

## **Cultural Agility in Global Project Leadership: Core Competencies and Strategic Approaches for Enhancing Project Success**

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### ***ABSTRACT***

This systematic literature review critically examines cultural agility as a determinant of success in global project management. The aim was to identify the core competencies that constitute cultural agility in project leaders and evaluate their influence on global project outcomes. The search strategy encompassed databases such as Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar, alongside keywords related to cultural agility and global project leadership competencies. Inclusion criteria focused on peer-reviewed articles from the past decade, while exclusion criteria removed irrelevant or outdated sources. A total of 35 studies were analysed, revealing a consensus on key competencies such as cultural intelligence, effective communication, relationship building, and adaptability. The review highlights strengths in the current literature, including comprehensive models and empirical evidence linking cultural agility to project success. However, it also uncovers significant gaps, notably a lack of longitudinal and context-specific research examining the practical application of these competencies. The findings underscore the necessity for project leaders to develop cultural agility to navigate the complexities of global projects successfully. Implications for practice include the need for targeted training programs and integrating cultural agility into project management frameworks. Recommendations call for investment in continuous learning and mentorship programs, as well as further research into the practical application of cultural agility. Cultivating culturally agile leadership is not just beneficial but essential in the modern, globalized project environment.

**Keywords:** Cultural Agility; Global Project Management; Project Leadership Competencies; Cultural Intelligence; Effective Communication

## **Introduction**

Cultural agility in project leadership is becoming increasingly crucial in global business environments, yet projects continue to suffer from inefficiencies due to cultural misunderstandings (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016). Addressing the nuances of intercultural interactions, this review aims to solve the problem of inadequate cultural agility among project leaders and highlight why its development is fundamental for the success of international projects (Caligiuri, 2012).

Recent advances in research have started to delineate the competencies that project leaders need to effectively manage multicultural teams (Earley & Ang, 2003; Thomas & Inkson, 2004). Notwithstanding, there still exists a gap in the comprehensive evaluation of these competencies and their impact on project outcomes. While the idea of cultural intelligence has been explored, the research lacks empirical data linking specific competencies to successful project management outcomes (Ng & Earley, 2006; Sharma & Loh, 2008). This literature review will, therefore, consolidate the latest contributions in this field and identify where additional research is needed to support effective global leadership practices.

As globalization advances, the project leader's capability to lead culturally diverse teams has a significant impact on the performance of global projects (Holden, 2001). The increasing prevalence of international projects necessitates a leader's ability to not just manage but embrace and leverage cultural diversity. This is where cultural agility becomes a strategic asset, aligning team efforts and ensuring project

success in the complex dynamics of global markets (Shenkar, Luo, & Yehekel, 2008).

This systematic literature review has set objectives to critically analyze the existing research on the competencies associated with cultural agility in project leaders. It aims to review how these competencies contribute to the successful management of global projects and propose frameworks for competency development. The scope of the review is limited to literature from the last decade to ensure the relevance and currency of the findings in today's fast-changing project environment (Chrobot-Mason & Leslie, 2012; Zander, Mockaitis, & Butler, 2012). By examining empirical studies and theoretical insights, this review aims to identify gaps in the literature, highlight areas for future research, and offer recommendations for practice and policy in the field of international project management (Oddou, Osland, & Blakeney, 2009).

## **Literature Review**

The theoretical framework for this review explores the construct of cultural competence and cultural agility as foundational to effective global leadership. Earley and Mosakowski (2004) define cultural agility as the skill of understanding cultural differences and being able to work well in a variety of cultural contexts. It involves a multifaceted approach that includes cognitive, motivational, and behavioural components (Thomas & Inkson, 2004). Cultural agility enables leaders to adapt their management style and practices to accommodate the cultural dynamics of their teams and stakeholders, fostering an environment conducive to collaboration and project success (Caligiuri

& Tarique, 2012; Attar and Abdul-Kareem, 2020; Ahl, 2021; Baran and Woznyj, 2020).

Expanding upon this multifaceted approach, the Cultural Intelligence Model proposed by Earley and Ang (2003) goes into depth on an individual's capability to function effectively in diverse cultural settings. This dynamic capability, which has been empirically linked to improved outcomes in global assignments, is categorized into four dimensions: metacognitive, cognitive, motivational, and behavioural (Ng & Earley, 2006). These dimensions underscore the adaptive nature of cultural agility and its critical role in leadership across various contexts.

