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Delegating effectively across cultures

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Delegating effectively across cultures

Abstract

This article builds on the contingency approach to global leadership to examine empowerment in a cross-cultural context. Drawing upon ethnographic research on employees of a French NGO in Madagascar, our study demonstrates that effective empowerment is not dependent on the amount of delegation, but rather it is dependent on how delegation is performed. Understanding the cultural representations of formalization, skill development, collective work, and decision-making appeared to be crucial to effective delegation in Madagascar. This result suggests that managers should adapt the way that they empower their teams based on the conditions and forms of delegation prevailing in local cultures.

Key words:

Cross-cultural leadership, Empowerment, Delegation, Madagascar, NGO

1. Introduction

Delegation is widely acknowledged to be a crucial aspect of effective leadership that often proves particularly challenging in a cross-cultural context. Research that examines the use of delegation across cultures remains scarce and, as Pellegrini and Scandura noted, *"still, research has yet to examine delegation in a cross-cultural context"* (2006, p. 264). In addition, much of the literature discusses the presence or absence of managerial delegation, although delegation is a complex and multi-faceted process (Yukl & Fu, 1999). The "how" of delegation across cultures remains under investigated. This paper addresses this theoretical gap and examines its practical implications. Its purpose is to examine the extent to which culture determines the conditions under which delegation is deemed acceptable.

This paper builds on the contingency approach to global leadership (Steers, Sanchez-Runde, & Nardon, in press). For the past several decades, research efforts have increasingly been directed at understanding the role of leadership across cultures. Many cross-cultural leadership studies have attempted to define a global leadership style (Javidan & Teagarden, 2011; Mendenhall, 2007). The contingency approach instead analyzes leadership-style variations across cultures while highlighting cultural contingencies and questioning the transferability of practices from one culture to another. The Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) research program (Dorfman, Javidan, Hanges, Dastmalchian, & House, in press; House, Hanges,

Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004) is one of the most influential studies in this area of research. Although most leadership attributes and behaviors were found to vary significantly across cultures, this study also identified some key characteristics of an efficient leadership style that are universally endorsed.

Our research is based on a study of relationships between French expatriates and Malagasy employees of a French non-governmental organization (NGO). Contrasting expectations with regard to delegation were observed across the two samples. This discrepancy is interpreted in light of Malagasy and French national cultures. This research enhances our understanding of cross-cultural leadership in two ways. First, it provides insight into leadership processes in a country with a very different culture than Western countries, where most of the research on leadership and delegation has been conducted. Madagascar has not been included in the sample population of most cross-cultural research (Hofstede, 2001; House et al., 2004). Second, it demonstrates that the effectiveness of delegation is contingent on national culture. Although this is in line with extant research (e.g., Pellegrini & Scandura, 2006), it shows that this cultural contingency might be better understood in terms of how delegation is implemented, rather than whether it should be implemented or not. Overall, the results of this study have both practical and theoretical implications.

The remainder of the paper is structured as follows. First, we briefly review existing research on leadership with a focus on delegation issues and introduce

our conceptualization of culture. Next, we introduce the empirical background of this study and the methodology. Then, we analyze and compare the views about delegation across French and Malagasy culture. Finally, the implications of this study are discussed.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Leadership and delegation: a contingency approach

The cross-cultural leadership literature can be divided into two categories: (1) studies that consider culture to be a moderator of the relationship between leadership and employees' outcomes, (2) studies that focus on variations in leadership styles, practices and preferences across countries. Culture is therefore expected to account for a significant variance in leadership (Van Emmerik, Euwema, & Wendt, 2008; Zander & Romani, 2004). We now briefly review these two categories, with a focus on delegation issues.

Delegation occurs when a manager gives subordinates the authority and responsibility for making and implementing decisions (Bass, 2008; Yukl & Fu, 1999). As such, delegation is central to participative leadership. Different studies in the first of the two aforementioned categories have shown that the outcomes of participative leadership depend on employees' cultural values (Lam, Chen, & Schaubroeck, 2002; Zhang, Wang, & Fleenor, 2011). The rationale for this moderating effect of culture is that people will respond differently to various leadership styles according to their culturally contingent prototype of an effective leader. For instance, Robert, Probst, Martocchio,

Drasgow, and Lawler (2000) found that empowerment was negatively associated with satisfaction in India, a high power distance cultural setting. Similarly, Hui, Au and Fock (2004) demonstrated that employees' willingness to accept and exercise discretionary power depends on the cultural value of power distance, which, in turn, moderates the effect of empowerment on job satisfaction. More recently, Pellegrini and Scandura (2006) suggested that delegation might not be an effective management practice in the Turkish business context, with respect to job satisfaction. Given that Turkey ranks high on measures of uncertainty avoidance, employees may be reluctant to deal with the ambiguity of being delegated a challenging task and prefer to be told what to do.

