

# The truth about cross-cultural B2B relationships

PART 6: ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL



# Introduction

## What people admire in famous business icons often differs from the values they prioritize in everyday business interactions.

In our survey of 1,701 businesspeople worldwide, we found that the admired heroes of the business world are often perceived to be innovative creators and trend-setting leaders. However, when reflecting on their own leadership practices, many business leaders say they prioritize trust, honesty, and care for others.

This difference between admired leadership qualities and the values prioritized in day-to-day business highlights the balance leaders must navigate — between acting as figureheads for their organizations and engaging meaningfully with colleagues, suppliers, and clients in everyday interactions.

This paper also explores how women in business leadership are perceived through stereotypes and how their actual behaviors — as shown in this report's data — challenge those assumptions. Long-standing stereotypes associating women in business with "care and empathy" may influence perceptions of their leadership potential, contributing to their underrepresentation in senior roles.



# **Key insights for this series include:**

#### Part 1 - Emotional influence in B2B

Understanding that emotion is key to B2B decisions should frame the understanding of other steps in the business journey. It's also important to anticipate the right emotions at the right time. Not only are business leaders two times more emotionally connected to B2B brands than FMCG brands, but these emotions range from a high positive at the start of a new B2B business journey and during long-term delivery to strong negativity when business relationships hit moments of friction.

#### Part 2 - Business culture fluency reduces friction

Business cultural fluency goes beyond understanding local customs. By understanding business behaviors through a lens of business cultural segments, business leads can anticipate potential differences between their own business culture and their client or supplier. Remapping the world by business culture instead of geographic criteria offers insights that help to avoid friction and increase cultural business fluency.

#### Part 3 - Contracts or people?

For some businesspeople, the contract is an opportunity to lock a scope; for others, it's the basis for a flexible relationship. Finding out your own team's view and your client's or supplier's cultural perspective on contracts helps provide clearer approaches to using them.

#### Part 4 - Win-win is better than win-lose

When striking new B2B deals, business leaders sometimes miss the early opportunity to discuss what happens if things go wrong. People in business say they prefer a win-win approach to resolving disputes, so building a win-win dispute resolution into the contract increases the chances of achieving an outcome that acts in the best interests of both parties. Rights-based and power-based approaches are also seen as options when needed.

## Part 5 - Siloed departments limit business success

Long business journeys mean multiple stakeholders. Certain stages of the B2B journey are more emotionally engaging than others for business leaders, so they are often happy to delegate stages they are less interested in or less skilled in. Departments that are traditionally assigned a single role can be integrated deeper into the full B2B journey to bring their skills to other stages of the process.

#### Part 6 - One size does not fit all

Previous research has examined the idea that "one size doesn't fit all" by exploring departmental differences and behavioral preferences.

In this final report, we focus on the gap between the traits that define admired business leaders and those that drive everyday professional interactions.

While admired leaders are frequently associated with creativity and innovation, trust, honesty, and care are the most valued qualities in daily business relationships. This distinction underscores the importance of balancing visionary thinking with consistent, relationship-oriented practices.

Although men and women tend to demonstrate similar behaviors in business, gender stereotypes continue to shape perceptions of leadership. To address this, organizations are encouraged to recognize leadership potential based on skills, experience, and strategic thinking rather than perceived gender traits.

Findings in this report also indicate that women often evaluate a broader range of suppliers, combining creative openness with a focus on realistic business objectives.

# The admired & trusted: Rethinking leadership in global business

This global study of B2B culture and relationships, conducted by ICC, Jus Connect, and McCann Truth Central, examined the business journey from identifying opportunities to delivering contracts and eventually managing and resolving friction.

Drawing on survey responses from 1,701 business leaders, the research explored the contrast between the qualities people admire in prominent business figures and the values they prioritize in their everyday professional interactions.

## From this analysis, two distinct themes emerged:

CHARACTERISTICS	ADMIRED BUSINESS HEROES	PRIORITIES IN DAILY BUSINESS
Creativity & Innovation	24%	13%
Leadership & Success	15%	8%
Advice & Learning	10%	12%
Trust & Honesty	5%	17%
Care & Empathy	8%	13%
Connection & Relationships	10%	8%
Motivation & Strength	9%	8%
Vision & Transformation	6%	5%
Care & Empathy	4%	7%
Connection & Relationships	5%	5%
Motivation & Strength	2%	2%
Vision & Transformation	2%	2%

Share of characteristics & values, Calculated as a share of 100% Based on natural language analysis of open-text questions. Base: 1,701

## How we reached this conclusion

As part of the survey, participants were asked two open-text questions.

