

Societal vs. Organizational Culture

Toward a Cross-Cultural Communication Model for South African Organizations

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1. Introduction

Political change; a general election; redistribution of wealth; nationalization; affirmative action; black empowerment; equalizing of opportunities; correcting the wrongs of the past under the system of Apartheid and similar expressions are ringing through the mountains and planes of South Africa and the corridors of large organizations.

These expressions give hope to some, bring fear to others, sound excellent in theory and through the rhetoric of politicians, but are causing fear and uncertainty in practice.

Nowhere are these changes that are occurring in South Africa felt more than in South African organizations which are now having to deal with a struggling economy caused by various factors, including previous and ongoing sanctions.

I believe that it is the duty of every individual living in South Africa to deal proactively with the problems facing the future South Africa and South African organizations. My research on communication in South African organizations (mining companies like Anglo American; a few private sector companies and public sector institutions like the South African Police Service), during the past few years brought me face-to-face with the complexity of the South African environment and the difficult road ahead in finding solutions to innumerable problems.

2. Societal Culture vs. Organizational Culture

South Africans need not go abroad to encounter other cultures - there is a great deal of cultural diversity in South Africa - in fact, we are famous (and notorious!) for our cultural diversity. With this diversity comes conflict, both in society and in the workplace.

Societal culture vs. organizational culture in South Africa has always been a problem but has grown in intensity due to recent political changes.

3. A Cross-Cultural Communication Model for South African Organizations

By analyzing the following cross-cultural communication model for South African organizations (which was compiled out of literature on cross-cultural communication in South Africa and my own research and experience), it is possible to see the complexities facing South African organizations

(See APPENDIX 1).

3.1 Societal Culture

South Africa consists of four race groups (White, Black, Asian and Colored)(See APPENDIX 2). These races have various ethnical groups with their own languages and cultures. The South African population also differs regarding educational qualifications and literacy. A large percentage of rural Blacks are illiterate (See APPENDIX 3). Among urban Blacks there is an increasing degree of Westernization. Mutual influences through the years took place among the various cultures. In many cases Blacks had to adapt to a Western culture because they came as migrant workers from the rural areas to the cities in search of job opportunities. In the cities these Blacks came into contact with a new city culture which caused identity problems for many Blacks - they experienced four cultures that they had to understand and live with - the Western culture of the Whites; their own relative static tribal culture; the dynamic Black city culture and the organizational culture that they had to work in.

Recent and ongoing political changes in South Africa brought about a more violent and turbulent society than ever before. Many people have to cope with yet another culture - a "culture of violence" in the townships. This violence - mainly Black on Black and politically motivated - forces many Blacks back to their traditional roots.

3.2 Organizational Culture

In classical terms organizational culture refers largely to a specific organization's rituals; norms; specialized language and jargon; the policy and mission statement that is presented; organizational heroes, friends and foes; legends and stories that are told; formal and informal rules that regulate behavior and the vision for the future. However,

we still need to recognize and understand the extent to which the socio-political and historical norms and values of a particular society or nation will have an impact on the organization. The organizational norms and practices are products of these values and belief systems that are dominant in any society. They are not static and will change over time. They are also not immune to influences from other parts of the world.

The significant factors that have shaped organizational culture in South Africa would be the norms and practices of European and American corporations, both historically as well as presently.

It can be argued that the beliefs and values of (mainly) Europeans and the exploitative traditions of Europe have determined the general norms of South African organizations, for example the Protestant work ethic; the European ethic about the relationship between man, his environment, technology and other people, et cetera. What emerges is the fundamentally exploitative and racial way in which these ethics have been applied in South Africa. At no stage have organizations sought to incorporate and use positively the norms and practices of indigenous South Africans. Here yet another culture emerges - the "culture of exclusion".

The lack of contact with and exposure to other cultures in society is a major obstacle when these cultures come together in the workplace.

South Africans of all cultures meet on a daily basis in organizations. For many Black South Africans the organization becomes more than merely a workplace - it becomes a shelter and a haven removed from a violent society. In these organizations workers attain yet another sense of who they are, what they should be doing and how they should behave through identification with the organizational culture. This can be confusing to many workers, but other issues also arise. The South African multiracial workforce has grown up in a segregated society where resources have been unequally allocated. Recent political developments have heightened expectations on the one hand and led to increased fear and uncertainty on the other. Whites need reassurance that their positions will not be threatened by equal opportunity initiatives and that their futures will be more secure in a society and organization where justice and trust exist.

