The Effects of Australian Tall Poppy Attitudes on American Value Based Leadership Theory

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Abstract. A survey study of twenty-two Australian CEOs and their subordinates assessed relationships between Australian leader motives, Australian value based leader behaviour, subordinate tall poppy attitudes and subordinate commitment, effectiveness, motivation and satisfaction (CEMS). On the whole, the results showed general support for value based leadership processes. Subsequent regression analyses of the second main component of Value Based Leadership Theory, value based leader behaviour, revealed that the collectivistic, inspirational, integrity and visionary behaviour sub-scales of the construct were positively related with subordinate CEMS. Although the hypothesis that subordinate tall poppy attitudes would moderate value based leadership processes was not clearly supported, subsequent regression analyses found that subordinate tall poppy attitudes were negatively related with perceptions of value based leader behaviour and CEMS. These findings suggest complex relationships between the three constructs, and the proposed model for the Australian context is accordingly amended. Overall, the research supports the need to consider cultural-specific attitudes in management development.

Keywords: Australia, cross-cultural management, leader-follower relationships, leadership, tall poppy attitudes, Value Based Leadership Theory

1. The effects of Australian tall poppy attitudes on American value based leadership theory

Almost all of the prevailing theories of leadership have come from American and Western European countries, reflecting the cultures of these countries. With the world migrating towards an increasingly global society (Alexander and Wilson, 1997), will these American and Western European leadership theories apply in other culturally different countries?

Recently, the need to better understand leadership processes in Australia was highlighted by The Report of the Industry Task Force on Leadership and Management skills (Karpin, 1995). The report exposed the inadequacy

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of the existing Australian leadership and management paradigm, suggesting that Australia lacked the leadership needed to provide Australia with an edge in the increasingly competitive global economy. Although the report highlighted the importance of understanding leadership processes, Midgley (1995) stressed the need to question the value of the extensive global leadership literature to Australia because the majority of this literature may not be applicable to the Australian culture. This is supported by studies that found that leadership processes are influenced by the culture in which the leadership process takes place (House, Wright and Aditya, 1997; Parry and Sarros, 1996).

The aim of this paper is two-fold. First, to provide the first empirical study in the Australian context of Value Based Leadership Theory, a theory developed in the United States (House, 1999). Second, to empirically test the argument that Australian cultural characteristics need to be taken into account when applying leadership theories developed outside the Australian context. In particular, it is argued that an Australian cultural characteristic, the tall poppy syndrome, will have a moderating effect on the relationship between a value based leader and his/her followers.

Value based leadership is defined as a relationship between a leader and one or more followers based on strongly internalised ideological values espoused by the leader and strong follower identification with these values (House, 1999). In other words, if the leader has values that appeal to the follower, the follower will be more motivated and committed in following the leader. Value based leadership has been found to be universally endorsed as contributing to effective leadership across cultures (House et al., 1998).

1.1. Value based leadership and motivation

An important component of Value Based Leadership Theory is McClelland’s (1985) work on the motivational bases of human behaviour. McClelland (1985) introduced a theory, the Leader Motive Profile (LMP), to explain leader effectiveness as a function of a specific combination of motives. McClelland (1985) argued that a certain combination of non-conscious motives were predictive of leader effectiveness. This combination is high power motivation, moderate achievement motivation, high responsibility disposition and power motivation greater than affiliative motivation. McClelland (1985) refers to this combination as the Imperialistic Motivational Pattern or the Leader Motive Profile (LMP).

House and Aditya (1997) have defined the power motive as a non-conscious concern for acquiring status and having an impact on others. Individuals with a high need for power enjoy influencing people and events, and are more likely to seek positions of authority. The achievement motive