

# **SIGMA Assessment Systems**

## **Cross-Cultural Application**



**Interpreting Leadership Scores  
and Response Styles Across  
Cultures with SIGMARadius**



# Assessing Leadership Scores and Response Styles Across Cultures with SIGMARadius

Performance ratings are an important form of documentation that can facilitate employee development and track progress over time.<sup>1</sup> In particular, 360 degree feedback can yield great benefits to both employees and organizations as it provides a holistic perspective of performance, highlighting an individual's strengths and opportunities for development.<sup>2</sup> 360 degree feedback refers to using ratings from stakeholders across multiple levels within a company, such as leaders, direct/indirect reports, colleagues, customers, and self-raters. However, as organizations do not exist in a vacuum, it is important to consider how context influences ratings and reactions in the performance management process.<sup>3</sup>

Culture is an important contextual variable that may influence how employees engage with performance management systems. Defined as shared assumptions that influence norms and behavior,<sup>4</sup> culture tends to effect performance management in two ways: by influencing how people rate themselves/others, and by impacting how people react to the ratings they receive.

## How Culture Influences Ratings

Culture is an extremely broad concept and influences performance ratings in a variety of ways; however, we can find consistent rating patterns by examining similar features among cultures. For example, cultural features such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism, and assertiveness tend to be the most impactful in terms of how individuals rate performance.

### *Power Distance*

Power distance is the extent to which it is acceptable for power to be spread unequally within a culture. Specifically, cultures high in power distance tend to accept that some individuals fall at the top of the power ladder, and some individuals fall at the bottom of the power ladder. In low power distance cultures, there is less acceptance of unequal distribution of power.

Cultures high in power distance tend to result in tiered, hierarchical organizational structures, whereas cultures low in power distance may favor a flat structure. There also tends to be more similarity between how individuals rate themselves and how they are rated by others in cultures with low power distance,<sup>5</sup> possibly due to increased opportunities for a variety of raters to observe an individual's behavior.<sup>6</sup> Research has found that organizations within a low power distance culture are likely to receive the most benefits from 360 degree feedback systems; however, these systems can still be implemented successfully across cultures.<sup>7</sup>

### *Individualism vs. Collectivism*

Another aspect of a culture that may influence how people rate others is the extent to which individuals within that culture tend to value individual goals or collective goals. In individualist cultures, people tend to focus on their own goals to guide their behavior, and self-reliance is strongly emphasized. Alternatively, collectivist cultures place a strong emphasis on group success, which may make it more challenging to distinguish individual performance from group performance. As a result, 360 degree feedback systems are particularly effective for organizations with individualist cultures,<sup>7</sup> however, the influence of culture on ratings has been shown to be minimal overall. Individuals in both individualistic and collectivistic cultures can gain valuable feedback from well-designed 360 degree feedback systems.<sup>8</sup>

### *Assertiveness*

Assertiveness is a third feature that may influence how individuals rate others within a culture. Cultural assertiveness is the degree to which aggressiveness or toughness is valued over tenderness and timidity. Highly assertive cultures tend to value expression of thoughts and feelings, emphasizing the importance of informally sharing feedback. The ongoing expression of feedback typical in highly assertive cultures is likely to lead self-ratings to be more aligned with ratings from others, as the self-rater may already have information from others about their performance prior to receiving formal feedback. In cultures with low assertiveness, there tends to be stronger differences between self-ratings and ratings from others.<sup>5</sup> This may be because modesty is more highly valued in cultures with lower assertive ideologies, and cultures low in assertiveness tend to value privacy, likely leading to individuals being less inclined to share informal feedback with direct reports and peers. It is important to note that a strong organizational culture of providing and receiving informal feedback can help to overcome the influence of less assertive cultures, making 360 degree feedback systems effective regardless of cultural context.

## **How Culture Influences Reactions**

Cultural context may also lead to variation in how individuals receive feedback. For example, in cultures with high power distance, people in leadership positions may be uncomfortable receiving feedback from direct reports.<sup>3</sup> These leaders may choose instead to only focus on the feedback that they have received from their superiors rather than from their direct reports and peers.

Further, culture may influence feedback acceptance.<sup>5</sup> Large discrepancies between self-ratings and other-ratings tend to elicit defensiveness during feedback interventions, and the target may not be receptive to the feedback they received.<sup>9</sup> This is especially true when feedback is more negative than the ratings they gave themselves.

