THESIS COLLECITION

Katul Yousef

THE VARIOUS CONCEPTS OF CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT

Insights from a Hungarian multinational company

Ph.D. thesis

Supervisors:

Professor Emeritus Dr. Miklós Dobák and Dr. Habil. Henriett Primecz

Budapest, 2021

Department of Organizational Behaviour

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Content

Content

I. Research history and justification of the topic

In different cultures, the same word, sentence or symbol has a different meaning; in order to have everyone on the same side, conveying their message in the right way is crucial. Communication on every level has to be carefully considered. Not only is top-down communication vital but the bottom-up and horizontal communication is also relevant (Schein, 2010). Contact between colleagues over great distances, and the ideas or fears coming from the lower level of the company, are an important part of understanding. Top-down communication feedback and comprehension has to be studied as well, in order to interpret of the initial message (Cader, 2017; Shah and Barker, 2017). Working as a team is for the common success of the company, but employees' have their own goals or objectives to accomplish (Argote, 2015). Understanding of such local concepts defines the future of a partnership. Studying such business relationships, and focusing on the cross-cultural management (CCM) issues that arise from daily communication between distance subsidiaries and the headquarters is a unique challenge. Communication, language and attitude all refer to the power and willingness of individuals. In the current research, cross-cultural challenges have been studied in a Hungarian multinational company between the headquarters and subsidiaries; more precisely, the challenges of the company bring new aspects into the already existing complex phenomena of CCM, widen horizons and gives a better understanding of CCM related challenges.

In order to study cross-cultural challenges through real, daily occurring examples, and to have a better understanding of the reasons, I chose a Hungarian multinational enterprise to manage my research in. This certain company is operating in the oil and gas industry, therefore I started my research with an overview of the industry. Oil and gas industry members have strong and robust business relationships that have been already built, and have been working efficiently for decades. It is challenging to get into the industry and create a business relationship with existing members. For countries that have entered the industry belatedly, competition is even harder. For this reason, they have to find regions that might be rich in raw materials which, while being tremendous opportunities also creates unique challenges that they must face. Cultural and political understanding is especially crucial in politically or economically high-risk areas. Customized CCM is needed in order to address the needs of business partners that appear in a certain time in a certain business context. To create more successful business relationships, the parties have to be more flexible.

I.1. Relevance of the research

Multinational enterprises play an increasingly important role in the world economy. Many of them have higher annual turnover than the GDP of a small country. In a world where companies have such influence and give jobs to thousands of people, they have to be managed in the best possible way since they are not only affecting the company members' lives, but also certain countries' societies. Therefore, paying attention to multinational enterprises and their actions is crucial, as the human factor is especially important. Among the company's resources – physical, human, financial and intellectual – the human resource is the most important from an organizational cultural point of view. Every large or medium sized company is operating in different countries by building a community from people with different backgrounds and cultures. The will of adaptation, openness and innovation is based on these factors (Lander, 2017). Multinational companies shape society, therefore the way they appear in a country and the messages they convey through their operation and brand might have an influence that changes individuals' mindsets and also smoothens business relationships.

Multinational business success can be built on effective communication and the right management styles to handle different cultures. Building up an organizational culture is important to survive in any kind of market. In this work, I focused on only one company and worked to understand their interpretation of CCM. It is hard to create standards, and most of the time useless, since every company has its own culture. The current research is exploratory and therefore we be qualitative in nature. My goal was to see and understand one company's organization culture and its cross-cultural challenges. I do not aim to create standards, or to do a cause and effect exploration, in general. My current research was about having a better understanding of the chosen company's Hungarian headquarters and its subsidiaries' relations with said headquarters, and their challenges. Although this research is unique to this case, it might serve as insight into other cases in similar situations.