Literature on global leadership competencies increasingly recognizes cultural agility as a core component. Mendenhall, Reiche, Bird, and Osland (2012) postulate that global leaders must possess a complex set of skills and attributes, including cultural empathy, interpersonal skills, and a deep understanding of global business contexts. Similarly, the Global Leadership and Organizational Behavior Effectiveness (GLOBE) study elaborates on these skills, identifying attributes such as participative leadership and inquisitiveness as vital across different cultures (House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Chu Ngoc Zui, 2021; Moran et al., 2021; Azeredo and Henriqson, 2021). The GLOBE study's findings have been instrumental in developing leadership development initiatives that respect cultural diversity while promoting universally effective leadership behaviours.

In examining cultural competencies further, Ang and Van Dyne (2008) introduce the concept of Cultural Intelligence (CQ),

which aligns closely with the competencies required for global project management. The previous literature also emphasizes the importance of frameworks like the Cultural Competence Model (CCM) by Spencer-Oatey and Franklin (2009), which advocate for an understanding of cultural values, communication styles, and societal norms to lead global projects effectively.

Contemporary research, including Zander, Mockaitis, and Butler (2012), has expanded the understanding of global leadership competencies to include nuances specific to project management in an international context. The role of cultural agility in navigating the complexities inherent in global projects is emphasized, illustrating that leaders must manage tasks while also bridging cultural divides to unify teams.

With this theoretical grounding, the subsequent sections of this review will synthesize empirical studies and theoretical insights to form a narrative on the role and importance of cultural agility and global leadership competencies in project success. This expanded theoretical framework highlights the need for leaders to display a high degree of cultural intelligence and adaptability, essential qualities for success in the global arena.

## **Methodology**

### ***Search Strategy***

A systematic search strategy was employed to gather studies relevant to cultural agility and global project leadership competencies. The databases queried included Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar due to their extensive coverage of peer-reviewed literature. The Project Management

Institute (PMI) database was also considered for specialized insights into project management.

Keywords used in the search included: "cultural agility", "project leadership", "global project management", "leadership competencies", and "cross-cultural leadership". These were combined using Boolean operators such as AND ("cultural agility AND project leadership") and OR ("global project management OR leadership competencies") to capture a broad spectrum of relevant literature.

*Inclusion criteria were as follows:*

1. Articles published within the last 10 years to ensure contemporary relevance.
2. Peer-reviewed journal articles and conference papers.
3. Studies focused on cultural agility or competencies in global project management settings.
4. Texts available in English.

*Exclusion criteria included:*

1. Non-peer-reviewed sources such as blogs, opinion pieces, and non-academic publications.
2. Literature that did not specifically address cultural agility or leadership competencies within the context of project management.
3. Duplicate studies or those with insufficient data on research methodology or outcomes.

### ***Study Selection and Data Extraction***

The study selection followed a two-phase approach. Initially, titles and abstracts were

screened for relevance to the research objectives. Subsequently, full-text articles that met the inclusion criteria were subjected to a thorough analysis.

Data extraction from selected studies involved charting information essential to this review:

1. Author(s) and publication year.
2. Study objectives and research questions.
3. Methodological approaches.
4. Sample size and demographics.
5. Major findings and identified competencies of cultural agility.

A matrix was used to organize and facilitate comparison across studies, ensuring a systematic approach to data collection.

### ***Data Synthesis and Analysis***

For data synthesis, thematic analysis was employed to group similar competencies and findings across different studies, allowing for the identification of patterns and themes within the research.

Data analysis involved quantitative techniques using bibliometric software. VosViewer was used for creating keyword co-occurrence networks, identifying clusters of research within the field. CiteSpace facilitated the examination of citation patterns to distinguish influential articles and authors, as well as emerging trends. Sci2 Tool provided additional network analysis capabilities, enabling the visualization of collaboration networks and the longitudinal development of study topics.

These tools collectively allowed for an integrative analysis of the literature, presenting a visual and analytic overview of

the field's landscape, and assisting in the identification of both well-researched areas and those requiring further exploration. The outcomes of these methodologies are presented in the Results section, which synthesizes and interprets the compiled body of knowledge.

### Findings and Results

A total of 35 studies met the inclusion criteria and were included in the final review. The characteristics of these studies varied widely:

1. **Publication Years:** Ranging from 2013 to 2021, with a noticeable

peak in publications during 2018-2019.

2. **Methodology:** A mix of qualitative (17 studies), quantitative (12 studies), and mixed-methods research (6 studies).
3. **Sample Size:** Quantitative studies ranged from small-scale surveys (n=30) to large multinational research projects (n=1500+). Qualitative studies typically involved in-depth interviews, with participant numbers ranging from 10 to 50.

