

# LEADING DIFFERENTLY

## The Research Behind PRISM and the Six Leadership Archetypes

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*Abstract.* This research brief summarizes the conceptual foundations, qualitative fieldwork, and psychometric scale development behind the PRISM Workstyles and Leadership Archetypes framework. Findings show five recurring dimensions of workplace behavior across sectors and regions, which reliably predict leadership patterns and team dynamics.



## RESEARCH BRIEF

Most leadership development assumes a single profile for what “good leadership” looks like. The ideal leader is said to be decisive, assertive, fast paced, and individualistic. The problem is not only that this caricature skews Western, male, and corporate. It’s that it also overlooks the diversity of contexts where leadership takes place and the many legitimate ways of leading. A tech product team, a hospital committee, and a government regulatory board each reward different approaches to authority, pace, decision-making, and communication. Yet the dominant leadership stereotypes lead many people to conclude, “That’s not me. I must not be a leader.” In reality, leadership comes in far more shapes and styles than the narrow profile we typically hear about (Bennett & Lemoine, 2014; Shantz, Mannion, & Smith, 2023).

Leadership development needs a framework that accounts for the wide range of leadership and work styles. This is the need that drove my colleagues and me to embark on a multi-year effort to understand leadership differences and team dynamics in organizations across the world. PRISM, the resulting framework that includes five dimensions of team dynamics and six global leadership archetypes highlights the patterns people use to approach the many day-to-day functions that happen on a team. It provides a clear way to recognize the range of effective leadership practices and team work styles that show up across functions, industries, and organizational cultures.

The purpose of this paper is to outline the sociological foundations of PRISM and describe how the five work style dimensions and six archetypes were developed. It summarizes the research behind the framework and explains how these patterns help leaders and teams understand the dynamics that shape their daily work. The emphasis is not on personality traits or cultural values but on the observable practices that influence team dynamics and leadership.

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### **From one-size-fits-all leadership to “figured worlds”**

The origins of PRISM rest in the work of anthropologist Dorothy Holland and colleagues and her concept of figured worlds (Holland, Lachicotte, Skinner, & Cain, 1998). Figured worlds are the social contexts where we *figure* out what is expected of us and how we’re supposed to think and behave. Our families, cultures, schools, and professional settings are just a few of the places we learn how to contribute on a team, communicate,

and address conflict. We implicitly learn who speaks first and who waits, how quickly decisions are made, whether to voice a dissenting viewpoint, and how much risk to tolerate (Livermore, 2022).

Leaders and their teams move across multiple figured worlds in a single week. The same individual who is expected to be bold and decisive in one setting is expected to be measured and steady in another. In some contexts, teams want rapid movement and individual initiative. In others, they expect

Careful consultation and a protective, relationship-driven approach. These contrasting expectations reveal why no single leadership style is effective everywhere and why leaders benefit from understanding the work styles and leadership approaches that shape team dynamics. PRISM was designed as a framework for measuring and understanding the team dynamics and leadership styles that emerge from one's myriad figured worlds.

### **How PRISM Emerged: A Sociological Framework**

Building on the theoretical perspective of figured worlds, we set out to develop a framework to measure the practices leaders actually use in work settings. This work followed a multi-stage methodology that combined a comprehensive literature review, qualitative research across 27 countries, and a multi-year scale development process. Data were collected from more than 3,700 leaders and professionals through interviews, focus groups, scenario testing, and survey administration between 2022 and 2025. The goal at each stage was to develop a workplace-focused measure that demonstrated reliability, validity, and global utility to understand how people work within myriad social contexts and how those learned practices shape team dynamics. What follows is a summary of the research process that led to the five PRISM dimensions and the six leadership archetypes.

#### **1. Review of research on team dynamics and leadership agility**

With Holland's theory of figured worlds as the conceptual framework guiding our research (Holland et. al., 1998), we looked at how an

individual is socialized to behave on a team. This included examining the role of family, education, profession, function, cognitive style, and other socio-demographic influences. It directed us to examine how people learn the practices expected of them in specific work settings rather than treating leadership behavior as an expression of fixed personality or national identity.