Cross-cultural communication plays an important role in business success. There is a cultural gap between the chosen company's headquarters and the subsidiaries' host countries. Besides diplomatic ties, there are no other relationships between Hungary and these particular Asian or African countries. The Hungarian company operates in several continents but does not have a long business history there so far. It gives Hungary a unique position among members of oil industry. This uniqueness has unusual advantages and drawbacks. Creating their own reputation is an advantage, but on the other hand, the

industry is closed and hard to get into the countries where the resources are. Building up a good relationship with the subsidiary host counties, and managing business relationship in these countries is crucial in order to stay in the industry. Studying this unique process and position from a CCM perspective adds a new colour to the already wide-range management challenges.

Table 1. Research model

Research focus: CCM related challenges through Hun-Comp's example focusing on relationship between the Hungarian headquarters and Middle–Eastern subsidiaries.		
Research problem: Solutions and best practices regarding CCM are hard to copy. Tailor-made CCM, efficient communication and management style are essential. Within Europe West and East European countries face different challenges and the solutions should be different too in order to address the special needs. For instance Hun-Comp as a Central-East European company has it own local needs and difficulties can not be compared to the West European countries.	**Research question:** The current research is explonatry, it is about to uncover the cultural differences and cross-cultural challenges of Hun-Comp's headquarter and its subsidiaries. Through Hun-Comp and its organization culture I would like to see how they build up their own organization culture, and within that what kind of challenges they face and how they manage to overcome these difficulties.	**Research purpose**: The overall goal is to have a better understanding of the process how Hun-Comp headquarter members analyse challenges and find solutions. First and foremost the important goal is to understand the context of certain difficulties regarding CCM.

The main question: How does Hun-Comp manage their cross-cultural challenges?

(In order to keep the chosen Hungarian multinational company's anonymity, meet the necessary requirements and help the reader in the better understanding of my results I chose Hun-Comp as a pseudonym).

This question is further divided into sub questions:

- How do the members of Hun-Comp see the challenges which come from being a multinational company?
- How does the Hungarian Hun-Comp headquarters members define cultural differences between Headquarters and the subsidiaries, compared to the subsidiary Hun-Comp members?
- How different is the context in Hun-Comp compared to other Western multinational companies - according to the company members' belief?

II. Methodology

The methodology section is intended to summarize the comprehensive method of the research; more specified descriptions and applications are detailed in each publication separately (Figure 1). The thesis is logically composed of two parts of the research: content analysis and semi-structured interviews. Both research methods are qualitative. In order to manage the exploratory research and have a better understanding of the individuals in the organization (and through them to see the deep structure of cross-cultural challenges) undoubtedly a qualitative methodology had to be used.

Figure 1. Links between the papers

CHAPTER II.

CHAPTER I.

1st Paper:

Yousef, K. (2020) *Four pillars of cross-cultural management A systematic literature review = A kultúraközi menedzsment négy pillére Szakirodalmi áttekintés.* Vezetéstudo mány - Budapest Management Review, 51 (5) pp. 27-38

2nd Paper:

Yousef, K. (2020) *Unique Hungarian way of cross-cultural management Through an example of a multinational company in the oil and gas industry,* Journal of East European Management Studies, Vol25 (3) pp.447-467;

Presented: EURAM 2018, Best Paper Award

3rd Paper:

Yousef K. (2021) *Implementing language mandates: English as lingua franca in a Hungarian multinational company* Journal of East European Management Studies, (under publication);

Presented: EURAM 2020

CHAPTER III.

III. The results of the thesis

III.1. First Paper: Four pillars of cross-cultural management A systematic literature review

Besides the traditional narrative, in this literature review I found it important to systematically analyse the literature regarding CCM. The phenomenon is complex and the definition of CCM is not fully in line with the understanding and usage we have in academic discussion. Adler's definition gives an overview, but studying the current most prestigious journals' articles, it is challenging to put them in line with each other. In order to clarify the meaning of CCM and give a stable foundation to my research, I made a systematic literature review. Despite the traditional narrative reviews, the research process with systematic literature review is more structured and transparent (Tranfield, Denyer and Smart, 2003). In my research I have studied the highest ranked international journals regarding CCM. I based my research on the SCImago top-ranked journals (Q1), and selected only cross-cultural topics. SCImago Journal and Country Rank is a publicly available portal that includes journals and country scientific indicators developed from the information contained in Scopus database - Elsevier B.V. The current paper's resources are based on this portal's journal ranking system (Q1-Q4), and according to this system the top category (Q1) journals are highlighted and studied for further use in the current literature review. Several disciplines are analysed: cultural science, business and international management, organizational behaviour, human resource management, and strategy and management. According to the SCImago ranking of top journals (Q1), these are the disciplines that have the biggest effect on CCM. The focus is on the top journals, and through analysing them, a common understanding regarding CCM. Not only the original conceptualization of CCM dominates, but the outcome of the comparison and analysis was shown too.

