

NATIONAL CULTURE

Last month, we looked at what culture is, generally: the values, beliefs, knowledge, and behaviour of a group with common rules which must be followed for group membership; or basically, the way we do things. Since organisations are groups of people with common rules, they develop cultures.

Another way to separate people into groups is by national boundaries. These are very large groups, usually in the millions, but still groups, and as such have cultures that define them. When we use the term “multicultural”, we are often referring to nationality.

With the rapid globalisation of business in the twenty-first century, companies usually span a number of national cultures. This can strongly impact on your business, so it is beneficial to have a good knowledge of how it can affect you.

What national culture is

National culture arises from a shared identity. People say: “I am a Finn” or “I am an American” and it means something to them and to others. Identification of the self with one national culture or another usually comes from the country of birth, or new country of residence, if a person has been there a long time – even more so if they have changed their citizenship to that of their new home.

History has a strong influence on the development of national culture. When opposition is successfully repelled, wars help to unite people against a common enemy, and strengthen the culture with a reinforcement of national pride; for example, the Winter War in Finland, or the American War of Independence in North America. New powers who do manage to take over often change the local language; for example, from its Celtic origins, English grew from the influence of a series of invaders (the Romans, the Saxons, the Vikings, the Normans). A new religion can even alter the way people think; consider the way Europe changed when Christianity was introduced. Laws, which are the formal rules of a national culture, usually have historical roots; for example, today’s Australian law was originally based on British law, as it was colonised by the British.

Climate determines certain aspects of culture. This is a phenomenon clearly observed in Europe: in the south, which is warmer, the cultures are more outgoing; in the north, which is colder, the cultures tend to be more introspective. This also affects the design of clothing, and buildings, and the “national cuisine” is usually based on the foodstuffs that are available there naturally, such as olives in Greece, and reindeer in Finland. Can you think of other things that influence national culture?

Management scholar Robert Vecchio says that national culture is the dominant set of learned, shared, and interrelated behaviour within a society. When you go to a country, you can see the behaviour of the people, the food, the clothing, the architecture; this is the *objective*, or visible culture.

Cultures are also made up of shared values, assumptions, and ideology, which you can't see. This is the *subjective*, or invisible culture, taught to children from birth, so it runs very strong in the psyche, and it drives the objective culture. If you want to do things in any country, you must understand the subjective side, because it affects the way people think, the way they work, the way they do business, and their attitude towards you.

Moving between cultures

Almost every organisation today is thinking about globalisation. Large organisations have the physical resources to place operations in other countries. And today, with the rise of the Internet, even small companies can do business globally. With nearly 200 nationalities in existence today, there are a lot of national cultures.

Some people believe that general management principles and practices are applicable universally. Others feel that methods of management are contingent, or bonded to local culture. Let's look at a few examples, and you can make up your own mind.

Finland is highly unionised, but the United States is not. This will influence labour contracts, and the legal rights of employers and employees. In Britain, organisational structure tends to be traditionally hierarchical, but in Sweden, the structure is flatter. How do you make decisions in such an environment? When in business meetings, you often make small talk beforehand. In some places, like in Australia, it is perfectly acceptable to discuss families and personal lives during chit-chat. But in Saudi Arabia, it would be inappropriate for a foreign man to discuss the female relatives of his business associates.

Shocked by the culture

Consider if you were going on international assignment, a common enough activity today. You might be there for a week or a month or years. You must deal with a new culture, not only in your business dealings, but also on a daily basis, no matter what you do.

When you first arrive, everything is exciting and interesting: you are like a tourist. However, as you stay longer, you encounter confusion and communication problems. You might feel angry, sad, or incompetent. For example, in a place where you don't know the language, it can be a major exercise just to do everyday things like shop for groceries, or do your laundry. This is called *culture shock*.

You may need to deal with people with a different understanding of politeness, business agreements, punctuality, authority, achievement, conflict and change management, disciplinary procedures, and so on.

A lack of understanding of the local culture and an inability to deal with culture shock are two of the main reasons that expatriate assignments fail. This can be very financially draining: not only has it cost a lot of money to send somebody abroad who did not perform, but their behaviour may damage your business in the other country,

making it difficult to hire new employees, motivate current employees, or sell your products and services.

A magic wand can't save you

Dealing with other cultures is never easy. There are no magic formulas. You need to be aware of the culture with which you are interacting. Culture is not just the clothes people wear and the language they speak, but their attitudes and values as well.

To work well cross-culturally, you must be prepared to be flexible and innovative, and show that you want to be. If others feel you are ignoring them or not even trying to understand them, they are less likely to be co-operative. Remember that they do not necessarily have the same values and beliefs as you do, and there is often more than one “right” way to do things.

Some related links (copy-paste into your browser):

Culture expert Geerte Hofstede's home page
<http://www.geert-hofstede.com/>

Culture shock at San Diego University
<http://edweb.sdsu.edu/people/CGuanipa/cultshok.htm>

Cross-cultural management in Asia: A research review
<http://www.apmforum.com/emerald/cross-cultural-management.htm>

Next month, we will be discussing norms and values, which are both the drivers of culture and key concepts in social psychology.

References:

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Carte, P., & Fox, C. (2004). *Bridging the culture gap: A practical guide to international business communication*. London: Kogan Page.

Hofstede, G. (1997). *Cultures and organizations: Software of the mind*. New York: McGraw-Hill.

Vecchio, R.P., Hearn, G. & Southey, G. (1992). *Organisational behaviour: Life at work in Australia*. Sydney: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.