

How Leadership Behaviors Influence Employee Motivation in Multicultural Teams: Evidence from Asia

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ABSTRACT: This study examines how leadership behaviors influence employee motivation in multicultural teams within Asian regional hub environments. As multinational organizations increasingly centralize regional functions in Asia, these hubs integrate employees from diverse cultural, national, and professional backgrounds, creating complex relational and hierarchical dynamics that shape motivational experiences. Using the Bangkok regional hub of the Electrolux Group as a case context, this qualitative study draws on in-depth interviews with 32 participants, including both managers and employees, to explore how leadership behaviors are interpreted across roles and cultures. The study is theoretically anchored in relational leadership and Self-Determination Theory, conceptualizing motivation as a socially constructed and context-dependent process rather than an individual trait. Reflexive thematic analysis was employed to examine culturally embedded interpretations of leadership, with particular attention to power dynamics, inclusion, and role-based differences. The analysis identifies five interrelated factors shaping motivation in multicultural teams: leadership behaviors, communication and inclusion, psychological safety, trust, and team diversity. Cross-group analysis reveals broad alignment between employees and managers regarding these motivational drivers, alongside notable differences in emphasis. Employees prioritize clarity, fairness, and feeling valued, while managers emphasize balancing empowerment with accountability and adapting leadership approaches across cultures. The findings reframe motivation as a leadership-mediated relational outcome and extend cross-cultural leadership research by highlighting the culturally contingent nature of empowerment, inclusion, and psychological safety. Practically, the study offers guidance for leaders seeking to strengthen motivation through culturally sensitive and inclusive practices in Asian regional hubs.

KEYWORDS – Asia, communication, employee motivation, leadership, multicultural teams

I. INTRODUCTION

Multinational organizations increasingly rely on multicultural teams to coordinate regional operations, particularly in Asia, where regional hubs function as strategic centers for cross-market integration. These hubs bring together employees from diverse national, cultural, and professional backgrounds, creating environments that are culturally rich yet organizationally complex. Recent research highlights the rapid growth and strategic importance of regional hubs in Asia, emphasizing their role in enhancing global competitiveness, regional responsiveness, and cross-border coordination (Cerdin & Brewster, 2022; Reiche et al., 2023).

Leadership plays a critical role in shaping how employees navigate this cultural complexity. Prior studies demonstrate that leadership behaviors significantly influence communication quality, relational climate, and employee motivation in culturally diverse teams (Wang et al., 2021; Zhang & Tu, 2022). However, leadership in multicultural contexts involves more than applying generic leadership styles. Leaders must manage differing expectations related to hierarchy, authority, decision-making, and interpersonal interaction, all of which shape how leadership behaviors are interpreted and whether they are experienced as motivating or disengaging (Bashshur et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2023).

Within the last four years, scholarship has increasingly emphasized psychological safety, trust, and inclusive communication as central mechanisms linking leadership behaviors to motivation in diverse teams. Meta-analytic and empirical studies indicate that psychological safety is positively associated with motivation, collaboration, and learning in global and multicultural teams (Frazier et al., 2021; Newman et al., 2020). Similarly, trust in leadership has been identified as a key predictor of engagement and sustained motivation, particularly in contexts where employees hold different cultural expectations regarding authority and relational closeness (Kim et al., 2023). Research on inclusive leadership further suggests that openness, accessibility, and fairness strengthen employees' sense of belonging and motivation in culturally diverse environments (Carmeli et al., 2020; Shore et al., 2022).

Despite these advances, important gaps remain. Much of the existing leadership and motivation literature is grounded in Western or single-country contexts, implicitly assuming that leadership behaviors such as empowerment, openness, and participative communication operate uniformly across cultures. Less attention has been given to how these behaviors are interpreted within Asian regional hubs, where cultural diversity intersects with matrix structures and hierarchical norms. As a result, leadership behaviors that are intended to motivate may produce ambiguous or even unintended effects when cultural expectations around power distance, voice, and feedback differ across team members (Choi et al., 2023).

Building on this leadership-focused work, recent studies further emphasize psychological safety, trust, and inclusive communication as key mechanisms. Employees are more engaged and willing to contribute when they feel safe to express ideas, trust their leaders, and experience inclusion. While these mechanisms are well documented in the literature, there remains limited empirical understanding of how they operate simultaneously within multicultural Asian workplaces, particularly in contexts where cultural norms may discourage open expression or reinforce hierarchical distance.

