

# DANISH LEADERSHIP STYLE IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT



## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report is designed to expand our understanding of the Danish style of leadership and its impact when applied in a global work context.

Drawing on two surveys (n = 971) and 32 qualitative interviews, and in common with the findings of existing studies, we find the Danish leadership style in a global context to be democratic and equality-oriented as well as informal, open and trusting – i.e. very similar to its manifestation domestically. And of course it is only natural that leaders should try to export tried and tested approaches to a new context.

Yet, the study also reveals several new characteristics that emerge when Danish-style leadership is practiced on a broader scale. The surveys support the notion that Danes have particularly strong international skills, for example – i.e. they are quick to adjust, and are more effective as global leaders compared to other nationalities. Effectiveness refers to meeting job performance requirements as set out by the current boss.

We also find that Danish global leaders typically facilitate more creativity in their work groups. Based on our own as well as prior research findings, we suggest that this is due to the trusting and open attitude and the democratic approach that Danes tend to display in global work. Our qualitative interviews show Danish global leaders to have a good work-life balance, and to be direct yet respectful.

The qualitative interviews also reveal instances when the Danish leadership approach is less effective, and less well accepted by non-Danish employees, however. In certain situations, rather than ensuring effectiveness and reduced conflict, equality, democracy and informality seem to have the opposite effect.

We suggest that Danish global leadership requires awareness and an agility in balancing democratic/autocratic; equal status/hierarchical; open/closed; informal/formal styles or approaches, then. In particular, Danish global leaders need to take into account the extent to which subordinates have been exposed to the Danish leadership style, and develop a heightened awareness of their leadership style and its consequences.

Danish leaders are not always aware of the impact their style has in a global work setting, our findings suggest. Exposure to work pressure (which can be heightened in a less familiar setting) can result in a loss of self-control and a tendency towards overly aggressive and/or too direct behavior – the result of stress and frustration if their democratic, empowering approach does not seem to be working.

Our qualitative results show that when this situation arises and there is insufficient inter-cultural understanding, leaders may revert to a counterproductive approach that is too formal, hierarchical, autocratic and closed – with dysfunctional consequences for global collaboration.

It is important that Danish leaders appointed to global positions are able to recognize and avoid this crude change in leadership styles in situations where their instinctive approach doesn't seem to be working.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Danish approach to leadership, in common with Scandinavian practice more broadly, tends to be largely democratic with a short relative power distance between employees (Smith, Andersen, Ekelund, Graversen, & Ropo, 2003). This style of leadership is seen to be in a contrast with the more directional type of management applied in central and southern Europe.

There are some recognized benefits to the Danish style of leadership. In particular, the network-oriented, empowering and motivating approach (Schramm-Nielsen, Lawrence, & Sivesind, 2004) lends itself well to a knowledge society that is under increasing pressure to innovate. Danes, for example, place greater emphasis on the strength of the argument as the basis for decision-making, than on the status of the person making the proposal. This creates greater freedom for ideas to flow across an organization, an openness which is crucial for creativity (Simons, Pelled, & Smith, 1999).

Although Hofstede's work (1991) has received criticism in recent years, its framework underpins the majority of the studies on Danish and Nordic leadership values. Denmark ranks third from the bottom in its relative power index, suggesting a leadership approach focused on equality, collaboration and dialogue between superiors and subordinates. This is mirrored in Danes' orientation generally towards equality and a democratic political system.

Organizational charts are often flat, and hierarchical power distance is short within companies (Smith et al., 2003). Employees and employers in Denmark often interact on an equal footing, giving rise to a co-operative and participatory leadership style. Proposals from executives must be thoroughly explained and justified, rather than imposed on the basis of given authority. And managers will tend to seek the opinions and advice of others; they accept that their proposals may be questioned and counter-proposals made.

Yet Denmark is also described as one of the 10 most individualistic countries in the world (Hofstede, 1991). This is manifested in the superiority of individuals' interests over the group's interest, and in somewhat superficial work relationships. Danes are very proud of their independence, freedom and autonomy. Power tends not to be centralized to any great extent; rather, Danish employees have a high level of involvement in the management of the business.

Hofstede (1991) also ranks Denmark as one of the most feminine countries – a cultural dimension that represents modesty and co-operation, and in which caring and tender attitudes are valued. This is in line with the ideals of the welfare state, supporting democracy and concerns for all members of the society.

Finally, but perhaps most important to global leadership, Denmark has a low score for avoidance of uncertainty. Cultures in this category tend to accept and feel comfortable in unstructured situations or changeable environments; they try to have as few rules as possible, and their people are typically more tolerant of change. Such nations are also thought to be more open to diversity and new ways of thinking (Schramm-Nielsen, 2000). Uncertainty avoidance is something that effective global leaders need in abundance (Caligiuri and Tarique (2009). Thus, Danes have a good foundation: as global leaders, they are naturally more comfortable with changing situations and different contexts.

The Danish style of leadership is influenced by the relatively high levels of education of an organization's workforce in Denmark, even among employees at lower levels of the organization. Children in Denmark are taught to think independently and critically, too, so by adulthood these qualities are deeply engrained. A further factor influencing the Danish approach to leadership is the high level of social trust that exists in the country (Delhey & Newton, 2005). In Danish society, individuals are trusted and expected to assume high levels of personal responsibility (Schramm-Nielsen et al., 2004).