In order to have a better understanding of the current meaning of CCM, highlighting the most important parts of it was crucial. CCM literature is constantly growing, and the meaning of CCM is changing. Therefore, identifying its main pillars gave a better overview (Oddou and Menedelhall, 1984; Starfield, 2002; Szkudlarek, 2009). It is becoming a more and more important discipline, which can be enriched by insights that expand beyond the core meaning (Tomaselli and Mboti, 2013). Four different aspects are identified based on the literature: According to the studied sources, CCM consists of four main pillars: initially it was a part of (1) psychology, then touching (2) anthropology, later on combining these with business practice related challenges, mostly (3) international business and (4) strategic management. Through these four aspects and their meeting points CCM, had been analysed in the first paper.

III.2. Second Paper. Unique Hungarian way of cross-cultural management Through an example of a multinational company in the oil and gas industry

Studying the literature from the beginning of CCM to the present gave a stable ground for the empirical research. I was able to base my research plan, and then manage my research, on this understanding. In the first part of my research, I conducted content analysis. I used all Hun-Comp's public, published documents. These documents helped me to have a better understanding of the official organizational culture, and also the values and beliefs they hold on to and convey to their audience. It is important not to standardize and not to look for the overall truth, but to have the best view to the points where different cultures meet each other. Coding the documents made it possible to see the whole picture. In this way, I could map the official corporate culture (Géring, 2015). To understand the basic message that the company expresses through every published document was essential since these are messages that are communicated outside the company as well. This kind of communication is attached with the brand of Hun-Comp; it attracts the people who want to work there, or who want to manage a business with the company. For having a better understanding of Hun-Comp's CCM related challenges, I analysed the organizational culture as the first step. Interviews were the most efficient way to collect data in this research, but first analysing these documents gave a glance of one side of the organizational culture; specifically, it using top-down communication to convey their values. The next step was to understand the real, everyday life of the Hun-Comp organizational culture. To manage this, semi-structured interviews were conducted. Putting these two data sets as parallels with each other, I was able to point out the differences of the conveyed message and the interpretation of it.

The research results showed that the main message Hun-Comp conveys through their documents, website and all online communication, focuses on the regional identity and crucial role of the leaders. CCM at Hun-Comp is based on their strong local, Central-Eastern European existence; and the hierarchy that it conveys is created of tailor-made rules and standards, based on their own needs. There is no overall truth and standard in CCM; Hun-Comp gives a good example of how to highlight the cultural similarities, and thus build a strong, long-lasting relationship on these basic principles. Hun-Comp headquarter's, and subsidiary host countries' cultures, might be different from each other (Hofstede, 1984), but their employees have similar needs (Schein,2010). Highlighting common values can provide a good way to understand the differences and be more tolerant towards each other within the company (Stoermer, Bader and Froese, 2016).

III.3. Third Paper: Implementing language mandates: English as lingua franca in a Hungarian multinational company

The qualitative methodology was the most suitable way to manage my research, and is what I used in this paper. Content analysis have given me enough information to have an overview, but to understand an organizational culture I had to continue my research with another methodology within the qualitative research. In my research, the focus was on Hun-Comp's cross-cultural challenges within the company. In order to uncover the deep structure of CCM as a phenomenon, I had to go through the interpretations of the individuals (Yoo, Matsumoto, and LeRoux, 2006; Zhou and Shalley, 2008). To manage this process, I planned to change the research method at that point. The organizational culture, the company members and their behaviour and interpretations had to be understood more, since they create the culture together (Smith, 2005; Moghaddam, 2006; Mahadevan, 2012). I conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews. The advantage of a semi-structured interview lies in its possibility to go for more descriptive answers; in my research this was priority. Grounded theory has been used for data analysis, and interviews as a source of data generation.