This study addresses this gap by examining how leadership behaviors influence employee motivation in multicultural teams operating within an Asian regional hub context. This study conceptualizes employee motivation as a relational and context-dependent process shaped by leadership behaviors and social conditions within teams. The Bangkok regional hub of the Electrolux Group is used as a case context, not as an object of organizational evaluation, but as an analytically relevant setting that reflects the multicultural, cross-functional, and fast-paced dynamics common to contemporary Asian regional operations.

By adopting a qualitative, interpretive approach, the study seeks to contribute to leadership and motivation theory by reconceptualizing motivation as a relational and culturally mediated process. It aims to show how leadership behaviors influence motivation indirectly, through the creation of psychological safety, trust, and inclusion, rather than as direct drivers of engagement. In doing so, the study advances understanding of leadership effectiveness in multicultural environments and responds to calls for more context-sensitive leadership research in Asia.

II. RESEARCH PROBLEMS

Although recent scholarship has advanced understanding of leadership and motivation in global organizations, important theoretical gaps remain regarding how leadership behaviors shape motivation within multicultural Asian regional hubs. These hubs are characterized by cultural diversity, matrix structures, and hierarchical sensitivities that distinguish them from both headquarters' environments and single-country operations. Existing leadership and motivation theories offer valuable insights, yet their applicability to such contexts remains insufficiently examined.

Rather than viewing these gaps solely as contextual absences, this study conceptualizes them as unresolved theoretical questions about how motivation is constructed through leadership-mediated relational processes in culturally complex environments. To address the limitations in existing scholarship on leadership and motivation, we frame the following research problems.

2.1 Limited theoretical understanding of leadership behaviors as motivational mechanisms in Asian regional hubs

Although most studies link leadership behaviors to motivation, they assume relatively stable cultural norms and organizational structures. There is limited theoretical understanding of how leadership behaviors function as motivational mechanisms within Asian regional hubs, where cultural diversity and power distance norms may alter how leadership actions are interpreted and experienced. This gap raises questions about whether leadership behaviors such as empowerment, clarity, and support operate as universally motivating forces or whether their motivational impact is contingent on cultural and structural context.

2.2 Insufficient theorization of role-based interpretations of leadership behaviors in multicultural teams

Existing research remains largely leader-centric, focusing on how leaders describe or intend their behaviors. Theoretical insight into how employees and managers interpret leadership behaviors differently within the same multicultural environment is lacking. This gap limits understanding of leadership as a relational process shaped by role-based power dynamics. Examining both employee and manager perspectives is necessary to theorize how motivation emerges through interaction, rather than through leadership behavior alone.

2.3 Limited integration of cultural context into motivation theory in multicultural team settings

In multicultural teams, employees may hold differing expectations regarding hierarchy, feedback, and interpersonal interaction, which can shape motivational responses. This gap points to the need for a more context-sensitive conceptualization of motivation that accounts for how cultural norms and power distance influence employees' willingness to engage, speak up, and take initiative.

III. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research design

This study adopts a qualitative, interpretive research design to examine how leadership behaviors influence employee motivation in multicultural teams within an Asian regional hub. A qualitative approach was appropriate given the study's aim to explore meaning-making, interpretation, and lived experience rather than to test predefined hypotheses. This design enabled an in-depth examination of how leadership behaviors are understood and experienced across cultural and hierarchical contexts. The study was guided by a relational and context-sensitive theoretical orientation, which views motivation as a socially constructed process shaped by interaction and organizational environment. This perspective informed the selection of methods and analytic approach, prioritizing participants' interpretations of leadership behaviors within their cultural and organizational context.

3.2 Case context and selection

The study uses the Electrolux Group's Bangkok regional hub of a multinational organization as a case context. This hub integrates regional roles across multiple functions and nationalities and operates within a matrix structure typical of Asian regional hubs. The case was selected not as a representative organization but as an analytically valuable context in which to examine leadership and motivation in multicultural teams. Asian regional hubs combine high cultural diversity, cross-market coordination, and hierarchical sensitivity, creating conditions that challenge assumptions embedded in existing leadership and motivation theories. Studying leadership behaviors within this setting, therefore, offers theoretical insight into how motivation is constructed in culturally complex environments.