Given the growing internationalization of business, the relative effectiveness of the Danish style of leadership on a global scale becomes increasingly relevant. Does it have the same impact in an international context, or is its efficacy reduced when met with other cultures, behaviors and expectations? While the Danish leadership style may function well in a domestic setting, this may not be the case in organizations with a multicultural workforce, with subsidiaries spanning across the globe.

Researchers and practitioners have expressed concern that the Danish leadership style cannot be simply copy and pasted into an international context with the expectation of the same impact (Bjørn, 1999).

This study seeks to add some detail to this assumption, looking more deeply at Danish leadership traits, at relative perceptions of Danish leadership style, and at its strengths and its limitations in a global setting.

The report is divided into a series of subsections. In the method section, we describe the quantitative and qualitative data collection techniques that form the basis of this study. We then explore how Danes see Danish global leadership and how this compares to the perceptions of non-Danish employees, before moving on to outline how Danes sometimes adjust their leadership style for global application. Finally, we describe the positive and negative consequences of Danish leadership styles when practiced in a global context.

## METHOD

The results discussed in this report build on both qualitative and quantitative data. The qualitative data has been derived from 15 international organizations, using different data gathering techniques – chiefly 32 semi-structured interviews conducted with Danish global leaders (in Denmark and abroad) as well as non-Danish subordinates of Danish global leaders (in Denmark and abroad). Besides Denmark, interviewees were based in England, Poland, Saudi Arabia, the US and China. The Danish managers as well as their non-Danish subordinates were asked to characterize the Danish leadership style and describe its effect at a global level.

In addition, we used two separate questionnaires to assess central aspects of the Danish leadership style, adding to the generalizability of our findings. Survey 1 was sent to global leaders in Asia.

Among the 482 global leaders who took part, 71 were Danes (response rate 19.8 percent). This allowed us to compare leadership styles between Danish and non-Danish global leaders. Among the Danes, the majority of the population was male (75 percent) with an average age of 52.52 years (SD = 9.59). Among the non-Danes the majority were also male (77 percent) with an average age of 49.88 years (SD = 9.25). In short, the two populations had similar demographics.

Survey 1 went out to 1,022 leaders of Danish multicultural work groups in 17 North European organizations. We received 489 responses over time, a response rate of 48 percent; 256 of the respondents were Danish leaders. The respondents had had an average period of employment of 7.59 years in their organization (SD=9.19) and the majority were male (71.5 percent). In particular we focused on matters relating to inter-cultural adjustment, effectiveness, openness to diverse values, stress, perceived work pressure, self-control and work group creativity. The scales we employed can be found in the Appendix.



# DANISH LEADERSHIP STYLE IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

In the following section, we describe the way Danish global leaders and non-Danish global workers characterize the Danish style of leadership, to try to identify distinctive features that might expand our understanding of its potential advantages and disadvantages when applied on a global scale.

## CHARACTERISTICS OF DANISH LEADERSHIP STYLE – SELF-PERCEPTION

In the first part of the qualitative study, we asked Danish global leaders to describe what they felt distinguished their own leadership style from that of leaders of other nationalities. As expected, a number of Danish interviewees emphasized the equality-oriented character of their leadership:

” In Denmark, we are all equal. The leadership style I have is that everybody has something to contribute. People should not sit and wait for orders, and it is quite okay if somebody has a counter response. It means a lot, my cultural heritage, to the way that I lead. — Danish global manager, Denmark

This characteristic also makes Danish global leaders more likely to express their opinions irrespective of their position in the organization:

” The Danish leadership is arguably less accepting of authority. There are some formal elements where the Americans quite clearly do not object upwards and they expect the same downwards. — Danish global manager, Denmark

The Danish approach to leadership, then, involves employees speaking their mind – even in situations where it challenges the opinion of their superiors. By promoting this philosophy, Danish global leaders see themselves as democratic in their approach to leadership:

” I try – with those I am engaged with internationally – to lead them in a manner similar to that which I’d use with a Dane. [With] a Dane I would more or less lead by speaking to the person about what it is that we want to achieve. And if what we want is similar to what I want, then it is better for me that we have found the solution, rather than me [having to dictate what we must do]. — Danish global manager, Denmark

Also following the democratic approach, Danish global leaders expect individual employees to show initiative, making decisions and taking actions of their own accord:

” The Danish management style is very democratic and delegates responsibility, and there is open communication with our employees [...] trust in other people and expectations of independence; expectations of being able to take responsibility and self-function within a framework. — Danish global manager, Denmark

Affiliated to the perception of the Danes as less authoritarian, is a belief in openness:

” Now I am myself part of a division management team, where we are four Danes and three Americans, and we have different leadership styles. The Danes are in many instances more open. — Danish global manager, Denmark

Danish leaders extrapolate from this openness a trait of being more informal than their counterparts around the globe:

” There are some cultural differences in the way that you lead which are pretty clear when you work in global firms and deal with other nationalities. We have companies in the US, Germany and in Denmark and there are some clear differences between Danish leadership, German leadership and American leadership. Typically, it is less formal. In, for example, Germany it is likely to be more formal at times. You have to know the person longer before you're anything but purely formal. — Danish global manager, Denmark

Finally, Danish global leaders describe themselves as having a more trusting attitude toward non-Danish employees around the globe:

” I find it predominantly positive that, as a point of departure, you seek to display trust in people. Of course you should not be naive or anything, but you [start from a point of believing] that people are at least as smart and skilled abroad as those based at the company headquarters, and that their input is as welcome as anyone else's. — Danish global manager, Denmark

