

CHAPTER 4

PRODUCTION CULTURE IN MEXICO

It has been mentioned in a previous chapter that one of the main factors driving this research project is the evident fact that nothing assures that what has proven to work in one facility, will work exactly in the same way in another one. The success of the endeavors carried on in different locations depends mostly on how the strategy sketched to be followed adapts itself to the local culture of those who will be primarily affected.

In today's world, synergy is required to achieve interdependent goals and it will only exist once one first understands others and then seek to be understood back. This chapter will deal with the main traits that define the work culture in Mexico, of course this will be a general description that may include, or leave aside, several factors that might be locally incoherent due to the cultural differences that exist among the country.

4.1 Culture

A great deal of time can be spent trying to define culture, but for the sake of this research project, just a couple definitions will be mentioned, and the rest of the section will be developed accordingly.

One of the simplest definitions of culture is as follows: "culture is the set of knowledge, beliefs, values, practices, conscience and organizational forms of a society" (De la O, 1997). This means that a culture is a coherent and logically chained system based upon cause and effect interaction.

For another author, culture is “a set of action practices and behavioral configurations shaped and symbolically transferred from one generation to another” (De la O, 1997). This means that a culture is something that is a result of repetitiveness through long periods of time, it means that paradigms are inherited from those who lived before and they will be transferred to those who will live afterwards. Culture can then be seen as either a vicious or virtuous circle, it all depends on the particular circumstances surrounding it at a given point in history.

Whatever definition is chosen to construct from, one can realize that culture is simply how people have been taught to behave, what they have been taught to believe in and how they have been taught to carry on their daily lives. It seems that culture is the biggest paradigm of all, but the bright side about paradigms is that they can be changed over time. It is by no means an easy task but it is actually doable.

Obviously, if one pretends to study a culture, one can do nothing less but try to understand it from its very origins up to the present time or the time it ceased to exist. One has to look at it under the microscope of reason, leaving aside all possible traces of one’s own cultural bias. This is the only way an effective analysis can be made.

Through the remainder of this chapter it will be seen how the culture of Mexico has given birth to work related sub-cultures that can be as contrasting as day and night. As strong as the mother culture can be, there is still room for change, provided some goodwill is available on the side of those who will see their culture affected in a very positive way.

4.1.1 Work and Corporate Cultures

4.1.1.1 Work Culture

Work culture can be defined as a “set of meaningful cognitive, normative and valuing processes that defines how the company’s workers will structure their actions toward their jobs” (De la O, 1997). It can be clearly seen that this definition underlines the human response to an institutional existence. Work culture is how do each one does his or her everyday jobs; what sets of rules are to be followed; how people react to company imposed goals; what people value the most and the least at the workplace. It is a shared paradigm within the members of an organization, it is the common denominator, so to speak, of how everybody acts, sees and feels at the workplace.

If one goes and asks workers about their jobs, all kinds of reactions will be obtained: dissatisfaction, instability, a sense of lack of control of the workplace, pride, joy, passion, etc. It is a matter of high priority to any company to do everything it can to get answers similar to the last three; otherwise, it is bound to fail eventually and usually, painfully.

It has to be recognized that any worker arriving to any given company will be suddenly exposed, and shortly thereafter inserted, in an environment defined by a long running set of traditions, cultural and symbolic practices that have been developed through the company’s history, and passed from one generation of workers to the next, it is nothing less than culture, in both a timely and spatially narrowed sense of the word (De la O, 1997).

Studies show that workers share among themselves solid common concepts regarding their jobs, rules and procedures to follow and carry on their daily activities of

let's say, quality and productivity, but the problem that companies face is a complete lack of identification with the guiding and ruling styles of management and the interpretation of such concepts (De la O, 1997). Work culture is an individual being existing within an organization that lives and dies under its own rules and practices.

4.1.1.2 Corporate Culture

Corporate culture is defined as the set of values and principles under which the different areas of a company develop their daily activities towards a common goal, it involves the what, why and how of all aspects of the business. In a few words, it is the way of life of a company, and whether its members like it or not, it establishes the “shoulds” and “should nots” for every behavior within the organization.