Next, we reviewed the major bodies of scholarship that inform contemporary thinking on team effectiveness and cross-boundary leadership. This included the Team Diagnostic Survey (Wageman, Hackman, & Lehman, 2005), research on learning agility such as the Leadership Learning Agility Scale (Bouland-van Dam et al., 2022), and the expansive global leadership literature on boundary spanning, coordination, and decision making under complexity (Bird, 2013; Mendenhall et al., 2013; Osland & Bird, 2018; Reiche, Bird, & Mendenhall, 2017; Park et al., 2018). These studies consistently highlight that team challenges arise from learned ways of working together under real organizational conditions.

To account for the global nature of many teams, we also reviewed cultural frameworks such as Hall, Hofstede, Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, the GLOBE study, Triandis, Schwartz, and Leung to ensure we were learning from these existing approaches while attempting to look beyond cultural values and behavioral preferences (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; Trompenaars & Hampden-Turner, 1997; House, Hanges, Javidan, Dorfman, & Gupta, 2004; Triandis, 1995; Schwartz, 1992; Leung et al., 2002). Examining these bodies of literature provided a robust foundation for advancing

our quest to understand how individuals interact with and lead teams.

## **2. Qualitative research on workplace teams**

Following a comprehensive literature review, we conducted extensive qualitative research to hear how leaders described the tensions they encountered on their teams. Through semi-structured interviews, focus groups, and non-participant observations across sectors and regions, several themes consistently surfaced (see Holland et al., 1998, for a similar socio-cultural approach to practice).

Leaders from every major region of the world described recurring dilemmas involving decision making, communication, rapport building, accountability, conflict resolution, and the pace of work. Many emphasized that they behave differently at work than in their personal lives. One leader said, “I’m pretty laid back and spontaneous in my personal life but I’ve learned to be structured and proactive at work. I have to.” Leaders across industries described similar adaptations, pointing to workplace expectations that differed from how they behave outside of work.

The qualitative findings highlighted the need for leadership and team development frameworks that focus explicitly on workplace behavior rather than mixing personality, identity, or generalized cultural tendencies (van der Vegt & Bunderson, 2005; Wageman et al., 2005). In addition, regardless of their political views on diversity agendas, leaders were unified in stressing the importance of understanding team dynamics in order to stay aligned around shared goals.

We systematically coded the qualitative data using a thematic approach and interpreted

those themes alongside the findings from the literature review. This analysis revealed a recurring set of workstyle differences that appeared across regions, industries, functions, and levels of seniority. These patterns would later crystallize into the core dimensions of the PRISM framework.

## **3. Designing and testing the PRISM scale**

The next step was to draw upon the literature review and the qualitative findings to construct a scale that would measure the work style patterns with a high level of validity and reliability. Our design principles centered on capturing observable behavior rather than aspirational values or self-descriptions.

We moved beyond abstract survey items and developed scenario-based measures that asked respondents how they would act in realistic, ambiguous, or high-stakes team situations. These scenarios assessed behavior under pressure, in the midst of ambiguity, during cross-functional collaboration, and when making decisions with incomplete information.

The behavioral patterns that emerged from these scenarios guided the development of concise survey items designed to capture the same actions across a broader respondent pool. Items went through multiple rounds of pretesting and pilot administration and were reviewed for clarity, workplace relevance, and cross-cultural usability, consistent with recommended practices for scale development (DeVellis, 2017).

Across iterative pilots, exploratory and confirmatory factor analyses consistently supported a five-factor structure aligned with the theorized dimensions of Power, Risk, Identity, Speed, and Messaging. Internal

consistency reliability exceeded accepted thresholds for applied research (Cronbach's  $\alpha$  values above .70 for all dimensions), and item-total correlations fell within expected ranges.

