WHITE PAPER

Crafting Your Career

Cultural Variations in Career-Relevant Relationships

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Center for Creative Leadership®

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Introduction

The next time you are walking the halls, take a look at how busy your manager is these days. He or she is probably on phone call after phone call, meeting after meeting, answering emails, working across organizational and geographical boundaries, using some sort of technological advance that enhances his or her productivity and performance. However, if you look beneath the surface, a lot of what that manager is actually doing is connecting with a person or people across multiple domains. Bottom line—relationships in organizations are increasingly important for both the work of the organization and the different career paths managers take.

Relationships can enable managers to navigate their careers using those different career paths. Indeed, the structure of a career has taken a dramatic shift. It used to be the case that a person's career was confined to one or two organizations. Now, careers are built over several organizations, locations, industries, and functions; they are protean and boundaryless. They are protean in that careers are driven by the person, not the organization; they are self-directed and value-driven, and people take their own initiative to make career decisions. They are boundaryless in that managers today may bounce around several organizations, occupations, and locations, no longer limited to one single organization.

Careers are less seen as "moving up the corporate ladder," relying on just your boss to help you, and are more likely described as developing in a variety of directions with a variety of people. In a sense, there is now a "constellation" of people and relationships required for career development. These relationships may be "above" or "below" you in the hierarchy, as well as "around" with your peers. They are also not confined to your current organization—career-relevant relationships also happen outside of work.

The study of relationships has been an integral part of leadership theories, positive psychology, and studies of career success. Through our research, we wanted to clarify how managers may best employ relationships relevant to careers, particularly when country- and culture-specific context plays a role in shaping managers' careers. Career development has been studied at local levels. But in this age of globalization it is imperative to understand how career-relevant relationships may differ in different parts of the world. Culture plays an intricate part in how people live and how people effectively work. It is important for people to realize the role culture may play in shaping these career-relevant relationships; culture can shape who career-oriented relationships are with and why. For example, national, country-level influence on relationships is an interesting variable because it includes legislative, cultural, racial, religious, philosophical, and economic differences and philosophies. All these contextual factors could affect career-related relationships in the organization. Yet, the impact of country context overall has received little attention with regard to relationships in organizations. This can be particularly important in the modern world where managers frequently have international assignments and work with a globally diverse workforce.

The research community has offered several different cultural taxonomies over the years that can be applied to understanding developmental relationships, measuring cultural values, practices, and attitudes. This work has continued over more than 30 years (e.g., Triandis, 1978; Hofstede, 1980; Inglehart, 1997; Schwartz, 1999; the GLOBE research of House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004). We know how to describe values that are shared by people within the same cultures but not by other cultures. We also have good ideas about the impact of these values for people's everyday behavior. For example, individualism/collectivism (the extent to which a person, for instance, shows concern about the effects of actions or decisions on others, shares material and nonmaterial benefits, or feels involved in and contributes to the lives of others) is one cultural value dimension along which interpersonal relationships are widely varying; those in collectivistic cultures see interpersonal relationships as more stable than people in individualistic cultures (Triandis & Suh, 2002). Similarly, the dimension of gender egalitarianism (whether a collective minimizes gender inequality or not) influences whether people pursue relationships for the sake of recognition and advancement or whether they build relationships mainly with the goal of cooperation and mutual care (Emrich, Denmark, & den Hartog, 2004). Hofstede (1980) wrote about power distance (whether a collective accepts and endorses authority, differences in power, or status) and the impact of hierarchy on relationships—are people comfortable with relationships with wide status differentials or do they prefer relationships grounded in equality?

The approach of Inglehart and his colleagues from the World Values Survey is highly relevant to developmental relationships. Inglehart and colleagues identified two dimensions of cross-cultural variation that are related specifically to human development:

1. **Traditional/secular-rational values dimension—the degree to which religion is central to a society.**
2. **Survival/self-expression—the degree to which a society is focused on survival or self-expression (tolerance, decision making in economic and political life).**

The second dimension is particularly useful in our study of relationships. According to their work, Inglehart and colleagues believe societies that are more self-expressive are more focused on human development and encourage self-actualization through career and other endeavors. The freedom to be self-expressive is related to trust and allows for the building of solid developmental relationships.