In the same vein, different studies in the second category have shown that participative leadership is far from being universally endorsed. For instance, GLOBE research suggests that high power distance and uncertainty avoidance cultures are less inclined to endorse participative leadership (House et al., 2004). Similarly, Wendt, Euwema and Van Emmerik (2009) found cultural individualism to be negatively related to supportive leadership. In the second category, different studies have also focused on leadership prototypes across cultures. These studies show that delegation is not universally acknowledged as an ideal leader's behavior. For instance, Romero (2004) demonstrates that traditionally, in a Latin-American context, delegation is not commonly expected from a leader (a similar result can be found in Dorfman & Howell,

1997). Conversely, Hoppe and Baghat (2007), as part of the GLOBE project, suggest that the ideal leader in the United States is someone who encourages participation through delegation. Beyond these few examples of studies that develop knowledge on leadership prototype variation across cultures, some other studies have researched the influence of different cultural dimensions on the inclination to delegate or expect delegation (Hofstede, 2001). Looking at actual managers' behavior, Offermann and Hellmann (1997) found that managers from high uncertainty avoidance countries tended to delegate less than those from low uncertainty avoidance countries. The rationale for this result is that leaders from high uncertainty avoidance cultures are more likely to find ways to keep their units under control in an attempt to make their working environment more certain. Their findings also indicate that power distance influences the inclination to delegate because this cultural dimension is associated with a tendency for leaders to autocratically retain power (similar results can be found in Van de Vliert & Smith, 2004).

Traditionally, delegation was conceptualized by characteristics of the subordinates and the manager-subordinate relationship (Schriesheim, Neider, & Scandura, 1998; Yukl & Fu, 1999). Our succinct review also suggests that the use of delegation is far from being a universal leadership behavior. However, in the literature reviewed above, the question is primarily addressed in terms of the presence or absence of managerial delegation. However, delegation is a complex and multi-faceted process (Yukl & Fu, 1999). The

forms of delegation across cultures remain underinvestigated. The remainder of the paper addresses this question.

2.2. National cultures

To date, most cross-cultural leadership researchers have considered culture drawing upon the comparative work of Hofstede (2001). Using this perspective, culture is a shared system of values that determines individual preferences and attitudes. In this paper, we adopt an interpretative approach to culture (d'Iribarne, 2009; Primecz, Romani, & Sackmann, 2011). In this approach, culture is the shared context of meaning (i.e., a set of references with which actors give meaning to their experiences). Thus, sharing a culture means using the same symbolic categories to make sense of reality and not attaching value to the same reality. Although such sense-making patterns are a strong constraining force, especially regarding legitimate ways of coping with social interactions within organizations, they do not affect attitudes in a deterministic manner. For instance, in the United States, social relations are mainly conceived as contracts. However, individuals can still disagree on whether a given action respects their contract while sharing the same definition for the concept of a contract (Chevrier, 2009).

Thus defined, culture is relatively stable due to its deep structure. Indeed, it appears that in any society, an opposition was formed between a dominant peril (i.e., a basic concern that makes people uneasy or even anxious) and paths to salvation that enable people to avert this fear (d'Iribarne, 2009). This

fear marks all social existence and, particularly, the life of an organization because many events taking place in organizations are likely to revive these fears. This opposition between situations that inspire fear and paths to salvation is based upon idiosyncratic references, which are implicit and unconscious. However, in a given society, this opposition is highlighted by a network of real or mythical figures and narratives. The vocabulary in use in a society also reflects the categories at work in this opposition.

The French cultural example, which we borrow from d'Iribarne (2009, p. 314-315), illustrates this definition of culture. In French society, the basic fear is servility (i.e., the experience of being bent by fear or by interest). A specific vocabulary is associated with this experience: "to yield", "to submit", "to lower oneself", "to crawl", "to reveal oneself to be spineless". The path to salvation is resistance, in the name of something great, over fear and petty interests; this path is associated with expressions such as "to face" and to "stand up to". Courage is opposed to cowardice, an idea that is well expressed in expressions such as "all is lost except honor" or "honor is safe". Thus, many French myths glorify resistance, from Vercingétorix to Jean Moulin, via Jeanne d'Arc. This opposition between the unworthiness of servility and the nobleness of resistance is far from being universal. For example, some other societies are much more concerned with chaos (China) or impurity (India).

