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# Motivating Your Global Talent:

**The Role of Culture**

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# Motivating your Global Talent: The Role of Culture

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What defines a great leader? Who or what motivates you to excel at work or to push a little harder in sports? In what jobs were you especially motivated and why? These are important questions to ask yourself from time to time. The answers you find will open up the door to your inner engine and reveal the fuel that makes you run and the inspiration that nurtures your performance.

One of the most important aspects of being a manager or leader is to motivate those that work for you. The talent of your employees is the most important resource you have. Where do you find the answers when you wonder how to motivate your talent? Many of us start with ourselves. Assuming that what motivates us will motivate others. Although there might be some truth to this, and it is a good starting point, we need to look beyond ourselves and our own cultural context to find what really motivates people.

## **Interpersonal Relations, Culture and Leadership**

There are differences in motivation and preferred leadership styles across cultures. To understand how culture influences how we work, interact and are motivated, two cultural dimensions developed by Geert & Gert Hofstede are useful to know and understand: individualism and power distance.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Hofstede & Hofstede 2005

## Individualism

In more individualistic cultures people have relatively loose ties between each other. In general it is expected that people in individualistic cultures look after themselves and their immediate family first. Social psychologists suggest that relationships in a very individualistic society such as in North America are more 'utilitarian'.

When I work with foreign expatriates who have relocated to the U.S., one of the most common questions they ask is "How do we become friends with Americans? They seem so friendly and open, but it is difficult to develop a close and deep friendship with them." Sometimes someone exclaims in frustration "Americans are superficial. They don't know what friendship is!"

These frustrated comments originate in a cultural misunderstanding. The person speaking is most likely from a culture with stronger collectivist or group-oriented values where the in-group relationships that one develops are closer, more transparent and more intimate.

When explaining interpersonal relations in North America, we often use a peach as an illustration. North Americans tend to be open and friendly and have a large number of acquaintances, but the inner core is hard and difficult to penetrate. Intimate friendship takes time and work. But is that really a North American cultural trait? Developing trust in a relationship requires time and dedication in general, no matter the culture. How we reach the level of trust and intimacy is what varies.

Interpersonal relationships in a society with stronger collectivist values have been described as more socio-emotional. The relationship is important for the mutual social and emotional meaning the relationship brings. We often call these societies 'relationship-oriented'. Belonging to and being loyal to an in-group is a central value in a collectivist society. It is expected that everyone takes care of the group members and the needs of the group go before the needs of the individual. Being loyal to the group is important.

At work this is manifested, for example, in how people talk about and perceive accomplishments. While individualists easily talk about what 'I' did and what 'my' accomplishments were during the year, staff members from a collectivist culture speak more about 'we.' Loyalty to the team or the company is important in a collectivist culture.

In my work as a career development consultant I have had the opportunity to work with people from all corners of the world. While managing one's career and performance is challenging for most people, it has an added level of complexity for those of us working for an organization in a culture different from our culture of origin.

People with stronger collectivist values often find it very difficult to identify and discuss their individual performance goals and accomplishments since they do not experience their contribution to the team from the vantage point of an individual. This can be

misunderstood as poor performance or low self-esteem by a manager from an individualistic culture who is not well versed in cultural differences.

As a manager having a performance discussion with your staff from a collectivist culture you may wish to ask them to talk about what the team accomplished and how they contributed to the goals of the team and what their role in the team was. When you discuss performance goals and indicators you can frame them within the more 'collectivistic' goals and needs of the organization and the team.

### **Power Distance**

The other cultural dimension that can help us understand interpersonal relations at work is power distance. The dimension of power distance is a measure of how members of society expect and accept that power and resources and access to them within an organization are not equally distributed.

In a high power distance country people accept that power is distributed unequally. Organizations tend to be very vertical and hierarchical and the manager or boss has the authority while staff expects to be told what to do and have less autonomy. Examples of high power distance countries are the Philippines, China, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Angola and Mexico.

In low power distance countries power and access to it are distributed more equally, in business and organizations managers are more accessible, the communication style between staff and management is more informal and decision making is more participatory. Staff have more autonomy and influence on decision making and expect delegated decision making. Examples of low power distance countries are Denmark, Sweden, Australia, Finland, Norway, Cost Rica, Germany and the Netherlands.<sup>2</sup>

How does power distance influence relations between management and staff? The most obvious influence is how management and staff interact and communicate. The higher the power distance the more formal the communication and the interaction. There is also less delegation of decision making and responsibility. Staff expect the boss to make decisions, take responsibility and care for the staff.