3.3 Labor Unions

Few people realize how powerful the various labor unions operating in the South African industry are. The labor union leaders are masters of negotiation and at this moment in time have more bargaining power than organisational and political leaders as well as the South African government. South African organizations have felt the influence of these labor unions during the last few years when strikes became more evident in industry than ever before. There are many cross-cultural communication problems caused indirectly by labor unions in organizations. These labor unions are not

negotiating information, industrial knowledge and a better working environment as they should, but are often communicating with labor union members and organizational leaders from a basis of power. Their information and dealings are often manipulative and intimidating and they have been branded political instigators. These labor unions do not always promote cross-cultural relationships in organizations, neither organizational culture.

3.4 Frames of Reference of Communicators and Recipients

The workers in the South African organization, whether they are communicators or recipients, differ not only culturally but also in terms of language, literacy, communication skills and attitude towards relationships with co-workers.

- Language

Many different languages and dialects are spoken in South African organizations. This multilingualism in South African organizations is surely not unique but extremely problematic and also challenging (See APPENDIX 4). Each alternative to the language problems has its own advantages and disadvantages:

A. Which language must the White worker learn? Languages, particularly Black languages are regionally based. By estimation only a small percent of Whites can speak any of the Black languages.

B. The question can be asked: Which official language should the workers learn? The answer could be English as universal business language.

C. A mixed language like Fanakalo (spoken on the gold mines of South Africa), has possibilities, but the opinions and feelings about the use thereof of late is not very positive.

D. The use of Black supervisors or interpreters has many possibilities for the organization, but my research showed that the Black workers' attitudes towards the use of Black supervisors varied from extreme positive to negative.

E. A temporary solution is to place Black workers that speak the same language and have the same culture under the supervision of supervisors that are familiar with their language and culture. Organizational leaders have though always exacerbated the problem by recruiting on an ethnic basis and in the case of the gold mines, segregating

the Black workforce into different language, working and residence units - the recent violence among hostel dwellers is a result of such division.

F. A combination of the above solutions regarding language problems in organizations could be tested in different organizations with different cultures.

- Literacy

It is a fact that the largest percentage of the South African workforce is illiterate. This causes immense problems for the productivity, cross-cultural communication and the well-being of the organization. This problem will worsen rather than improve in the years to come. The South African workforce will have to cope with workers from the so-called "lost generation" (young people with almost no skills or education and victims of the political situation and violence), that will be moving into organizations. Basic concepts like "democracy", "affirmative action", "job responsibility" and organizational technology (old and new) are alien to them. Apart from training programs, these workers will have to be educated in basic life skills.

- Communication skills

To the Western mind and organizations, reading and writing business letters; taking decisions; solving problems; managing conflict and making business presentations are everyday organizational tasks. In the South African organization these communication skills can by no means be taken for granted. Workers should be trained in communication skills as they are in basic life skills and literacy.

- Human relationships

The situation in South African organizations and also in the country in general, will never improve if workers do not feel positively towards their co-workers. The turbulent political environment, racial and ethnic tension are not helping job relationships either. Human relationships have to improve - unfortunately this will only be possible over time, but workers should be trained to endure diversity and to work towards cohesion in the organization.

- Attitudes, beliefs and values

One has to determine and analyze the nature of prejudice, ethnocentrism, racism and stereotyping in South African society and the organization. Having been brought up

to distinguish between "we" and "they", workers tend to discriminate against anyone and anything that differ from what they are used to.

Traditionalism and belief in the traditional system is still rife in South Africa. As a result workers in South Africa still maintain values, norms and attitudes that are not consistent with rational behavior in a modern economic sense. The most conspicuous characteristic of the Black culture is the very strong group affiliation of its members. The well-being of the tribe is considered the highest value to be pursued and with this tribal context each member has a hierarchical position and status determined by birth, age and sex. This pattern can dominate the whole tribal life.

Many decisions are based on and still influenced by beliefs in gods and the spiritual world, laws, rules and ancient customs. The whole life of these workers is governed by such decrees and every happening is seen as the result of the mystic influence of supernatural forces. This often implies that people have no control over their fate and are not accountable for anything that happens, also at work. These pertain of course much more to rural than urban Blacks. It can nevertheless be safely assumed that traditional influences still play a significant role in the lives of the vast majority of Blacks in spite of their migration to the cities and contact with Western culture. The traditional belief system is particularly prevalent recently because of the insecurities brought on by violence and political changes. These influences are at least important enough to merit an investigation of their effect on the organization and its collective culture; management; structure and functions; planning; development and change; co-ordination; control and communication.

3.5 The Organizational Communication Message

In most of the communication audits I have conducted in South African organizations, message transmission was one of the main stumbling blocks. Due to language problems, racial and ethnic tension - task information and socio-emotional message content are often confused. Black workers seem to need more integrative communication messages, including information improving their knowledge about tasks, as well as structured job descriptions.

3.6 Transmission Channels and Feedback

The management and communication structures of South African organizations vary from classical models where the flow of communication are still strictly hierarchical in nature; to structures where participative management are being tried out in a systems approach to organizations.

