# Is empathy a critical success factor for a sales leader? If this hypothesis is true how I transform my leadership style and how would my team benefit from it?

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**ABSTRACT**

Whereas cultural shades impact a professional's networks and day-to-day relationships with the peers, colleagues and customers, it is worthwhile to assess the transformation of one's leadership style to become more empathic and concerned about others. In this light, invoking one's MVS and CS to appreciate the diverse shades of professional relationships, I have attempted to draw inferences on the basis of a very fundamental action research exercise (SDI) as to how my leadership-cum-communication style-as a sales leader heading a number of sales teams- might transform into an empathic one which is more accommodating and understanding while dealing with peers, colleagues and customers hailing from different nationalities.

**Keywords:** Empathy, sales leader, leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

Cross-cultural working is fraught with challenges and opportunities alike. With a professional background as a consultant in a global company, I was fortunate enough to earn good job offers abroad. I worked in countries like Norway, United Kingdom, Italy, Germany, etc. Most of my professional roles brought me at the helm of affairs which were customer-centric and I was at the roles which are direct and frontline and which entail a lot of interaction with the customers. It was indeed intriguing to face a myriad set of customers with their priorities and anticipations. While I would attempt to draw parallels between the cultures where I was placed in as a consequence of my professional capacity, I was enthralled by the stark differences in some cases. Moreover, the business environs were at times quite dissimilar. There were different value systems in these countries and the cultural background was at times, predictable and at other times, it was unpredictable. Thus, the cultural ramifications impinged upon my role as a professional dealing with customers and the interactions with these customers took different forms resulting in different deals and outcomes. Amidst this cultural medley, I had to ensure that I would adjust myself in terms of my responses and interactions with the international customers and beg better results while ensuring customer satisfaction at the same time. Therefore, I would make efforts to put myself in their shoes and try to understand them and their perspectives with an open mind while furthering my interaction with them.

It is indeed interesting to ponder over how my interactions with clients and customers of international background shaped over time. I recall my experiences during my first international assignment at Norway where I was responsible for arranging software design workshops for customers in Norway. Once, I had to take a very critical design decision as it had bearings on the project costs and project scheduling. It was a critical moment and the decision had to be spontaneous yet optimum. The situation was such that it required immediate action and decision had to be taken on the same day. For facilitating a team interaction, I took the call of arranging a meeting with the rest of the project team members and the management representatives. However, to my utter dismay, while I was there at the scheduled venue and hour to attend the meeting, none of the Norwegian project team members or the management representatives turned up for the meeting. This was my first brush with cultural differences. Professionally, I would have never allowed a personal reason to intervene my professional priorities, but in Norwegian setting, things were not the same. In Norway, there is strong emphasis on work-life balance and the work hours stretch till 3 in the afternoon only. While my doubts were dispelled during this experience, I decided that in all my forthcoming international assignments, I would scan through the cultural framework of every new destination.

Culture is described as a collective phenomenon, because it is at least partly shared with people who live or have lived within the same social environment and it is in this social environment that culture was learned (Hofstede, 1991). It has been well-documented in research on cultural differences that nationality is a sensitive subject and it varies across societies. At the same time, it must be underscored that value systems and motivations of individuals are a function of an individual's personality and these values remain stable across a cross-section of population inhabiting a country. Furthermore, research based on culture also surfaces aspects like the way families function and the upbringing of children; the way schools are run and the admission processes therein for different societal sections; impact of political system on the lives of the citizens and the historical background which has shaped the society over a period of time. Besides, the Motivational Value System (MVS) of the individual is defined by the cultural affiliation of an individual which impinges upon the personal and business interface.

Presently, I am responsible for heading different sales teams and I hold regular interactions with clients in the Middle East, North Africa, Iran and Pakistan. I can very well relate to the diverse MVS's on a day to day basis on account of my regular interactions with my clients and customers.

**What is my concern?**
For the present study, I seek to appreciate and critically reflect my values from the lens of MVS and gauge the varying shades of MVS in my teams as well. In this vein, my study upholds the following objectives:

a. How best do I fit in the MVS frame?
b. In what ways are my values influencing my behavior and how do these values affect my interaction with my team members especially during conflicting situations or critical leadership positions and decision-making scenarios?
c. What is the best way to assess the MVS of my team members and how should I interpret the cultural patterns, if any?
d. In what ways can I transform my leadership style to be an empathic leader? How can my

performance improve by such self-transformation?

e. Will there be different interpretation of my leadership style in different cultural contexts?

f. What would be the impact of being an empathic leader on the performance of the sales contributors in my team?

g. Through my transformation as an empathic leader, how can the loyalty of my team members be furthered?