Thus defined, culture represents a framework for individual and collective action. Management practices are culturally rooted. Hierarchical relations will

be interpreted in the light of cultural dominant peril. For instance, in the French context, one can intuitively understand how the implicit reference to servility will help individuals to determine whether a relationship is acceptable. This does not mean that French leaders systematically avoid placing followers in a servile and degrading situation. Actual behaviors are widely dispersed. However, both leaders and followers will refer to the same basic opposition to make sense of their relationships. At a cross-cultural level, this implies that delegating and symmetrically taking responsibility refer to culturally contingent sense-making patterns. These differences might explain some difficulties associated with delegation across cultures.

3. Background of the case study and methodology

This research has been undertaken at the request of a French NGO named GRET[1]. Founded in 1976, GRET is an association of professionals for fair development. GRET designs and implements field projects, provides expertise in a wide range of areas and conducts applied research and studies. Its headquarters are located in Paris, France. GRET is active in more than thirty countries, and it has thirteen permanent branch offices in Asia, Africa and Latin America. This study was almost entirely conducted in the office in Antananarivo, Madagascar. In headquarters, as well as in the Malagasy branch office, French managers regularly complained of the difficulties in transferring some of their tasks to Malagasy teams. Because it was suspected to be a cross-

[1] GRET stands for "Groupe de recherche et d'échange technologique", which can be translated as the "Technological Research and Exchange Group"

cultural issue, the GRET headquarters and the head of its permanent branch office in Antananarivo jointly initiated this study with the authors. The purpose was to identify the conditions for effective delegation for both Malagasy and French partners.

Table 1 presents our interviewee sample. As this table illustrates, our sample covers the whole range of positions in the local GRET office, including the head of the office, his assistant, administrative personnel and members of project teams. To avoid a possible organizational bias and to reinforce the robustness of our analysis, we included Malagasy interviewees from other NGOs. In this way, we could reasonably assume that the shared representations that we identified were specific to the Malagasy culture and not only the GRET organizational culture. Table 1 also reveals an imbalance between the number of French and Malagasy interviewees in our sample. To control for this bias, this work takes advantage of previously completed interpretative research on French culture (d'Iribarne, 1989; Segal, 2009).

Our data were collected in 2009 and 2010 and consist of recorded semi-directed interviews, for an approximate total length of forty hours. These interviews were based on a guide that was structured around broad themes: professional aspirations, decision making and expectations toward superiors' attitude. However, respondents were invited to answer very freely, and digressions were allowed. We tried not to influence respondents with our own cultural conceptions, and we expected them to describe working situations and

events with their own words and through their own mental categories. We favored spontaneous expression to understand individuals' representations as closely as possible.

The interviews have been typed out word for word. The data were analyzed afterwards using the inductive coding method (Miles & Huberman, 1994). From an interpretative perspective, this method allows the researcher to progressively disentangle the respondents' implicit mental categories (d'Iribarne, 2011). Our emerging coding categories are presented in Appendix 1. Concretely, on the basis of a careful analysis of the interviews, we identified recurrent words and ideas in the discourse of interviewees and how different words and ideas could be associated or opposed. By cross-checking the interviews, we identified shared representations among the French, on the one hand, and the Malagasy, on the other hand. Furthermore, in this study, the interpretive process was performed by both authors in parallel. This protocol limits possible bias by ensuring that results are convergent among researchers.

Table 1: Overview of interviewee sample

Total sample= 41 interviewees

GRET sample= 33 interviewees

French[a] sub sample= 8 interviewees			
	Position	**Leader/Follower[b]**	**Project[c]**
1	Project team member (knowledge capitalization)	Follower	Nutrimad
2	Project manager	Leader	Médéa
3	Project team member (beneficiaries communication and education)	Leader	Médéa
4	Project manager	Leader	Nutrimad
5	Project manager	Leader	Rhyvière
6	Head of the permanent branch office	Leader	Transversal
7	Program manager	Leader	Headquarter
8	Program manager	Leader	Headquarter