First, they were asked:

"Who do you admire in business? Who is your business hero, and why?"

This was followed by:

"If you were sharing a piece of advice on how to do business, what would it be?"

The research team at McCann Truth Central analyzed the responses using an AI-driven natural language model. This model was built on multiple frameworks from human values and psychology, including Jungian Archetypes, Myers-Briggs personality types, Schwartz Universal Human Values, and additional sources such as Chinese personality frameworks.

Thousands of words from the responses were coded and grouped into 12 key characteristic categories.

# Innovation is central to admired business leadership

66 My business hero is a creative person who is dedicated to their work, who has ethics, and an aptitude for innovation. 99

- Female business leader, Saudi Arabia

## The most prominent words used to describe admired business leaders were:



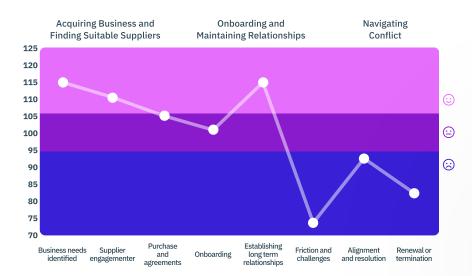
"Creative & Innovative" leaders who have built something inspiring — whether a business, a brand, or a lasting contribution — are seen as individuals with original "ideas," an "entrepreneurial spirit," and a touch of "genius."

66 They made a vision of the future, a commercial genius, they're an example.

- Male business leader, France

This admiration for innovation and the pursuit of new ideas connects with one of the core insights from this series of white papers.

When asked to rate different stages of doing business, participants identified the moment of discovering an idea or opportunity as one of the most exciting and emotionally engaging stages of the B2B rollercoaster.



Index of emotional engagement by business leaders in each stage of the B2B journey. 100 = average emotional engagement. Base: 1,701

The act of transforming a thought into reality through creativity is not only the most admired trait in a business leader but also one of the emotional high points in the B2B experience. The second major peak occurs during long-term delivery and the cultivation of enduring business relationships.

# Successful innovation needs leadership

**66** The business hero I admire the most possesses very high leadership thinking, professional and technical skills, and constantly pursues innovation. 99

- Male business leader. United States

Innovation and new ideas alone are not enough to define admired leadership. Business leaders are also valued for having the leadership skills and technical expertise to guide ideas through to completion, a characteristic often associated with "Leadership & Success."

Prominent words linked to this characteristic include:



**66** The CEO of my company is my work hero. I admire the ideas he brings to the company. I admire his leadership qualities and team spirit. 99

- Male business leader, Saudi Arabia

Beyond innovation and leadership, other admired qualities include wisdom and the ability to provide mentorship.

Words commonly used in this context were:



Participants also valued leaders who bring a human touch and foster connection with others, using words such as:



While creativity, leadership, and mentorship are highly admired, personal business values often focus more on building long-term relationships based on trust and honesty.

Only 5% of the language used to describe admired business heroes focused on "Trust & Honesty," yet this emerged as the most important value when participants shared advice on how to do business. In this context, 17% of all language shared focused on trust and honesty — the highest proportion across all topics.

66 Integrity is important in doing business to thrive and establish trust with clients. This makes business run smoothly and helps maintain relationships. 99

- Female business leader, United Kingdom

Words most often associated with this theme were:



This emphasis on trust and honesty was particularly strong in the United Kingdom (23 percent), India (20 percent), and France (18 percent).

## Most people trust business partners

Although this global research was initially prompted by an interest in what happens when business deals go wrong, the findings show that most businesspeople express a high level of trust toward their partners.

When asked about their general attitudes toward customers and suppliers:

65% said "Generally, I'm very trusting of promises from customers and suppliers."

35% said "Generally, I'm skeptical of promises from customers and suppliers."

