SOCIETAL AND ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON ETHNOCENTRIC JAPANESE LEADERS

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ABSTRACT

Senior Japanese business leaders within the U.S. consumer electronics industry were studied to understand how Western societal and organizational culture values impact their leadership approach. The focus was temporary ethnocentric cross-cultural staffing assignments. Utilizing a qualitative multi-case study design with phenomenological element, findings suggested a majority of these senior Japanese leaders experienced lifetime employment practices, indiscriminate career paths, mentoring, and job rotation. A majority exhibited an ethnocentric philosophy and the path-goal theory of leadership effectiveness.

Keywords: Leadership, Cross-Cultural Leadership, Societal Culture, Organizational Culture, Ethnocentric Philosophy, Temporary Cross-Cultural Assignments
INTRODUCTION

Sales of U.S. consumer electronic products are projected to reach $209.6 billion in 2014 (Consumer Electronics Association, 2013) and Japanese subsidiaries operating in the U.S. continue to play a major role in the industry’s evolution. At the same time, globalization of Japanese consumer electronics companies places senior Japanese executives into temporary cross-cultural leadership roles within U.S. subsidiary operations. The need to understand cultural and cross-cultural influences on leadership has never been more important (House, Javidan, & Dorfman, 2001; Rao, Hashimoto, & Rao, 1997). While the United States has been the principal source of leadership theory, American solutions to leadership problems do not always work in other nations or with other cultures (Rao et al.; Trompenaars, 1998). Triandis (2004) noted most of the literature on leadership is from a North American perspective, implying these findings are universal truths rather than culturally influenced.

Cultural understanding is part of the leadership context and it should serve as a frame of reference when drawing conclusions about leadership (House & Javidan, 2004). Cross-cultural research confirms that culture influences leadership style (Hofstede, 1980; House, 2004; Jung & Avolio, 1999; Kets De Vries & Florent-Trency, 2002; Trompenaars, 1998) and the expectations of those who assess their effectiveness (Hofstede, 1980; House, 2004).

The interpretation of its respective members provides a solid foundation for the study of a culture (Segall, Lonner, & Berry, 1998) and for understanding its behavior, policies, and practices through shared values. Smith (1997) declared understanding local variations in the cultural concepts as necessary to avoid imposed etic (universal) findings based on invalid measures. The interaction of societal culture and organizational culture is essential to understanding implicit leadership attributes, behaviors and underlying values, and their corresponding impact on leadership practices (House, 2004). Numerous cross-cultural studies have examined leadership practices using a dimensional framework from a societal or organizational cultural perspective. This study integrated the societal, organizational, and cross-cultural lenses within the confines of the U.S. consumer electronics industry at a senior Japanese leadership level.

BACKGROUND

According to Ouchi (1981), the seven distinctive cultural characteristics of Japanese organizations are slow employee promotion and evaluation processes, indiscriminate career paths, implicit control mechanisms, collective decision-making, collective responsibility, lifetime employment, and holistic concerns, which filter down to employee non-work, family, and personal matters. Ouchi (1984) posited integrated planning at the societal level was responsible for Japanese industrial success, specifically through harmonious relationships among financial institutions, industrial organizations, labor, and government.
In response to the success of Japanese companies in world markets, researchers have actively studied and compared Japanese leadership systems and styles (Clayton, 1992). Clayton observed the difficulty of Western researchers in grasping the essential cultural aspects of Japanese leadership; such difficulty appears in the variety of views, descriptions, and prescriptions found in Western literature.

Leadership expectations, what actions leaders may or may not take, and the status and influence bestowed on leaders vary considerably as a result of cultural forces in the societies in which they lead (House, 2004). The essential features of Japanese leadership theory include a strong emphasis on participation supported by consensus, with a corresponding emphasis on collective responsibility and a long-term focus (Clayton, 1992; Hofstede, 1980; House & Javidan, 2004).

