



The World Today

Do our Management Styles and Practices fit our Cultural Values?

Betty-Jane Punnett

Professor, International Business & Management Department of Management Studies, The University of the West Indies, Cave Hill Campus;

Associate Fellow, The UWI Graduate Institute Of International Relations, The University of the West Indies, St. Augustine Campus

Over the past few years, I have been involved in a number of research projects on management practices in the English-speaking Caribbean (*for details on these projects, please contact the author at eureka@caribsurf.com*). These projects have addressed a variety of issues ranging from absenteeism, through goal-setting and performance, to the characteristics of professionally successful women. Respondents have been employees and managers, students, and professional women – a range of backgrounds and occupations - and they have come from Barbados, Jamaica, St. Vincent & the Grenadines, and Trinidad & Tobago – a range of countries, larger and smaller, better economies and worse ones. This research has given some insights into the cultural values found in the region.

Many of the research projects, in which I have been involved, have included measures of cultural values, over various backgrounds of occupations, and countries. However, the results have been remarkably consistent. Three cultural values that have been measured in the studies are *Individualism/Collectivism, Acceptance of Uncertainty and Risk, and Attitudes towards Power Differentials*.

These three dimensions of cultural values are based on a study done in the 1980's by Geert Hofstede, and they have been examined in many countries and regions of the world. Briefly, Hofstede and others argue that societies vary on these values, on a scale of scores that can range from very high (100) to very low (0). Societies can be described, at the two extremes, as follows:

Some societies emphasise the role of the individual in making decisions and taking action, while others believe in the value of the group and collaboration for making decisions and taking action;

Some societies seek out uncertainty and risk and are more comfortable in uncertain situations, while others prefer certainty and avoid risk where possible;

Some societies accept differences in power as normal and to be accepted and adhered to, while others believe that equality should be the goal of society and there should be equal opportunity for everyone.

These differing cultural values have important implications for management. Generally, scholars believe that management style and management practices need to “fit” with a society’s cultural values for managers to be effective in motivating others. For example:

- in an individualistic society, individual task assignments will be most effective, and in a collective society, group work would be best;
- where people prefer certainty, then clear cut, explicit policies and procedures will be effective, and in a society that is open to uncertainty and risk, more general policies would be preferred;
- if power differences are expected and accepted, then hierarchical organizations, with clear power distinctions will be effective, and where equality is desired, less structure and distinction would be appropriate.

These are very simple examples, but they illustrate the idea of “fitting” management practices to cultural values. What do we know about cultural values in the English-speaking Caribbean? What does this tell us about the effectiveness of our traditional management style and practices?

The empirical evidence from the studies mentioned previously shows consistently, across samples and countries, that we are moderate on individualism/collectivism, that we prefer certainty and avoid risk, and that we are low on power differentials (we believe in equal opportunity and equal distribution of power). What does this mean in terms of management style and practices? It means that people work well both individually and in groups, it means people like the certainty of knowing what is expected of them, and it means that they work best where there is a sharing of power.

How does this relate to our traditional management style and practices in the Caribbean? In terms of individualism, the “fit” is probably pretty good, with managers emphasizing team work as well as individual effort. In terms of certainty, the “fit” is again pretty good, with managers emphasizing rules, policies, and procedures.

Where a major gap occurs, is when we examine power differentials. Management style and practices seem to be the reverse of what would be effective given the cultural value score. A history of colonialism and plantation economies has left the Caribbean with a legacy of top down management in which hierarchy and power are important, communication is limited and top down, information is guarded, and trust restricted to those in the “in group”. In contrast, a low score on power differentials indicates that people value equality, and are uncomfortable with the differences in power and status that are an integral part of hierarchies. They react well to delegation, participation in decision making, and a flattening of organizational structures. They value open communication and trust, and want to feel that their input is valued. This suggests that we need to change our management style and practices in these areas.

As the Caribbean continues to face the increasing competition that comes with globalisation, effective management becomes ever more important. Good management is the key to increased productivity. Our managers need to understand the cultural values of

their counterparts and subordinates, and ensure that their style and practices fit these values. Achieving a fit will mean that employees are highly motivated and committed. In turn, this will result in higher levels of productivity, lower costs, lower levels of absenteeism, fewer labour disputes, more innovation, and a host of other positive organizational outcomes.

It is always easier to continue with the status quo than to change, but the status quo does not seem to be working. Changing management style and practice is difficult and takes commitment, time and effort. It may, however, be the most important step we can take towards being relevant players in the current business environment.