When Studying Career-Relevant Relationships, We Had Three Major Aims

1. **Capturing the breadth of developmental relationships in real life.** We first wanted to explore a wide range of career-relevant relationships, both inside and outside the organization, and develop a taxonomy that shows several different relationship partners.
2. **Assessing the impact.** We wanted to understand how various relationships impacted managers' careers, both positively and negatively.
3. **Discovering cultural differences.** We know that culture influences how people initiate social relations with others—but does that also apply to career-relevant relationships? We wanted to get a comprehensive picture if this important vehicle for managerial careers today is used differently in different countries, and if the importance and frequency of specific kinds of relationships might be bound to cultural values. Thus, we included managers in five different countries, located in wider Europe and culturally very different, in our study: the Netherlands, Norway, Russia, Spain, and Turkey. Table 1 shows how these countries differ on a variety of cultural indicators.

Our white paper therefore reports findings that lay out the variety of relationships that are relevant to careers of managers in Europe and how managers in different parts of the world may use relationships in building their careers.

Table 1 Background Information on Countries

	Netherlands	Norway	Russia	Spain	Turkey
Population (million, 2012 est.)	16	4	142	47	79
GDP (PPP per capita) in USD (2011)	$824.7 billion	$477.6 billion	$1.821 trillion	$1.456 trillion	$791.9 billion
Political System	Constitutional Monarchy	Constitutional Monarchy	Federation	Parliamentary Monarchy	Republican Parliamentary Democracy
Dominant Religion or Philosophy	Mix of Catholic and Protestant	Protestant	Russian-Orthodox, large population of non-practicing believers and non-believers	Roman Catholic	Muslim
Legislation Related to Gender Equality	Parents have a right to part-time work	Corporate boards must be 40% female	Former communistic legislation required that both genders are in (full-time) employment	Rigorous Gender Equality Act; gender equality practiced in government	Secularist legislation promoting gender equality
Democracy Index 2011 (rank out of 165)	10	1	117	25	88
Human Development Index 2011 (rank out of 187)	3	1	66	23	92
Happy Planet Index (rank out of 151)	67	29	122	62	44
Life Satisfaction (rank out of 36)	4	2	33	24	34
Self-Expressionism Scores (2005)[1]	2.17	1.39	-1.42	.54	-.33
Power Distance (practices/values)[2]	4.11/2.45	Not Available	5.52/2.62	5.52/2.26	5.57/2.41

[1] Inglehart, R., & Welzel, C. (2005). *Modernization, cultural change and democracy: The human development sequence*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

[2] Carl, D., Gupta, V., & Javidan, M. (2004). *Power distance*. In. R. J. House, P. J. Hanges, M. Javidan, P. W. Dorfman, & V. Gupta (Eds.), *Culture, leadership, and organizations: The GLOBE study of 62 societies* (pp. 513– 563). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

1. Who are career-relevant relationship partners?

When thinking of the people who shape our careers, the tendency is to think about the people at work. Surely, for instance, a manager's boss can exert great influence on career development. However, our findings show that developmental relationships are much broader than that. In fact, we categorized relationships into four main relationship categories. Only two of the categories exist within the manager's own organization: hierarchical relationships inside the organization (e.g., bosses and direct reports), and horizontal relationships within the organization (e.g., peers).

The other two categories of relationship partners exist external to the manager's current organization. Managers described developmental relationships with non-family members such as former professors or colleagues, or within a professional association. And, managers described relationships with family members as developmental as well. In fact, family members represented between 25% and 33% of all relationships studied. This is a key finding in that family and friends are often not included in conversations (and research) about career development—yet they clearly have a role to play.