### **Interaction of Cultural Dimensions**

It is important to remember that how one cultural dimension is manifested may vary between countries since other cultural dimensions may interact with that cultural dimension. Individualism in the very egalitarian Denmark looks different from individualism in the United States. For example, Danes, as are most of their Nordic neighbors, are individualistic but also have a strong value of equality, solidarity and humility.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://geert-hofstede.com/countries.html>

Communication tends to be direct and informal but when it comes to talking about your accomplishments you are expected to be more indirect and humble than what North Americans are.

The level of individualism and the degree of power distance impacts how people are motivated to perform. Someone from a very individualist culture with a low power distance expects autonomy in decision making, wants more coaching and transformational leadership and a strong and direct connection between work performance and individual rewards.

Feedback is best given individually in private and rewards and pay are often expected to be merit-based and tied to the individual's performance.

Staff from a more collectivistic, group-oriented culture with high power distance might not thrive under a leader who manages as a coach. Their expectation is that the leader gives direction and orders that the staff follows. A leader that is inclusive and asks for the views and opinions of staff might even be perceived as weak. Being loyal to the company and the team are important values that drive the individual's actions and the motivation to perform.

Feedback is commonly given to the group and pay and rewards are often expected to be the same for all staff on the same level in the hierarchy. This is an important cultural aspect of motivation. The now widely spread management philosophy of merit-based pay that originated in the U.S. might not be the best motivator in a group-oriented culture. The expected effect of the reward might actually be the opposite and even lead to lowered motivation among staff.

As a cross-cultural competence trainer I have worked with several managers from different parts of the world assigned to lead cross-cultural and intergenerational teams in a new office and in a new country. Understanding the values, needs and expectations of the staff you lead will help you be a better leader.

Before you embark on an expatriate assignment, make sure you do research and know the local culture, the pertinent cultural dimensions and how they are manifested in business structure and management style and know what values drive the motivation of your staff. And of course, all cross-cultural knowledge begins with knowing yourself, your personal values, biases and preferences.

### **What Motivates Us: Internal or External Rewards?**

If you are a parent you know how challenging it can be to motivate your children to eat their vegetables, do their homework and perhaps take that shower. We try reward schemes and 'pull rank' – because I am your mother/father and I said so!

Well, behavioral experts say that true motivation needs to be found inside of us. We need to not 'pull rank' but instead seek to inspire an internal wish to learn in our children because learning is fun and rewarding in itself.

Motivation is often defined as being either intrinsic or extrinsic. Intrinsic motivation is simply explained as our inherent or internal drive to explore and learn new things, to use our skills and to perform to our best ability and beyond. The driving motivation is the resulting feeling of satisfaction and accomplishment achieved by the action. For example, we may feel motivated by the satisfaction we feel after completing a particularly difficult project at work.<sup>3</sup>

Extrinsic motivation feeds on rewards that originate outside of us. For example, extrinsic motivation includes the actual result of your work such as more recognition, a bonus or a promotion, or perhaps the need to please a client. Motivation in this case is reward and compliance driven.

Intrinsic motivation needs a certain degree of autonomy of the individual, meaning that the person decides on an action with little or no external control and coercion. For example, you decide to work late not because your boss expects you to, but because you enjoy the project you are working on and find the work meaningful.

Extrinsically motivated behaviors are the opposite. They are externally regulated, for example, you work late to finish a new project not because you want to or enjoy the project but because your manager tells you to.

As a manager or leader what do you think is the inspiration behind the performance of your staff? What can you do to encourage your culturally diverse global staff to excel, to spend those long days at work doing their best and some more?

Many North American leaders seem to believe that what really motivates staff are external control and rewards -- that year-end bonus or promotion with more responsibilities and recognition. However, some research suggests the opposite to be true, also in individualistic North America. Most staff in a study of motivation reported having intrinsic motives for working, not the extrinsic ones their managers assumed they had.<sup>4</sup>

If you are moving to the U.S. as an expatriate manager and wonder how best to motivate your team, do not rely on your assumptions and stereotypical portraits of North Americans as being simply money-driven. Take time to talk to your staff, get to know them and understand what is important in their lives, what their values are and why they work.

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<sup>3</sup> Ryan & Deci, 2000

<sup>4</sup> DeVoe & Sheena, 2004

All performance ratings are subjective because no matter how well developed the system is, it ultimately involves people evaluating people and we all have preconceptions of others, both positive and negative. It is especially important for managers who assess the performance of others and thus hold the career progress of others in their hands, to be aware of their own biases and how these biases influence how they perceive the performance of their staff. To minimize the impact of our biases we need self awareness, openness and empathy, both important leadership skills, especially for those leading global teams.

## **Motivation across Cultures**

Let's look beyond U.S. borders and include Latin Americans and Asians. Overall people from countries in these regions tend to be more collectivist in their values even though differences between these countries exist. For example, Asians have a more holistic view of life (the influence of Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism) overall, also when taking into account differences between countries, than what Latin Americans tend to have. Latin Americans, in general, are more relationship oriented, and from a North American vantage point, also more emotionally expressive at work.