One way to overcome these challenges is by providing raters with education about 360 degree feedback systems to emphasize the value of receiving feedback from employees at all levels within an organization. It is important to remember that culture is not only present at the geographical or country level. Organizations can also have their own internal culture that influences important processes like performance ratings and the delivery of feedback. Building a strong organizational culture that values soliciting and accepting feedback from all members of the organization can make the 360 degree feedback system more effective regardless of the broader societal culture that one is in.

## The Big Picture: Interpreting SIGMARadius Across Cultures

Despite these potential differences in 360 ratings and reception, research tends to show that the impact of culture on 360 degree feedback systems is small and that there are more similarities than differences between cultures.<sup>8</sup> Further, culture is not the only variable that influences how ratings are made and received. Meaningful differences exist between individuals within any given culture.<sup>10</sup> These differences are what make 360 degree feedback so valuable; it provides a holistic picture of a leaders' performance without solely relying on one single perspective.<sup>2</sup>

## Get Started with SIGMARadius Today

Taking advantage of 360 degree assessments can yield great benefits for leaders' growth and development. SIGMARadius has been adapted for use in various cultures and follows recommendations regarding the importance placed on language, as well as the behaviors chosen for rating.<sup>3</sup> Specifically, SIGMARadius takes advantage of professional translations and a cross-culturally relevant competency model to tap into both traits that are broadly valued as well as those that are especially relevant within specific contexts. SIGMA's competency model encompasses 50 unique dimensions of leadership associated with leader success. This model can be further adapted via benchmarking to only include the competencies that are relevant within a specific context.

SIGMARadius is an easy-to-use, scientifically-sound tool that helps to provide leaders with varying perspectives about their leadership abilities. We recognize that the careful administration of 360 degree systems can be central to their success, and therefore SIGMA also offers consulting and coaching services to help facilitate rater training and feedback acceptance. [Contact us](#) to learn more about how SIGMARadius can assist in advancing leadership skills within your organization.

## How SIGMA Can Help

If you'd like help developing your leadership competencies and using assessments like SIGMARadius, check out SIGMA's individual and group [coaching](#), custom [consulting](#), and [succession planning services](#). To learn more about our solutions and how SIGMA can help your leadership team, click [here](#), or contact us directly for more information.

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<sup>1</sup> Cannon, M. D., & Witherspoon, R. (2005). Actionable feedback: Unlocking the power of learning and performance improvement. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 19(2). <https://doi.org/10.5465/ame.2005.16965107>

<sup>2</sup> Nowack, K. M., & Mashih, S. (2012). Evidence-based answers to 15 questions about leveraging 360-degree feedback. *Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research*, 64(3), 157–182. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0030011>

<sup>3</sup> Brutus, S., Leslie, J. B., & McDonald-Mann, D. (2001). Cross-Cultural Issues in Multisource Feedback. In D. W. Bracken, C. W. Timmreck, & A. H. Church (Ed) *The handbook of multisource feedback: The comprehensive resource for designing and implementing MSF processes* (pp. 433-446). San Fransisco, CA: Jossey-Bass Inc.

<sup>4</sup> Hofstede, G. (1980). *Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values*. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.

<sup>5</sup> Atwater, L., Wang, M., Smither, J. W., & Fleenor, J. W. (2009). Are cultural characteristics associated with the relationship between self and others' ratings of leadership? *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 94(4), 876–886. <https://doi.org/10.1037/a0014561>

<sup>6</sup> Eckert, R., Ekelund, B. Z., Gentry, W. A., & Dawson, J. F. (2010). "I don't see me like you see me, but is that a problem?" Cultural influences on rating discrepancy in 360-degree feedback instruments. *European Journal of Work and Organizational Psychology*, 19(3), 259-278. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13594320802678414>

<sup>7</sup> Shipper, F., Hoffman, R. C., & Rotondo, D. M. (2007). Does the 360-feedback process create actionable knowledge equally across cultures? *Academy of Management Learning & Education*, 6(1), 33–50. <https://doi.org/10.5465/AMLE.2007.24401701>

<sup>8</sup> Robie, C., Kaster, K., Nilsen, D., & Hazucha, J. (2000). *The right stuff: Understanding cultural differences in leadership performance*. Minneapolis, MN: Personnel Decisions International.

<sup>9</sup> Brett, J. F., & Atwater, L. E. (2001). 360° feedback: Accuracy, reactions, and perceptions of usefulness. *Journal of Applied Psychology*, 86(5), 930-942. doi:10.1037/0021-9010.86.5.930

<sup>10</sup> Graen, G. B. (2006). In the eye of the beholder: Cross-cultural lesson in leadership from Project GLOBE: A response viewed from the Third Culture Bonding (TCB) model of cross-cultural leadership. *Academy of Management Perspectives*, 20, 95–101.