**Why am I concerned?**

As afore-mentioned, I am looking after the Middle East operations and here I lead teams which have members hailing from diverse backgrounds. Each of my team members has a unique personality and each one of them has a different drive to work with her value system and motivations. Besides, for the purpose of recruitment and management of attrition and severance, I am confronted with different MVS's of the team members. As a result, I perceive difficulty in leading the teams and managing them. It is precisely in this respect that I believe that my assessment of the MVS's of my team members' holds pertinence. Furthermore, I should be able to appreciate my own MVS to bring about a balance between mine and my teams' emotions and values. I am sure that by this self-assessment and self-transformation into an empathic leader, I would be able to execute leadership in a befitting manner.

**The situation as it is**

In a bid to better comprehend my leadership style and to improvise the same for better management of my team members, I have picked "appreciative inquiry" as the corner stone. Appreciative Inquiry has been defined in terms of a transformation approach which helps in inspiring, mobilizing and sustaining human system change (Cooperrider & Whitney, 2005). Applying the 4-D cycle will help me discover myself and what I do well, anticipate what would work well. Further, it is anticipated that the 4-D cycle shall come to my aid during my interaction with my team members. I would also be in a position to comprehend the MVS's of my team members and therefore, execute my leadership style in such a way which would garner support and loyalty from my team members.

The 4-D cycle shall be probed and applied with the help of Strength Development Inventory (SDI)-an action research method proposed by Elias H. Porter. I can vouch for this action research method as I had perceived its positive effects when I implemented on myself while I was undergoing a course in leadership in August, 2016. This action research method helped one to define the MVS and conflict sequence besides appreciating the primary motives of an individual. Motives are defined as concern for people (BLUE), concern for performance (RED) and concern for processes (GREEN). As a consequence of the application of this action research method, I must avow that I was appalled to witness that all my fellow participants who had been arranged in teams confirmed that their derived (MVS) are in line with their own personal assessment. The participants of the teams were assessed in terms of their primary motives and their motivation during the role plays' performances and other simulation exercises. Overall, I was in a position to gain insights into my team members' MVS and I was successful in adapting my behavior to leave a positive impact in the role plays. My experiences were so motivating that I decided to study more about the action research method and acquire a certification for the same. Now that I am doing the study on my self-transformation as an empathic leader, I have the opportunity of invoking the action research method in the 4-D cycle. Below, I explicate the constituents of the 4-D cycle in brief.

**DISCOVER:** (appreciating and valuing; 'what works well')
1. To be able to compare my self-perception vis-à-vis the perception of others-my team members- about me. For this purpose, I conducted the Johari Window exercise (Luft & Ingham, 1955).
2. To assess the degree of similarity between the Johari Window results and my own MVS.
3. For understanding the MVS of my team members, I administered a questionnaire based on the SDI.
4. Based on the aforementioned, I categorized the results by country of origin and age group to identify potential patterns.

**DREAM:** (envisioning; 'what would work well in the future')

5. In this phase, I chose those team members who were either poor performers, showed lesser degree of loyalty or had a propensity for conflicting situations in the course of business activities.
6. I discussed with each of the identified team members their MVS and how they could use the understanding of their motivations in future to work better
7. I analyzed the interaction between my own primary motives and MVS vis-à-vis the selected team members to understand how my interaction could work better in future

**DESIGN:** (planning and constructing; "how can it be")
8. During this phase, I developed a 'manual' together with the team members identified in the DREAM phase leveraging MVS and I introspected the best ways in which I could mould myself during my interactions with the team members to emerge into a more empathic leader.

**DESTINY:** (implementing; "how it runs and sustain")
9. In this phase I defined the review cycle for myself and the designated team members to periodically measure the improvement and adapt my leadership accordingly.

**DISCOVER – Johari Window**
Out of the 55 adjectives which are mentioned in the Johari Window, I find myself being best defined in terms of six adjectives: confident, intelligent, logical, powerful, tense and extroverted. I know I am a confident person and in situations I feel uncomfortable I use logic and intelligence to structure and draw sense out of the situation. Since my key objective was to introspect myself using the lens of appreciative inquiry which encourages self-determination (Lewis, Passmore & Cantore, 2008), I could self-assess myself as to why I picked the selected adjectives from the Johari Window. It is actually true that while encountering any situation, I meet every situation with confidence and leverage intelligence and logic to bolster my confidence. If I perceive that confidence is lacking, I tap power, anxiety or impatience to regain confidence. This was an interesting discovery as also it maps to my MVS and CS which is described later.

