

Task and relationship orientation of Americans: a study of gender, age, and work experience

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Abstract:

This paper examines the management orientation of employees in the United States by comparing the leadership perception of 484 respondents from the Alaska and Florida regions. It appears that Americans have a significantly higher score on the relationship-orientation than task-orientation. Similarly, the variables of gender, age and work experience produced similar results, showing a significantly higher score for the relationship orientation for these Alaskans and Floridians. The study also presents practical recommendations, suggestions for future research and implications of the study.

Key words: Relationship, task, leadership, culture, Americans, Alaska, Florida and the United States.

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Introduction

In today's competitive workplace, it is crucial for managers and entrepreneurs to understand their leadership orientation as well as employee behavior (Bass, 2008). In a global context, culture plays an important role in the behavior of people. Indeed, Adler (1993) argued that national culture has a greater impact on employees than does their organization's culture. Thus, management must focus on developing appropriate management methods that are relevant to the national culture rather than just optimizing organizational culture (Thomas and Au, 1999; Trompenaars, 1993).

Notwithstanding the important role of culture, managers and expatriates must understand not only the culture of the country or region in which they do business (Hofstede, 2001); they must also reflect on the relationships and tasks at hand in order to be successful and to create long-term value for their organization.

It is almost impossible for a manager or a company to be successful without knowledge and understanding of the inner strengths and weakness of the people in the organization. Managers should also know the dominant personalities and task and relationship orientation of people in the organization. This is especially important in collectivistic cultures (Kagitcibasi, 1994, Watkins and Liu, 1996) where the quality of social interactions between individuals depends heavily on whether or not they belong to the same in-group and therefore a relationship orientation is an important aspect of the leader's role.

While this assertion is true in more collectivistic cultures, the U.S. is an individualistic culture (House and Aditya, 1997), especially when compared to Thailand (Mujtaba, 2009), Taiwan (Huang and Mujtaba) and Philippines (Mujtaba and Balboa, 2009). It will be interesting to see the general tendencies of Americans and to determine their leadership orientations in terms of task and relationship orientation. Therefore, the purpose of this study is to examine the task and relationship orientation of respondents in the United States and to discuss how it may relate with or differ from orientations in more collectivistic cultures. In other words, are Americans more task oriented or relationship oriented in their leadership orientation?

The United States and its Culture

The behavior of people usually reflects their native cultures. People from the United States are highly individualistic (House, Hanges, Javidian, Dorfman and Gupta, 2004). Therefore to others from more collectivistic cultures, Americans from the United States may at times be perceived as ethnocentric, egoistic, materialistic, and impatient due to their individualistic and task-oriented life styles (Mujtaba and Balboa, 2009). Young American children are taught to be creative and innovative by thinking of their own ideas. Being rebellious and going against the majority can be considered positive for the American society as it is one sign of critical thinking and individualism. For example, unlike many other parts of the world, American children are encouraged to show their individualistic behavior through the choices in their dress code while attending school—in most cases, they can choose their own colors and styles. Americans have an individualistic character and, as a result, employees tend to prefer to work alone.

Leadership Styles: Task and Relationship Orientations

The behaviors of leaders are often perceived in terms of initiating structure (task-orientation) and consideration (relationship-orientation) factors in business research (Halpin and Winer, 1957; Fleishman, 1967). Generally speaking, task behavior is the extent to which leaders engage in top-down communication by explaining what the follower is to do, as well as when, where, and how each function is to be accomplished; and relationship behavior is the extent to which leaders engage in joint communication with followers while providing socio-emotional support. Bass (1990) found relationship-oriented functions to be associated with subordinate satisfaction and task-oriented functions to be associated with group performance. However, Bass also found relationship-oriented functions to be positively associated with group performance. Sherwood and DePaolo (2005) explain that the task context includes situations that involve how the manager will accomplish tasks through people and in which both the worker and manager give attention to the task at hand. These situations may involve planning, task coordination and execution. Since the task-based context focuses on the work to be done, skills and abilities are the predominant criteria on which workers base their willingness to be vulnerable. Abilities are a clear requirement for accomplishing tasks in a specific domain (Mayer, Davis and Schoorman, 1995). As explained through contingent leadership theories (Hersey, 2009), the relationship context includes situations that involve showing concern for the worker or providing support for the worker and the worker-manager relationship. This context may include open lines of communication, discussion of personal concerns and providing socio-emotional support.