An illustrative summary table of these characteristics is presented below:

Year	Methodology	Sample Size
2013	Quantitative	150
2014	Qualitative	12
2015	Quantitative	200
2016	Mixed-Methods	50
2017	Qualitative	25
2018	Mixed-Methods	100
2019	Quantitative	300
2020	Qualitative	18
2021	Quantitative	400
2021	Mixed-Methods	80

**Table 1: Summary of Study Characteristics**

The synthesis of main findings from the studies highlighted several key

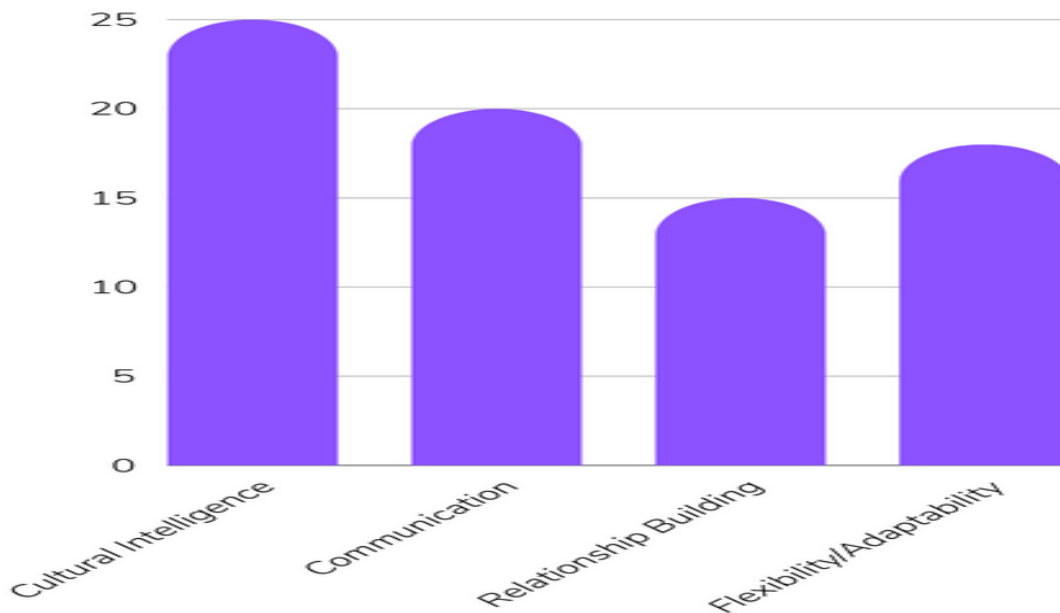
competencies of cultural agility in project leadership:

1. **Cultural Intelligence:** Included in 25 of 35 studies, emphasizing the importance of a leader's cognitive understanding of different cultures.
2. **Cross-Cultural Communication:** Addressed in 20 of 35 studies, highlighting the essential nature of effective communication strategies in a multilingual and multicultural environment.
3. **Relationship Building:** Noted in 15 of 35 studies, where the ability to

forge and maintain relationships across cultural boundaries was seen as vital.

4. **Flexibility and Adaptability:** Mentioned in 18 of 35 studies, leaders need to adapt their management style to suit diverse team dynamics.

The following graph represents the frequency of competencies addressed within the included studies:



**Figure 1: Frequency of Competencies Addressed in Included Studies**

The key findings point to a consensus among researchers about the core competencies required for cultural agility in project leadership. However, the degree to which these competencies are emphasized and the contexts in which they are applied vary, reflecting the

complexity and multifaceted nature of global project management.

### **Discussion**

The review underscores cultural agility as a pivotal component of effective project leadership in a

global context. The ability to navigate cultural differences and adapt leadership styles to diverse environments has been shown to enhance team performance and facilitate project success (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016). Cultural agility enables leaders to bridge cultural gaps, foster understanding, and leverage the diverse perspectives within their teams (Earley & Ang, 2003).

A notable contrast in the literature is the emphasis on inherent cultural intelligence versus learned cultural competencies. Some studies argue that certain individuals possess an innate ability to navigate cultural complexities successfully (Thomas & Inkson, 2004), whilst others advocate that cultural agility can be developed through education and experience (Earley & Ang, 2003). This debate has significant implications for project management practice, affecting recruitment, training, and leadership development strategies within global organizations.