Malagasy[a] sub sample= 25 interviewees			
	Position	**Leader/Follower[b]**	**Project[c]**
9	Project team member	Follower	Médéa
10	Project team member (engineering)	Follower	Médéa
11	Project team member (assistant)	Follower	Nutrimad
12	Project team member (beneficiaries communication and education)	Follower	Nutrimad
13	Project team member (engineering)	Follower	Nutrimad
14	Project team member (institutional partnerships)	Follower	Nutrimad
15	Project team member (project monitoring keyboard operator)	Follower	Nutrimad
16	Project team member (risk management and infrastructures)	Follower	Nutrimad
17	Project team member (statistical studies)	Follower	Nutrimad
18	Project team member (engineering)	Follower	Rhyvière
19	Project team member (engineering)	Follower	Rhyvière
20	Project team member (engineering)	Follower	Rhyvière
21	Project team member (engineering)	Follower	Rhyvière
22	Administrative team member (accounting)	Follower	Transversal
23	Administrative team member (assistant)	Follower	Transversal
24	Administrative team member (logistics)	Follower	Transversal
25	Administrative team member (management accounting)	Follower	Transversal
26	Assistant of head of the permanent branch office	Leader	Transversal
27	Project manager	Leader	Drynet
28	Project team member (opportunity studies)	Leader	Médéa
29	Project team member	Leader	Nutrimad
30	Project team member (project management in rural areas)	Leader	Nutrimad
31	Project team member (project monitoring and evaluation)	Leader	Nutrimad
32	Project team member (engineering)	Leader	Rhyvière
33	Chief administrative officer and human resource manager	Leader	Transversal

Additional non GRET sample= 8 interviewees
7 Malagasy[a] NGO employees
1 French[a] NGO employee

(a): Quotations from the interviews are identified as follows: (M) for Malagasy interviewees, (F) for French interviewees

(b): For interviewees with a leader position, the interview addressed both upward and downward relationships

(c): Appendix 2 provides a brief overview of these projects

4. Results

French managers mentioned that they were urging Malagasy teams to take on initiatives. However, most of them complained of still being consulted on decisions or actions that Malagasies were expected to make by themselves. The French interpreted this attitude as a reluctance to take responsibility or even a lack of courage. At first sight, some accounts given by Malagasies tended to confirm this interpretation. Some of them mentioned their fear of making bad decisions or their tendency to expect approval from their superior. However, we also observed that delegation was sometimes successful. Above all, the analysis of the Malagasies' professional aspirations revealed a strong and shared desire to take on greater responsibility. However, for Malagasies, several conditions had to be met to make delegation effective. In particular, delegation should be accompanied by (1) a detailed formalization of roles and structures, (2) skill development, (3) collective work and (4) a clarification of decision procedures and processes. Although it could be argued that these conditions are universal, our analysis revealed that these conditions did not refer to the same sense-making framework on the French and Malagasy side, even if convergence points also emerged.

4.1. Role and structure formalization

Both the Malagasies and the French perceived role and task formalization as a means of understanding their place in the organization by clarifying everyone's prerogatives and duties. Role and task formalization was also

mentioned as a necessary objective basis for performance appraisal. Beyond this convergence point, our analysis revealed that the two communities made sense of formalization very differently (figure 1).

Figure 1: French and Malagasy representations of formalization

Insert figure 1 here

On the Malagasy side, formalization was first perceived as a means to dispel uncertainty about everyone's legitimate scope of action. Taking on responsibility becomes much easier once it is formally written that one is responsible for a particular task. Detailed individual remits provide a secure context in which both leaders and followers can perform their actions without worrying about infringing upon others' prerogatives.

I could go and arrange an appointment, so that the head would discuss with the boss [...], but I should not trample his role and the same is true for my hierarchical superior. (M)

Conversely, in the Malagasy perspective, knowing who to communicate with or to consult, according to the topic at stake, avoids situations in which individuals make decisions alone when other team members would have expected them to be made collectively. Task formalization contributes to a clear allocation of responsibilities. It plays a central role in facilitating teamwork and allows for both the avoidance and settlement of conflicts.

Indeed, it avoids them by limiting possible overlaps, and it regulates them by providing a benchmark to refer to in case of dispute.

I had two people under my responsibility, so I distinguish well what everyone does so that there is not this overlap of activities where everyone does the same thing and where some activities are left aside. (M)

Formalization expectations did not only concern tasks but also structures and hierarchical relationships. Detailed individual reporting relationships are expected as a means to specify everyone's legitimate scope of decision making. To conclude, in the Malagasy perspective, formalization is a way of escaping from an ambiguous and blurred organization that inhibits action and creates conflicts.