"And I would say I have a very good network of—not very big—but extremely good network of friends, male or female, with whom I can talk…I mean the fact that I am part of a very close network of people with high-level responsibilities in different companies is helping a lot. Because we are talking about things that we all know from different approaches. And I think that always getting ideas is supporting a lot."

—Spanish Manager

Table 2 **Relationship Partners by Country[3]**

	Spain	Russia	Turkey	Netherlands	Norway	TOTAL
Someone (or some group) Outside the Current Organization	**20%** (23 responses)	**30%** (38 responses) [a, b, c]	**17%** (21 responses) [a]	**11%** (10 responses) [b]	**12%** (14 responses) [c]	**18% (106 relationships)**
Relationship Inside the Current Organization—Horizontal	**31%** (35 responses)[d]	**17%** (22 responses)[d,e,f]	**20%** (25 responses)[g]	**31%** (27 responses)[e]	**40%** (49 responses)[f,g]	**28% (158 responses)**
Relationship Inside the Current Organization—Hierarchical	**20%** (22 responses)[h]	**22%** (28 responses) [i]	**37%** (46 responses)[h, i, j]	**32%** (28 responses) [k]	**17%** (20 responses) [j, k]	**25% (144 responses)**
A Family Member	**29%** (33 responses)	**31%** (39 responses)	**26%** (33 responses)	**26%** (23 responses)	**31%** (38 responses)	**29% (166 responses)**

[3]Pairwise comparisons showed the following significant differences: [a] Russia number is higher than Turkey ($z = 2.432$, $p < .05$). [b] Russia number is higher than Netherlands ($z = 3.295$, $p < .05$). [c] Russia number is higher than Norway ($z = 3.466$, $p < .05$). [d] Spain number is higher than Russia ($z = 2.550$, $p < .05$). [e] Netherlands number is higher than Russia ($z = 2.408$, $p < .05$). [f] Norway number is higher than Russia ($z = 4.023$, $p < .05$). [g] Norway number is higher than Turkey ($z = 3.427$, $p < .05$). [h] Turkey number is higher than Spain ($z = 2.888$, $p < .05$). [i] Turkey number is higher than Russia ($z = 2.612$, $p < .05$). [j] Turkey number is higher than Norway ($z = 3.526$, $p < .05$). [k] Netherlands number is higher than Norway ($z = 2.532$, $p < .05$).

All partner types were mentioned in all five countries, with a few interesting differences noted. For instance, in Russia, participants described the highest percentage of external relationships, compared to the other countries. Similarly, they mentioned the fewest horizontal relationships within their organization. Russian interviewees often mentioned that they did not trust their internal peers or internal networks. One cultural explanation may be that Russia has relatively low scores on the cultural dimension of "self-expression." Cultures low on this dimension tend to put less emphasis on actualizing individual potential. The lack of freedom to be self-expressive may undermine trust and therefore may be reflected in this finding.

Interestingly, not only were the relationships described external to the manager's current company, they were often also external to the manager's country. This is consistent with the changing economy in Russia. Non-Russian relationship partners can provide opportunities to learn about economic and market strategies that are relatively new to Russia.

2. How do these relationships shape careers?

There is no "one size fits all" approach to how developmental relationships can shape careers. The managers in our study described a diverse range in terms of the different roles their relationships served and the outcomes they provided. Roles ranged from providing information about how to perform the work (task information) to boosting one's confidence to encouraging them to go for a promotion (psychosocial support). See Table 3 for a description of each type of relationship function we found.

