



RESEARCH BRIEF

Multicultural managers may have an edge in global competition

A new study finds that managers with multicultural backgrounds can improve organizational performance, especially when competition crosses national and cultural boundaries. The advantage, however, depends on context. What helps a leader navigate a highly global environment may matter less in a more regionally homogeneous one.

Why it matters

Global organizations need leaders who can interpret unfamiliar situations, connect across cultural divides, and adapt quickly as conditions change. Yet firms often treat international experience or multicultural identity as universally desirable rather than asking where those qualities will create the most value.

This research suggests that multicultural background is a context-dependent leadership resource. Managers exposed to multiple cultures may develop broader cognitive and behavioral repertoires, but the performance payoff is strongest when the role itself requires navigating substantial cultural variety and change.

How we know

The researchers replicated and extended a 2019 study using international soccer as a setting in which leadership, competition and performance are clearly observable. One analysis covered 810 men's national team appearances in major global and regional tournaments from 1992 to 2022, a second examined 296 women's national team appearances from 1991 to 2023.

Performance was measured by wins per game. Managers were classified as multicultural if they had migrant parents, came from a nationally mixed family, or had lived at least five years outside their country of origin. The statistical models accounted for manager characteristics, country conditions, player skill, football tradition, home-field advantage, country, and year.

Now what?

- ▶ Map leadership roles by their degree of cultural variety, volatility, and international stakeholder exposure.
- ▶ Build escalation plans that place culturally versatile leaders in assignments where those capabilities are consequential.
- ▶ Pair multicultural leaders with executives who offer deep local knowledge, creating leadership teams that combine global adaptability with contextual expertise.
- ▶ Track whether leader-context fit predicts operating outcomes across regions, business units, and international assignments.

What researchers found

- ▶ In the men's sample, teams led by multicultural managers performed better on average, and their advantage became stronger in global competitions.
- ▶ In women's World Cups, multicultural managers were associated with better performance.
- ▶ In women's regional tournaments, teams with monocultural managers performed better, reinforcing the importance of alignment between a leader's background and the competitive setting.
- ▶ Overall, the women's sample showed the same general pattern as the men's sample, but the evidence was not strong enough to support a firm conclusion.

What this means

- ▶ **For executives:** Match leaders to the cultural complexity of the assignment rather than assuming one leadership profile is best everywhere.
- ▶ **For HR leaders:** Look beyond nationality and assess cultural adaptability, communication competence, and the ability to integrate competing perspectives.
- ▶ **For boards:** Treat multicultural leadership experience as potentially strategic when selecting executives for globally exposed businesses, transformations and cross-border roles.

LINK TO THE STUDY