A corporate culture may be very powerful to develop and innovate a new product with higher marketability (Moritz, 1997), but it will need the help and commitment of those working in and around it.

As will be presented in the following chapters, the way a corporate culture is developed, shared and ultimately implemented is a major challenge for the company's leadership. It involves much more than dreaming about the future and wishing the stock prices keep an ascending trend line, it involves commitment first and foremost, from top management, in order to get the shop floor operators to believe it and then to adopt it.

4.2 The Mexican Worker

The scope of influence of this research project limits itself to a tiny little region in central Mexico. The basic social, cultural and historical characteristics of such people, the “Tlaxcalans”, have already been established. Nevertheless, they share many if not most of the common denominator traits of the Mexican worker, which is precisely why this section will be devoted to their study.

Unfortunately, several stereotypes of the Mexican worker were found during the course of this research and will be necessarily mentioned in the following paragraphs. No offense is intended, and the author’s sincere apologies are given before hand to the reader that gets to feel uncomfortable or insulted.

Generally speaking, the Mexican labor force is characterized by an empirical learning process in which a newly hired worker starts doing his or her job without clear instructions, first through observation, then doing on his or her own simple tasks until gradually he or she acquires the mastery necessary to become an officer (De la O, 1997) This is a methodology that can be called a “ don’t ask process” in which the work er is expected to acquire specific skills just as he or she learned to speak, by pure imitation. No analyses are made, no questions are asked, and only the job is done the way it was first learned. What kind of systematic improvement of the workplace can be expected as a result of this process? Simple answer, none.

This really shouldn’t be a surprise, Rocío Guadarrama describes the Mexican worker in her book, “Cultura y Trabajo en México”, as a person with a deep inferiority feeling which is constantly nurtured by the comparison with other countries and directly

derived from the dominance Mexico has been subjected to for hundreds of years now. This feeling leads him to not trust himself, what he does and those who surround him, thus making him susceptible, aggressive and macho. Consider separately the difficult social and economical positions that the country's situation over the years has forced him to live in. The direct and not surprising result of this is a worker with serious problems of adaptation to modern, simplified and organized working systems (Guadarrama, 1988).

One can easily contrast how a newly hired worker is received in a local company to that of a multi-national corporation. A formal training period will only exist in the latter. A local company will try to immediately get the worker to do exactly that: work. Most certainly he will be assigned easy tasks that let him or her learn from what the others are doing. In a multi-national company the worker is going to be attending first for a couple of days, a series of training sessions in which the philosophy of the company is explained along with the safety, quality and productive expectations. Depending on the area where the new worker is bound to, a technical workshop with hands on experience given by the experts of the site may be also part of this training process. At least this is how it works in A&B.

When the Mexican workforce is compared with that of some of the most industrialized countries, one can clearly see a worker that severely lacks willpower to change what surrounds him; scarcely reflexive and even less analytical. He has absolutely no sense of time, never previewing, and by no means devoted to work. He obviously has to do it because otherwise the only option is starving, but he'd definitely rather not do it and stay at home, enjoying a life devoted passionately to family, traditions, religion and party, completely unable to plan his future as committed as he is to his present as was just described (Guadarrama, 1988).

Catholic in their vast majority, the Mexican workers somehow adopt from their religion a rather fatalist position that discourages and leads him to laziness, most of them will not even try to improve their situation in life. He is sensitive and romantic in nature, which makes him avoid awkward negative and/or conflictive situations, which results in a rather difficult process of open discussion of the issues that usually arise in the shop floor, for him, giving direct answers is not really necessary and there is nothing wrong with “half-truths” or little lies. Add up the fact that he owns an aesthetic and dreaming mentality that makes it hard for him to understand the practical needs of the modern entrepreneurial world. He sees his job as something that only gives him the means to enjoy much more relevant things such as sharing time with friends and family. All the Mexican worker is looking for is a nice and comfortable environment where to spend a few hours a day, without any planning and for instance without any commitment to deadlines (Guadarrama, 1988).