The next step is to identify how my team members assess me from the lens of Johari Window. For this, I sent the Johari Window survey to my team In order to identify my 'Blind Spots' (adjectives picked by others to describe me while I remain oblivious of those), 'Façade' (adjectives picked by

myself for self-description while they remain oblivious to others), 'Arena' (adjectives which were picked by myself and others) and the 'Unknown' (adjectives which are neither picked by me nor by others). Results showed that my team members (69%) rated me as confident, logical (46%), knowledgeable (38%), intelligent (38%), organized (30%) and trustworthy (30%). Further, I was rated as powerful and tense rated by team members. Concomitantly, I could draw parallels with these results and the situations and the team members. For instance, I could recollect that a recent performance review meeting with some of the team members, there was a heated discussion and difference of opinions and this could have prompted them to rate me as tense. On the positive side, I appreciate that my leadership skills were acknowledged by myself and others and I was rated accordingly in the "Arena" block

At the 'Blind Spot' bold, knowledgeable, organized and trustworthy were named most often. I would loosely link knowledgeable with intelligent, organized with logic and bold with confident. Being considered as trustworthy from my team reflects the confidence into my leadership and it is indicative of my long-term relationship with some of them as well.

Extroversion was identified in 'Façade' which shows that my team doesn't perceive that I evince extroversion. I would agree with this because when I am with my team, I prefer to use my logic and intelligence to bolster my confidence but not extroversion.

In conclusion, I must affirm that Johari Window facilitated me to assess myself and appreciate the perceptions of others while juxtaposing the results with my MVS and CS at the same time.

### Research – (MVS) by Porter

MVS is the core of this project and here, I seek to gauge the perceptions of the team members. Based on the result of the SDI questionnaire I did in August 2016, my MVS dot is in the RED region of the triangle and this is implicative of a strong concern for performance as a primary motive. Also, my attributes are assertive and directing which implies motivation to accomplish tasks and achieve results. (see APPENDIX B, SDI, MVS results). SDI describes the values *assertive* as confidently, self-assured and forceful and *directing* as giving authoritative instructions or guidance. Out of the strengths defined for REDs, Risk-Taking, Ambitious and Self-Confident best capture my personality. From the lens of Johari Window, I would suggest that Risk-Taking translates into gaining team's trust and therefore could be mapped to the adjective trustworthy from Johari Window whereas Self-Confident and Ambitious are linked with being confident and bold.

The MVS guide suggests focus and effective style for communications with REDs:
10. Be clear, direct, positive and brief
11. Start with a goal and get to the point quickly
12. Identify opportunities and challenges
13. Show confidence
14. Have clear time-frames, end results, benefits and relevant facts

As stated earlier, to appreciate the MVS of my team members, in the months of September and October, I had solicited responses from my team members via the SDI questionnaire. Results by country of origin and age range are provided below.

| Nationality | Age Range | Primary Motive | Values | Testimonial |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Indian | 30-40 | BLUE-GREEN | CAUTIOUS - SUPPORTING | x |
| UK | 50-60 | HUB | FLEXIBLE-COHERING | |
| Portuguese | 40-50 | GREEN | ANALYTICAL - AUTONOMIZING | x |
| Indian | 30-40 | RED | ASSERTIVE - DIRECTING | |
| South African | 40-50 | BLUE | ALTURISTIC - NURTURING | x |
| Egyptian | 50-60 | RED-GREEN | JUDICIOUS - COMPETING | |
| Indian | 30-40 | HUB | FLEXIBLE-COHERING | |
| American | 30-40 | GREEN | ANALYTICAL - AUTONOMIZING | |
| Syrian | 30-40 | BLUE | ALTURISTIC - NURTURING | |
| Russian | 30-40 | RED-GREEN | JUDICIOUS - COMPETING | |
| Indian | 30-40 | RED | ASSERTIVE - DIRECTING | x |
| Indian | 40-50 | HUB | FLEXIBLE-COHERING | x |
| Indian | 30-40 | RED-GREEN | JUDICIOUS - COMPETING | |
| Saudi | 30-40 | RED-BLUE | ASSERTIVE - NURTURING | |
| Saudi | 20-30 | HUB | FLEXIBLE-COHERING | |
| American | 50-60 | RED | ASSERTIVE - DIRECTING | |
| American | 40-50 | RED | ASSERTIVE - DIRECTING | |
| Pakistani | 30-40 | HUB | FLEXIBLE-COHERING | |
| French | 40-50 | HUB | FLEXIBLE-COHERING | |
| Indian | 30-40 | RED-BLUE | ASSERTIVE - NURTURING | |
| French | 30-40 | HUB | FLEXIBLE-COHERING | |