In addition, Danish managers believe themselves and their Danish peers to be particularly well suited to being global leaders. We also uncovered some

unique characteristics, which, to a lesser extent, have been touched on in existing research on Danish leadership. Something often mentioned is a tolerance of uncertainty when Danish leaders find themselves in an unpredictable environment. Again, this is linked to the willingness to delegate, and openness towards diversity:

” As Danes, we have a good point of departure, in that we can live with substantial uncertainty, and we are not afraid of delegating tasks. We are also more accustomed to working with other nations; we are open towards other countries and cultures.  
— Danish global manager, Denmark

Similarly, Danes are described as being particularly good at adjusting to novel environments, due to well-developed intercultural skills:

” There isn't a Dane who needs to be embarrassed about our international skills. We speak English, we speak German, and wherever we go we can cope. This is because of our understanding, our perspectives on life, and our opinions.  
— Danish global leader, Saudi Arabia

The ability to handle uncertainty and the unique intercultural skills make Danes effective global leaders, according to our interviewees.

” The Danish managers I know are very effective in what they do when they lead people from other countries.  
— Danish global manager, England

To test the characteristics of Danish global leaders, we used a quantitative approach (Survey 1). Here we assessed openness to diverse values, inter-cultural adjustment, and the effectiveness of Danish global managers (measures are listed in the Appendix).

Our results showed that Danish leaders emerge as more effective and quick to adjust compared to other nationalities. Effective here refers to the self-perception of Danish leaders about how satisfied they think their boss' are with their job/role performance. We found no significant inter-group differences with regard to job adjustment or openness to diverse values, which means that there is no difference between Danes and other nationalities (see Table 1).

**TABLE 1**  
**Survey 1: Time to adjust and effectiveness**

Dependent Variables	Danes Mean N = 75	Non-Danes Mean N = 407	Multi-variate effect	Uni-variate F-ratios
			5.41**	
Time to Adjust	3.637	4.456		7.668***
Effectiveness	5.676	5.472		3.435*

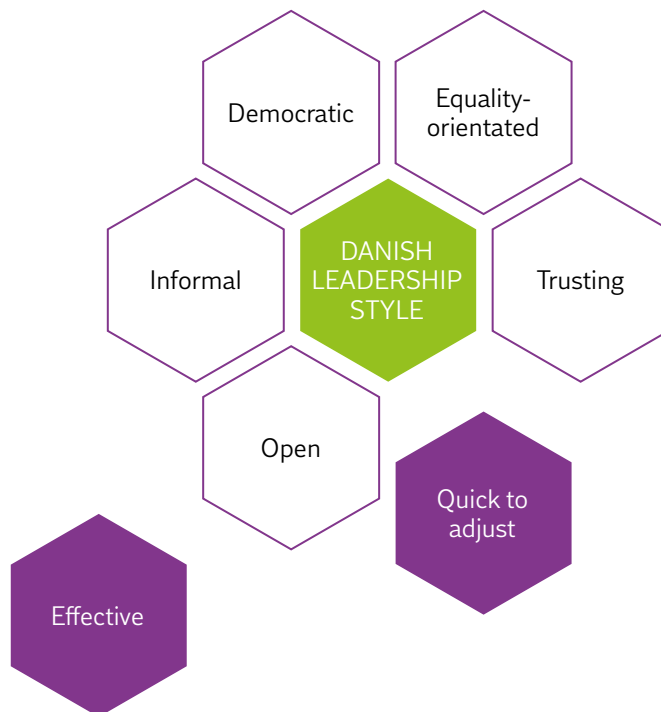
**SUMMARY**

In conclusion, we can list a number of characteristics of Danish global leadership style that are interrelated (see Figure 1).

First, Danish leadership style is described as equality-oriented, meaning that each employee globally is perceived as being of equal value and importance.

Connected to this is a willingness to challenge authority, and a democratic approach to leadership – i.e. involving inclusive decision-making. A democratic style also relies on a certain degree of openness and trust – allowing leaders

**FIGURE 1**  
**A Danish and global perception of the Danish leadership style**



to be receptive to input that might run counter to their own opinion and ideas, while trusting employees to strive continuously towards high-quality input.

Finally, the egalitarian and democratic bias to Danish-style leadership tends to foster a more informal relationship between the leader and global employees. We also found strong support for the belief that, compared to other nationalities, Danish global leaders have strong international skills (for example, being quick to adjust). As a result, they tend to be more effective than peers of other nationalities who are appointed to international leadership positions.

## **CHARACTERISTICS OF THE DANISH LEADERSHIP STYLE – THE PERCEPTION OF NON-DANES**

Other nationalities are often positive about Danish leadership style, although some negative elements were also highlighted (as discussed in a later section of this report). Many non-Danish interviewees repeated some of the same characteristics described by Danish global leaders as differentiating their leadership style. However, non-Dane employees working closely with Danish global leaders also mentioned some additional characteristics as being common to the Danish leadership style.

One non-Danish director noted that Danish global leaders are seen as being respectful yet direct in their communication:

“ The Danish style is to be direct, and I think we all know that very, very well. But what always impresses me is the ability to be direct without being disrespectful. In Switzerland, for example, you would not have the direct thing. In order not to be disrespectful, they go on and on. But here it's direct, assertive, but not disrespectful. That's the difference that I can see.