On the French side, although formalization is acknowledged to have many virtues, it is also perceived as having strong paralyzing effects. On the one hand, formalization is expected as a means to clarify relationships and to define everyone's space of autonomy. On the other hand, there is a strong fear of an excessive formalization, which is associated with an image of bureaucracy and paralyzing rigidity. Although both Malagasy leaders and followers overwhelmingly advocated for a thorough formalization of roles and tasks, French leaders were wary of getting locked in such formalization. In the French context, formalization rather refers to a broadly defined mission or role in the organization or a project. Such a definition leaves room for maneuvering and is conceived as *"a score that still has to be interpreted" (F).*

4.2. The development of skills

On both the French and Malagasy sides, skills are at the heart of taking on increased responsibilities and delegation. Skills refer to know-how that can either result from education or on-the-job training and are perceived as a source of legitimacy. Nevertheless, beyond this shared ground, quite different patterns emerged from our analysis (figure 2).

Figure 2: French and Malagasy representations of skills development

Insert figure 2 here

From the Malagasy perspective, skills were associated with control over one's function or *"domain" (M)*. The word "domain", which was used by many Malagasy interviewees, clearly evoked ownership over one's field. Skills also emerged as the key resource to *"keep control" (M)* over work situations and not to be *"overtaken by events" (M)*. This conception is consistent with high formalization expectations (see above). A thorough definition of everyone's remits both determines the boundaries of the domain according to which skills will be valued and provides securing benchmarks that will help to keep control over this domain. Accordingly, it appeared that skills were prerequisites for delegation endorsement. Skills clearly determined the acceptable scope of responsibilities of Malagasy employees. Being assigned responsibilities outside one's skill-set is a cause for legitimate refusal in the Malagasy context. Conversely, if such a situation is accepted, it will be perceived as a strong

"challenge" that requires intensive learning efforts to gain control over the domain that one is entering.

It is a challenge. Sometimes I enter a domain that I don't know, so I'm obliged to go into this domain in depth, to research this domain, to improve on just a little, to try to see what this subject really is. (M)

On the French side, skills emerged as the key to professional autonomy. They allow people to appropriate their mission and to know what to do within a very loosely defined general frame. Skills refer not only to know-how, but also to knowing what to do. In other words, skills refer to the knowledge of the rights and duties of one's "métier"[2]. Skills allow people to take initiatives. Such initiatives will only be limited by people's implicit professional rules. For instance, skills entitle employees to free themselves from some administrative constraints. They allow them to decide whether procedures should be followed scrupulously, or if an operational emergency prevails over administrative rules and the situation will be regularized afterwards.

4.3. Collective work

Collective work was perceived by Malagasy and French interviewees as the means to complete complex projects through synergies between various areas of expertise. It was also mentioned that collective work creates strong interdependencies between individuals because everyone's work is then

[2] The French word "métier" is difficult to translate. It refers to one's professional role or field of expertise, and it is a key reference in French culture (d'Iribarne, 2009).

dependent on the other's contribution. However, it was commonly acknowledged that such interactions are a source of mutual learning (figure 3).

Figure 3: French and Malagasy representations of collective work

Insert figure 3 here

Malagasies overwhelmingly advocated for collective work, which is considered the most natural way of working. From their perspective, working alone is hardly conceivable, even if technically possible.

I believe this is not normal to work really on my own and I think it is always necessary to have support from a person or another [...] if I have a project and I found myself alone, it could still work in terms of project management, you can always reach the goals, but it would not be very exciting, teamwork is always better. (M)

It appeared that for Malagasies, collective work means a shared objective that creates mutual involvement and a strong feeling of belonging. It also emerged that collective work is an opportunity to help each other and to find solutions together. It is worth noting that for Malagasy interviewees, collective work referred to both lateral relationships and hierarchical relationships. Everyone is expected to bring help as much as his (or her) skills allow. Such help takes place in various contexts, including mutual aid between team members, support from leaders to followers, and vice versa. The group also makes a heavy workload more bearable, as summarized in a Malagasy proverb recalled

by one interviewee: *"Once shared, a burden becomes a feather"*. The group contributes to a pleasant atmosphere that some Malagasy interviewees compared to that of *"a family"*. This reference to family clearly evoked *"fraternal"* relationships (i.e., close and egalitarian relationships). Maintaining this fraternal atmosphere implies the need to weigh one's words, to avoid conflicts, and to keep to oneself what might hurt others.