Convergent and discriminant validity were examined against established measures including the Big Five personality traits, the Team Diagnostic Survey, Hofstede's cultural values, and the Leadership Learning Agility Scale. The PRISM dimensions demonstrated strong convergence with related constructs and clear discriminant separation from personality and cultural value measures, reinforcing that PRISM measures workplace behavior rather than stable traits or cultural preferences.

To assess robustness, we examined the factor structure across major world regions and industry sectors. The pattern remained stable across groups, providing preliminary support for the view that the five dimensions represent recurring work practices not tied to a single cultural or organizational context. Additional studies are underway to test measurement invariance and further forms of construct validity.

Test-retest reliability was examined on two subsets of participants ( $n = 316$  and  $239$ ) over a 6–8 week interval. Stability coefficients indicated moderate consistency across the five dimensions, supporting the presence of distinct workstyle tendencies while remaining aligned with PRISM's theoretical foundation. Because the measure captures workplace behavior rather than fixed personality traits, some variation across survey administrations is expected, particularly when one's role or context shift. Stability coefficients fell within

the .65–.80 range, consistent with accepted standards for applied behavioral measures.

Taken together, the scale development and validation work produced a concise instrument that measures five work style dimensions and can be used confidently in leadership and team development contexts. The result is a measure that quantifies how people tend to work and lead on teams and can be interpreted alongside qualitative insight from leaders and their organizations.

#### The PRISM Scale

The outcome of the scale development is a measure that predicts the way individuals work and lead on a team. PRISM identifies recurring patterns in how individuals approach authority, decision making, collaboration, pace, and communication in the settings where they work. These patterns reflect a wide range of socialization forces including profession and function, industry norms, organizational culture, cognitive style, social class, education, generation, gender, race, and national or regional context.

The emphasis of PRISM is on how one *actually behaves* as a team member and leader rather than what they espouse to value. It gives leaders and teams a shared language for the work style differences that most often create friction or alignment. The focus is primarily on what people *do* in the workplace rather than why those tendencies exist.

While there are myriad tools used to address how teams work together, PRISM measures something different:

**Personality assessments** such as the Big 5, MBTI, DISC, and Gallup's Strengths identify relatively stable traits that apply across

situations. Their value lies in understanding and leveraging one's innate preferences whether that be as an extravert or a "connector."

**Cultural values and behavioral preference assessments** explain the deeper values that shape one's expectations and interpretations. These tools, often rooted in national and cross-cultural research, provide a rich explanation for *why* people prefer what they do across their personal and professional lives.

**Cultural Intelligence (CQ)** measures one's capability to work and relate effectively with anyone who is different. It is the foundation for leading and collaborating in diverse teams (Ang & Van Dyne, 2008; Livermore, 2024).

PRISM builds on the foundation of these tools while measuring something different. It's not measuring personality, behavioral preferences, or CQ. It measures how one actually behaves on a team as a result of myriad figured worlds that have shaped them. The emphasis is primarily on *how* one interacts on a team rather than *why* they behave the way they do with the most salient difference being the use of the scale to predict one's dominant leadership style. For any team with significant cultural diversity, PRISM can extend the application of cultural intelligence by making concrete the work practices leaders and teams must navigate together (Livermore, 2024).

PRISM is an acronym for five observable work styles that shape how individuals behave when working with others. These are not personality traits or value orientations. They are learned practices people use when

deadlines tighten, authority shifts, conflict arises, or expectations differ across the figured worlds where they work. The PRISM dimensions are the default behaviors people use as they interact on a team and lead. The five dimensions are as follows:

#### *Power*

Power reflects how individuals enact and respond to authority in collaborative settings. The scale assesses the degree to which people rely on formal leadership structures, defer to senior decision makers, or initiate open disagreement with those who hold positional power. It captures patterned behaviors rather than stated beliefs about hierarchy.