— Swiss manager, Denmark

Something else described by non-Danish interviewees is Danish leaders' ability to achieve a good work-life balance. In particular, non-Danish global workers are impressed by the determination not to let work interfere too much with their private life:

“ I love the Danish leadership style. Whatever it means for me, I love it. It is very close to my values – personal and family values [...] A Danish leader would always give preference to a family situation rather than a work situation. Then, Danes are very respectful of your private and personal life, so certainly not intrusive; I wouldn't expect a Danish manager to call me at 5pm on a Friday. I think that would need to be a very, very, very, very rare exception, so they're quite respectful of your private and personal life.

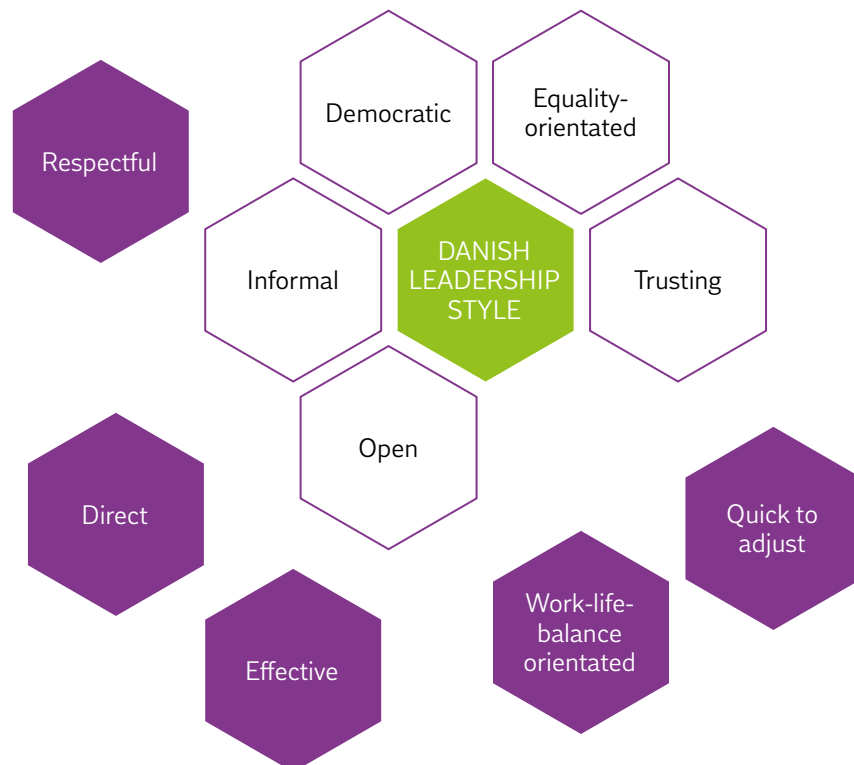
— Polish manager, Denmark

## SUMMARY

Based on these additional insights, we can now add characteristics such as respect, directness and work-life balance orientation to our description of Danish global leadership style (see Figure 2).

The 'respectful' characteristic refers to courteous, well-mannered behavior, which among Danish global managers is paired with a direct, clear and concise form of communication.

FIGURE 2  
A Danish and global perception of the Danish leadership style



Finally, global leaders applying a Danish leadership style also emphasize the importance of family and leisure time.

It is clear, then, that Danish global managers possess many values that are positively perceived both by the Danish global leaders themselves and by non-Danish global workers.

Below, we take a closer look at the positive and negative consequences of practicing Danish leadership style in a global workplace.

### **DANISH LEADERSHIP STYLE – POSITIVE CONSEQUENCES**

Many international employees are enthusiastic about the Danish style of leadership. In some cases, non-Danish employees expressly prefer reporting to Danes than to leaders of their own nationality:

“ There are quite simply a number of Americans who would rather report to Danes than to their American managers.  
— Danish manager, US

In particular, the interplay of openness and trust is emphasized by non-Danish global workers as being valuable in global organizations where it is difficult to manage individual global workers due to distance:

“ I think the Danish mentality with openness and trust in people... for me that aligns well with working in a distributed set-up because you cannot micro-manage at distance. That is, you have to trust in people...of course they have to be self-propelled and be able to drive themselves.  
— Polish global manager, Denmark

In addition, Danish leadership style seems to promote more creative and innovative thinking among global workers – a process that is often spearheaded by the Danish global leader and rooted in the inquisitive nature of Danish leadership:

“Something I’m also a big fan of is the Danish perspective; I think the Danish leaders are able to see and imagine different perspectives. Sometimes I’m very surprised, and then I’m like, “Ooh, why couldn’t I think of that?” [...] I think Danes generally are very good at asking very good questions.

— American global manager, Denmark

Importantly, we found statistical support for the claim that Danish-style leadership can spark creativity among global workers (see Table 2). This lends credibility to the theory that teams led by Danish managers demonstrate more originality, take more risks, produce new ideas, and solve more problems compared to work groups led by other nationalities (see measure in Appendix).

**TABLE 2**  
**Survey 2: Work group creativity**

Dependent Variables	Danish team leaders Mean N = 256	Non-Danish team leaders Mean N = 233	Multi-variate effect	Uni-variate F-ratios
			3.846*	
Work Group Creativity	3.79	3.61		6.581***

## SUMMARY

Based on the findings presented here, and in prior research (e.g. Schramm-Nielsen et al., 2004), we propose that Danish leadership style might be particularly valuable for unleashing the creative potential in a global workforce.

