

SIGMA Assessment Systems

Cross-Cultural Application



**Interpreting Leadership Scores
and Response Styles Across
Cultures with the LSP-R™**



Assessing Leadership Scores and Response Styles Across Cultures with the LSP-R™

Many organizations consider leadership assessment to be a valuable component of their talent management systems for several reasons. These assessments can highlight individual strengths, identify potential areas for development, help inform selection decisions, or even support succession planning initiatives. Because leadership assessments can be leveraged in so many ways and their use can have a significant impact on personnel decisions, it is important that these assessments are used fairly and consistently across all leaders in an organization.

There is a growing trend across organizations to promote diversity among leadership teams. This is encouraging to see for several reasons, including the [many benefits that diverse teams bring](#) to organizations. However, with an increase in the diversity of backgrounds, experiences, and perspectives of leaders, it is important to evaluate whether the leadership assessments that get used are appropriate for all leaders. As part of this evaluation, an important place to begin is understanding whether individuals from different backgrounds respond to the assessment in the same way. The way in which a leader responds to an assessment is called their response style.

What are Response Styles?

Decades of research have demonstrated that individuals often adopt response styles when completing self-report assessments. This means that they tend to display a specific pattern of responses. There are 5 common response styles that appear most frequently across different types of assessments:

- **Acquiescence:** a tendency to agree with most statements on the assessment, regardless of the content of the statement
- **Socially Desirable:** a tendency to portray oneself in an overly favorable light (i.e., exaggerate one's strengths and minimize shortcomings)
- **Extreme:** a tendency to give responses at either the high or low end of the rating scale
- **Midpoint:** a tendency to use only the midpoint of the rating scale
- **Group Reference:** a tendency to compare oneself to others when making ratings

Why are Response Styles Important?

Response styles are rarely intentional. In most cases, leaders are not aware that their responses follow these patterns. However, these styles can have an impact on assessment results and this is especially relevant whenever assessments are used to make comparisons across leaders. For

example, if you administer an assessment to two leaders as part of a selection process and one leader has a socially desirable response style while the other has a midpoint response style, the leader who portrays themselves in a more favorable light will likely have better assessment scores. This means the leader with the socially desirable response style may be more likely to be selected than the leader with the midpoint response style.

Response styles are particularly concerning when there are large-scale differences in the types of response styles that some leaders use versus others. For example, if midpoint responding tends to be more prevalent among leaders from a particular cultural background and socially desirable responding is more prevalent among leaders from a different background, then there is a risk that the assessment will systematically favor leaders from one background over another. It is therefore important to understand cultural differences in response styles so that leadership assessments do not disproportionately favor leaders from one culture over another.

Response Styles Across Cultures

How people complete assessments may be influenced, in part, by their cultural or ethnic background. In the table below we summarize some of the most commonly documented relationships between culture and response styles. However, it is important to be aware that the overwhelming majority of evidence suggests that if cultural differences in response styles are present, they tend to be quite small. In general, we tend to see more variability in which response styles get used within cultures than we do across different cultures.¹ This is because there are many factors beyond culture that can impact which response style gets used, including the individual’s personality and even features of the assessment itself.

Response Styles

Response Style	What It Looks Like	Differences Across Cultures	Impact on the LSP-R
Acquiescence	A tendency for test-takers to agree with or say “Yes” to most statements.	<p>Tends to be higher in individuals from more collectivistic cultures^{2,3,4,5} and in minority groups compared to White test-takers.^{3,4,6}</p> <p>May reflect a collectivistic preference for harmony or avoidance of conflict.</p>	Tests can be designed to minimize the impact of acquiescent responding by the way questions are worded. The LSP-R leverages these techniques, so acquiescent responding is not likely to have a significant impact on test scores.

Socially Desirable	A tendency for test-takers to respond to statements in a way that portrays them more favorably to others (i.e., promote strengths, minimize development areas)	Differences, if any, are small. ^{4,7, 8, 9,10} May reflect cultural differences in what is considered socially acceptable behavior. ¹	During development, content was written in a way that minimized desirability. This means that when test-takers read the statements on the LSP-R, it is often not obvious what the “good” or “desirable” response would be. Also, research shows that social desirability is unrelated to job performance. ¹¹
Extreme	The tendency to endorse the highest and lowest options of a response scale.	Extreme response styles tend to be more common in Western cultures than in Asian cultures. ^{12,13}	Research suggests that cultural differences in extreme and midpoint responding do not affect cross-cultural comparisons of item means. ^{14,15}
Midpoint	The tendency to endorse the middle option of a response scale, generally indicating a neutral position.	May reflect modesty, which is valued in many Asian cultures. ¹⁶ May also occur when direct reports are asked to rate their leaders, especially in cultures that value authority, where it would be disrespectful to give criticism to one’s leaders, even if it were honest.	Different statements on the LSP-R were written to reflect different levels of the trait they measure. This helps to make the LSP-R resistant to both extreme and midpoint response styles.
Reference Group Effect	The tendency for individuals to compare themselves to another group of individuals when making self-report ratings.	Raters from different cultural backgrounds may use different references groups when making self-ratings. ¹⁷ May be an issue when comparing scores between test-takers.	Assessments that emphasize self-reflection or ask about concrete behaviors may be more resistant to reference group effects. ¹⁷

The LSP-R asks test-takers about specific behaviors or preferences, rather than directly asking about their leadership performance or competence, making the assessment more resilient to this kind of response bias.