#### *Risk*

Risk assesses how individuals behave when information is incomplete or outcomes are uncertain. It examines whether people delay decisions until risks are fully addressed, follow highly structured plans, or act with limited clarity. This dimension reflects actual patterns in how individuals navigate ambiguity in workplace situations and ignores one's risk tolerance in other contexts.

#### *Identity*

Identity captures how individuals go about contributing to a team. The scale measures the degree to which people approach tasks as autonomously or through a collective effort as well as their preference for independent versus shared recognition. This dimension reflects learned practices about what effective collaboration looks like across myriad work contexts.

#### *Speed*

Speed assesses how individuals pace decision making and action when collaborating. It measures whether people prefer extended deliberation and consensus or whether they move quickly toward closure and expect others to match a faster tempo. This dimension becomes especially salient under pressure.

### *Messaging*

Messaging reflects how individuals convey meaning, disagreement, and alignment in workplace interactions. The scale assesses whether people communicate in explicit, unambiguous ways or rely on more relational, nuanced, and indirect forms of expression. This dimension captures practical communication behaviors rather than broader orientations toward “context” (Hall, 1976).

PRISM provides teams and leaders with a concise and practical instrument that identifies the behavioral patterns most likely to influence team dynamics and leadership effectiveness.

### **From PRISM profiles to Leadership Archetypes**

As we began to analyze the data from measuring the PRISM dimensions, we considered how different combinations of the dimensions affects how one leads. Rather than treating each dimension in isolation, we wanted to know whether certain configurations of PRISM behaviors appear more often than others and whether those configurations reflect recognizable leadership patterns. Methodologically, this meant moving from analyzing single dimensions to clusters of combinations.

To identify recurring leadership patterns, we used cluster analytic techniques on the full dataset of PRISM profiles. Analyses focused on the combinations of dimensions that actually occurred rather than theoretical permutations, enabling us to identify six empirically grounded leadership archetypes that appeared consistently across industries, regions, and hierarchy levels.

With five dimensions, each expressed at different levels of extremes, there are hundreds of possible configurations of work styles. Our interest was not in cataloguing every theoretical combination but in identifying the combinations that emerged most often. Recurring combinations began to surface with certain work style values consistently clustered together. A preference for more top-down authority often aligned with more collectivist norms, as we see in many Sub-Saharan African contexts or military organizations where loyalty to the group and respect for rank go hand in hand. Likewise, Speed frequently linked with Identity. Individuals who oriented more toward individual autonomy tended to favor faster decision making, whereas those who emphasized group alignment often preferred more deliberation.

We used cluster analysis to examine these patterns across the full range of PRISM profiles, from moderate to more extreme expressions. Out of the hundreds of possible configurations, six clusters appeared repeatedly across industries, regions, and organizational levels. These clusters became the basis for what we now describe as the six leadership archetypes.

We then compared these six patterns with the broader global leadership literature and mapped where each archetype tends to appear (Bird, 2013; House et. al., 2004; Mendenhall et al., 2013; Reiche, Bird, & Mendenhall, 2017). Some configurations are more prevalent in Western corporate contexts, others in parts of the Global South. Some show up more often in technology and finance, others in health care, education, government, or family-owned enterprises. Yet the most important finding is that these archetypes transcend nationality, ethnicity, generation, and industry. Not all Asians lead alike, nor do all Millennials, and the PRISM data makes that point empirically clear.

In practice, this means that two leaders who share similar scores on most dimensions can still lead very differently because of a single divergence in their profile. A leader who is risk averse and direct shows up very differently from a leader who is risk averse and indirect. Two individuals can align on four dimensions and diverge on Power, with that one difference reshaping how they exercise authority, invite input, and handle disagreement.

The six archetypes that emerged are not personality types and they certainly are not descriptions of entire cultures, organizations, or industries, though some show up more predominantly in some contexts than others. But more importantly, they describe the six dominant leadership styles that exist across the world.