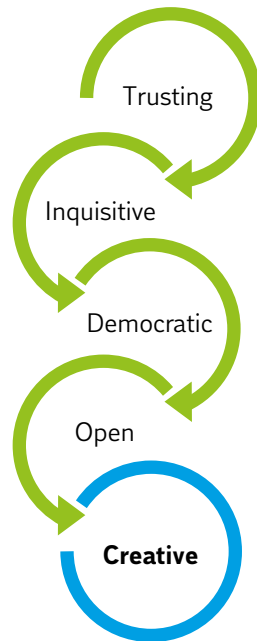
In particular, we suggest that an open and trusting attitude combined with a democratic approach is important.

However, in order to spark creativity the global leader needs an inquisitive approach where he/she asks the “right questions” rather than trying to provide the “right answers” (see Figure 3).

Clearly, this is a positive aspect to Danish-style leadership and one of central importance. There can also be less positive consequences of Danish leadership however, as will be explored in the next section.



**FIGURE 3**  
**The interrelation of key characteristics of the Danish leadership style important for sparking creativity**



### DANISH LEADERSHIP STYLE – NEGATIVE CONSEQUENCES

While there are many positive dimensions to Danish-style leadership in a global context, there are also some challenges. A number of non-Danish employees working in Denmark point to the informal way of interaction as one example. Difficulties here arise in part because many organizational routines in Denmark are relatively implicit rather than explicit.

” The Danes are accommodating in that you can always ask anything in English and people don’t get offended. But in another way people are not very accommodating. There is not a lot of help. You are expected to know how the system works even though you may not.

— American manager, Denmark

A consequence of the informal and implicit way the Danes tend to lead is that non-Danish employees can become annoyed and even angry with their Danish colleagues and leaders. Global workers may be reluctant to repeatedly ask for help, a situation exacerbated by the fact that no formal introductions may have been made. Asking numerous questions and making many mistakes are associated with substantial loss of face in many cultures. By contrast, Danes expect

people to ask questions and take responsibility for their own actions. This trait can be negatively interpreted as a lack of interest, or as colleagues being unhelpful and too informal.

” When I came here I had to ask every single time I had to do something. And I really got in trouble with budgeting because you need to have this and this invoice – well, nobody told me. I had so many questions and you can only ask so many questions before people begin to think you are an idiot.

— Dutch employee, Denmark

In Poland, after you have had the initial tour you are not supposed to ask so many questions. That is different. Here, there was no tour. You have to find out about a lot of things for yourselves – like the access cards and the canteen cards and all that. (Polish global manager, Denmark)

Informality is also linked to a very direct tone of voice. This can come across as condescending and offensive, according to some global workers:

” Danes that come here tend to say ”I – Think – You – Are – Wrong – Because ...” and there are other ways to say that in English. At the beginning, the Danes will be very abrupt and that pisses people off.

— English manager, England

Similarly, the democratic and equality-oriented character of Danish leadership style isn't always positively received by global workers, because of the associated lack of guidance and authority:

” There isn't so much reporting to a manager. It is flatter here. That can be a negative. Sometimes I miss the authority: someone that can stand up and resolve the problem. Or the guidance – that you can go to one person if you have a conflict. Not ten people. Sometimes the Danish way can have the effect of delaying work.

— German employee, Denmark

Some non-Danish employees also find the democratic leadership styles to be ineffective, especially in relation to decision-making and conflict resolution.

” They always tell me that Danes are so good at working in teams. I don't think it is true. They are so afraid of conflict. And everybody really just thinks of his own job. I was really disappointed when I started to work in the group. They think they all have to agree. Like meeting on the smoking policy. They cannot have people disagreeing. It is really not a good approach to just avoid conflict. Instead you need to find a solution. Maybe they know that, but are too afraid.

— Italian employee, Denmark

## SUMMARY

It is clear, then, that not everyone is uniformly content with Danish leadership style. It may function well in some situations but not in others. Rather, an equality-oriented, democratic and informal approach can in some situations decrease effectiveness and increase conflict rather than having a positive impact.

This is a paradox, which characterizes much global work, and which international leaders must learn to confront – knowing which characteristics to downplay and which to emphasize in a global setting. This starts with being more aware of and sensitive to the situation, reading situations better and knowing how to respond.

## LEADERSHIP AGILITY IN GLOBAL ORGANIZATIONS

Danish global leaders aim to flex their leadership style when faced with employees from different cultural backgrounds. One Danish global leader describes mixing different characteristics like this:

I have had many years of international experience ... That has made me better at mixing Danish consensus and jolly leadership and being a bit harder and squarer in my leadership style when results have to be achieved (Danish global leader, Denmark).

In particular, interviewees emphasize the need to be less equality- and consensus-oriented, and more hierarchical in their leadership approach:

” If you go to Ukraine, well then ... the same leadership style can also be okay down there, but you also have to be sharper there, as in: ”This is the way I want things” and then serve a plan, and then ”It is like that; that works.”

— Danish global manager, Denmark

” To begin with you are probably a bit too ambitious or too Danish. You start out involving the other nationalities too much and then, eventually, you conclude that it doesn’t work. Then you learn not to waste your time. You know, the Danish way can get you far, but there is no point dragging on for the last bit. Then it will be: ”You do this and you do that – and that is how it has to be.”

