on the FRLT items, as the leadership effectiveness instrument consisted of only four items and was deemed unidimensional.

Means were calculated and presented and mean differences were then calculated using ANOVA. The cut-off score for statistical differences between means was set at 0.05. If mean differences were found, Cohen *d*-values were calculated. Cohen (1988) indicated that *d*-values up to 0.2 represent a negligible effect, between 0.2 and 0.5 a small effect, between 0.5 and 0.8 a medium effect and beyond 0.8 a large effect.

Correlations between the different leadership styles and leadership effectiveness were calculated per race. The interest in this study was not the size of the correlation but rather the differences of these correlations across race. Z-observed scores were calculated to determine if these correlations differed significantly from each other (Field, 2013). Z-observed scores higher than (+/-) 1.96 were interpreted as indicative of a significant difference between the correlations, at  $p < 0.01$  (Pallant, 2020). When z-observed scores were smaller than (+/-) 1.64, it was assumed that the differences in the correlations were not significant.

## Ethical considerations

Permission to conduct the research was granted by the Research Ethics Review Committee of the Graduate School of Business Leadership under approval number 2016\_SBL\_003\_CA. Students who assisted with the data collection were informed of the conditions under which the data would be used. They were required to obtain formal written approval from relevant executives in the organisations where they collected the data. All potential respondents received a comprehensive information sheet explaining the

nature of the research and the way the data would be used. Participation was both voluntary and anonymous, and it was explained to the participants that completing and submitting the questionnaire would be deemed as consent to participation.

## Results

### Demographics

Responses from 1140 employees were captured. Of these, 573 (50.3%) were men and 567 (49.7%) were women. Black people were the dominant group, with 762 respondents (66.8%), followed by white people with 206 respondents (18.1%) and smaller numbers of mixed race (116 or 10.2%) and people of Asian descent (56 or 4.9%). The age of the respondents varied between 20 and 64 years, with a mean of 38.62 and a standard deviation of 9.364.

The respondents were asked questions about their leaders. In total, 702 (61.6%) of the leaders were identified as men and 437 (38.3%) as women. The race composition of the leaders reported on were as follows: 655 (57.5%) black, 350 (30.7%) white, 90 (7.9%) mixed race and 45 (3.9%) of Asian descent. The age of the leaders reported on by the respondents varied between 23 and 70 years, with a mean of 44.23 and a standard deviation of 8.380.

### Reliability analyses

The TFL scale showed high levels of reliability, with a Cronbach's alpha of 0.942 (20 items). The Cronbach's alpha for TSL was 0.750 (11 items), 0.834 (5 items) for LFL and 0.951 (4 items) for the measure of leadership effectiveness.

### Validity

The factorial validity of the leadership style instrument was tested. An acceptable Kaiser–Meyer–Olkin measure of sampling adequacy score of 0.939 and a Bartlett's test of sphericity approximation with a significant ( $p < 0.001$ ) chi-square ( $df = 630$ ) of 27070.982 indicated that the data on the 26 items were suitable for factor analysis. A five-factor solution provided the best fit and declared 60.5% of the variance in the data set. The items from TFL loaded on factors 1 and 3, while the items from TSL loaded on factors 2 and 4. No cross-loadings larger than 0.4 occurred across these two groups of factors. All the items from LFL loaded on factor 5, with one item having a significant cross-loading on factor 4 (which forms part of TSL). The observed fit of the data suggested that, at a factorial level, the measurement of leadership was valid.

### Mean differences

The mean scores for leadership style for black and white leaders, as assessed by their subordinates, are presented here. Low scores on leadership show low levels of that behaviour style and, similarly, low scores on effectiveness reflect low levels of leader effectiveness.

**TABLE 1:** ANOVA: differences between leadership style means across race.

Style	Source of variance	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
TFL	Between groups	0.143	1	0.143	0.246	0.620
	Within groups	583.842	1003	0.582	-	-
	Total	583.985	1004	-	-	-
TSL	Between groups	0.954	1	0.954	2.381	0.123
	Within groups	400.184	999	0.401	-	-
	Total	401.138	1000	-	-	-
LFL	Between groups	4.374	1	4.374	5.342	0.021
	Within groups	819.504	1001	0.819	-	-
	Total	823.878	1002	-	-	-

ANOVA, Analysis of Variance; TFL, transformational leadership; TSL, transactional leadership; LFL, laissez-faire leadership.