Most certainly no surprises are presented to the reader in this tough but realistic description, one can daily prove it just by looking at the work peers, supervisors, subordinates, and even at each other. There is no hesitation in implying that this description may very well be valid for most of the Ibero-American world (Spain comprised of course). This is nothing but its culture, its paradigms and nowadays its challenge to change or disappear.

It is not surprising then that when it comes to working for a foreign company that asks for precision and efficiency, the Mexican worker reacts with an attitude of distrust and suspicion because his paradigms are simply stronger than reason.

4.3 Globalization Effects

Globalization seems to find no obstacles to settle here and there. The way globalization has appeared in the Mexican workplace has made both national and foreign companies around the country to analyze their current situation and develop effective action plans to smooth out the transition process towards the inevitable and steady conquests of a globalized interaction in the economic, social and cultural aspects of everyone's lives.

Globalization processes enforce interaction among different working cultures with an intensity that had never been seen before. The implementation of new organizational systems goes through several intercultural conflicts which ought to be managed before actual cultural clashes occur. The modern corporate philosophies feel an urgent need to create a brand new work culture all around the globe, and what they are really seeking is to adapt the work culture to the corporate one (De la O, 1997).

The stereotypes of the Mexican worker, as previously stated, can and shall be managed by the Human Resources department of each company in order to find the best way to blend their workers into the corporate philosophy. At the same time, new technologies are being constantly introduced, just as fast as new challenges are recognized by small, medium or large organizations, challenges that are established by international competition.

This ferocious competition calls for a systematic approach to get rid of losses, to reduce inventories, to make the best use of raw materials, to make processes and transfers as fast and efficient as possible, as this is the only way for survival.

The globalized concept of work culture dictates new and modern methods to increase productivity, to control and increase product quality and to eagerly seek for a

broader participation, involvement and commitment of the work teams and management in order to fully develop all the potential of the people and getting therefore the most out of modern technology (Guadarrama, 1988). Nowadays this concept of work culture is nothing but a hybrid model that truly and effectively adapts local social-cultural conditions to modern day needs. It is important to mention that the word ‘hybrid’ in the previous statement is defined as the transfer process of the Japanese model into a local context (Guadarrama, 1988).

This current trend is looking for the development of work culture that underlines ‘team work’ as its deepest foundations. Unfortunately, this effort still finds many obstacles in the Mexican workplace where middle management still refuses to substitute old control structures that seriously affect the line performance, they know it doesn’t work their way, but they are terribly afraid of change, of losing control, of being left out of the commitment process between top management and operators. The outcome is a terrible amorphous combination of both individual and collective practices and interests that do not constitute by any means a solid foundation where to start building upon.

In summary, globalization at the workplace is looking for the development of absolute identity with the company, involvement values regarding the job and commitment feelings and loyalty to the boss. Once this is accomplished, the beginning of radical positive changes will be on its way.

4.4 Motivation

If the company is requesting flexibility, quality and productivity from its workers, the company must be willing to offer something in exchange. The first issue that may come to the reader's minds is their wages. Usually, motivation is immediately related to an increase in their paychecks. This concept is totally out of date and has proven to be of little impact on the medium to long terms. Every company is very well aware that they cannot, under any circumstances, increase wages every two months regardless if it wanted to and even if the results are exceeding what was forecasted in terms of the three concepts mentioned at the beginning of this paragraph. Therefore, leading the workers to think that doing their jobs as they are supposed to deserves continuous raises in their paychecks or performance bonuses given without apparent solid criteria, is a terrible mistake of the company's management.

What motivation is really about is to make the employee feel that his or her work is highly appreciated and that it highly contributes to achieve the goals set by the company. Motivation should recognize publicly or privately, each and every one of the accomplishments of every worker in the organization. How can this be done? The options are innumerable: honor rolls, displaying of personal achievements in the company's intranet or magazine, visits to other facilities, special meals, personal development courses, stock options, etc. What is really important is to make the person recognize him or herself as an important part of the company, to see that whatever it was that he or she did, it had an impact on the company's overall performance. This will in turn develop a sense of ownership and pride that will keep on going as a virtuous circle that benefits both parts

equally. This kind of philosophy will definitely contribute to build a friendly, challenging and rewarding work environment for everyone.