Another major problem recorded during communication auditing was the problem of communication transmission channels and feedback. Whereas Western organizations

are familiar to written and electronic channels of communication, the South African organization is dualistic in nature. Electronic communication is available and utilized in most organizations, but these channels of communication excludes a large percentage of the workforce who does not have the basic skills of reading and writing, let alone use and understand electronic communication. The results of communication audits done in Infogold at Anglo American and the UNISA library showed that the more personalized channels of communication (like face-to-face interaction) are still preferred in South African organizations.

4 Recommendations for the Improvement of Cross-Cultural Communication in South African Organizations

South African organizations are growing, learning and changing systems. These organizations have to exist in a political unstable and often violent society. Organizational culture is influenced by societal culture, but has to be changed and managed according to what is happening in society.

4.1 Organizational Culture

What is required in South Africa is a comprehensive program that reflects an organizational culture which places strong emphasis on concern for people. Each South African organization must strive towards finding, managing and maintaining its own organizational culture. Organizational culture must find expression in human resources utilization, worker development, labor relations improvement and corporate social responsibility. In moving towards a new organizational culture, South African organizations should:

- re-evaluate their norms and practices so as to benefit all workers in the organization
- move away from attempts to inculcate values and belief systems that have hitherto had as heroes those who have benefitted through exploitative mechanisms, with no legitimacy
- shift from a racial to a non-racial value system - not seeking to either Westernize the workforce or Africanize the workplace

- re-evaluate management structures - moving towards consensus management with elements of ubuntuism (an African existential concept meaning "you are what you are through and with other people") as well as consultative management

The South African organization should evolve its own value system which is neither Black nor White. Black workers should be circumspect and avoid distorted White value systems; equally Whites should derive lessons from Black traditional practices such as learning how Blacks make decisions through a process of consensus. South African organizations need an organizational culture that will incorporate the new spirit of a changing South Africa.

Organizational change should be "real" change - many South African organizations believe that mere cosmetic changes will guarantee their survival.

4.2 Organizational Communication Research

The importance of autogenous organizational communication research in South Africa can never be underestimated. Research in communicating organizational culture, management and communication, assessing organizational communication effectiveness, the rhetoric of the South African organization, labor relations and the role of labor unions in changing and maintaining organizational culture, et cetera, must be researched.

4.3 Organizational Communication Training

Affirmative action can never take place without the gradual and meaningful empowerment of the Black workforce within corporate South Africa. The South African organization has a secondary task and function in the changing South Africa. Apart from the classical organizational functions of production, innovation, maintenance and service, it will have to educate, train and develop the workforce. This should be done by means of communication training programs which could include:

- Cross-cultural communication training which has long been advocated as a means of facilitating effective cross-cultural interactions. Cross-cultural communication training should be factual (written material, lectures, briefings); analytical (sensitivity training, video and films); and mainly experiential (simulations, workshops, field trips, role plays, interactive language and skills training).
- Literacy and language training programs must be implemented in organizations (some South African organizations do have these programs) to foster development and understanding.

- A South African case study was Tongaat-Hullett Sugar which has a long history of organizational effort to improve cross-cultural communication. Their current program has a number of different emphases covering industrial relations; equal opportunities; affirmative action; general quality of life; training and development.
- Cultural awareness courses must be run for all levels of workers. The input should be tailored to suit the knowledge, skills and ability of the workers.
- Normative re-education strategies for attitude change must be developed. Various difficulties regarding effective management arise from traditional attitudes and beliefs (from Whites and from Blacks). A re-orientation of values and attitudes is required in order to change this traditional fatalism to modern prerequisites.
- Training and education in basic life skills for the Black worker in the organization is necessary. Training and education must be based on knowledge and not power - and here the labor unions have a significant role to play. Black workers need knowledge about concepts like affirmative action, equal opportunities dealing with financial matters, job responsibility and even the meaning of democracy.
- Communication skills training, particularly cross-cultural communication skills training are becoming increasingly important in the South African organization. The Department of Communication at UNISA and various communication consultants in South Africa are aware of this need for communication skills training and undertake research and training programs on a regular basis

5 Conclusion

The South African society and South African organizations are experiencing, in the words of Charles Dickens, the best of times and the worst of times. The South African organization needs research, training, education and development. Forums of cross-cultural communication must be created in addition to the formal structures that exist for the regulation of industrial relations.

Negotiation, whether it takes place within the organizational environment or in the political arena, should move away from mere talking to action. Workers need to learn to

respect and endure diversity in organizations and tolerance in the workplace and in South African society as a whole is a necessity.

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Appendix I

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Appendix II

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Appendix III

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Appendix IV

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