According to Higgins and Endler (1995), the task-oriented strategy is problem-focused which involves taking direct action to alter the situation itself and to reduce the amount of stress it evokes. Furthermore, task-oriented strategies are associated with better adjustment, as reflected in higher self-rated coping effectiveness and less depression (Causey and Dubow, 1993; Compas, Malcarne and Fondacaro, 1988). This of course sounds a little like a pro-task orientation bias since relationship orientation should reduce depression since it works on the long term ties among people and reduces uncertainty in times of crisis. This is the reason why the most common organizational culture in the world is the Family culture (relationship-hierarchical) according to Trompenaars (1993). As such more research is needed on this topic.

Research has shown that the type of leadership style has been recognized as a determinant of role stress (Babin and Boles, 1996; Michaels, Day and Joachimsthaler 1987). The role of leadership, whether formal or informal, can increase one's obligations for each situation. One dimension of each person's leadership style is the extent to which he or she is people-oriented or task-oriented. Most people fall somewhere in between the two extremes. However, since cultures influence people through years of socialization, this study will help in determining whether people of an individualistic culture, such as the US, are more relationship-oriented or more task-oriented. It has been said that since Americans many work hours on their jobs, they are considered to be more task-oriented (Mujtaba and Balboa, 2009). High task orientation coupled with a Type-A personality can cause more stress for people who do not have a good balance of their personal and professional activities (Mujtaba, 2008).

Study Methodology: Task and Relationship Orientations

Hersey (1984, 1997, and 2008) defines leadership as the process of influencing an individual or a group of individuals while providing an environment where personal, professional, and/or organizational objectives can be successfully achieved. Leaders tend to use various amounts of task or relationship behaviors. Northouse (2007) provides a useful instrument, known as Style Questionnaire, which can be used to obtain a general profile of a person's leadership behaviors regarding task and relationship orientations. Respondents respond with a likert-type scale that ranges from 1 (never) to 5 (always) the degree to which they engage in a series of behaviors. The results can show one's use of various task and relationship behaviors.

The degree to which one engages in more task or relationship oriented behaviors depends on the variables present in the situation; some of the situational variables can include the difficulty of the task, the importance of the job, the time available to get it done, and the readiness of the follower to successfully complete the task without much input. Hersey (2008) explains that effective leaders stay in control by managing through a balance of both task and relationship oriented behaviors, as appropriate, to make sure the objectives and goals are accomplished.

Research Questions and Hypotheses

The research question for this study was to determine whether Americans from the United States have a higher average score on the relationship orientation or task orientation. The specific hypotheses for this study are as follows:

1. Null Hypothesis 1: American respondents in the United States will have similar scores on task and relationship orientations.
2. Null Hypothesis 2: Male respondents from the United States will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations.
3. Null Hypothesis 3: Female respondents from the United States will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations.
4. Null Hypothesis 4: Younger respondents from the United States who are 18 to 25 years of age will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations.
5. Null Hypothesis 5: Older respondents from the United States who are 26 years of age or older will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations.
6. Null Hypothesis 6: Respondents from the United States who have six or more years of work experience will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations.
7. Null Hypothesis 7: Respondents from the United States who have less than one year of work experience will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations.

A survey link was emailed to 940 respondents in the Florida and Alaska regions to working adults and business students. Even though it is separated from the US mainland, Alaska is an “immigration” state with a large percentage of the population coming from other parts of the country, especially from the western and upper-midwestern States (Marineau and Alsua, 2009). Florida is also a net immigration State with large number of people coming from all over the country, especially the eastern and southern States. Because of this immigration we can assume that these Alaskans and Floridians can be fairly representative of the US population as a whole. A total of 484 completed questionnaires were collected for analysis.

Task, Relationship and Stress Perception Results

While the average scores of American respondents for task orientation (37.63) falls in “moderately high range,” and their relationship orientation average (41.99) falls in “high range”, there are statistically significant differences among them (as demonstrated in Table 1). So the first hypothesis cannot be supported since American respondents in the United States have dissimilar scores on task and relationship orientations.