## Care & empathy matter more in dayto-day business relationships than in admired business heroes

When businesspeople described the characteristics of admired business heroes, the theme of "Care & Empathy" appeared far less frequently representing just 8% of all language used.

In contrast, "Care & Empathy" emerged as the second most important value when participants described their daily business behaviors.

To bring this theme to life, business leaders used words such as:



66 Always put people first in business. It is easy to get caught up in the number and the bottom line. Treat people with fairness, respect, and empathy.

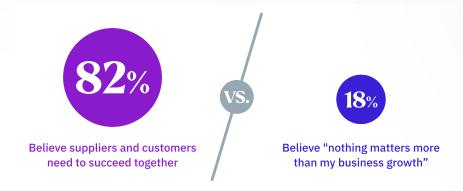
- Female business leader, Nigeria

The importance of "Care & Empathy" ranked among the top two or three values across nearly all countries surveyed. In Mexico, it was the highest priority, with 19 percent of language focused on this theme, making it the country's number one business value.

66 Think about other people's problems as closely as possible, because this helps build great business relationships. 99

- Male business leader, India

One of the survey's key unifying statistics highlighted these dual priorities—truth and "Care & Empathy." Both values are strongly linked to the second emotional high point of the B2B rollercoaster: establishing longterm relationships. In another significant finding, over 80% of participants said they prioritize mutual success over individual growth.



**Base:** Global Businees Leaders (n=1701)

While "Trust & Honesty" was highly valued in Saudi Arabia, a smaller proportion of responses emphasized "Care & Empathy" (6%). Instead. respondents in Saudi Arabia placed greater emphasis on "Motivation & **Strength"** (15%).

## Words commonly associated with this theme included:



This emphasis on "Motivation & Strength" was also reflected in responses from the United States, Nigeria, and China, where 10% of language focused on this theme.

**66** Have patience, perseverance, cooperation, and work on innovation. 99

- Female business leader, Saudi Arabia

## Men & women admire the same qualities & prioritize the same behaviors

When asked to describe a business hero they admire, both men and women highlighted similar characteristics.

Individuals associated with "Creativity & Innovation" were the most admired heroes, followed by those linked to "Leadership & Success," which ranked as the second priority for both groups.

#### Characteristics admired in business heroes:

CHARACTERISTICS	MEN DESCRIBING BUSINESS HEROES	WOMEN DESCRIBING BUSINESS HEROES
Creativity & Innovation	25%	25%
Leadership & Success	15%	16%
Advice & Learning	9%	12%
Connection & Relationships	10%	9%
Motivation & Strength	7%	10%
Care & Service	9%	7%
Vision & Transformation	6%	7%
Trust & Honesty	6%	4%
Goals & Ambition	4%	4%
Inclusion & Respect	4%	2%
Energy & Fun	3%	2%
Challenge & Disruption	2%	2%

When asked about their own priorities or to share advice on how to be successful in day-to-day business, men and women expressed similar values.

## **Characteristics prioritized in daily business advice:**

CHARACTERISTICS	MEN GIVING BUSINESS ADVICE	WOMEN GIVING BUSINESS ADVICE
Trust & Honesty	17%	17%
Creativity & Innovation	14%	13%
Care & Service	13%	14%
Advice & Learning	12%	12%
Motivation & Strength	7%	9%
Connection & Relationships	7%	8%

Leadership & Success	8%	7%
Inclusion & Respect	7%	6%
Vision & Transformation	5%	6%
Goals & Ambition	5%	4%
Energy & Fun	2%	2%
Challenge & Disruption	2%	1%

While the values and characteristics admired in business heroes and prioritized in daily behaviors show strong similarities between genders, a key difference appears when examining the specific names of admired business heroes.

When reviewing the most frequently mentioned business leaders in public perception, the majority of named figures were men. This reflects ongoing visibility gaps in leadership representation and highlights the continued underrepresentation of women in publicly admired leadership roles.

## **Most frequently named business** heroes were men

Previous research has long highlighted the gap between men and women in senior leadership roles. In 2015, The New York Times reported that fewer women led large companies than men named "John." More recently, Bloomberg reported in 2023 that 41 female CEOs of S&P 500 companies finally outnumbered men named "John," "Jon," or "James." However, women still represent fewer than 10 percent of all CEOs among these top-ranked companies.