**TABLE 2:** Descriptive statistics: leadership styles across race.

Variable	Race	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Std. error	95% CI lower	95% CI upper
TFL	Black people	655	3.584	0.796	0.031	3.523	3.645
	White people	350	3.609	0.696	0.037	3.536	3.683
	Total	1005	3.593	0.762	0.024	3.546	3.640
TSL	Black people	654	3.036	0.679	0.026	2.983	3.088
	White people	347	3.100	0.534	0.028	3.044	3.157
	Total	1001	3.058	0.633	0.020	3.019	3.097
LFL	Black people	654	2.517	0.953	0.037	2.444	2.590
	White people	349	2.378	0.806	0.043	2.293	2.463
	Total	1003	2.469	0.906	0.028	2.413	2.525

Note: Minimum score was 1 and maximum 5. To assess if these differences were statistically significant, an ANOVA was performed.  
CI, confidence interval; TFL, transformational leadership; TSL, transactional leadership; LFL, laissez-faire leadership.

From Table 1, it can be observed that, apart from LFL ( $F(1,1001) = 5.352; p = 0.021$ ), the mean leadership scores did not differ from each other statistically. In Table 2, it can be read that the mean score on LFL for black people was 2.517, while for white people it was 2.378. The Cohen's *d*-value  $((2.517-2.378)/0.906)$  was 0.058, which suggests that, at a practical level, the difference was negligible.

From Table 3, it can be observed that the means did not differ significantly. This is also evident from Table 4, where the mean score for black people was 5.084, and that of white leaders was 5.037.

### Correlations and differences between correlations

Table 5 reports the correlation between the different leadership styles and leadership effectiveness and the data regarding the differences between these correlations, which is reflected by z-observed values.

In Table 5 numerically, black leaders who display TFL are perceived to be more effective than white leaders and white leaders who display TSL are judged as more effective than black leaders. There is a negative correlation between LFL and leadership effectiveness, and this correlation, in numerical values, is stronger for black than for white leaders. However, when testing for the significance of the differences between the correlations, the z-observed values indicate that these differences are not statistically significant.

**TABLE 3:** ANOVA: differences between leadership effectiveness means across race.

Source of variance	Sum of squares	df	Mean square	F	Sig.
Between groups	0.493	1	0.493	0.171	0.679
Within groups	2888.713	1003	2.880	-	-
<b>Total</b>	<b>2889.206</b>	<b>1004</b>	-	-	-

ANOVA, Analysis of Variance.

**TABLE 4:** Descriptive statistics: Leadership effectiveness across race.

Race	N	Mean	Standard deviation	Std. error	95% CI lower	95% CI upper
Black people	655	5.0844	1.711	0.066	4.953	5.215
White people	350	5.0379	1.668	0.089	4.862	5.213
<b>Total</b>	<b>1005</b>	<b>5.0682</b>	<b>1.696</b>	<b>0.053</b>	<b>4.963</b>	<b>5.173</b>

Note: Minimum score was 1 and maximum 7.

**TABLE 5:** Correlation of leadership style, leader effectiveness across race.

Style	Black people	White people	Z-observed
TFL	0.790 ( $p < 0.001$ ) $n = 655$	0.762 ( $p < 0.001$ ) $n = 350$	1.06 ( $p = 0.144$ )
TSL	0.370 ( $p < 0.001$ ) $n = 654$	0.416 ( $p < 0.001$ ) $n = 347$	-0.816 ( $p = 0.207$ )
LFL	-0.511 ( $p < 0.001$ ) $n = 654$	-0.480 ( $p < 0.001$ ) $n = 349$	-0.619 ( $p = 0.268$ )

TFL, transformational leadership; TSL, transactional leadership; LFL, laissez-faire leadership.

## Discussion and conclusion

The review of the literature on African leadership and the FRLT allowed for a variety of hypotheses to be set, linking certain cultural groups with specific leadership styles. It should be acknowledged that the conceptualisation of the hypotheses was more often based on stereotypes and intuition than on specific literature suggesting such correlations. Hence, the aim of the study was to investigate the validity of these assumptions, making use of empirical data.