Here is a brief description of each archetype that emerged:

#### *Trailblazer*

**Trailblazers lead with vision and momentum.** They're the kind of leaders who

are most often featured in business magazines, leadership books, and management case studies. They lead with confidence and gravitas, they thrive on possibility, and they're energized by uncharted territory. The Trailblazer is the prototypical US business leader, though even in the US, this leadership style is increasingly met with mixed reactions depending on the context. Trailblazers are great at forging new ground but they need CQ to ensure that their optimism and constant drive for innovation don't leave teams overwhelmed or unheard.

#### *Architect*

**Architects lead with structure and precision.** They provide direction and leadership through systems and processes. Unlike trailblazers, they're less likely to announce a new change by sharing a grandiose vision and are more likely to share a detailed account of *how* a change is going to take place. This style often thrives in engineering, legal, and operational environments and is common in many European companies. Team members that value reliability and predictability often flourish under Architects. But CQ becomes critical when an Architect is leading individuals who want to be inspired through vision, charisma, and possibility.

#### *Coach*

**Coaches lead by empowering others.** They listen carefully, ask thoughtful questions, and invest deeply in developing their team members. They often lead by doing the work directly with the team (e.g., a "player-coach"). Coaches fit well in Nordic cultures, where autonomy is valued while still being mindful of the collective. In addition, organizations with highly competent talent such as universities

or hospitals, often prefer a coach's leadership style because of the leader's priority on resourcing highly competent team members and staying out of their way. Coaches may, however, need to apply CQ most when a situation calls for speed, hierarchy, or firm direction rather than consensus.

#### *Guardian*

**Guardians lead by protecting their people and supporting them with resources.** They use a more top-down leadership style than the above three archetypes but their hierarchical approach is rooted in their care and protection for their teams. Picture a Mexican matriarch's protective posture with her family and you have an idea of how the guardian leads. Guardians create trust by shielding their teams from external chaos, a style often seen in Latin American organizations and family businesses. Yet, in environments that prize open debate or rapid change, Guardians may need CQ to adapt their protective instincts so they empower rather than constrain their teams.

#### *Director*

**Directors lead with clarity and authority.** They bring order to ambiguity and are valued for making confident, timely decisions. Many of us are familiar with this "command and control" style when we observe leaders in the Middle East and parts of Asia. The Director style is the archetype most often criticized in Western leadership curriculum as being outdated and ineffective. Yet many global teams find reassurance in a leader who is decisive, explicit, and structured. As generational shifts occur worldwide, the Director may need to apply CQ to ensure their top-down approach doesn't stifle creativity, innovative input, and engagement.

#### *Navigator*

**Navigators lead with flexibility and responsiveness.** They're highly pragmatic and thrive on problem solving. They bring calm and direct leadership in situations where others tend to be more reactive. You often find navigators across Central Europe and Southeast Asia where addressing myriad cultural and geopolitical realities has been characteristic of the region for many decades. There's also a high percentage of Navigators working worldwide in NGOs and in supply chain roles where agility is essential. The Navigator is comfortable steering through ambiguity and has little tolerance for theoretical, ambiguous solutions. CQ helps Navigators pair adaptability with foresight, ensuring that short-term flexibility doesn't undermine long-term direction.

No archetype is inherently better than another and none of us is solely one leadership type. Your leadership archetype is not a straitjacket. We all have the ability to expand our range into other styles when the moment calls for it. But understanding our dominant leadership archetype is a critical part of being a more effective team leader.

### **How leaders and teams use PRISM**

The PRISM Workstyles and Leadership Profiles provide a valuable resource for teams and leaders. Here are a few key applications:

#### **1. Enhanced Self-Awareness**

PRISM provides teams and leaders with vocabulary and insights to understand the way they approach the most relevant team dynamics. Rather than describing personality traits or cultural values, PRISM makes visible

how individuals actually behave on a team. It highlights how people use power, manage uncertainty, balance autonomy and alignment, set the tempo for collaboration, and communicate meaning. Seeing oneself across the five dimensions and understanding one's archetype often explains team friction as well as points of natural alignment. Many leaders who do not match the charismatic fast moving stereotype of a leader discover that their preferred ways of working and leading are both legitimate and effective when used in the right settings.