Not only the headquarters members were involved in the research, but subsidiaries' members too. Their understanding and experiences of cross-cultural challenges had to be studied to see the interpretation they have. The solution was to involve the expats coming from the subsidiaries to the headquarters, and also the expats from the headquarters to the subsidiaries (Husted, 1996). I wanted to look at how way employees think, how they receive messages from the headquarters, and how they interpret the rules and values Hun-Comp headquarters in Hungary conveys. The official, written values and the real-life ones have to be compared with each other in order to find out the effectiveness of their communication (Reinecke, 2015). It is difficult to understand a culture, but with this methodology it was possible to see the core elements. The best way was to go into the organization and study the different actions and behaviours, and to also pay attention to the context (Shuter, 1977; Van Maanen, 2006; Lihui, 2015; Gustaffson et al., 2016).

This paper summarizes an understanding of all the cross-cultural challenges that came with the new strategy announced and started in 2013. This new strategy was about the new, official organization language: English as lingua franca, instead of Hungarian. For Hun-Comp, this changing project seemed the most important step towards being a multinational company. Interviewees mentioned this event as one of the most significant changes in the organization's history. English as lingua franca seemed more as a new responsibility, and caused a barrier between employees (Brimm, 2015). At that point, the goal was to have a better understanding of this changing process through the employees' and managers' experiences.

Findings from the interviews show that Hun-Comp, as a Hungarian multinational company, faces different challenges regarding the language shifting process than other company headquarters that are based in Western countries, since English is a second language for almost all members of those companies. Changing to English as a lingua franca is challenging since it needs more effort to manage the same task while still meeting the same deadlines and managing the same projects. The new official language raised many sensitive questions. Since Hungarian is not a well-known language in the business world, choosing Hungarian as a lingua franca at Hun-Comp was not an option. Since 2013, the new lingua franca created groups of similar-minded people, and did not make communication easier. These facts can lead to misinterpretations and cause stress within the company, which makes it challenging to serve the long-term strategy.

III.4. Summary of the results

In the following chapter I summarize the answers to my research questions that I raised at the beginning of the research. During the process every main part of the research was published in a paper; this approach helped me to reflect on my work at each step. An overall summary of these three papers and the conclusion of the research are presented in the following pages.

III.5. Conclusion of the research

This research was considered exploratory; the focus was to understand one certain organization's CCM and its main strategy. Furthermore, it looked at the difficulties the company members face, and the way they manage business relationships despite these obstacles. The goal was to have results that serve for a better understanding of the specialities that a cross-cultural relationship has. Understanding CCM's deep structure through individual interpretation can bring up factors that play a crucial role in building up CCM. Instead of a standard-making process, learning and having a better understanding were priority.

Highlighting common values can provide a good way to understand the differences and be more open and understanding towards each other within the company. The message that Hun-Comp conveys through their documents, website and all online communication focus on the regional identity and crucial role of the leaders. CCM at Hun-Comp is based on their strong local, Central-Eastern European existence; and the hierarchy that conveys the rules and standards they created for themselves is based on their needs. There is no standard, one best way in CCM; the focus needs to be shifted in order to build a tailor-made strategy. Hun-Comp gives a good example on how to emphasize cultural similarities and thus build strong, long-lasting relationships on these basic principles. Hun-Comp headquarters' and subsidiary host countries' cultures might be different from one another, but their employees have similar needs. Instead of focusing on cultural differences and addressing them individually, Hun-Comp aims to bring shared values and common goals to the forefront. All the parties need clear, standard rules and processes; therefore, Hun-Comp's strict and standardized way of business management is mutually accepted and serves the company's success by giving clear guidance for members.