This case is particularly suitable for examining relational leadership processes because daily work interactions require ongoing negotiation of authority, communication norms, and cultural expectations. The focus of the study is on these processes rather than on evaluating organizational performance or effectiveness.

3.3 Participants and sampling

Participants included 32 individuals, comprising 17 managers and 15 employees working within the regional hub. Participants represented a range of cultural backgrounds and functional roles.

Purposive sampling was used to ensure inclusion of both managerial and non-managerial perspectives, enabling examination of role-based interpretations of leadership behaviors. Email invitations were sent to 20 managers and 20 employees, resulting in voluntary participation from the final sample. Including both employees and managers allowed for analysis of leadership as a relational process shaped by power dynamics and role expectations. This sampling strategy supports the study's theoretical focus on motivation as an outcome of interaction rather than unilateral leadership action.

3.4 Data collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews conducted over a defined period. Interview guides were developed separately for managers and employees, allowing questions to reflect participants' roles while addressing common themes related to leadership behaviors, communication, psychological safety, trust, and diversity.

The semi-structured format enabled consistency across interviews while allowing participants to elaborate on experiences they perceived as most salient. This flexibility was particularly important in capturing culturally grounded meanings and nuanced interpretations of leadership behaviors.

All interviews were conducted in English, recorded with consent, and transcribed verbatim. Ethical considerations were addressed through informed consent, anonymity, and confidentiality.

3.5 Data analysis

Data were analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis following Braun and Clarke's six-phase approach: familiarization with the data, generating initial codes, developing candidate themes, reviewing and refining themes, defining and naming themes, and producing the analytic narrative.

The analytic process was iterative and reflexive rather than linear. Initial coding focused on participants' explicit descriptions of leadership behaviors and motivational experiences. Through repeated engagement with the data, codes were examined for patterns, contradictions, and role-based differences. For example, early codes related to empowerment evolved into a broader theme that captured both motivational benefits and instances of ambiguity or reduced confidence.

Reflexive memoing was used throughout the analysis to document analytic decisions, challenge assumptions, and track the evolution of themes. This process supported critical engagement with the data and helped ensure that themes were grounded in participants' accounts rather than imposed a priori.



Figure 1. Conceptual framework on how leadership behaviors influence employee motivation

IV. FINDINGS

The reflexive thematic analysis of 32 interviews revealed five interconnected themes that shape how employees experience motivation: leadership behaviors, communication and inclusion, psychological safety, trust building, and team diversity. The table below provides an overview of the analytic themes, summarizing their core ideas, how participants described them, and their motivational implications.

Table 1. Summary of Analytic Themes

Theme	Core Idea	How Participants Described It	Impact on Motivation
Leadership Behaviors	Leadership shapes the climate in which multicultural teams work.	Vision, empowerment, clarity, and people orientation were consistently valued. Leaders who adapt to cultural differences create stronger engagement.	Motivation increases when employees feel trusted, respected, and guided with purpose.
Communication and Inclusion	Inclusive communication creates belonging and shared understanding.	Clear messaging, active listening, and inviting quieter voices were central. Leaders adapt communication styles across cultures.	Motivation grows when employees feel heard and able to contribute confidently.
Psychological Safety	Safety to speak, question, and learn is essential.	Employees described the importance of non-judgmental responses and constructive handling of mistakes. Managers emphasized reducing fear and hesitation.	Psychological safety encourages initiative, learning, and collaboration, which reinforce motivation.
Trust Building	Trust supports collaboration across cultures and geographies.	Participants defined trust through consistency, fairness, honesty, and respectful behavior.	Strong trust increases commitment, openness, and willingness to take ownership.
Team Diversity	Diversity is enriching but requires intentional leadership.	Participants noted benefits such as creativity and learning, as well as challenges related to differing communication styles and expectations.	Motivation increases when diversity is accompanied by inclusion and cultural sensitivity.

Table 2. Perspectives on Leadership and Motivation in Multicultural Teams

Theme Area	Employees	Managers
Leadership Behaviors	Emphasize relational care, fairness, recognition, and feeling valued. Motivation rises when leaders show support and clarity.	Focus on balancing empowerment with accountability. Emphasize adapting leadership styles across cultures and managing expectations.
Communication and Inclusion	Sensitive to unclear communication and hesitant to speak in multicultural settings. Value simple, inclusive communication that invites participation.	Emphasize the need to ensure alignment across countries. Focus on clarity, structure, and adapting communication methods for diverse teams.