For this study, we asked participants to name a business hero and explain why. Our primary interest was in understanding what actions or qualities made these individuals stand out as leaders. In analyzing the responses, a key finding emerged: among the top 50 businesspeople named, only

four were women.

The top 10 includes many well-known global business leaders. While opinions about Elon Musk may vary, he was the most frequently mentioned figure and was admired for his creativity and innovation.

NAME	MENTIONS
Elon Musk	217
Bill Gates	117
"My CEO/My Boss"	76
Ratan Tata	70
Aliko Dangote	68
Jack Ma	58
Steve Jobs	56
Jeff Bezos	51
Warren Buffett	30
Mukesh Ambani	28

Following Elon Musk were other figures from the fields of technology, investment, manufacturing, and industry. Mentions also included participants' own CEO or direct manager.

Among the top-named business leaders, four were women: fashion designer Vera Wang (3 mentions); The Body Shop founder Anita Roddick (2 mentions); former PepsiCo CEO Indra Nooyi (2 mentions); and Sheryl Sandberg (2 mentions), former COO of Meta Platforms and founder of LeanIn.Org.

Other women named, each mentioned once, included Brazilian venture capitalist Camila Farani (also a former judge on the Brazilian version of Shark Tank) and Dong Mingzhu, chair of the Chinese home technology company Gree Electric.

Among the women mentioned, the language used to describe their leadership qualities often reflected different themes compared to the language used to describe male business leaders.

Of all the language used to describe female leaders, 32% aligned with one of the three "supportive" archetypes — compared to 20% of language used to describe male leaders.

This included greater use of "Motivation & Strength" language when describing women in business, often emphasizing themes of perseverance and overcoming challenges.

#### Common terms included:



Descriptions of female leaders also more frequently featured language from the "Inclusion & Respect" and "Care & Service" categories, with words such as:

"People"

"Giving"

"Help"

"Think of Others"

By contrast, women in business were less frequently described using language from the three "visionary" archetypes, which are associated with creativity, innovation, transformation, and exploration. While 35% of the language describing male leaders fell into this category, only 26% of the language describing women did.

These patterns suggest a perception gap in how leadership is recognized. "Care & Empathy" are widely valued in daily business relationships, yet "Creativity & Innovation" are more commonly celebrated in admired leadership figures. This gap may contribute to the continued underrepresentation of women in senior leadership roles despite their demonstrating similar business behaviors.

## Persistent stereotypes vs. Business reality

Our review of media coverage and previous academic research on women in business leadership found that these sources often frame leadership differences in ways that reinforce gender stereotypes. While such articles may aim to celebrate perceived distinctions between female and male business leaders, this framing can unintentionally limit women's opportunities for advancement.

Admired characteristics associated with successful business leaders typically include creativity, innovation, leadership, and success. These are the qualities most people expect when envisioning an ideal leader.

In contrast, stereotypes about women in leadership often emphasize

traits such as care and empathy. However, these attributes appeared in only 8% of the language used to describe business leaders in this study. Such stereotypes tend to reflect assumptions about leadership style rather than actual behaviors or capabilities.

The research presented in this report focuses on the day-to-day realities of doing business and provides evidence that men and women demonstrate largely similar behaviors when managing deals and business relationships.

This study challenges gender-based assumptions in business leadership by highlighting how leaders operate in practice rather than how they are often portrayed through stereotypes.

## Media & culture reinforce stereotypes

A recurring narrative across a wide range of published sources is that women in business are more nurturing, collaborative, and emotionally intelligent than men. While these perspectives highlight valuable leadership qualities, they also risk reinforcing limiting stereotypes about women in business.

A review of earlier literature often assumes that female business leadership is fundamentally different from male leadership. For example, an oft-quoted study by the Pew Research Center found that women leaders were seen as more compassionate, empathetic, and better at resolving conflict than men. The research asked members of the American public about perceived differences between male and female leaders. In the study, 59% of respondents said female business leaders "do a better job at being compassionate and empathetic," while only 4% said the same about male leaders.