— Danish global leader, Saudi Arabia

In addition to the potential pitfall of having an approach too geared to equality, Danish global leaders also emphasize the danger of being too democratic and the necessity of being somewhat autocratic if the situation demands it (the key being to spot what’s needed, and be able to adapt the leadership style accordingly):

” Denmark is one of the most democratic places in the world. This means that when we are a little less democratic, it becomes easier for those coming from the outside. This makes it easier for them to get into the system. Danes will accept hierarchy if decisions coming from above are reasonable.

— Danish global leader, Denmark

Interestingly, it is not only the employee in the leadership role who needs to adjust to the extended power distance and the leaning towards hierarchy but also the employee in the subordinate role:

” Something I do is get coffee for my boss when we are at meeting abroad – simply to show, ”Alright, guys, we might be arriving as two, but he is the boss and I get the coffee and write the notes because that is what is expected in such forums.”

— Danish global leader, Denmark

Perceptive Danes will also try not to speak in a way that is too open in front of superiors in global organizations, rather bringing a slightly more closed approach into play if the situation appears to demand it:

” It is very much the managing director that speaks to the CEO. In reality we are supposed to shut up, until we are asked; that can be difficult for a Dane, and also for many of the Swedish and Norwegians [...] but that is what is expected of us, so we practice that. And that is quite entertaining. It is very much like playing along, and in particular it is about the hierarchy. That you have to understand. It is one of the things I believe is the biggest challenge to the Scandinavian model when you are elsewhere; that you do not really, how should I put it, understand that it is another game that you are playing.

— Danish global manager, Denmark

**In addition, Danish leaders emphasize the importance of being more formal rather than informal when working in a global context.**

” In Southern Europe, for example, I feel it can become difficult. There is a different sense of pride and another degree of formality that you are not used to at home, and that you have to respect in some manner. It is those things that I am most aware of.

— Danish global leader, Denmark

**There is evidence however that, given time, when non-Danes come to Danish global organizations they eventually become accustomed to – and appreciative of – the Danish leadership style.**

” It may sometimes be necessary, to some extent, to adopt the leadership style they come from. You can't do so one hundred percent – play the role. But you learn that if they come from more authoritarian management styles, it helps not to ask too much for their views. It can take two years before it really penetrates – how we do things here. We talk a lot with them about their expectations of the management style.

— Danish global leader, Denmark

## SUMMARY

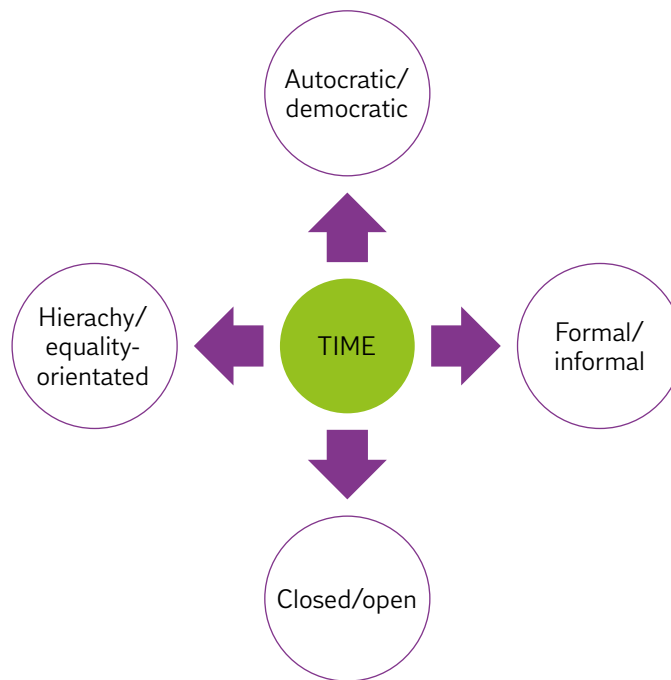
In conclusion, we suggest that Danish global leaders view leadership in global organizations as requiring a blend of democratic/autocratic; equality-oriented/hierarchical; open/closed; informal/formal approaches. As well as paying attention to the cultural composition of the global workers and the task to be solved, we suggest that the global leader also takes into account the extent to which the employees have been exposed to the Danish style of leadership (see Figure 4). However, this requires a certain agility, derived from increased awareness and a willingness to make the extra effort. If the Danish global leader is not attentive, things can easily tip the wrong way with negative consequences for global collaboration, so Danish global leaders need to appreciate exercising leadership in a global context is different from being a manager in Denmark.

## INAPPROPRIATE DANISH LEADERSHIP BEHAVIOR IN GLOBAL ORGANIZATIONS

Getting the balance right may not be easy. There is also the risk of counter-productive, dysfunctional adjustment, e.g. when Danish managers over-emphasize the autocratic aspect in line with non-Danish leadership styles. In

FIGURE 4

### Time as a central dimension when the global leaders mix his/hers leadership characteristics



the current study, we found some examples of inappropriate Danish leadership behavior in England and China.

In England, we found accounts of Danish managers appearing to have some difficulty in achieving results using a democratic leadership style, and struggling to find the right blend of approaches in their global leadership. Consequently, they veered towards a style that was excessively autocratic. According to the English leaders, their Danish counterparts did not understand how to use communication and active leadership when working in hierarchies, and found themselves disarmed due to their lack of experience in this respect. As they went to the other extreme, invoking a more authoritarian style, the Danish managers began to gain a reputation for a more Germanic leadership style which did not sit well with the English employees:

”” What we would be looking for are the more Anglo Danes, not the more Germanic type of people – the more autocratic people that think people will do something just because they tell them to. The people that would just expect that if I told them to do it, they would do it, are more like the German ‘Luftwaffe’.