Many U.S. subsidiaries of leading Japanese consumer electronics companies currently use ethnocentric cross-cultural leadership assignments (Rao et al., 1997). Ethnocentric leadership supports the use of existing Japanese leadership attributes and behavior, regardless of cross-cultural norms (Heenan & Perlmutter, 1979; Perlmutter, 2001). These temporary U.S. assignments include 3- to 5-year terms in senior leadership roles, in support of U.S. business operations. During temporary ethnocentric assignments, Japanese leaders experience frequent interaction with U.S. leaders supporting their own implicit assumptions and beliefs. Without cultural awareness and understanding of implicit leadership assumptions and beliefs, cross-cultural interaction can have a negative impact on individual performance, problem solving, decision-making, and management practices within the U.S. subsidiary environment (House, 2004).

PURPOSE

House (2004) suggested knowing what leadership practices are effective or ineffective and understanding explicit differences between the two cultures—yours and the other—is likely to facilitate a more efficient and effective business environment. The results of this study provide organizational leaders with additional knowledge and understanding of how Western societal and organizational cultural values influence senior Japanese leadership practices in a temporary ethnocentric cross-cultural staffing assignment within the U.S. consumer electronics industry. Such knowledge and understanding may serve as the foundation for cultural and cross-cultural training and development. These materials may better prepare expatriate personnel for temporary assignments and help Western environments to better understand and support such a cross-cultural experience.

Through the application of a multi-case study qualitative research design (Stake, 1994) with a phenomenology element (Moustakas, 1994), this research study provides a foundation to explore the individual experiences of senior Japanese leaders to understand how Western societal and organizational culture influences their approach to leadership in a temporary ethnocentric cross-cultural staffing assignment within the U.S. consumer
electronics industry. Specific elements included what cultural values influence senior Japanese leadership practices as well as how Japanese and Western cultural values and leadership practices differ. The goal of this research study was to identify which Western societal and organizational cultural values influenced senior Japanese leadership practices and how Japanese and Western cultural values and leadership practices differed in a temporary ethnocentric cross-cultural staffing assignment within the U.S. consumer electronics industry.

THEORETICAL AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The conceptual framework (see Figure 1 in Appendix) depicts the unique societal and organizational cultural dimensions, attributes, and beliefs existing within Japanese and U.S. business environments to create culturally specific leadership behaviors and styles. In a Japanese ethnocentric staffing environment, U.S. and Japanese cultural dimensions integrate, uncovering comparability and determining leadership characteristics within the consumer electronics industry. The corresponding cross-cultural environment influences cross-cultural leadership through cultural congruence, cultural difference, and near-universal theory. The design of the case study helped to explore the individual experiences of senior Japanese leaders to understand how Western societal and organizational culture influenced their approach to leadership in a temporary ethnocentric cross-cultural staffing assignment within the U.S. consumer electronics industry. The goal of the study was to identify what Western societal and organizational cultural values influenced senior Japanese leadership practices and how Japanese and Western cultural values and leadership practices differed in a temporary ethnocentric cross-cultural staffing assignment within the U.S. consumer electronics industry.

NATURE OF STUDY

The qualitative multiple-case study approach (Stake, 1994) with a phenomenology element (Moustakas, 1994) used documentation, participant as observer (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994), and semi-structured face-to-face interviews (Appendix A) to explore the individual experiences of senior Japanese leaders to understand how Western societal and organizational culture influenced their approach to leadership in a temporary ethnocentric cross-cultural staffing assignment within the U.S. consumer electronics industry. Interview participants supporting participant as observer (Atkinson & Hammersley, 1994) were from five supporting U.S. consumer electronics companies.

Eight defining categories provided groups for the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix A): Demographic Profile; Role-Based Profile; Leadership; Cross-Cultural Leadership; Ethnocentric Leadership; Societal Culture; Organizational Culture, and U.S. Cultural Background and Guidance. All participants were senior Japanese leaders in temporary ethnocentric staffing assignments within the U.S. consumer electronics industry.
DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

All 32 potential participants received informed consent letters via the U.S. postal service and/or personal company e-mail. Twelve participants who met the selection criteria agreed to participate in the study. The approximate interview length ranged from 35 minutes to 1 hour and 12 minutes.