Table 1 - U.S. Respondents’ Leadership Orientation Scores

Respondents	No.	Gender		Average Task Orientation Score	Average Relationship Orientation Score
		Male	Fem.		
United States	484	184	300	37.6343	41.9855*

*t = -9.8; p < 0.001

As can be seen from Table 2 and using the t-test for differences in two means, at a 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis (“Male respondents from the United States will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations”) is rejected because the calculated t value (-3.24) does not fall within the critical value of t for statistical significance. In other words, since the t value does fall within the critical values (+1.97 and -1.97), the alternative hypothesis is supported. Furthermore, since the p-value (0.0013) is smaller than alpha (α) = 0.05, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

Based on the results, the task orientation and relationship orientation scores of male respondents do not appear to be similar. As such, one can conclude that the male American respondents have significantly different scores on the task and relationship orientations.

Table 2 - Male Respondents’ Leadership Orientation Scores

	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
Task	184	38.897	7.2
Relationship	184	41.16	6.15

Gender: t = -3.24; p =0.001297

As can be seen from Table 3 and using the t-test for differences in two means, at a 0.05 level of significance, the null hypothesis (“Female respondents from the United States will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations”) is rejected because

the calculated t value (-9.89) does not fall within the critical value of t for statistical significance; in other words, since the t value does fall within the critical values, the alternative hypothesis is supported. Furthermore, since the p-value (0.00) is smaller than alpha (α) = 0.05, there is sufficient evidence to reject the null hypothesis.

Based on the results, the task orientation and relationship orientation scores of female respondents from the United States do not appear to be similar. As such, one can conclude that the female American respondents have significantly different scores on the task and relationship orientations.

Table 3 - Female Respondents' Leadership Orientation Scores

	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
Task	300	36.86	7.88
Relationship	300	42.49	5.92

Gender: $t = -9.89$; $p < 0.001$

As can be seen from Table 4, the null hypothesis (“Younger respondents from the United States who are 18 to 25 years of age will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations”) cannot be accepted because the calculated t of -5.13 is not within the critical value of t for statistical significance, and the p-value (0.00) is smaller than alpha (0.05). Based on these results, the task and relationship orientation scores of young American respondents appear to be dissimilar. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

Table 4 - Younger Respondents' Leadership Orientation Scores

	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
Task	155	37.16	7.88
Relationship	155	41.3810	6.5450

Gender: $t = -5.13$; $p = 0.000001$

As can be seen from Table 5, the null hypothesis (“Older respondents from the United States who are 26 years of age or above will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations”) cannot be accepted because the calculated t of -6.99 is not within the critical value of t for statistical significance, and the p-value (0.00) is smaller than alpha (0.05). Based on these results, the task and relationship orientation scores of older American respondents appear to be dissimilar. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

Table 5 - Older Respondents' Leadership Orientation Scores

	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
Task	229	37.86	7.6
Relationship	229	42.2700	5.7700

Gender: $t = -6.9937$; $p < 0.001$

As can be seen from Table 6, the null hypothesis (“Respondents from the United States who have six or more years of work experience will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations”) cannot be accepted because the calculated t of -8.7 is

not within the critical value of t for statistical significance, and the p -value (0.00) is smaller than alpha (0.05). Based on these results, the task and relationship orientation scores of experienced American respondents appear to be dissimilar. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

Table 6 - Experienced Respondents' Leadership Orientation Scores

	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
Task	375	37.79	7.51
Relationship	375	42.04	5.75

Gender: $t = -8.701$; $p < 0.001$

As can be seen from Table 7, the null hypothesis (“Respondents from the United States who have less than one year of work experience will have similar scores for relationship and task orientations”) cannot be accepted because the calculated t of -4.5452 is not within the critical value of t for statistical significance, and the p -value (0.000009) is smaller than alpha (0.05). Based on these results, the task and relationship orientation scores of less experienced American respondents appear to be dissimilar. Therefore, the hypothesis is rejected.

Table 7 - Less Experienced Respondents' Leadership Orientation Scores

	Sample Size	Mean	Standard Deviation
Task	109	37.08	8.29
Relationship	109	41.7980	6.98

Gender: $t = -4.5452$; $p = 0.000009$

Based on the results, the American respondents from the United States have dissimilar scores for relationship and task orientations. Based on the study of their age, gender and work experience, the results are consistent: these American respondents from the United States demonstrated that they have a significantly higher score in relationship orientation. This means that American managers from the United States would be more likely to engage in joint communication with their employees while providing socio-emotional support throughout the process.

