How national culture influences life at work

Culture will influence communication and acceptance levels at the office. PHOTO | FILE

IN SUMMARY

- There are positive and negative parts of a people, but they determine leadership, style, and management systems.

Culture represents the stunning pinnacle of human civilisation. Culture makes us who we are as a nation, as a people, as a community.

Inasmuch, social scientists endeavoured for decades to clearly define culture, how to measure it, how to identify it, and how to accentuate it.

American anthropologists Kroeber and Kluckhohn developed more than 160 definitions of culture way back in 1952. But essentially in more modern terms, researcher Edgar Schein delineated that culture embodies three different main levels.

First, observable displays of culture are considered artifacts. A newcomer to a culture may view the manifestations of the cultural artifacts, but be unable to decipher the underlying cultural context.

How Kenyans build homes, wear clothes, drive cars or ride on buses all may be observed as artifacts to outside observers.

Pre-colonial homes in South Sudan were very different from homes in what was previously called Western Province from the same period, as an example.

Researchers Susan Schneider and Jean-Louis Barsoux narrowed down culture to inside organisations whereby one may view artifacts in organisation charts, buildings, communications, and dress codes.

Second, cultures hold beliefs on how the world should be in terms of values. Values shape our behaviour and how we judge others.

How Rwandans greet each other with a handshake followed by two hugs accompanied with touching the sides of one’s face against the other person’s face three times finished off with a handshake stands remarkably different than how Kenyans greet each other with an extended handshake or Japanese with a bow. Further, our values shape how we as a people judge each other.

Traditional Kikuyu culture, as an example, with its agrarian history champions calm polite interactions and, therefore, judges outspoken blunt individuals more harshly when compared to traditional Luo culture with its fishing history that celebrates dissent and challenging the status quo.

Third, the deepest levels of culture involve its basic assumptions about what is good, normal, and correct.
In Kenya, we find it acceptable and correct for women to work and hold senior managerial positions within companies as compared to Saudi Arabia that frowns on such gender inclusion.

Additionally, last week’s Mr and Miss Albinism Kenya showcased Kenya’s acceptance of people with albinism in stark contrast to elements of Tanzanian culture that view these precious people merely as objects for witchcraft or segments of Rwandan culture that see them as children of ghosts.

Essentially, Cristina Gibson summarised culture as an identifiable group of individuals and the conformation of rudimentary assumptions about people and their interconnectedness to each other and the wider world.

Broadly, national culture links to organisational performance via material differences in leadership, style, and management systems within national cultures.

Researchers Rajendar Garg and Jun Ma looked at dramatically different managerial practices between foreign-owned, joint ventures, and Chinese-owned and operated companies.

Interestingly, Chinese manage differently from Americans and combined management teams manage differently from either individually as just one example among many.

What aspects stand out in Kenyan management styles compared to the rest of the world? Kenyan executives are more likely to deliver bad news politely in an affirmative way as compared to Indian managers’ blunt direct tones. Kenyan managers also take longer to fire non-performing employees than their American counterparts.

So when managing a business, one must be careful to consider divergent views of business practices and behaviours, which asserts that organisational practices must be tailored to work effectively within national contexts.

The viewpoint looks at all aspects of national disparities that the late researcher Graham Dietz highlighted including political, social, legal, economic realities, religion, inland or coastal, urban or rural, education level, and subcultures.

Inasmuch, organisational procedure adaptations across national boundaries and within national regional boundaries yields diverging practices.

More specifically, a culture-specific framework narrows down national differences to only investigate cultural variances. The view holds that facing various challenges clamouring for change, cultural factors firmly rooted in the society affect how managers approach and react to change.

Several different models have been established, including the Hofstede model as well as the Schwartz and Bilsky approach, Trompenaars model, and most recently the GLOBE Framework developed by Robert House at the University of Pennsylvania’s Wharton School in conjunction with an army of researchers around the world.

Last week Business Talk highlighted research conducted by Geert Hofstede, the most prolific culture writer in the past 40 years.

Every national culture also carries negatives and Kenya is no different. Our Kenyan national culture of indifference to corruption helps hinder our government’s delivery of critical services to our population.

Also, our lack of attention to detail hinders our manufacturing and production capabilities and hampers our writing excellence. However, our positives far exceed our negatives. Kenyan employees more heartily accept colleagues than many other cultures.

Kenyan willingness to see the brighter side of life and our enduring hope in the future enables us to enjoy the most prolific humour for everyday experiences in the whole world.

Finally, our own Kenyan national culture makes the country the most generous nation in all of Africa according to the just released CAF World Giving Index 2016. Kenyans give more to each other than anywhere else on the continent.

So, be proud of our Kenyan national culture. Accept the positives and realise the negatives. Do not be shy to try to change perceived downsides of our culture among those within your sphere of influence.

Discuss the positives and alleged negatives of Kenyan culture on Twitter through #KenyanCulture.

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