Psychological Safety	View psychological safety as essential for sharing ideas and asking questions. Strongly influenced by the leader's tone and reactions.	Recognize the need to reduce fear of making mistakes. Aim to create open environments but acknowledge challenges due to workload and cultural differences.
Trust Building	Trust is built through fairness, consistency, and respectful behavior. Trust loss is felt emotionally and demotivates quickly.	See trust as necessary for delegation and problem-solving. Link trust to transparency and reliable communication across regional boundaries.
Team Diversity	Experience diversity as enriching but potentially confusing without inclusive leadership. Motivated by opportunities to learn from different cultures.	Value diversity for innovation and cross-regional insight. Highlight the leadership responsibility to manage differences and maintain team cohesion.

V. DISCUSSION

The results are theoretically grounded in relational leadership and self-determination theories, which assert that motivation is socially constructed and context-dependent, rather than merely an individual psychological state. This research expands these viewpoints by illustrating that leadership behaviors affect motivation indirectly, by fostering conditions such as psychological safety, trust, and inclusion. In doing so, the study reframes motivation in multicultural teams as a relational outcome shaped by leadership-mediated environments rather than a direct response to leader actions.

5.1 Leadership behaviors as relational motivational mechanisms

Employees described motivation as closely linked to feeling trusted, supported, and guided, while managers emphasized the need to balance autonomy with accountability across cultural contexts. These findings align with research on culturally intelligent leadership, which suggests that adaptive leadership behaviors are essential in multicultural environments.

However, the findings also reveal a tension within empowerment practices. While autonomy boosted motivation for some employees, inadequate guidance led to reduced confidence in others. This contradiction highlights the role of cultural expectations related to hierarchy and authority, particularly in high power distance contexts. The findings, therefore, challenge the assumption that empowerment is universally motivating and suggest that its effectiveness depends on culturally sensitive calibration between autonomy and structure.

5.2 Communication, inclusion, and the construction of belonging

Communication and inclusion were identified as critical pathways through which leadership behavior influenced motivation. Employees emphasized the importance of clear, accessible communication that enabled participation regardless of language background. Managers talked about planned ways to make multicultural meetings more inclusive and understandable. These findings reinforce existing research that positions inclusive communication as central to engagement in diverse teams.

Beyond confirming prior work, this study extends understanding by demonstrating that inclusion operates not only as a behavioral practice but also as a symbolic signal of respect and legitimacy. When leaders adapted communication to include quieter or culturally reserved team members, employees interpreted this as recognition of their value within the team. Conversely, when communication practices unintentionally privileged dominant cultural norms, employees reported disengagement, revealing how subtle power dynamics shape motivational experiences.

5.3 Psychological safety, power distance, and motivational risk-taking

Psychological safety emerged as a foundational condition for motivation, particularly in teams characterized by cultural diversity and hierarchical sensitivity. Employees reported increased motivation when leaders addressed inquiries and errors constructively, while managers acknowledged the significance of viewing mistakes as opportunities for learning. These findings are consistent with psychological safety theory, which links interpersonal safety to learning and engagement.

Importantly, the findings suggest that psychological safety functions differently across cultural contexts. Employees from cultures with strong respect for hierarchy were particularly sensitive to leaders' reactions, and even minor negative responses discouraged participation. This highlights how psychological safety in multicultural teams requires heightened leader awareness of cultural power dynamics. The study, therefore, extends psychological safety theory by demonstrating its culturally contingent nature in multicultural and hierarchical environments.

5.4 Trust as a stabilizing force in multicultural team motivation

Trust building was identified as a key mechanism through which leadership behaviors influenced motivation. Employees associated trust with fairness, consistency, and respectful treatment, while managers viewed it as essential for delegation and effective collaboration. These findings align with existing leadership research linking trust to engagement and performance.

The results also show that trust helps multicultural teams stay stable by lowering uncertainty and preventing cultural misunderstandings. In the context of regional hubs characterized by matrix structures and cross-border coordination, trust enables employees to raise concerns, seek clarification, and take initiative. This suggests that trust enhances motivation and supports coordination in culturally complex organizational environments.

