

## **CULTURAL ISSUES IN PERSONNEL SELECTION**

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Personnel selection is an important part of organization systems and processes. It is the primary element of organizational processes. If an organization fails in this first step, the subsequent processes will not be effective. Further processes such as training, job redesign, employee involvement program, or even performing the basic job function will be difficult when the selection is done poorly.

Issues on personnel selection become more complex, when an organization is put into a global environment. A global organization is challenged with diversities of cultures in various part of the world. Within a multicultural context, its complexity may result from a question on the possibility to find a proper match between the selected personnel and the different cultures of the organizations where they may be located. The selection practice of this type of organization may appear in two forms, i.e. selecting employees to be sent to a foreign country as expatriates, and selecting local employees in a foreign branch office. In this level, it is relevant to explore the factors –related to culture and skill-- which need to be considered in the selection practices to enhance the right matching. Best selection practices performed in one country, may not be suitable for other country, regarding its cultural specificity and the relevant skills required.

So far, researches in cultural differences have shown that cultural values play a significant role in the work place (e.g. Hofstede, 1984; Riyono, 1996; Shane, 1995; Liouville and Nanopoulos, 1996). Based on the findings on cultural influences in work behavior, Michael (1997) listed 18 propositions that match specific managerial behaviors with cultural work values. He categorized management behaviors into five elements, i.e. decision-making behaviors, relationship-oriented behaviors, communicating behaviors, motivating behaviors, and influencing tactics. The effectiveness to perform those five elements of management behaviors is dependent upon where it takes place or in what cultural groups it is done. Managers from different cultural background might find it difficult to perform well without proper understanding of the local culture, even though he/she is the best manager in his/her home culture.

Since the effectiveness of behavior or job performance is the ultimate purpose of selection programs, criteria in selection processes need to be adjusted by including specific characteristics of the culture where the organization is located. The purpose of this paper is to formulate selection strategies for overseas placement or local hire on overseas subsidiaries or joint ventures, considering local cultural values. The paper will begin with a description of the five dimensions of culture, then followed by the propositions for the criteria for successful working behavior in particular cultural setting, and examples of the application of the criteria in a particular country, which has a combination of the five dimensions of culture.

## I. FIVE DIMENSIONS OF CULTURE

There are five dimensions of culture that has been found as related to work values and influencing work behavior. Four of them were introduced by Hofstede (1984), i.e. individualism/collectivism, power distance, uncertainty avoidance, and masculinity. The fifth dimension was introduced by Hall and Hall (cited in Michael, 1997), i.e. polychronic and monochronic.

The individualism/collectivism dimension deals with how individual perceive their role in the organization or community. Individualist society assumes individual responsibilities and rights as the strongest values in social interaction. Individuals are encouraged to take action and initiative on their own behalf. Collectivist society stresses the importance of duties to the community or organization rather than rights. In collectivist society individuals are expected to be a member of certain group or organization and making decision based on consensus. As a result they have less individual accountability to the decisions made. Blaming individual on organizational mistakes would not be considered appropriate (Hofstede, 1984).

There are five dominant values in individualistic culture, i.e. freedom or individual rights, justice or equity, hedonism, social status, and honesty, while on the other side, collectivist culture also possesses five dominant values, i.e. harmony, moderate or equality, humility or duty, consideration or thoughtfulness, and thrift or conservation (Riyono, 1996).

The power distance dimension refers to the perceived relationship between different status/positions in an organization/community. Society with high power distance has a strict hierarchy of status and centralized power. Society with low power distance is more egalitarian, less hierarchical and decentralized power (Hofstede, 1984).

The uncertainty avoidance dimension refers to the degree to which people can deal with uncertain and ambiguous situations. Society with high uncertainty avoidance feels threatened by uncertainty and therefore they create mechanisms to reduce risk. In the work place, those mechanisms can be in the form of job security and well-defined work rules and regulations. On the other hand, society with low uncertainty avoidance have higher tolerance to ambiguity and assume risks (Hofstede, 1984).

The masculinity dimension refers to the degree to which a society holds traditionally related sexual values. Traditional masculine values such as assertiveness, achievement, and performance are dominant in a masculine society. Society that stresses the values of quality of life, congenial atmosphere, and cooperation among members are categorized as having a feminine culture (Hofstede cited in Michael, 1997).