Importantly, Pew's research measured public attitudes toward women in business, not their actual behaviors. Despite this, other academic work continues to draw strong conclusions. For instance, an article in the journal Small Business Economics stated: "Women, more than men, have been associated with being nurturing, collaborative, cooperative, affectionate, and concerned for others."

While these attitudes toward women in business have existed for decades, they can now be challenged based on this new research, which shows that gender business behavior differences are more a perception than a reality.

This prompts the question of whether this perception and stereotype help or hinder the entry of more women into prominent and aspirational business leadership positions.

## No gender difference in business behaviors

In this research study, business leaders were asked to share their preferences across 161 different "micro-behaviors," attitudes, and practices related to doing business with other companies or working with colleagues.

Findings show that of these behaviors and attitudes were the same between men & women

The data indicates that gender does not influence a more emotional or collaborative approach to business. Nor does it shape a more forgiving or empathetic response when things go wrong. While these may be common

assumptions people make about women in business, they do not reflect the reality of actual behaviors.

When asked about onboarding new business suppliers, men and women had similar views about balancing collaboration with proven performance. Only 32% of women and 33% of men said they would prioritize emotional chemistry and the ability to collaborate. The majority said they would focus on a supplier's track record.

When asked how they would respond to a supplier failing or not meeting expectations, 42% of female business leaders said they usually do not give suppliers a second chance after a significant mistake, compared to 40% of men.

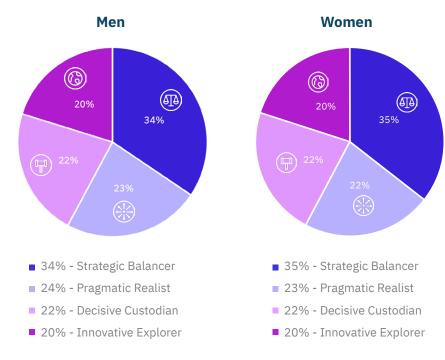
Women also reported being just as likely to address business problems directly. 58% said they would raise concerns even if doing so might offend someone, compared to 60% of men.

In addition, women were just as likely to approach mistakes tactfully and appropriately. Seventy-five percent said that if someone made a mistake in business, they would contact the person directly first, compared to 74% of men. Only around one in four of both men (26%) and women (25%) said they would typically escalate the issue, for example, by copying someone's manager in an email.

# Four B2B personality types are equally likely to be women or men

In paper two of this research series, we explored individual values and business culture by identifying four personality types commonly found in B2B environments. These personality types were based on an analysis of the micro-behaviors described earlier in this report.

The research segmented people into four groups, reflecting distinct business cultures or personality styles.



**Source:** Segmentation analysis of 50 micro-behaviors in B2B. Base: n=996 men. n=698 women. (n=7 identify as non-binary/other. Base too small to analyse)

Critically, women are just as likely as men to demonstrate any of these personality types in their day-to-day business activities.

Women were equally likely to be strategic, pragmatic, decisive, or innovative — challenging any assumption that certain business behaviors are more typical of one gender over another.

## Women seem more willing to take chances on others than on themselves

This research identified small but statistically significant differences between men and women in specific business practices.

Women's approach to onboarding new suppliers showed a broader and more exploratory strategy. 40% of women said they would seek quotes from six or more potential suppliers when considering a new project, compared to 30% of men. The rest preferred working with a smaller number of proposals.

With a wider list of potential suppliers, women also showed a greater preference for originality and creativity in proposals. 64% of women said they liked supplier proposals that demonstrated a willingness to be creative and take risks, compared to 58% of men — a statistically significant difference.

Despite an openness to creative or risk-taking suppliers, women were more likely to take a realistic approach when setting project or client-supplier goals. 80% of women said they set realistic and achievable business objectives, compared to 75% of men. By contrast, 25% of men said they liked to set stretching, even if unrealistic, goals, compared to 20% of women.

While this 5% difference may appear small, it is statistically significant given the large survey sample. Over time, a more cautious approach to goal-setting could limit how women are perceived in leadership — especially when bold, innovative leadership is often most admired in business.

This pattern reflects a dynamic frequently reported in studies about gender and ambition. A widely cited Hewlett Packard internal report found that "women only apply for a job when they believe they meet 100% of the qualifications listed, compared to men who apply when they meet 60%."