— English manager, England

A Danish leader offered his own perspective on the situation, yet failed to fully appreciate the critique raised by the employee, thereby escalating a conflict that hindered effective collaboration between the parties involved:

”” The English hold a kaleidoscope centering a lot on Germans. If they meet anything that reminds them of Germans, like if you do not catch the English irony fast enough... if you do not laugh at things. Sometimes Danes get to the point where we say ”Enough of all the bollocks; now we need to take a decision. That can be perceived as [the behavior of] a German Dane.”

— Danish global leader, England

In China, too, we found indications of Danish managers adopting a more hierarchical position – but without the sensitive fatherly attention that the Confucian tradition dictates to Chinese leaders. Accordingly, the Danish global leaders did not listen carefully to what the local employees said. As one Chinese manager put it: ”My opinion is not important to the Danish managers and many times they don’t believe me. I give them my opinion two or three times, and the fourth time I will keep quiet”.

Changes in leadership style can occur in situations where Danish managers find that the Danish approach is not working, yet lack sufficient inter-cultural skills to switch between the local and Danish style of leadership. The tendency is to play it safe by adopting an autocratic, formal and hierarchical style of leadership, which is not preferred anywhere in the world.

We can conclude from all of this that, while it can often be an advantage to blend Danish and more global leadership approaches, assuming a straightforward autocratic leadership style as the default international leadership strategy, can be very damaging to the employee-leader relationship. Some Danish leaders overdo it because they lack the necessary agility to adapt naturally to their new environment. Often the root cause is that the Danish global leader has become stressed, due to the increased effort they have had to apply in blending different styles. This can create a vicious circle, where inappropriate leadership leads to stress, and stress leads to inappropriate leadership. What we can take away from this is that global leadership can be more stressful than domestic leadership.

We were interested in testing this level of stress, and the relative work pressure experienced between Danes and non-Danes. It becomes clear from the quantitative survey that Danes experience higher work pressure, potentially leading to a strategy of "taking the easy way out" – ie by adopting a directly contrasting leadership style, such as becoming more autocratic, rather than try to adapt with a more blended approach that requires more thought and effort. This may be partially explained by the finding from the survey that Danes tend to lose self-control when stressed, leading them to react inappropriately, by being too aggressive or too direct for example.

**TABLE 3**  
**Survey 2: Stress and experienced work pressure**

Dependent Variables	Danes Mean N = 256	Non-Danes Mean N = 233	Multi-variate effect	Uni-variate F-ratios
			3.574*	
Stress	3.7520	3.8393		2.943*
Work Pressure	4.3379	4.1102		5.991**

**TABLE 4**  
**Survey 1: Self-control**

Dependent Variables	Danes Mean N = 71	Non-Danes Mean N = 482	Multi-variate effect	Uni-variate F-ratios
			6.311**	
Self-control	2.573	2.671		4.522**

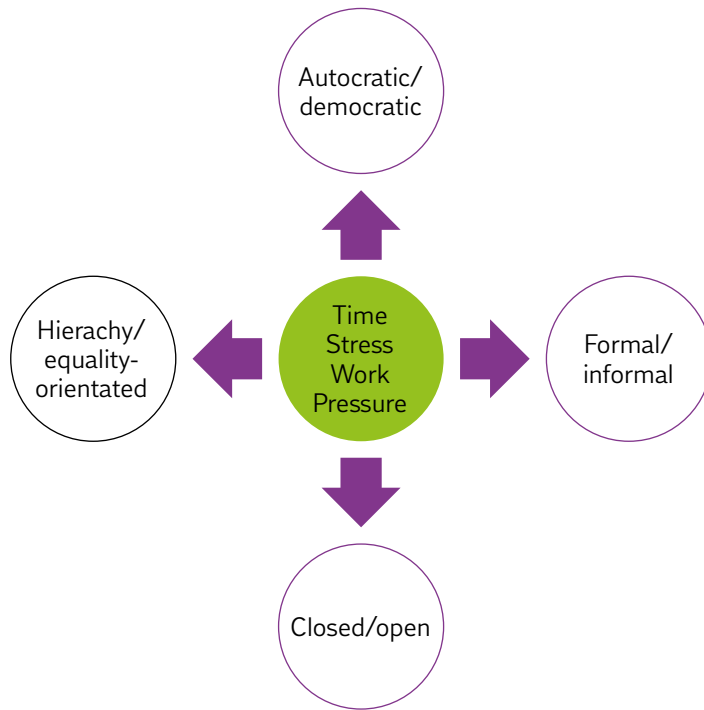
## SUMMARY

We can conclude that being a Danish leader in a global environment can be stressful and demanding because it requires a very conscious, active, agile and engaging type of leadership – particularly when you have to switch between different approaches according to the context.

This situation becomes particularly acute when employees are not motivated or well trained, as they are likely to be in Denmark. This can cause leaders to fall back on a relatively autocratic leadership style in an attempt to drive results. The downside of this tactic is the detrimental impact on relationship building if Danish leaders don't understand in more detail how the local leadership culture functions. Hierarchies do not necessarily imply one-way communication; to be effective they also require sensitivity from superiors to the unexpressed feelings and attitudes of subordinates (see Figure 5).