Interviewer (I): *Are there other people who've provided you with support and encouragement along the way?*

Respondent (R): *My husband.*

I: *And how does he help?*

R: *First of all, he has always been very positive about my career development. And second, he provided just, you know, day-to-day support. When he could take care of kids he did so, and he's really trying to help in terms of, you know, housework, homework, and these kinds of things. He's really supportive, for example, when I considered joining the MBA, I told him it will mean that I work more, and my weekends will be all about reading and studying. And he said, "Just do it if you want to do it. No problem."*

–Russian Manager

Table 3

The Different Types of Relationship Functions

Function of the Relationship	Total
Provides a Life Challenge: The relationship provides a challenge or difficult circumstance that forces learning.	2%
Role Modeling: Someone demonstrates what to do or what not to do. The relationship provides the opportunity to learn by observation.	5%
Career Stalling or Limiting: The relationship partner acts in a way that blocks the career of the interviewee.	13%
General Mention: The relationship is described as providing support, but specific functions are not identified.	19%
Provides Psychosocial Support and Acceptance: The relationship provides confirmation, encouragement, acceptance, and/or recognition.	28%
Provides Career Guidance and Task Information: The relationship provides information as to how to move ahead in one's career either by providing task knowledge or activities offering career guidance.	33%

Variation in relationship function existed in all countries studied. However, there were a few notable differences observed. For one, managers from the Netherlands reported the greatest proportion of career stalling or limiting relationships. One possible explanation for that may be related to societal norms in that country around combining family and work. A common practice for Dutch parents (especially women) is to work four-fifths (a reduced schedule). According to some of the managers in this study, this can at times limit managers from being offered the most challenging assignments, resulting in a perception that they are less qualified. Working part-time is a double-edged sword in the Netherlands. Although it can make it easier to combine work and family, it can also create an impression of less ambition. Another difference between countries was that Norway had the highest proportion of relationships that provided psychosocial support, and Turkey had the least. Norway had the highest score on the dimension of self-expression of all of the countries in the study. Cultures high on this dimension tend to be more focused on human development and encourage self-actualization through career and other endeavours. This cultural context may make forming supportive developmental relationships easier.

3. Are *all* developmental relationships helpful?

The term "developmental relationships" has a very positive ring to it—we tend to value both development and relationships in career and life in general. However, we all know that learning and growth does not always come about easily. At times, it is the toughest experiences—and perhaps relationships—that shape us most profoundly. In our study, some relationships described by managers were clearly helpful in that they facilitated positive outcomes for the manager whereas others were clearly harmful in that they created negative career outcomes. For example, having a boss who helps you network with the right people within the organization would be an example of a helpful relationship, whereas a boss who prevents you from taking on stretch assignments to develop would be an example of a harmful relationship. Both types of relationships were found to be powerful sources of career development.

"I think to know managers at the higher level than myself, I think that's important. In this organization, it's very important . . . So I think, sort of be able to present myself and my type of work or my knowledge to the right people above me, is actually a success."

–Norwegian Manager

Table 4 **Helpful vs. Harmful Relationships by Country[4]**

	Spain	Russia	Turkey	Netherlands	Norway	TOTAL
Helpful	**83%** (94 responses)	**88%** (112 responses)	**86%** (108 responses)	**78%** (69 responses) [a]	**83%** (101 responses)	**84% (484 responses)**
Harmful	**17%** (19 responses)	**12%** (15 responses)	**14%** (17 responses)	**22%** (19 responses) [a]	**17%** (20 responses)	**16% (90 responses)**

[4]Pairwise comparisons showed that there were more helpful relationships and less harmful relationships in Russia than in the Netherlands ($z = 1.962$, $p < .05$).

Most relationships described by managers were in fact deemed helpful, accounting for between 78% and 88% of all relationships discussed during the interviews. The country with the highest percentage of harmful relationships was the Netherlands (22%), but this was only slightly higher than the country with the lowest percentage—Russia (12%). The main finding here is that while developmental relationships are more commonly helpful than harmful, in all countries studied, harmful relationships can play an important role in shaping careers. This demonstrates that regardless of where they play out, human relationships are complex and can yield both positive and negative outcomes for managers.