5.5 Diversity, inclusion, and motivational ambivalence

Team diversity was experienced as both motivating and challenging. Employees valued exposure to diverse perspectives and learning opportunities, while managers highlighted diversity as a source of innovation. At the same time, communication differences and varying expectations around hierarchy created moments of confusion. These findings support research suggesting that diversity enhances outcomes when supported by inclusive leadership.

The study adds nuance by illustrating that diversity alone does not guarantee motivation. In the absence of inclusive leadership practices, diversity amplified uncertainty and disengagement. Motivation increased only when leaders actively facilitated inclusion and mutual understanding. This finding reinforces the view that diversity is a contextual condition whose motivational potential depends on leadership-mediated processes.

5.6 Cross-role perspectives and theoretical implications

A comparison of employee and manager perspectives reveals broad agreement on what supports motivation, yet there are important differences in emphasis. Employees focused on relational and emotional experiences such as feeling valued, safe, and respected. Managers prioritized coordination, accountability, and adapting leadership behaviors across cultures. These role-based differences illustrate the value of examining leadership as a relational process experienced differently by leaders and followers.

Overall, the findings advance leadership and motivation theory by demonstrating that motivation in multicultural teams is relationally produced and culturally mediated. Leadership behaviors influence motivation not directly, but through the conditions they create. This study contributes to cross-cultural leadership scholarship by situating these processes within an Asian regional hub context, highlighting how cultural diversity, hierarchy, and organizational structure shape motivational dynamics.

5.7 Limitations and Future Research

This study has several limitations that offer opportunities for future research. The findings are based on qualitative interviews from a single regional hub, which may limit generalizability to other organizational contexts. Future studies could compare multiple hubs or industries to explore whether similar motivational patterns emerge in different cultural or structural environments. Longitudinal research would also help uncover how leadership practices shape motivation over time, particularly in fast-evolving regional structures. Future research could also examine how national cultural composition moderates leadership-motivation relationships within regional hubs.

VI. CONCLUSION

This study examined how leadership behaviors influence employee motivation in multicultural teams within an Asian regional hub context. The findings demonstrate that motivation is not driven by isolated leadership actions but emerges through a set of interrelated relational and cultural conditions shaped by leadership practices. Leadership behaviors, communication and inclusion, psychological safety, trust, and team diversity collectively influenced how employees interpreted their work environment and their willingness to engage.

Importantly, the findings reveal that leadership behaviors commonly assumed to be motivating, such as empowerment or openness, did not function uniformly across cultural and hierarchical contexts. Employees' motivational responses were shaped by cultural expectations related to authority, clarity, and fairness, as well as by role-based power dynamics between managers and employees. These insights highlight that motivation in multicultural teams is contingent, relational, and culturally mediated rather than universally produced.

A comparison of employee and manager perspectives showed broad agreement on the factors that support motivation, while also revealing meaningful differences in emphasis. Employees focused on relational experiences, including feeling valued, safe, and fairly treated. Managers emphasized coordination demands, accountability, and the need to adapt leadership behaviors across cultural contexts. These role-based differences reinforce the importance of examining leadership as a relational process rather than a unidirectional influence.

The study contributes to leadership and motivation theory by advancing a relational conceptualization of motivation in multicultural teams. It demonstrates that leadership behaviors influence motivation indirectly by shaping psychological safety, trust, and inclusion, particularly within culturally diverse and hierarchical

environments. By situating these processes within an Asian regional hub, the study extends existing theories that have largely been developed in Western or culturally homogeneous contexts.

Practically, the findings offer guidance for organizations operating multicultural teams in Asia. Leaders can strengthen motivation by calibrating empowerment with clarity, practicing inclusive and accessible communication, fostering psychological safety through consistent responses, building trust through fairness and transparency, and actively supporting inclusion within diverse teams. These practices are particularly relevant for regional hubs characterized by cultural diversity, matrix structures, and hierarchical sensitivity.

Overall, this study underscores the importance of culturally sensitive and relationally grounded leadership in sustaining motivation within multicultural team environments. By integrating theory, empirical insight, and practical relevance, the study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of leadership effectiveness in contemporary Asian organizational contexts.

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