The polychronic/monochronic dimension deals with different patterns of thinking among different cultural groups. Polychronic culture highly values commitment to people and maintaining interpersonal relationships rather than commitment to time or schedule. Tight schedule is perceived to be disruptive to interpersonal relationships, so they usually sacrifice time commitment for the sake of maintaining relationships with others. Deep involvement with others is important in order to be sure of giving appropriate service, for example to clients, friends or employees. Information exchanges occurs in a high context environment, where most of the information is implicitly understood by participants (Hall and Hall cited in Michael, 1997). When communicating new ideas or suggestion and especially asking for a favor, they will start with describing the

context first, so the communicant will be able to imply what is really the point with the broader understanding of the context or background.

Monochronic culture values linear, rationally based paradigm to cope with problems. Cause-effect relationship explanation is an important way of thinking, which is always encouraged in education and social interaction. Schedule commitment is a serious matter, to the extent that interpersonal relationship tends to be in a short-term basis. Information processes occur in a low context environment, where significant amounts of information must be explicitly transmitted for effective communication to occur (Hall and Hall cited in Michael, 1997). Being straight forward and to the point is the prescription of an effective communication, and then followed by the reasoning behind that point or the "why". In polychronic culture understanding the "why" first is important, and then the point will follow, sometimes not explicitly. In other words, polychronic culture has a circular communication style, while monochronic culture has linear communication style.

These five dimensions of culture have implications on work behaviors through values and beliefs system, which will lead to motivational problems if people interact with others from incompatible cultural background. Since the influences on behavior are not in a direct manner, culture is often overlooked as the main cause of the problems. But the fact that there is persistent problem of significant rates of premature return of expatriate managers (Baliga and Baker cited in Katz and Seifer, 1996) provides sufficient evidence that the development of a strategy to prevent cross-cultural problems in performance is strongly needed. Some ways to cope with these problems are pre-departure training, cross-cultural consulting, on-site socialization and selection. Among those four, selection intervention is the most cost effective and preventive way. The next part of this article we will discuss several propositions for the criteria for successful working behaviors in particular cultural setting, to be used as a guideline for selection decisions.

## **II. CRITERIA FOR SUCCESSFUL WORKING BEHAVIORS IN PARTICULAR CULTURAL SETTING**

Based on Michael's paper (1997) on the matching of management behaviors and cultural dimension, the following is a list of the necessary skills needed for each cultural dimension. On each cultural background, different values and expectations will be discussed in accordance to the effects on skills needed to perform effectively in a group holding that particular culture. Some skills are effective in several cultures but some are counter-effective in certain culture. The focus on the following list is on the skills that are required or conducive to optimum performance on the organization with certain cultural background.

### **1. Individualistic Culture**

Individualistic society expects their members to be independent and responsible for their own life and therefore they are expected to fight for their own rights. People respect individual rights and encourage the fulfillment of it. In supervisor-subordinate relationship each have their own rights and interact in a way that they can get the appropriate recognition from others. In such cultural background, supervisors are expected to involve their subordinate in decision making and to share the authority. Therefore, delegation and consultation skills are important in order to

maximize performance. For example, Management by Objective programs, which emphasize co-partnership between boss and subordinate, work well in United States, which has a strong individualistic culture (Hofstede cited in Michael, 1997).

Skills to cope with conflict situations are also important in individualistic culture, especially for an open conflict situation for example in a form of open arguments. Conflict is more likely to occur in individualistic culture when the interaction between individuals has conflicting interests, and everybody is strongly hold on their individual rights, each party want to win and perceive the situation as a part of the fight for their own rights. On the other hand, in collectivist culture that highly values harmony, conflict situation is less likely to occur.

## **2. Collectivist Culture**

Ability to understand others or empathy is essential in collectivist culture to maintain harmony people has to be able to put himself/herself in others position. They are expected to give more consideration rather than direction. Supervisor doesn't have to tell or remind subordinate about heir duty since they already understand it. Simple expressions like "It's your job!" or "It is your responsibility!" or "You are paid to do that!" might offend the subordinates.

What is expected from the supervisor is his/her understanding of subordinate's rights, because if the subordinate straightforwardly ask for their individual rights it will be considered as inappropriate or impolite. To show this consideration, supervisors might do supporting, mentoring and inspiring their subordinate rather than orders or directions. Therefore, supporting and mentoring skills are important in collectivist culture.

Other skills that are obvious in collectivist culture is team building. Collectivist culture prefer group belongingness rather than individual works, especially in order to maintain harmony rather than for task performance purposes. Stressing task performance when doing team building will not sincerely accepted because the firs things that is matter is to be a member of the group itself. Performance will follow accordingly.