French interviewees acknowledged that collective work creates conviviality. However, from their perspective, collective work was conceived as a place of debate and a means to confront various points of view. Thus, priority is not given to avoiding offense, but to defending opinions with thorough and logical reasoning. Therefore, individuals express themselves very frankly and frequently interrupt one another to vigorously assert conflicting arguments. In other words, ideas prevail over relationships. Collective work is perceived as very time-consuming because it may result in endless discussions, unlike the autonomous decision making process, which fosters quicker decisions. From the French perspective, collective work is used in case of uncertainty regarding the right way of managing projects, but it may be sacrificed in the case of operational emergencies.

4.4. Decision making

Employees' willingness to make decisions by themselves clearly reflects delegation acceptance in a given cultural context. However, our analysis

revealed strong discrepancies between French and Malagasy conceptions of decision making (figure 4).

Figure 4: French and Malagasy representations of decision-making

Insert figure 4 here

In the Malagasy context, decisions are considered more efficient when they are collective. Although Malagasies thought that they could ultimately make decisions within their *"domain"*, it appeared that collective decision making was perceived as providing security because it reduces the risk of error and its potential negative consequences for oneself, others, the project or even the entire organization.

I did not take too many risks because if I ever make the [wrong] decision it may have an impact on the project ... (M)

Malagasy interviewees expected to be consulted about what falls within their *"domain"*. They also expected their opinion to be taken into account in the final decision. Conversely, others, whether leaders or followers, were considered to be sources of experience and expert advice. Well-informed decision making should result in stable, definite and formalized decisions. At the same time, turning to others does not mean abdicating responsibilities. In other words, there is no contradiction between seeking advice about a problem and individual responsibility.

We discuss with them, even if they do not answer, they already know. Because if one day, it ever has any effect or impact on the whole program, at least everyone is already aware, but it does not abolish our responsibility. We are still responsible. (M)

I am responsible for that, even if I report about it, which is quite natural [...].Anyway I consider that ultimately, decisions are mine and that they are there to supervise and to advise me, with their experience. (M)

Repeatedly, Malagasies used the term *"primary responsible for"* [a department, a project…]. This clearly expressed that individual responsibilities are not weakened by collective work. Thus, someone is always clearly identified as responsible for a decision. However, the word *"primary"* suggests that some other people were also considered as jointly responsible. This word clearly suggested that other members of the group felt jointly liable. At the same time, it appeared that from the followers' point of view, hierarchy played a crucial role in decision-making. Leaders' decisions are naturally imposed on followers, with the exception of those fields that have been delegated explicitly and formally to followers. Such formalization, along with skill development, is necessary to help followers legitimately make and take responsibility for decisions personally.

In the French context, decision-making is considered a matter of personal choice for which individuals should take responsibility. Some say that several responsible parties make as many irresponsible people. In other words, from

the French perspective, responsibility should not be dispersed. Decision making is, above all, related to personal autonomy within a field of liability. This field results from a subjective perception of one's "métier". Within this field, anyone should be able to make a decision by himself in the light of one's personal interpretation of professional references. A good professional whether leader or team member, is expected to take reasonable risks. When decision-making exceeds one's subjectively defined prerogatives, a consultation might be held to consider various options and arouse support for the one that seems the most favorable. Because ideas prevail over relationships, individuals are expected to stand up for their opinions, even if those opinions are different from the leader's point of view. In this context, decisions are made and implemented because they are considered relevant, not simply because they were explicitly requested by leaders. Accordingly, once a decision has been made, it may be easily changed if another alternative is perceived to be better. This situation is perfectly acceptable in the French context.

5. Discussion

In this study, our starting point was twofold. At the theoretical level, consistent with the contingency approach of global leadership, we intended to investigate the "how" of delegation across cultures. At the empirical level, we tried to explain discrepancies with regard to delegation expectations between

two culturally distinct subsamples. We now return to these two dimensions and discuss the implications of our research.

In the case of hierarchical relationships between French expatriates and Malagasy employees in GRET's Antananarivo branch office, delegation was the most important issue. It seemed that there was a deep misunderstanding regarding what French leaders and local personnel expected from each other. We further explored the situation and identified distinct cultural representations along four dimensions, namely, role and structure formalization, the development of skills, collective work and decision making. Differences in sense-making patterns with regard to these four dimensions, and the resulting reciprocal interpretations, help explain the initial situation.