**FIGURE 5**  
**Time, stress and work pressure as central dimensions that the global leader has to pay particular attention when mixing his/hers leadership characteristics**



## FINAL REMARKS AND CONTACT INFORMATION

The purpose of this research project has been to identify the defining characteristics of Danish leadership style and their impact on different facets of global collaboration, considering both the positive and negative potential as well as some of the challenges and pitfalls that Danish leaders might encounter when assuming a global role.

To achieve this aim, we conducted 32 qualitative interviews in 15 international organizations. We also drew on quantitative data from two separate surveys in different Danish-owned international organizations. As a general rule, we have respected the anonymity of individuals and companies, disclosing only whether respondents are global leaders or employees in subsidiaries, and the national origin of the informant.

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## APPENDIX: STATISTICAL SCALES EMPLOYED

Time to adjustment was measured using four elements from Pinder and Schroeder (1987). For two of these elements, respondents used a five-point scale to record how quickly they became proficient/comfortable in their new job after relocating, for example: "Overall, how quickly do you feel you became proficient at your new job (starting from the day you arrived in the host location)?" The scale ranged from 1 = very quickly to 7 = very slowly (this is reversed compared to the original scale so that a high score indicates a relatively long time taken to achieve proficiency). For the other two elements, we asked directly how many months it took for the respondents to become effective at their new jobs (eg: "How many months did it take you to become effective at your new job (counted from the day you arrived in the host location)?"). Due to the use of different type of scale, standardized z scores were used to compute a mean score ( $\alpha = .72$ ).

Effectiveness was gauged by a three-part, seven-point scale by Tsui and Ohlott (1988). The response categories for this scale ranged from (1) = "Not at all" to (4) = "Neutral" to (7) "Entirely". One element was deleted to achieve an acceptable level of reliability. A sample question here might be: "Overall, to what extent do you feel that you are performing your job the way your boss would like it to be performed?" ( $\alpha = .88$ ). The other two were "To what extent do you think that you have met your boss's expectation in your roles and responsibilities" and "If your boss had his or her way, to what extent do you think that he or she would change the manner in which you are doing your job."

Work group creativity. We used Tierney et al.'s (1999) instrument for employee creativity. It consists of nine elements that probe eg. whether employees demonstrate originality in their work, take risks in producing new ideas, find new uses for existing methods, and solve problems that cause other people difficulties ( $\alpha = .86$ ).

Job stress was measured by a 6-part scale (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983), a sample option being: "There are lots of times when my job drives me up the wall." ( $\alpha = 0.78$ ). Other examples are: "I have felt uneasy and nervous as a result of my job", "My job gets to me more than it should", and "Sometimes when I think of my job I get a tight feeling in my chest."

Work pressure was measured by a 4-part scale (Parker & DeCotiis, 1983), eg. "Working here leaves little time for other activities." ( $\alpha = 0.79$ ), or "We have too much work and too little time to do it", and "Working makes it hard for team members to spend time with their family."

Self-control was assessed by a thirteen-part, four-point scale (Tangney, Baumeister, & Boone, 2004). The scale was anchored at 1 = "not at all" and 4 = "very much", eg: "People would say that I have iron self-discipline." (alpha = .85), "I say inappropriate things", "I wish I had more self-discipline", "Sometimes I can't stop myself from doing something, even if I know it is wrong", "I often act without thinking through all the alternatives."

Job adjustment was measured by a three-part, seven-point scale (Black and Stephens, 1989). The respondents indicated how well adjusted they were to their job on a scale ranging from 1="very unadjusted" to 7 = "completely adjusted", eg: "Supervisory responsibilities" (alpha = .86), "Performance standards and expectations", and "Specific job responsibilities."

Openness to value diversity was measured with a two-part instrument by Hobman, Bodia, & Gallois (2004), eg: "In my department, members make an extra effort to listen to people who hold different work values and/or motivations." ( $\alpha = .68$ ), and "In my department, members are keen to learn from people who have different work values and/or motivations".





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## DANISH LEADERSHIP STYLE IN A GLOBAL CONTEXT

This study was commissioned by the Global Leadership Academy, a joint research and development cooperation between DI – Dansk Industri, Copenhagen Business School and Industriens Fond.

The study was conducted by the International Management Team at the Department of Business Administration, Aarhus University.

### Highlights of the study:

Danish-style leadership – exercised in a global context – can be characterized as democratic and equality-oriented as well as informal, open, and trusting – i.e. very similar to its manifestation domestically. In general, Danes have strong international leadership skills when compared to other nationalities. Yet, the Danish-style of leadership can be extremely effective in some situations and outright destructive in others.

### Upsides of Danish-style leadership:

- An open and trusting approach to collaboration makes Danes well suited to be global leaders
- Openness and inquisitiveness helps them to adjust to new work contexts quickly
- Attitudes like open-minded, trusting and including facilitate creativity and innovation
- Danes' democratic and inclusive approach often motivates foreign employees
- Danish leaders are known for establishing a good "work-life" balance, also to the benefit of foreign employees.

### Downsides of Danish-style leadership:

- Not all foreign staff are content with the Danish way of leading
- Implicit processes and the lack of formal routines can cause confusion and irritation among foreign workers
- Danish directness can be experienced as patronizing
- The democratic approach can lead to inefficient decision-making and lack of conflict management
- Danes have a tendency to get stressed, i.e. appear ridged and dictatorial, when the democratic and including leadership style does not work as intended.

More information about the Global Leadership Academy can be found on [di.dk/globalleadershipacademy](https://di.dk/globalleadershipacademy)