Self-awareness alone is not enough, however. Understanding your work styles and leadership archetype is different from recognizing when those tendencies support or limit your team. Leaders can see where familiar habits and their default leadership style are overused. This might include moving too quickly, protecting too much, structuring too tightly, or communicating in ways that others find confusing. With this insight, leaders can make deliberate adjustments that strengthen trust, improve decision making, and enhance overall team performance.

## **2. Expanding leadership range**

Effective leaders learn to widen their range so they can lead in ways that fit the needs of the team and the demands of the moment. The goal is not to replace your natural approach but to add flexibility in how you communicate, decide, and build trust.

Two practices support expanding beyond your dominant archetype. The first is perspective taking across the archetypes. Learning the six patterns allows leaders to view a situation through a different lens. A Director can study how a Coach creates direction through

dialogue, while a Navigator can observe how an Architect brings clarity through structure. The point is not imitation but a deeper understanding of the assumptions and behaviors that guide different ways of leading.

The second is stretching your dominant style when the situation requires it. Leaders who understand the alternatives can borrow elements that improve alignment or decision quality. This may involve adjusting the pace of a decision, shifting between more explicit or more nuanced communication, or recalibrating authority and autonomy. Stretching expands a leader's effectiveness while remaining grounded in their core strengths.

## **3. Diagnosing Team Tension and Designing Norms**

PRISM gives teams and their leaders a practical way to identify the sources of tension in their collaboration. Instead of interpreting problems as personality conflicts or performance issues, leaders can see where differences in workstyle are creating friction. A team might be moving at different speeds, relying on different levels of structure, interpreting authority differently, or communicating in ways that others misread. Naming these gaps lowers defensiveness and makes it possible to discuss complex issues in straightforward terms.

Once the dynamics are visible, teams can use PRISM to design norms that reflect both the people in the room and the work they need to accomplish. These agreements clarify how they will make decisions, set timelines, manage risk and escalation, communicate disagreement, and integrate different work styles on high stakes projects. The emphasis

is on deliberate alignment rather than defaulting to the preferences of the most dominant voices or the implicit norms of the organization. Teams create practices that match their collective strengths and the task at hand.

#### **4. Applying Cultural Intelligence with Greater Precision**

Cultural intelligence remains the foundation for working across differences. When working with a diverse team, cultural intelligence combined with the insights from PRISM creates a way to apply CQ. CQ describes a leader's capability to work effectively with differences. PRISM provides a concrete way to apply CQ to decision-making,

communication, implementation, and rapport building on a team.

A leader who understands their archetype can see when their familiar habits may support alignment or inadvertently create friction. A culturally intelligent Trailblazer notices when a team member may be looking for concern and resources more than inspiration. A Director recognizes when a group requires more structure and process than authority. Instead of generic guidance to adapt to the culture, leaders can ask which PRISM tensions are active and which aspects of their leadership style will help or hinder the team. This brings clarity to adaptation and strengthens overall effectiveness.

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#### **Future Horizons**

PRISM offers leaders and teams a practical way to make sense of the workstyle differences that shape collaboration and leadership in real organizations. By focusing on observable behavior and moving beyond personality or cultural values, it provides a clear lens for understanding how people actually work together and how leadership effectiveness shifts across contexts.

At the same time, PRISM is an evolving framework. Ongoing studies continue to examine the stability of the dimensions and archetypes across cultures and sectors, as well as their predictive links to team performance and leadership outcomes. The promise of PRISM rests in the continued refinement of the measure and its increasing ability to provide meaningful insights for leaders, teams, and organizations.

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