How to Minimize the Impact of Response Styles

There are several steps that test publishers can take during the development of leadership assessments to minimize the likelihood that response styles will be triggered. This is a critical step in the development of any assessment, but especially for leadership assessments that will be used with a diverse sample of leaders to inform personnel decisions.

At SIGMA, our personality-based leadership assessment, the Leadership Skills Profile – Revised (LSP-R) is a great example of such an assessment. The LSP-R is used for a variety of HR functions including [selection](#), [leadership development](#), and to [support succession planning decisions](#). This is why it was so important for SIGMA to develop the LSP-R in a way that would help to minimize the impact of response styles on leaders' assessment results. In the table above, we explain how different features of the LSP-R were designed to mitigate each of the different response styles. The sum of these efforts is an assessment that can be used with diverse teams across a variety of contexts.

Get Started with the LSP-R Today

SIGMA's LSP-R is an inclusive, scientifically-validated, and easy to administer assessment that can help organizations understand how effective leadership is defined in their organization. When developing the LSP-R, measures were taken to minimize the influence of response styles and individual differences. This makes the LSP-R a cross-culturally valid and reliable assessment, that can be used to select and guide the development of high-performers. [Contact us](#) to learn more about how the LSP-R can help your organization select and develop strong leaders today.

How SIGMA Can Help

If you'd like help developing your leadership competencies and using assessments like the LSP-R, 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.

¹ Bou Malham, P., & Saucier, G. (2016). The conceptual link between social desirability and cultural normativity. *International Journal of Psychology, 51*, 474–480.

² Harzing, A. (2006). Response styles in cross-national survey research: A 26-country study. *International Journal of Cross Cultural Management, 6*, 243–266.

³ Carr, L., & Krause, N. (1978). Social status, psychiatric symptomology, and response bias. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 19*, 86–91.

⁴ Ross, C., & Mirowsky, J. (1984). Socially-desirable response and acquiescence in a cross-cultural survey of mental health. *Journal of Health and Social Behavior, 25*, 189–197.

⁵ Smith, P. (2004). Acquiescent response bias as an aspect of cultural communication style. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 35*, 50–61.

⁶ Marín, G., Gamba, R. J., & Marín, B. V. (1992). Extreme response style and acquiescence among Hispanics: The role of acculturation and education. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 4*, 498–509.

⁷ Dunn, P., & Shome, A. (2009). Cultural crossvergence and social desirability bias: Ethical evaluations by Chinese and Canadian business students. *Journal of Business Ethics, 85*, 527–543.

⁸ Odendaal, A. (2015). Cross-cultural differences in social desirability scales: Influence of cognitive ability. *SA Journal of Industrial Psychology, 41*, 1–e13

⁹ Heine, S., & Lehman, D. (1995). Social desirability among Canadian and Japanese students. *The Journal of Social Psychology, 135*, 777–779.

¹⁰ Patel, C. (2003). Some cross-cultural evidence on whistle-blowing as an internal control mechanism. *Journal of International Accounting Research, 2*, 69–96.

¹¹ Salgado, J. F. (2005). Personality and social desirability in organizational settings: Practical implications for work and organizational psychology. *Papeles del Psicólogo, 26*, 115–127.

¹² Dolnicar, S. & Grun, B. (2007). Cross-cultural differences in survey response patterns. *International Marketing Review, 24*, 127–143.

¹³ Chen, C., Lee, S., & Stevenson, H. W. (1995). Response style and cross-cultural comparisons of rating scales among East Asian and North American students. *Psychological Science, 6*, 170–175.

¹⁴ Zak, M., & Shigeo Takahashi, S. (1967). Cultural Influences on response style: Comparisons of Japanese and American college students, *The Journal of Social Psychology, 71*, 3–10.

¹⁵ He, J., & Van De Vijver, F. (2015). Effects of a general response style on cross-cultural comparisons: Evidence from the Teaching and Learning International Survey. *Public Opinion Quarterly, 79*, 267–290.

¹⁶ Chun, K. T., Campbell, J. B., & Yoo, J. H. (1974). Extreme response style in cross-cultural research. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology, 5*, 465–479.

¹⁷ Heine, S., Lehman, D., Peng, K., & Greenholtz, J. (2002). What's wrong with cross-cultural comparisons of subjective Likert Scales? The reference-group effect. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology, 82*, 903–918.