



INSPIRING WAVES OF CHANGE

## UNDERSTANDING CULTURES IN MANAGEMENT

There is a school of thought, which says that managers from different cultures conceptualise and think differently about management. This is as a result of their cultural environment in which certain values and beliefs are conditioned in them socially. Therefore two managers managing similar organisations in culturally different countries will manage their organisations differently. What constitutes good management practices in the perception of one may not necessarily be the same for the other.

While I agree with most of the above, I find that a major limitation is that they have been explained only in the context of national culture. Surely, organisational culture must also be taken into consideration. Working in different organisations will expose managers to different management practices and hence have a major influence in their managerial attitudes, beliefs and values. The contention here is that, this working environment rather than the social environment will have a greater influence on a manager's attitudes and beliefs about management practices.

To further illustrate this point, let's take an example of an American manager who is posted to head a business organisation in Malaysia. He brings with him not only American national culture, but also his previous organisation's work culture. He then has to contend with, not only Malaysian national culture, but also importantly, his new organisation's culture. How well he does in his new job will to a large extent depend, not on how well he copes with Malaysian national culture, but on how well he manages, copes and adapts to his new Malaysian organisational culture.

I accept the fact that national culture will have significant influences on organisational culture, but my contention is that these national cultural influences prevalent in that organisation will still fall under the broad categorisation of organisational culture. I would also argue that the American is able to exert some form of control over these influences. As an example, let's take the question of timeliness. Malaysians have a cultural aversion to being on time. Not surprisingly, this national cultural trait is prevalent in most Malaysian organisational cultures. In the work environment however, the American manager can take measures to eradicate this cultural aspect. Assuming he is successful in his efforts, he would have managed to inculcate a value in his employees, which is contrary to the values of Malaysian national culture. He will however have no such power to do so in his social environment.

The main reason is that, national culture as practised in the social environment is generally more rigid as compared to work culture. Managers and trainers can control, manipulate and inculcate organisational culture. They will have no such power where national culture is concerned. In this respect, the Army is a classic example of an organisation, which uses training to inculcate and perpetuate the desired organisational culture. When a new officer cadet reports, he brings with him certain cultural traits that are not acceptable to the role culture of the Army. The basic training program is therefore designed to ensure that the concept of immediate and unquestioned response to orders is ingrained in individuals. Importantly, the training process also tries to eradicate individualism and stress is placed on group dynamics. The point being made here is that organisational culture can be inculcated although it may not necessarily be compatible or complementary to national culture. But this does not in any way mean that a person who joins the Army will lose his national cultural values and beliefs. That would be too simplistic and naïve a view. What it means is that the individual will undergo a process of adaptation on a daily basis between his work culture and his social culture.

Multi-national companies are presently adapting the methods of the military. Due to the fact that they operate across international borders, these companies face very real cultural management problems. One of the ways to overcome these problems is by inculcating a strong organisational culture to counteract national cultural influences. Large multi-national companies, by design, tend to have strong organisational cultures, which has a homogenising influence on the values and work ethics of employees. This is usually inculcated through the training process. For example, training in McDonald's is not only aimed at imparting skills, but importantly, to inculcate the McDonald's culture in their employees, so that they will uphold and

perpetuate the desired Mcdonald's image and business strategy. Managerial practices in Mcdonalds restaurants are therefore to a large extent similar whether in India or in Argentina. Hence in Kuala Lumpur, or for that matter, in Peking, there will be this conscious and unconscious process of 'movement' by local staff and importantly, managers, between organisational and national cultures. They become part of this symbiotic relationship between these two cultures.

It is my contention that organisational culture has to be taken seriously when discussing about cultural effects on management practices. With the present process of globalisation and the rise of large multi-national companies, it is perhaps organisational culture and not national culture, which may play a more important role in management and cross cultural management training in the future.