Forbes explored this topic further, referencing a "confidence gap" where "men are confident about their ability at 60%, but women don't feel confident until they've checked off each item on the list." Harvard Business Review also suggested that adherence to guidelines, rather than lack of ability, contributes to this gap.

If women are more willing to take a chance on creative suppliers but more cautious when setting their own project goals, this may offer an opportunity to address the gender leadership gap. Encouraging greater risk-taking and innovation among women in business could help close this perception gap.

It is important to note that these differences represent only a small proportion of day-to-day business behavior. 90% of the attitudes and behaviors measured in this research showed no difference between men and women.

Ultimately, the gap appears to be driven more by perception than behavior. Unconscious bias often leads to women leaders being associated with resilience and empathy, while creativity and success are more commonly celebrated qualities in admired leaders.

This conclusion is supported by other academic research. A 2022 meta-analysis published in the Journal of Intelligence reviewed several previous studies and found that gender gaps in leadership styles were "almost always near zero." This reinforces the finding that similarities between men and women in business behavior are far greater than the differences.

# **Conclusions**

Admired business leaders are celebrated for their creativity, innovation, and ability to build something transformative. However, the daily realities of business leadership prioritize trust, honesty, and care.

This research highlights a clear contrast between aspirational leadership

qualities and the practical values that sustain B2B relationships. Business leaders consistently emphasize reliability and human connection over visionary disruption.

Although men and women admire the same leadership traits, gender stereotypes persist. Women are more often described using supportive qualities, while men are more commonly associated with visionary archetypes. However, behavioral data challenges these assumptions. The research shows that men and women approach business decisions in similar ways, with only small differences in supplier selection and risk appetite.

Ultimately, while creative leadership is admired, trust and empathy are the foundation

# **Implications**

the need for leaders to balance innovation with trust and care in their daily practices.

behaviors are shaped more by context and experience than by

## **Recommended actions**

#### 1. Balance innovation with relationship-driven leadership

While visionary thinking and innovation are highly admired, long-term business success depends on trust, honesty, and care. Leaders should foster a culture that values bold ideas alongside strong, ethical relationships.

Embedding integrity and empathy into leadership development programs will help align admired qualities with daily leadership practices.

#### 2. Redefine leadership beyond gender stereotypes

The assumption that men and women lead differently is outdated. Business behaviors are largely similar across genders.

Companies should celebrate individual leadership styles without making gendered assumptions. Leadership potential should be recognized based on individual skills, experience, and strategic thinking.

Reviewing hiring and promotion criteria to remove implicit biases will help ensure talent is recognized equitably.

#### 3. Create systems that reward long-term integrity

Given that trust and honesty rank as the most important daily business values, companies should embed these principles into performance evaluations and partnership decisions, like:

- Implementing transparent reporting structures
- Creating ethical decision-making frameworks
- Conducting supplier trust audits

These practices can reinforce integrity as a core pillar of business success.

## **About the organizations**

#### **International Chamber of Commerce (ICC)**

The International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) is the institutional representative of more than 45 million companies in over 170 countries. ICC's core mission is to make business work for everyone, every day, everywhere. Through a unique mix of advocacy, solutions and standard setting, we promote international trade, responsible business conduct and a global approach to regulation, in addition to providing market-leading dispute resolution services. Our members include many of the world's leading companies, SMEs, business associations and local chambers of commerce.

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#### **Jus Connect**

Originating from the extensive Jus Mundi arbitration and international law database and empowered by Conflict Checker, Jus Connect epitomizes informed decision-making. We provide legal teams with unparalleled data-backed profiles and analytics, enabling them to strategically choose external counsel, experts, or arbitrators while avoiding conflicts of interest. But it's not just about selection; law and expert firms find in us a partner that amplifies their reach and revenue. With our tailored business development solution, arbitration teams can showcase their practice, setting them apart in a competitive market.

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#### **McCann Worldgroup Truth Central**

McCann Worldgroup Truth Central is McCann's global intelligence unit dedicated to unearthing the macro-level truths that drive people's attitudes and behaviors about life, brands, and marketing. Truth Central leverages its expertise in global marketing and communications to navigate and articulate complex cultural nuances, shaping insights that drive strategic business decisions.

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