## **3. High Power Distance Culture**

In a high power-distance culture, a leader is expected to have more knowledge, ability and wisdom than the followers do. That is why they perceived to be having higher status in the social hierarchy. When a leader often asks subordinate's opinion before he/she makes decisions, he/she makes decisions, he/she will lose respect for being incapable leader. If the leader loses respect, he/she will also lose the ability to inspire subordinates, and the result will be a lower motivation that leads to lower performance. To be an effective leader in a high power-distance culture a leader should minimize the consulting behavior.

On the other hand, being perceived as having more knowledge, ability and wisdom, he/she is expected to do more mentoring and supporting behaviors toward his/her subordinate. Supporting and mentoring skills is essential because they will have a significant impact on subordinate's motivation, because to be close to a person with a higher status itself will make them feel proud.

There are three kinds of influence tactics described by Kipnis & Schmidt (cited in Micheal, 1997). First it is hard influence tactics which characterized by demanding, assertive and sometimes

intimidating and even threatening behaviors. Second, soft influence tactics that characterized with flattering, behaving nicely, and drawing on their friendship to influence. The third tactics are rational tactics, which uses facts, logic and bargaining to explain why certain decisions or behavior should be taken.

Managers in high power distance culture are expected to be able to use hard influence tactics to their subordinate, so they can maintain the inequalities between boss and subordinate relationship (Michael, 1997). But on the other hand they are also expected to be sensitive and appreciate soft influence tactics by their subordinate, especially if the manager comes from a low power distance culture. In low power distance culture soft influence tactics by subordinate will be perceived as “kissing up” and lose its effectiveness.

#### **4. Low Power Distance Culture**

Communication skills are essential in low power distance culture since equality between boss and subordinate requires a lot more two-way communication. That is why participative management programs work better in low power distance culture. The communication skills required can be in the form of informing, clarifying and monitoring behavior.

Since the relationship between boss and subordinate is equal, the most appropriate influence tactics is the rational one. Ability to present facts, use logic and explaining the rational of an opinion or a recommendation is highly important to be able to perform well in the job.

#### **5. High Uncertainty Avoidance Culture**

In a society with high uncertainty avoidance, details on every aspect of the job are important, because otherwise employees will be anxious. Supervisor are expected to spend more time to explain what is expected from the job to be done (Michael, 1997). Standard procedures, guidelines, and detailed data of work results are some of job aspects that are common in a culture with high uncertainty avoidance. Therefore Ability to deal with and preference to work with details is required.

For a manager to be able to perform well, communication skills that enable them to reduce the uncertainty on the job is important. Those communication skills include informing, clarifying monitoring behavior.

#### **6. Low Uncertainty Avoidance Culture**

Since in low uncertainty avoidance culture uncertainties are more acceptable, managers can focus on strategic issues rather than details. A bias from planned action or change is best performed by those who can tolerate uncertainty. Strategic planning skills would be most effective in a low uncertainty avoidance background, and a deliberate strategic planning is more appropriate.

Low uncertainty avoidance is also conducive to innovation championing roles (Shane, 1995), so managers with innovative ideas will perform best in an organization with low uncertainty avoidance cultural background.

## **7. Masculine Culture**

Cultures that are masculine tend to attach great importance to earning, recognition, advancement, and challenge (Hofstede cited in Michael, 1997). Sekaran & Snodgrass found that individual recognition and performance are emphasized in masculine culture (cited in Michael, 1997). Considering these cultural tendencies, managers are expected to have rewarding, recognition behaviors, and inspiring behavior. Managers who do not have favorable attitude toward individual recognition and rewarding will not fit in masculine culture.

## **8. Feminine Culture**

Dominant values in a society with feminine culture are personal relationships, group harmony and group performance, and they judge successful behavior by the ability to concern more about other's welfare and less motivated by self-interest (Hofstede, Kanungo & Jaeger cited in Michael, 1997). Supporting and mentoring skills are essential for managers to be successful in their career. Teambuilding skills are also appreciated for the purpose of consideration rather than tasks orientation.

## **9. Polychronic Culture**

This dimension of culture especially deals with the preferences of cognitive processes people take. The most significant behaviors that effected are planning and problem solving behavior. In polychronic culture managers are expected to be able to think in a broad and situational bases when they make plans or solve problems. As a consequence, planning will take longer time (Doktor cited in Michael, 1997). Managers who is a "let's get going" type won't fit in the polychronic culture, since patient and thorough considerations are needed. Adding to that, flexibility is also important since the situation will change when the plan is implemented, and when it happens the decisions and actions should also be changed accordingly. this type of planning behavior is called as emergent-type planning by Mintzberg (Cited in Michael, 1997).