Further analysis shows that similar primary motives and values exist between same cultural and age groups. Though random sampling was followed, the number of interviewees is too less to be able to derive a statistically proven result. Despite this research limitation, it provides me an opportunity to leverage the MVS's of my team for direct team management. In November the results were shared with the team Most of the challenges pertained to performance, loyalty or interaction. It was an opportunity to discuss my MVS and those of others which has helped me in improving on my

leadership and communication skills.

| Number | Nationality | Age Range | Result | Values |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| 1 | Indian | 30-40 | BLUE-GREEN | CAUTIOUS - SUPPORTING |
| 2 | Portuguese | 40-50 | GREEN | ANALYTICAL - AUTONOMIZING |
| 3 | South African | 40-50 | BLUE | ALTURISTIC - NURTURING |
| 5 | Indian | 30-40 | RED | ASSERTIVE - DIRECTING |
| 6 | Indian | 40-50 | HUB | FLEXIBLE-COHERING |

**Testimonials:**

The first testimonial picked for the purpose is that provided by an Indian sales representative aged between 30 and 40 years. We shared our MVS and the RED, BLUE and GREEN facets. We discussed about the need to focus for communication with REDs as well the so-called 'things to avoid'. As a BLUE GREEN, his main characteristics were being careful to avoid potential problems or dangers (*cautious*) and providing encouragement, comfort and being emotional help (*supporting*). His MVS was opposite to mine. Patience, self-reliance and congeniality were his priorities while interacting with others. I asked him if we could have a discussion around his performance but being cautious about the others' MVS, I remained cordial during our interaction. I understand that in past interactions I was very confrontational and persuasive in pointing out his low performance and lack of commitment. This modified stance was beneficial to me as he also changed his communication style to address me with clear information in line with the suggested communication style with REDs. I must concede that at several occasions, it was difficult to stay focused on the MVS of the testimonial and not move into my typical RED communication patterns. One point was when the testimonial was urging to focus more on myself and how I would perceive him rather than the subject. This is a typical BLUE behavior which '*talks about feeling and benefits for others*'. In previous communications, I would have reacted in a disinterested and confrontational way as these are mentioned as 'things to avoid' in communication with BLUEs. This time I kept listening and after he finished I reminded him on the 'things to avoid' with a RED by. '*not getting to the point and focusing overly on emotions and social matters*'. He adapted himself at the next point. Overall, the communication went much more efficient in terms of the aimed results. The feedback from the testimonial was positive. He nominated this conversation being 'the best one we had so far' and he felt 'more motivated to perform'.

The second testimonial I have selected was also an Indian sales representative with similar RED MVS like my own. Performance and loyalty weren't the concern in the past interactions but instances of adversarial situations between him, myself, his peers and those at the hierarchy were quite often. Consequently, there were low outcomes in discussions. Our MVS were exchanged and I was able to leverage my knowledge on effective style and focus of communication with REDs and heard his oppositional comments. I geared myself for the conversation with a clear goal to achieve; namely that for the remaining part of the conversation, he should focus only on the effective style and focus for communication with REDs and 'things to avoid'. Thus, we were able to avoid drifting

into the negative reactions of my MVS. Post-discussion, we agreed that in all future conversations, we would reserve the first five minutes to remind ourselves on the MVS and conduct ourselves accordingly.

With the other three testimonials, my interactions were wholesome and they urged to induct MVS into my leadership style and infuse the same in the team culture and while dealing with customers. The key learning from the testimonials was to identify the MVS of others without conducting SDI. I perceive this as a challenge to be tackled in near future.

### Research – Personal Reflection on my inquiry
This research was driven by my professional experiences in different cultures where I pondered about the variations and similarities in value systems held by individuals. Also, the sheer variation in the MVS of myself and my team intrigued me and I wondered if being empathic could facilitate in being a good sales leader. Johari Window confirmed that my self-assessment is congruent to my RED MVS. Further, my testimonials provided me insights which would facilitate in improvising my leadership and communication style in future.

### Transformation of my practice and continuation of the research
The entire exercise has been enthralling and a learning experience. In the next two months I am planning to arrange individual meetings with all team members to exchange thoughts on MVS and how to improve communication and look into the 'things to avoid'.
I propose to get my direct reporting manager certified in Porter's SDI and he should be a facilitator while infusing the same in the team. Besides, CS should be imbibed to better appraise the conflicting situations. Finally, I am hopeful that with the rollout of the CS and discussion of MVS, there is a transformation towards empathic leadership.

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