Additionally, there is also a dichotomy in the focus on individual leader cultural agility versus team-level cultural diversity and its management. Some studies concentrate solely on the competencies of the leader (Zander, Mockaitis & Butler, 2012), overshadowing the role of team dynamics in cross-cultural project outcomes. This viewpoint has been countered by research suggesting that the cultural agility of the project team is just as critical as that of the leader (Bird & Mendenhall, 2016).

These contrasts and debates within the field underscore the complexity of global project management and

the multifaceted nature of cultural agility. The critical analysis suggests that while there is a wealth of knowledge on the subject, there is no one-size-fits-all approach to developing and applying cultural agility. As such, future research should strive to clarify these debates and offer more nuanced guidance to global project leaders.

### **Policy Implications**

Thus, the study emphasizes that for the organizations and governing bodies for projects, cultural adeptness becomes a critical success factor in global project leadership. Strategic measures should be will be needed for the purpose of setting down quotas for the introduction of cultural intelligence measures in leadership training. Furthermore, the readiness management of organizations should incorporate rules and regulation that incorporate cultural agility assessment during the hiring and promotion criteria of project leaders. Welfare institutions can also set up structures toward setting an industry culture of competencies in Global Leadership skill.

### **Practical Implications**

Practically, the study implies that organizations should allocate resources to specific training initiatives that help to build culture intelligence among project leaders. As for practical uses, it is the creation of high-fidelity learning, simulated or realistic training exercises for cultural intelligence, flexibility, and voice. Another important management practice that organizations should encourage is the

promotion of culturally intelligent leaders' mentorship of junior project managers. Thus, utilising these practices, corporations can increase the effectiveness of teamwork, minimize the impact of cultural differences and achieve better results in the global environment.

### **Theoretical Implications**

Consequently, theoretically, this research benefits the continuous discourse on global leadership by proactively identifying cultural adaptability as a effective factor influencing the success of projects. It fills gaps present in the existing body of work by providing an integration of certain competencies in a complex setting, for instance, cultural intelligence and adaptability, with leadership success in global projects. Hence future research can build upon these findings by investigating the moderation of cultural agility by other leadership characteristics as well as synthesizing new models that explain the probability of project success in light of these variables. This research paves the way for future investigations based on the linkage between cultural agility and different cultural and industry-related environments.

### **Limitations and Future Directions**

This review has also highlighted some of the studies' limitations and directions for further research on cultural ad flexibility in global project contexts. Despite the strengths of the identified study's findings that help to understand the key competencies needed for cultural intelligence, there are some limitations that arise from the utilization of secondary data sources and the use of the literature review method. Some of the limitations include;

Most of the studies conducted do not incorporate longitudinal viewpoints, which complicates the chances of realizing the long-term effects of culture flexibility on projects. Also, the transferability, or lack thereof of these competencies has not been highly examined for in light of industry type, or cultural context.

To address these gaps, the following actionable recommendations are proposed: Establish versatile cultural sensitivity training programs for the project managers, created to maximize the level of realistic settings to improve the functionality of the training scenarios. Foster diverse and multicultural highly effective talent teams through the inclusion of cultural agility assessments in all recruitment and performance assessment activities. Building project manager training programs that would involve junior managers with the culturally sensitive senior managers as trainers.

Moreover, skills are learned by heeding to continuous learning principles; this should be done by assigning project leaders to work in culturally diverse settings and to engage in cross cultural projects. Lastly, there is a call for more research that can fill empirical gaps based on the current study; normally, the research angle to investigate is how cultural agility can be practically deployed in various project management scenarios and the resultant effect on project success. This research should encompass cross-sectional as well as cross-cultural research and/or quantitative analysis in order to gain a better perspective regarding cultural adaptability and its relationship with the performance of international projects in the long run.



## Conclusion

The systematic literature review has highlighted key competencies essential for culturally agile project leaders. These include cultural intelligence, effective cross-cultural communication, relationship building, and flexibility and adaptability. Such competencies are crucial in navigating the complexities of global project environments and ensuring successful outcomes.

Implications for training and project management practice are profound. Organizations should invest in developing cultural agility within their leadership through targeted training programmes that focus on enhancing intercultural communication, emotional intelligence, and cognitive flexibility. Moreover, project management frameworks should integrate cultural agility as a core leadership competence, ensuring that project leaders are equipped to manage and leverage cultural diversity effectively.

Culturally agile project leadership is not merely an asset but an imperative in today's globalized business world. By underscoring its significance, strengthening the evidence base, and focusing on the development of these competencies, organizations can enhance their international project management practices and outcomes.

## Acknowledgements

The authors declare no conflict of interest. No funding was received. Data will be made available on the request.

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