The French interpreted the Malagasy cultural representation as cowardice or reluctance to take responsibility for decisions and actions. For instance, French leaders probably did not perceive that the Malagasy followers' tendency to consult them was only the expression of their cultural representation of collective work, which is based on mutual aid. Similarly, although role and structure formalization plays a crucial role in both avoidance and settlement of conflict in the Malagasy context, this practice is perceived negatively in the French context because it is considered to have paralyzing effects. Additionally, the definite nature of decisions in the Malagasy decision-making process might have been perceived as a reluctance to take initiative and a lack of reaction to operational imperatives from the French viewpoint.

Reciprocally, some practices of the French leaders might have been perceived negatively from the Malagasy viewpoint. For instance, in the French context, delegating a very loosely defined mission shows the trust that a leader places in his followers. Such delegation practices may be very disturbing from the Malagasy viewpoint. It may be that French leaders do not meet Malagasy followers' expectations with regard to formalization. This analysis is consistent with previous research that sheds light on the difficulties that French expatriates have when exercising leadership abroad (d'Iribarne, 2009a; Frank, 2000; Segal, 2009).

At the theoretical level, we believe that our research contributes to a better understanding of leadership across cultures with regard to delegation. Existing research suggests that culture influences both followers' expectations and leaders' inclination to delegate (Hoppe & Baghat, 2007; House et al., 2004; Hui et al., 2004; Offermann & Hellmann, 1997; Pellegrini & Scandura, 2006; Romero, 2004). Our results confirm that the use of delegation is subjected to cultural relativism. However, this research suggests that the relationship between culture and the use of delegation as an effective leadership practice may be less deterministic than it is usually regarded. We observed that both French and Malagasy leaders could delegate more or less depending on circumstances and their personal profile. This suggests that culture does not represent in itself a definite constraint on delegation. However, this also does not imply that the cultural dimension of delegation could be neglected.

Delegation practices only make sense in the light of cultural systems of meaning. Our empirical study demonstrated that French and Malagasy cultural representations of delegation were significantly different.

6. Managerial relevance and conclusion

At the practical level, ignoring differences in cultural representations seriously impairs the effectiveness of delegation as a leadership practice. Therefore, the issue is not to know to what extent leaders should delegate, but to understand the specific conditions of effective delegation in various countries. Additionally, we believe that this understanding should not be limited to the followers' cultural representations. Leaders should also understand that their own delegation practices are subject to cultural relativism. For instance, although they easily recognized themselves in our description, very few French leaders were conscious of their manner of advancing their "métier", professional autonomy and associated skills. These cultural representations are far from being shared around the world. The desire to respect skillful followers by giving them broad autonomy and being careful not to interfere in their area of responsibility creates deep misunderstandings. Although these practices may just be driven by the desire to help followers, they may be interpreted as indifference, ambiguity, or even arrogance. Hence, in a cross-cultural context, it seems crucial to increase leaders' awareness of their own basic concerns and to make them reflect upon the meaning of their practices.

While we advocate for a better understanding of the cultural representations of delegation, we must acknowledge that this does not automatically lead to appropriate leadership practices. In a cross-cultural context, the following question remains unanswered: who should adapt their practices? Should expatriate leaders adapt to local followers' expectations? Or should local followers compromise with expatriate leaders' "exotic" practices? There is probably no single answer, but we believe that a thorough explanation of cultural contexts can open the path to negotiations for appropriate practices. Acknowledging that there is no single way to delegate is the first step toward effective delegation practices across cultures. This recognition becomes particularly crucial in a time when expatriates are expected to increase host country nationals' autonomy and often play a key role in the transfer of know-how from headquarters to subsidiaries (Bonache & Brewster, 2001).

Our research also has a number of limitations that should be acknowledged. In terms of data collection, the main limitation of our research is related to the relative imbalance between French and Malagasy interviewees in our sample. We tried to control for this bias by taking advantage of previous interpretative research on French culture (d'Iribarne, 1989, 2009; Segal, 2009). Additionally, one of the two authors was involved in many cross-cultural research projects concerning the French culture. Previous research results helped validate our interpretations of French cultural representations. We are also careful to acknowledge that the scope of this research is limited. Our study was based on

an ethnographic approach. Although this provides a thorough understanding of cultural representations, this involves relatively small samples and a limited number of countries. It would therefore be necessary to enlarge the study to other countries with bigger samples to get a broader understanding of delegation across cultures. Finally, our study was conducted in a specific organizational context, namely, NGOs in the field of fair development. Further research is therefore needed to study delegation in other contexts.