Upon completion of the interview transcription, each participant received a copy to review for accuracy. Suggestions to the participants requested notice of any corrections or modifications to ensure the information was accurate. All 12 of the participants acknowledged receipt of their transcripts (Appendix C). Eight of the participants accepted the original transcript with no changes. Three of the participants (P3, P7, and P12) made minor changes to their transcript. One of the participants (P5) made significant changes to several of the interview questions. Three of the 12 senior Japanese leaders (P7, P10, and P11) have since completed their temporary U.S. assignments and returned to Japan.

The semi-structured interview research took place between September 9, 2009, and January 12, 2010. This study generated 12 participants, including 4 presidents, 6 vice–presidents, and 2 directors. Study participants included 11 males and 1 female (P5), with the temporary assignments ranging from 14 months to 10 years.

FINDINGS

Demographic Profile

Questions 1a, 1b, 1c: Japanese leader tenure, assignments, and previous employers. The demographic profile questions provided support for lifetime employment practices and indiscriminate career paths (Ouchi, 1981), mentoring and job rotation (Pascale & Athos, 1981), with limited cross-cultural experience outside of the U.S. Ouchi (1981) acknowledged indiscriminate career paths as a distinct Japanese organizational characteristic, while Pascale and Athos (1981) indicated the common practice of mentoring and job rotation are distinct Japanese leadership qualities. Support for lifetime employment applied only to study participants’ with 18 or more years of continuous service with their current Japanese employer. These findings support the premise of a cultural shift away from this distinctive Japanese organizational characteristic.

Role-Based Profile

Question 2a, 2b: Describe and discuss role changes. The role-based questions consistently revealed discussions of a two-dimensional assignment. The first dimension included frequent communication and interaction with Japan, while the second generally outlined a highly task- or performance-oriented focus in support of current U.S. duties, with any discussion of changes relating directly to changing job responsibilities and/or
changing business conditions. The nature and structure of this two-dimensional role reflected a Japanese ethnocentric philosophy through control of key U.S. product, pricing, or functional decisions (Perlmutter, 2001).

In addition to a two-dimensional approach in support of an ethnocentric philosophy, participants emphasized a task- or performance-oriented approach to their daily activities, supporting the path-goal theory of leadership effectiveness. Path-goal leadership theory espouses improved employee performance and employee satisfaction by concentrating on employee motivation (House & Mitchell, 1974). Path-goal theory focuses on subordinate motivation to explain leadership effectiveness (Yukl, 1989). However, some hold conflicting cultural perspectives regarding the concept of motivation.

Western theories on motivation developed within the U.S. focus on individual efforts based on personal needs supported by rational calculations and experienced psychological states. Japanese theories on motivation focus on the collective, and the needs to fulfill duties and obligations and to contribute to the group, while cultivating a unique leader-follower exchange relationship based on unconditional dependence and obligation. These findings suggest successfully implementing the path-goal theory of leadership effectiveness in a temporary cross-cultural environment requires senior Japanese leaders to adjust their motivational practices. Motivation should focus on individual efforts designed around personal needs, supported by rational calculations and psychological states (Gelfand et al., 2004).

**Cross Cultural Leadership**

Questions 4a, 4b, 4c, 4d, 4f: Discuss current duties and responsibilities, skills and challenges and a successful U.S. leader. When comparing responses across the defining cultural dimensions of leadership and cross-cultural leadership, the Japanese leaders did not consider motivation and harmony or cooperation and groupism as skills. However, 83% of participants identified these aspects as important skills in the U.S. These findings support implicit leadership theory, suggesting individuals have implicit beliefs, convictions, and assumptions concerning attributes and behaviors that distinguish effective leaders from ineffective leaders across different cultural environments (House & Javidan, 2004). These findings reinforce the cultural foundation of these aspects, minimizing the need for leaders to cultivate these skills. For example, motivation, harmony, cooperation, and groupism are cultural norms in a collectivist culture, such as that of Japan. The cultural norms create these aspects naturally, minimizing the need for leaders to possess the skills individually.