While in monochronic culture networking is sometimes necessary if there is dependency toward the party involves, in polychronic culture, networking is part of the social interaction that has to be maintained with a long-term implication. In line with the circular way of thinking, polychronic culture would say that they have to make as many friends as possible, "Making friend with him is good. I don't have to know why right now but we never know what will happen in the future". This kind of emergent-type thinking is part of the culture, while monochronic culture's way of thinking is "I need a help so I make friends" or at least "I need a friend so I make friends".

Polychronic culture expect networking skills in a way that it is important for a long term relationships among business partners and with government officers in order to maintain the environmental support for the organization. Networking behavior in polychronic culture is a way to anticipate environment long-term support for the organization when unpredicted problems occur.

## **10. Monochronic Culture**

As mentioned above, monochronic culture prefers to think in a linear way, a cause-effect relationship. It is also concern with precision and time sensitive. Planning is where goals are specified in advance and purposeful activities are performed in a step-by-step process. Managers are expected to be able to compartmentalized activities into a linear format and having a deliberate and rational attitude toward planning. this type of planning is called a deliberate-type planning by Mintzberg (cited in Michael, 1997).

Reasoning ability is highly valued in monochronic culture so that every decision made always have a sufficient reasoning behind it. People would ask why certain plan should be implemented or certain decision has to be followed. Intuitive managers would not effectively influence subordinate behavior as they do to the polychronic culture.

The required skills for each particular cultural background mentioned above are useful for a guideline in selection program to fill positions in a country different from the organizational home country. Those required skills combined with other technical skills should help managers with different cultural background to perform as expected by the company.

To provide a clearer picture of how we can use this guideline in practice, in the following will be presented examples of a selection criteria consideration for Japan with mix cultural dimensions. the descriptions will only cover the culturally bias criteria, not specific to certain position, so the technical skills requirements are omitted.

## **III.APPLICATION EXAMPLES**

### **Japan**

Japan has a combination of collectivism, masculine, moderately high power-distance, high uncertainty-avoidance, and polychronic culture. This mixed cultural background makes Japan sometimes difficult to understand for American business people, especially when they outperformed United States in economic growth in the 1980's.

In Japanese workplace some patterns of behaviors are quite typical and worth consideration for American business people if they want to do business there. These patterns of work behaviors are related to the five dimensions of cultures described above.

Interpersonal relationship in Japanese company is highly important, both between boss-subordinate and among co-workers or colleagues. Interpersonal conflict has to be avoided and managers should be able to create an environment of trust and harmony. Safe environment with no open conflict among employees will motivate to perform better.

In order to release tensions from work-life, informal gathering is important. That is why Japanese workers usually spend more time with boss and co-worker beyond working hours. They usually go to a pub to have a drink with their supervisor and co-workers and they can talk about issues of work or some trivial issues as they like. In that informal meeting they can feel at ease, free from formal and structured relationship they have on the workplace.

Japan has a "tate-shakai" or a vertical society, a society with hierarchical interpersonal relationship (S. Sezaki, personal communication, May 3, 1998). They even use different language

when communicating with persons from different hierarchical status. Respect to those in higher status is a must. Failing to do it will result in a relationship problem, and since relationship is important for business it will also have impact on business performance.

This hierarchy is in a contextual manner, meaning that one person might have low status in one context and high in other context (S. Sezaki, personal communication, May 3, 1998). For example, a new employee that has a low status within the company will be perceived to be in a high status when he goes to other company as a customer. Since this status hierarchy is important, promotion and social recognition is very motivating for them.

Considering the above mentioned cultural context, the following criteria for selecting employee to be placed in Japan needs to be employed: 1) strong interpersonal skills, especially humility or willingness to put oneself in a lower status position when necessary, 2) networking skills, in order to build and maintain a long-term relationship, 3) supporting and mentoring skills or sensitivity to provide social recognition to subordinate, 4) team building skills, 5) flexibility in behavior and decision making and ability to adjust quickly to different context of interpersonal relationship, and 6) ability to work with details and communicate in a comprehensive and detailed manner.

#### IV. CONCLUSION

There are a lot of evidences that culture differences have a significant influence on performance in multi-cultural working environments. But most researches on cultural influences on work behavior so far are descriptive in nature rather than practical. Practical approach to address this phenomenon is necessary in the future studies on cross-cultural organizational psychology.

Cultural issues in selection is one topic that will attract more attention in the next decades of global market that characterized with rapid changes and dynamic working activities. This paper has given an initial contribution but not sufficient to this discourse, so empirical studies following these propositions is recommended.

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