Through these interviews and the subsequent analysis, we know more about the breadth and impact of relationships. There is evidence from all countries that managers' careers are influenced by others inside and outside the organization and through a variety of ways (support, role modeling, etc.). We also know that not all developmental relationships are positive experiences. Yet, even those that are quite challenging can influence managers' careers. Across countries, we found more similarities than differences. However, we have evidence that cultural differences do impact the way we use our developmental relationships to shape our careers.

So How Can You Use This Knowledge for Yourself?

1. Enhance the developmental aspects of your existing relationships.
Think about your relationships, and what you get out of them—support, advice, or important lessons to be learned. If you are dissatisfied with the help you get from your network for career development, it doesn't necessarily mean that you need to widen your network—you might just as well simply deepen or reshape your existing relationships, to ensure that each relationship you have is in some way developmental for you.

2. Don't underestimate family relationships.
Intuitively, most managers look for developmental relationships at work, emphasizing the need for a developmental boss or for role models and mentors, in order to develop in their careers and as leaders. However, this white paper emphasizes the importance of non-work relationships for career development. Being committed to non-work roles, such as parenting or community engagement, increases your range of interaction, and often also of negotiation and influence skills. (If you have teenage kids, you know what we mean.) From previous CCL research we know that committed parents are seen as better leaders than those who are not committed in their parenting role (Graves, Ohlott, & Ruderman, 2007).

3. Practice reflection.
While others can help your development by being a sounding board, empathic listener, or challenging discussion partner, this doesn't necessarily result in real career-relevant learning if you don't reflect on it. A great but simple trick to ensure you reflect on your experience is to make it a habit to ask yourself two simple questions:

- What have I learned from this (conversation, talk, debate, discussion, interaction . . .)?
- What have I learned from this about me?

If possible, jot down your learnings and revisit them every so often. This way you also get a sense of your own progress in thinking, attitude, and skill.

4. **Realize that one size doesn't fit all.**
While our research found that all functions of developmental relationships occurred in all cultures, some different patterns emerged regarding their frequency. Thus, you might find that managers in other countries see different types of relationships as developmental, or might frown upon the relationships that you use for your career. Interpersonal interactions are governed by cultural norms of behavior and differences in fundamental values, such as the degree to which a culture accepts a person to "speak their mind" and express their individuality, also impact what relationships people have and how these are maintained.

5. Think diversity.
Different people will be able to provide you with different ways of support and development. In order to ensure you get a broad range of developmental relationships, maintain relationships with diverse people—diverse in their background and experience, but also in their values and opinions, and different in their cultural background. As this paper has shown, development and learning do not only emerge in helpful relationships, but also through people that might be considered obstacles or difficult.

Description of Participants

We conducted semi-structured interviews with 53 men and 45 women managers in the Netherlands (*n* = 16), Norway (*n* = 21), Russia (*n* = 21), Turkey (*n* = 20), and Spain (*n* = 20). All interviewees were experienced managers in large multinational firms, originated from the country in which they were interviewed, and spoke fluent English. They had some experience with leadership development and were selected for the interview either because they were recommended by a corporate leader development practitioner or had participated in a leadership development program. The average age of participants was 40.27 (*SD* = 7.02) and average years in the organization was 8.86 (*SD* = 6.25). A vast majority (more than 90%) were well educated, with at least a university-level degree. Most of the participants worked in for-profit companies (92.8%) with those companies mostly employing between 251-1,000 people (23.7%) or more than 1,000 people (58.8%). In addition, more than half (55.3%) managed employees located in different countries and 31% managed multiple functions or groups, with an average number of 7.45 (*SD* = 11.03) direct reports and 78.05 (*SD* = 190.27) indirect reports. Finally, participants worked in various organizational levels, with 44.3% at the top or executive levels and 46.4% working in middle- or upper-middle-level management. Through the interview process, other pieces of information were found for most participants in reading the transcripts (though some did not reveal this information during the interview). Just over three-quarters were married or living with a partner and just fewer than 70% had children.

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