When considering challenges across the leadership and cross-cultural dimensions; all leaders identified communication, motivation, and negotiation, supporting a variform universal (Lonner, 1980). The Japanese leaders also considered execution speed, time management, and assignment knowledge, compared to just individualism in the United States.
Finally, the U.S. leadership profile did not include negotiation, hard work and dedication, leading by example, or any education, training or mentoring characteristics. This compared to the Japanese leadership profile, which failed to include engagement and a strong personality, characteristics used to describe an ideal U.S. leader. These findings support integrated theory, while further reinforcing the Japanese leadership practices and recognizing that attributes and entities distinguishing a specific culture are prophetic of leader attributes and behaviors most often enacted and effective in that culture (House & Javidan, 2004).

A majority of senior Japanese leaders participating in temporary cross-cultural assignments experience lifetime employment practices, indiscriminate career paths (Ouchi, 1981), mentoring, and job rotation (Pascale & Athos, 1981). An ethnocentric philosophy (Perlmutter, 2001), and House’s (1971) path-goal theory of leadership effectiveness support a majority of senior Japanese leaders participating in temporary cross-cultural assignments within the U.S. consumer electronics industry.

Through the concepts of implicit leadership theory, value-belief theory, integrated theory, and variform universals study findings identified to be effective in their temporary cross-cultural U.S. assignments, senior Japanese leaders had to develop, communicate, and gain support for their mutual goals. Senior Japanese leaders also had to accept opposing viewpoints and operate effectively within the decentralized, autonomous, and specialized structure of Western cultural environments. This required senior Japanese leaders to make adjustments to their communication, motivation and negotiation practices.

Across the defining categories of leadership, cross-cultural leadership, and ethnocentric leadership, two recurring cultural themes emerged from the data collected from the 12 senior Japanese leaders participating in the study. The recurring themes focused on effective leadership in a cross-cultural environment, and designated the adjustments senior Japanese leaders had to make (see Figure 2 in Appendix).

**Theme 1: Effective leadership in a cross-cultural environment.**

To be effective, senior Japanese leaders participating in a temporary ethnocentric cross-cultural assignment in the U.S. consumer electronics industry focused on developing, communicating, and gaining support for their mutual goals; accepting opposing viewpoints; and operating effectively within the decentralized autonomous and specialized structure of Western organizational environments. When discussing skills, challenges, and successful leadership in Japan, senior Japanese leaders consistently identified cultural norms emphasizing harmony, cooperation, groupism, and consensus. This compared to temporary U.S. cross-cultural environments where such collective traits are not natural processes, nor are they embedded in cultural norms. The findings suggested senior Japanese leaders had to individually develop, communicate, and gain
support for their mutual goals to be effective in their temporary cross-cultural assignments.

In addition to cultivating mutual goals, senior Japanese leaders emphasized the importance of accepting opposing values and views in their assignments. When discussing skills, challenges, and successful leadership in a Japanese cultural environment, senior Japanese leaders consistently referenced practices of collectivism and Nemawashi. These Japanese leadership practices produce individuals who are interdependent and advance duties, obligations, and values as aligned with group membership. Participants reported a strong focus on group identity, where group members are responsible for individual members through implicit control mechanisms (Ouchi, 1984). Individuals are willing to subjugate their personal wants, desires, and values for the greater good of the group or collective.

At the organizational level, individuals are highly interdependent within the organization, and the organization becomes a part of the individuals’ own self-identity and values. Japanese employees are willing to make personal sacrifices of their individual values, goals, and desires to fulfill organizational obligations. When discussing cross-cultural leadership challenges, senior Japanese leaders emphasized individualism as the primary focus, supporting the practice of diverse values and beliefs. The findings suggested senior Japanese leaders had to accept conflicting values and beliefs to be effective in their temporary cross-cultural assignments.

In addition to mutual goals and accepting opposing values and beliefs, senior Japanese leaders emphasized the importance of operating effectively within the decentralized autonomous and specialized structure of Western organizational environments. In a Japanese cultural environment, a centralized focus in addition to cultural norms supporting harmony, cooperation, groupism, consensus, and a generalist orientation allowed for smooth coordination and operation across departments. This compared to their temporary cross-cultural assignment, which emphasized a decentralized focus in conjunction with individualism and a preference for specialists supporting autonomous organizational units. The findings suggested senior Japanese leaders had to effectively coordinate work tasks across decentralized autonomous departments to be effective in their temporary assignments.