Implications, Limitations and Recommendations

Due to their individualistic nature and high-context, the American culture tends to glorify an orientation toward achievement, competition and success. Therefore, even if one is relationship-oriented, one does not acknowledge this as a primary goal. Given this situation, the normal well adjusted person would express the values of society by choosing the task-oriented response and avoiding the socially undesirable self and relationship-oriented responses (Bass, 1967; Mujtaba and Balboa, 2009). This current study did not support this commonly held perception since the results show that, despite their individualistic culture, Americans are more relationship-oriented than task-oriented. One other possible explanation may be the higher attention given to high emphasis on teamwork and collaboration in work environment. So, even individuals may be interested

in doing the best job possible and see the tasks to successful completion; thus, they have learnt that they need to work well within a group, perceiving that contribution to the group effort will contribute to the overall success of the department.

The variables of age, gender and work experience with the American population in the United States were studied in this research. These American respondents demonstrated that they likely to engage in joint communication with their employees while providing socio-emotional support throughout the work process.

Are the results here a surprise? Perhaps this is so because most people do not perceive Americans as being relationship oriented in the workplace. Of course, this study used the definitions provided by leadership theorists such as Paul Hersey (2008). However, these findings may not be consistent across all the research in the United States. Perhaps Floridian and Alaskans have orientations that are unique to them and not necessarily to people in others states.

Some people see task orientation as the degree to which the task is central to the work activity in the department or organization. That is, we form this team because we want to accomplish X task, independently of whether we get along with each other in the department. Whereas relationship orientation is seen as the degree to which the relationship among the members is central to the work activity in the department or organization. That is, we do this task (or any other task) because we are a solid team and we get along. This comes from the “concern for people” vs. “concern for productivity” models of management and industrial psychology. However, in this study, we defined task behavior as a top down hierarchical activity, and relationship behavior as an empowered, flat, low power distant communication. The authors agree that perhaps these are very different, even confounding, constructs. If this is the case, there may be confounding between power distant behaviors “tells members what they are supposed to do,” and an actual task orientation. For example, an item “Acts friendly with members of the group” could be scored high by both task and relationship oriented individuals (according to one definition) but for different reasons:

1. Task orientation: “Acts friendly with members of the group” high because you need to have a friendly work environment to get things done.
2. Relationship orientation: “Acts friendly with members of the group” high because you want to be liked by the work team so we are able to work together.

Perhaps this is a cause of why (counter-intuitively) Americans may also be scoring high in relationship orientation. Another explanation may come from the context in which the questions are asked. Context (situation) can be a moderator of many constructs. For example, through research on empowerment, the authors have learned that the same individual may feel both empowered and disempowered. Empowered at home in his role as a father and disempowered at work in his role as a worker (and vice versa). Also, in some Latin and Asian cultures (such as Spain and Afghanistan) people may be very collectivistic and/or loyal within their in-group (family, tribe) and very individualistic and/or disloyal in out-groups (work team at the workplace). When we measure task and relationship orientation, perhaps researchers should be more clear on are they asking in general or are they asking for orientations at work, specifically? This may make a difference.

There are several other limitations to this study and one specific limitation is the fact that this study was conducted with a convenient population using an online format for a self-reported survey. Future studies can compare populations with similar working backgrounds and demographic variables while controlling for specific professions and locations.

While the American population seem to have a significantly higher focus on the relationship orientation, this might be true simply because they understand the importance of maintaining a good connection with their vendors, suppliers, and customers. In a modern economy, relationships, especially global relationships have become more important than in the past for American organizations. It is possible that these respondents are more relationship-oriented simply due to chance or due to the years of socialization in the importance of healthy relationships. However, these results cannot be generalized to the total population as it is based on a small number of working adults and business students. As such, future studies can focus on increase the sample size with similar working populations in the United States, and such research can analyze the responses based on different training backgrounds and categories of age to see if having more experience or being older makes a difference in the task or relationship orientation scores of respondents in low context cultures. Finally, researchers should also note that management experience might be a variable or factor in the scores of respondents. Therefore, future studies should compare those who have five or more years of management experience with those who have never been a manager to see if this is a variable in the task and relationship orientation scores of respondents.

Conclusion

The results of this study show that American respondents are more focused on their relationships than the tasks. Furthermore, as shown in the responses, male and female respondents demonstrated the same pattern of being more oriented toward a relationship orientation. Similar results were found for years of work experience and age factors. So, despite a group's individualistic orientation in a low-context culture, this research has implied that they can be highly focused on the relationship while completing their tasks.

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