I have worked with several clients from Latin America (Columbia, Brazil and Mexico) and all of them emphasize the importance of close relationships at work manifested by having lunch together, outside of the office, and getting to know your colleagues and managers personally. Display of emotion and affection at work is also more the norm compared to in the U.S. Work and life are more intertwined and the business culture is often described as warm and personal.

The Asian holistic world view and the Latin American preference for close relationships and emotional closeness at work influences how people feel motivated. In a cross-cultural study of manager's perceptions of motivation the results indicated that Asian managers expected their staff to be both extrinsically and intrinsically motivated while Latin American managers anticipated that their staff have a preference for intrinsic motivation.<sup>5</sup>

These managers knew how to motivate their staff. The staff surveyed responded as their managers expected. The Asian staff members described their motivation as being both extrinsic and intrinsic while the Latin Americans confirmed the assumed intrinsic motivations.

What does this really mean? It means that performance rewards and incentives need to be adapted to local culture. Simply applying an incentive package built upon extrinsic rewards, such as bonuses and other monetary awards might not yield the expected performance from staff across different cultures. Instead of assuming that we know how to motivate

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<sup>5</sup> DeVoe & Sheena, 2004

others to perform their best we need to acquire local cultural knowledge and personal understanding to know how to effectively lead and motivate.

## **Motivating with Values and Empathy**

How do you find those performance incentives that will motivate your staff? Start asking staff members what their work and core values are. Why did they choose their current career or job? What is important for them at work? Is it being an expert in a field, getting recognition from others, being creative or perhaps solving problems? Don't forget to ask about life outside of work, you will need to understand the individual as a complete being with a life and responsibilities outside of work.

When I work with clients who are seeking a career change this is the starting point for finding a new career passion or to reignite a current one but perhaps transplanted into a new environment. Not much suffocates motivation like a poor value-fit, except perhaps poor management. As we grow older our values change, the need-to-prove-one's-self drive in the late 20s and early 30s is slowly replaced with other values, such as having time for love and family and creating a legacy. Most of the clients that seek me out for career change have lost their motivation for the work they do. Often the root causes are that they are not challenged any longer, the work has become too much of a routine, the environment is stifling or too stressful and there is not enough engaged and inspirational leadership.

When explaining differences in work values across the world we often simplify by dividing people and cultures into those that live to work and those that work to live. Where do you fall? North Americans are often described as living to work, and indeed, it seems so when looking at the US legislation about work conditions. Vacation and maternity leave are not guaranteed in a federal law and people increasingly depend on their own savings for retirement.

Contrast this with France or the Nordic countries where the work week is shorter, guaranteed minimum vacation starts at approximately four weeks a year and people take a month off from work, at once, rather than spreading it throughout the year.

Regardless of political system, legislation and cultural background, people want to be inspired and feel appreciated at work. At our best we seek opportunities to learn new skills and to use them. Core values differ between individuals and between cultures. Those of us who are higher on the individualism dimension tend to value personal time, freedom to apply our own style to work and being challenged, while those with more of a collectivist orientation value training and to be able to improve our skills, physical conditions and to be able to fully use our skills at work. <sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005

What's striking in the hierarchy of work goals listed above is the absence of clearly externally motivated goals, such as more pay and a promotion. Instead most of the goals are closer to what can be explained as internally motivated, such as using and developing skills, being challenged and having more personal time.

You can be an inspiring leader who motivates your staff to perform regardless of your cultural background. What it takes is being open to understanding, first your own preferences, values and biases and then those of others. Use this information to create the conditions for your staff to feel valued, understood and motivated.

One may think that people in a high power distance culture where organizational structure is more hierarchical and leaders more distant and authoritarian do not expect or value the leaders who display empathic emotion. This assumption, however, has been contradicted in studies. These findings show that empathic leaders were appreciated and assessed higher by people both from high and low power distance cultures.<sup>7</sup>

Empathic leadership is a core skill for leaders working across cultures. It is difficult to understand a different culture with differing values, beliefs and behaviors without judging, if one is not empathetic. Being empathetic means that one has the ability to identify and understand the feelings and thoughts of others.

In a world that seems to shrink in front of our eyes as we find love, build relationships and engage in business across oceans and continents the ability to understand differences, work collaboratively and motivate each other to greatness is the foundation.

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<sup>7</sup> Sadri, Weber & Gentry, 2011

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## About KHD Consulting International LLC

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KHD Consulting International LLC offers cross-cultural and management training, career transition consulting and relocation & repatriation training & coaching. We advise & assist companies entering the US market on HR related matters, such as recruitment & talent management and development.

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