When considering challenges across the leadership, cross-cultural, and ethnocentric dimensions, universally identified elements included communication, motivation, and negotiation. While supporting a variform universal (Lonner, 1980), the elements have different cultural meanings based on cultural specific behaviors. House et al. (1997) and Smith (1997) supported the need for senior Japanese leaders in temporary cross-cultural assignments to make adjustments to their communication, motivation, and negotiation practices.
Theme 2: Adjustments the leaders made.
The first adjustment senior Japanese leaders had to make while participating in temporary ethnocentric cross-cultural assignments was recognizing traditional Japanese communication practices supporting ambiguity, silence, implicit communication and nemawashi would not be effective in a temporary U.S. cross-cultural environment. Instead, Japanese leaders had to adjust to a straightforward, clear, and direct communication style.

Implementing such a clear and direct communication style was necessary to support cross-cultural and ethnocentric practices designed around a low-context structure. In such a structure, verbal dialog contains most of the information, with very little embedded in the setting or the participants involved (Davies & Ikeno, 2002). This contrasted with Japanese communication practices designed around group harmony, group consciousness, group cooperation, and group social structure, supporting a high-context language structure. In this structure, a vast majority of the communication content lies outside of the spoken work and within the actual setting or the people involved in the interaction (Davies & Ikeno, 2002).

Senior Japanese leaders in a temporary cross-cultural assignment were not accustomed to Western negotiation practices, which allow both sides to present conflicting interests and ideas before reaching a conclusion. The goal of the Japanese cultural practices of nemawashi or laying the groundwork inconspicuously in advance is to reach a compromise solution as amicably as possible by communicating in advance how others think. Nemawashi or decision by consensus is common in Japanese business circles, compared with decision by majority, which dominates Western culture (Davies & Ikeno, 2002). In addition to communication and negotiation practices, senior Japanese leaders also adjust their motivational practices.

Japanese motivational practices address dependency, loyalty, and the need to fulfill duties and obligations in support of the group or collective. To be effective in this temporary cross-cultural environment, senior Japanese leaders had to focus on individual interests and needs for understanding goal-directed behavior. Motivational practices in the U.S. tend to focus on individual efforts designed around personal needs, supported by rational calculations and experienced psychological states (Gelfand et al., 2004). Collectively, Japanese communication, motivation, and negotiation practices emphasize dedication, consensus, and harmony, compared with Western practices that emphasize assertiveness and individualism (Davies & Ikeno, 2002; Gelfand et al., 2004).

The Western cultural value of assertiveness means the degree to which individuals in organizations are forceful, tough, dominant, and aggressive in social relationships. Assertiveness uses the individual performance-oriented view of dominance, taking charge and actively controlling the environment. This view reflects the assumption that the environment can be manipulated and controlled, supporting a pragmatic orientation toward reality and a belief in human perfectibility (Den Hartog, 2004). Assertiveness
reflects an internal orientation or belief in one’s self, supporting an internal locus of control. Den Hartog suggested assertiveness supports competition and competitiveness and considers conflict and resistance as positive signs of passion and conviction.

The cultural values of individualism reflect shared assumptions for systems to promote individual autonomy and rational exchanges between members in the organization. Selection originates in a rational calculation of the employees’ knowledge, skills, and ability, explaining how they fit within the organization’s needs. Compensation uses an inequity model, where individuals receive rewards based on performance, and where promotions arise more often from merit than from other factors such as seniority, tenure, age, or personal connections. Individualism supports rewards contingent on performance (Gelfand et al., 2004).
CONCLUSION

Lifetime employment practices, indiscriminate career paths (Ouchi, 1981), mentoring, and job rotation (Pascale & Athos, 1981) still characterize a majority of senior Japanese leaders participating in temporary cross-cultural assignments. An ethnocentric philosophy (Perlmutter, 2001) and House’s (1971) path-goal theory of leadership effectiveness support a majority of senior Japanese leaders participating in temporary cross-cultural assignments within the U.S. consumer electronics industry.