Regarding the methodology, it could be stated that the sample was diverse and equitably representative of the different gender profiles, although significantly more black people than other groups were included. The strength of the sample representativeness is that the leaders are working for different organisations, and therefore, it minimises the risk of organisational cultural bias, something that Hofstede was criticised for (Baskerville, 2003; Javidan et al., 2006; Minkov, 2018). The overall sample size is sufficient to test the hypotheses and to inform perceptions of leadership. Furthermore, the validity and reliability analysis conducted provide comfort that the measurements are dependable (that if replicated, similar results would be reported) and valid.

The results revealed that mean scores for all three leadership styles did not differ on a practical level across cultural groups, and where there was a slight difference, in the case of laissez-faire, it was negligible. This supports the notion that leaders, regardless of cultural background, demonstrate or display similar behaviour attributes. This is contrary to the most basic assumptions of cross-cultural studies (Center for Creative Leadership, 2012; GLOBE, 2020). It is, however, a very positive notion, suggesting that South Africans, irrespective of cultural background, display similar leadership behaviour.



Transformational leadership was judged as the most effective leadership style, followed by TSL. Regardless of their cultural background, leaders in South Africa who apply both transformational and TSL styles were judged as effective. The results of this study are aligned with the literature, which suggests that leadership is neither exclusively transactional nor transformational but that it happens on a continuum and that the best leaders are those who apply both transformational and transactional styles based on the situation at hand (Bass, 1990; Khan et al., 2016). Laissez-faire leadership was negatively related to leadership effectiveness.

Across the groups, the relationships were of a similar magnitude. Thus, all hypotheses that predicted leadership style and effectiveness based on racial and cultural background were rejected. The results of this study suggest that leaders from different cultural backgrounds and working in the geographical area of South Africa are judged by their subordinates as acting very similarly. Therefore, black or white leaders who 'apply' TFL are judged to be equally effective. Similarly, those who 'apply' LFL are judged as ineffective, irrespective of race and colour. These results contradict the argument found in the literature that people of different cultures differ in terms of their perceptions and expectations of leadership effectiveness (Center for Creative Leadership, 2012; Eyong, 2017) and of what constitutes an outstanding leader (Hoppe & Eckert, 2012; House et al., 2014). This is, again, a very positive insight, suggesting that South African leaders, irrespective of cultural background, are experienced as similarly effective when they apply specific leadership behaviour.

While the study revealed that those from different cultural backgrounds who practice leadership within South Africa are similar in many respects, it has not shed light on whether the leadership behaviours displayed are distinct to Africa, and this matter requires further research. Based on the results of this study, it is concluded that cultural background does not have a major influence on leadership expectations and leadership effectiveness. People generally have the same expectations of leadership behaviour that inform whether the leader is perceived as effective or not.

Given these results (that South African leaders generally behave similarly and, when engaging in a particular style, are judged similarly), it could be asked if culture and context have a significant influence on leadership style and leader behaviour. In addition, it could be asked whether there is such a phenomenon as African leadership, and if so, what the definition thereof might be. These questions remain unanswered. Researchers interested in cultural dynamics and leadership effectiveness are encouraged to conduct more scientific research, specifically quantitative research such as this, which will add to the body of knowledge and understanding of leadership within the African context.

## Limitations of the study

A central assumption in this research was that white people living in South Africa are Westerners and embrace Western

cultural practices and that black people living in South Africa are Africans and embrace African cultural practices. Thus, white people will manage in the same manner as Westerners, irrespective of their exposure to Africa and black people will manage like Africans, irrespective of their exposure to the West. Following this approach implies 'painting with a very broad brush' and is considered a serious limitation of this study.

Another limitation of the study is that the sampling of organisations was convenient. While this is a limitation that other researchers should try to avoid, sampling within the organisations was random and this should be replicated in future studies. While there is a risk of suggesting that the sample is culturally biased, as most of the respondents were black, this notion may be put to rest as the sample is strongly representative of the South African population.

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### Competing interests

The authors have declared that no competing interest exists.

### Authors' contributions

M.L. was responsible for the literature review, data collection, data analyses and writing the first draft. R.S. was involved in the conceptualisation of the work, the methodology and the data-analyses. In terms of the literature review, R.S. played an editorial and critiquing role.

### Ethical considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Graduate School of Business Leadership Research Ethics Review Committee, which specifies how the project adheres to the values and principles expressed in the University of South Africa's policies on research ethics (ref. no. 2019\_SBL\_AC\_005\_FA).

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### Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

### Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not represent the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the authors.

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