In order to give stable ground to daily business communication and knowledge sharing within Hun-Comp headquarters, and between the headquarters and subsidiaries, a new organizational language had to be chosen. Hungarian, as it is not a well-known language in daily business life, could not serve the company's efficiency goals. Despite the fact that English is one of the most widely taught foreign languages in Hungary, it raised number of challenges. As the first company-wide project, the new official language shifting process brought out hidden issues. Hun-Comp's long-term strategy, to give an equal chance to all the members and became a multinational company with one standard language, made efficiency decrease in the short term, and shook the shared belief in common values. Conducting semi-structured interviews highlighted the facts that any change in the company rules and standards

can raise a number of questions in individuals. The dominant spoken language was Hungarian in the headquarters, thus English as a lingua franca created a gap, and divided the company between Hungarian and non-Hungarian employees.

The headquarters' language is used in the company and the language policy is communicated by the headquarters to the subsidiaries, but in the case of Hun-Comp, the issue is more difficult. The language changing process was more challenging at the headquarters, since all the communication, including emails, meetings and most of the in-person communication had to be changed from Hungarian to English. The lack of English knowledge, a lack of experience working in daily basics in the second language, and the unusual lack of use of English by even the Hungarian colleagues at the headquarters caused this division. The subsidiary members, who had to use English even before the new language policy, found it easy to fulfil the new requirements. However, these two different attitudes towards the new official language alienated the members from each other. Cultural differences were not only an occasional issue to face, but became a daily challenge to overcome. Cross-cultural difficulties can be managed with communication and transparency, but if communication is the problem within the company, then it is a barrier for understanding each other.

Findings from the interviews show that Hun-Comp, as a Hungarian multinational company, faces different challenges regarding the language shifting process than other company headquarters that are based in Western countries. At Hun-Comp, English being a second language for almost all members of the company made it more difficult for the headquarters to implement the language project. About their best practices regarding CCM, the companies with headquarters based in Western Europe must face different challenges than the Budapest-based Hun-Comp. The language changing process changes power positions and requires higher-level language skills. In the headquarters, using English and not Hungarian raises a number of sensitive questions. In Hun-Comp, the leaders' roles are important, and their performance is an example to the other members. Most of the managers have been working for decades in the company, and have a certain working routine and level of performance; some find it challenging to meet the new requirements. Hun-Comp, by changing the lingua franca, creates a new, more international workplace and through this a new organizational culture. At Hun-Comp standards, the hierarchy and their own rules gives a stable foundation to their everyday work life with their distant subsidiaries. Changing this ground with a new official language changes the company and every individual within the company.

III.6. Contribution to the science

The most important result of my research was adding another approach to the discussion of CCM by focusing on the not well-researched Hungarian, Central-Eastern European company's perspective. The majority of the books and papers I have studied during my research are about Western companies' CCM challenges and best-practices. There is a homogeneity in these sources, since they are mostly addressing similar needs and offer explanations and solutions that are only applicable for certain companies with almost the same characteristics. The circumstances within Europe varies from nation to nation; their history, diplomatic ties, and the economic status of the countries are different from one another. When companies' headquarters are based in a different country than the subsidiaries (with different cultures), they face different challenges regarding CCM, and each of them need their own tailor-made solution. The result of my own research is a part of a complex and ever-growing discussion regarding the CCM literature. In order to have a better understating of CCM, it has to be analysed from many different aspects. Each viewpoint has to be compared to many others to see the differences and similarities. To widen the horizon in the CCM literature, there is a great need for different approaches.

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V. Author's publication in the topic

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Language policy and real language use (2020) conference presentation European Academy of Management (EURAM) Conference, Dublin, Ireland, 4-6, December 2020.

Hungarian success story in Central-Asia (2018) conference presentation, European Academy of Management (EURAM) Conference 2018., Reykjavik, Iceland, 19-22, June 2018.

- winning the Best Paper Award

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Eltérő kultúrák azonos érdekek, (Different cultures – Similar interests) Spring Wind Conference 2017, Miskolc, Hungary, 31. May – 2. April 2017.