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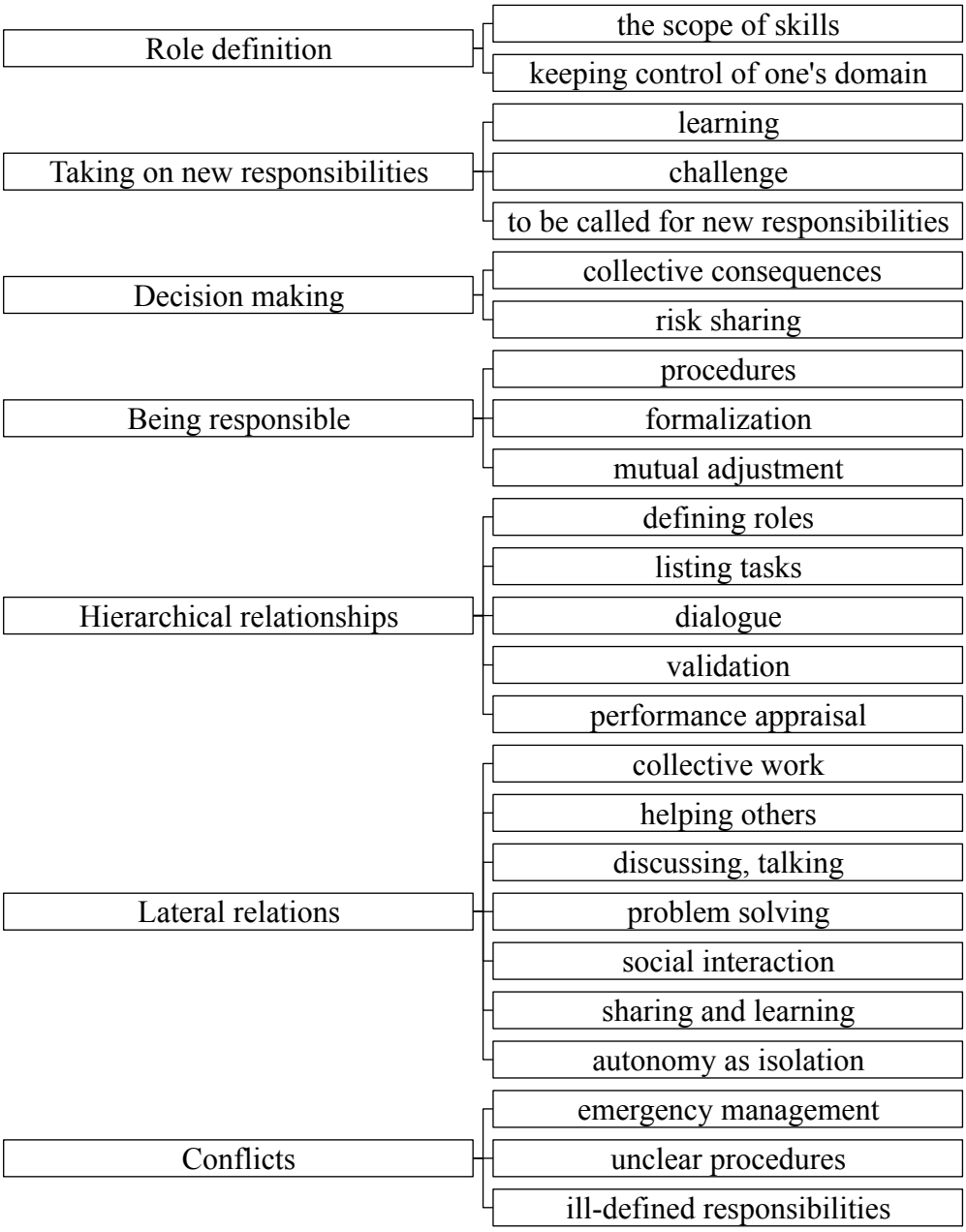
Appendix 1: Emerging coding categories



Appendix 2: GRET's projects in the scope of the study

Nutrimad	It aims to establish a channel of manufacturing and distribution of nutritious flour, to fight against child malnutrition.
Meddea	Project that aims to promote access to safe drinking water by installing sewage systems and water distribution systems.
Rhyviere	Program for the development of small hydropower in rural areas.
Drynet	A recent project concerned with the fight against desertification.