Through the concepts of implicit leadership theory, value-belief theory, integrated theory, and variform universals, study findings indicated senior Japanese leaders had to develop, communicate, and gain support for their mutual goals to be effective in their temporary cross-cultural U.S. assignments. Senior Japanese leaders also had to accept opposing viewpoints and effectively operate across the decentralized, autonomous, and specialized structure of Western cultural environments. This required senior Japanese leaders to make adjustments to their communication, motivation, and negotiation practices. The corresponding adjustments supported the Western cultural values of assertiveness and individualism.

Study findings recommended cross-cultural training and development begin with an understating of the unique Western communication, motivation, and negotiation practices. The findings expanded to discuss how the Western cultural values of individualism and assertiveness influence Japanese leadership practices, which support groupism, development of a generalist, creating a sense of belonging and loyalty, and participation supported by consensus. Such knowledge and understanding will better prepare expatriate personnel for temporary assignments and help Western environments to better understand and support such a cross-cultural experience.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A. SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

1. Demographic questions
   a. How many years have you been working for XXX Company?
      i. Is XXX Company the only company you have ever worked for?
   b. What were your previous assignments at XXX Company?
      i. Were any of these previous assignments outside of Japan? If so, in what country(s)?
   c. How long have you been working in your current U.S. assignment?

2. Role-based questions
   a. Describe your normal day in this current U.S. assignment.
   b. How has your normal day changed since starting your new assignment in the U.S.?

3. Leadership
   a. What skills were important in your previous assignment?
   b. What were your greatest challenges in your previous assignment?
   c. How did you manage these challenges?
   d. How did these challenges make you feel?
   e. Describe a successful leader in Japan.
   f. Describe a successful leader-follower relationship in Japan.

4. Cross-cultural leadership
   a. What are your current U.S. duties and responsibilities?
   b. What skills are important in this U.S. assignment?
   c. What challenges have you faced in this U.S. assignment?
   d. How did you deal with these challenges?
   e. What effect do these challenges have on your assignment?
   f. Describe an ideal U.S. leader.

5. Working with U.S. management in an ethnocentric leadership role
   a. What challenges do you experience when interacting with U.S. management?
   b. Have these challenges led to changes in how you work with U.S. management?
   c. Do you feel accepted by U.S. management?
   d. Do you feel successful in your current assignment?

6. Societal cultural
   a. What influence does corporate Japanese leadership have on the U.S. operation?
   b. What influence does corporate Japanese leadership have on your current assignment?
c. Is this influence different from previous assignments, and if so, in what ways?

7. Organizational culture
   a. Please describe in detail the process used for making critical decisions and determining employee promotions at XXX Company in Japan.
   b. What were the most important organizational values at XXX Company in Japan?
   c. Please describe in detail the process used for making critical decisions and determining employee promotions at your current U.S. assignment.
   d. What are the most important organizational values at your current U.S. assignment?
   e. What do you see as the key differences between the organizational culture at both companies?

8. U.S. cultural background and guidance
   a. Before accepting this new assignment, what prior knowledge of U.S. culture and U.S. business practices did you have?
   b. What advice would you have for your replacement?

9. Closing questions
   a. Are there any other questions I should ask you to understand your current assignment?
   b. Is there anything else you would like to discuss about the differences in managing and leading both here and in Japan?
## APPENDIX C. DEMOGRAPHIC SUMMARY

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>U.S. Position</th>
<th>Years with Japanese Company</th>
<th>One Employer</th>
<th>Assignments outside of Japan and U.S.</th>
<th>Previous U.S. Assignment</th>
<th>Diverse Background</th>
<th>Months in Current Temporary Assignment</th>
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FIGURE 1

Figure 1. Conceptual framework
FIGURE 2

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<th>Practices</th>
<th>Theme 2. Leader Adjustments</th>
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<td>Straightforward, clear and direct communication</td>
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<td>Mutual Goals</td>
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<td>Negotiation</td>
<td>Nemawashi</td>
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<td>Compromise Consensus/Harmony</td>
<td>Present conflicting interests and ideas</td>
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<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Collectivism</td>
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<td>Dependency, Loyalty Obligation in support of group or collective</td>
<td>Responding to personal needs. Internal locus of control</td>
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<td>External locus of control</td>
<td>Western Organizational Structure</td>
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Figure 2. Japanese senior leader adjustment