

The application of Hofstede's cultural dimensions at Botho University: A model for workplace harmony in a multi-cultural business environment

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Abstract

Botho College staff can be categorised into eight distinct nationalities. This paper seeks to determine how Hofstede's cultural dimensions can be applied with reference to the three dominant nationalities at Botho University namely Batswana, Indians and Zimbabweans. The findings of the research will be used to determine how different nationalities can relate and how employees and management can harmoniously co-exist and effectively handle the expectations of these dominant groups. The study used in-depth interviews as the most dominant data gathering tool. A sample of 30 staff members from the teaching staff – 10 Batswana, 10 Indians and 10 Zimbabweans were selected using the purposeful random sampling procedure. Observation was also used to examine the behaviours and perceptions of staff of these nationalities over a period of time. Research findings indicate that employees of different nationalities covered in the sample have different behaviours based on Hofstede's five cultural dimensions.

Keywords: Culture, power distance, individualism, uncertainty avoidance, long-term orientation, masculinity

1. Introduction

The world has become a global village where technology has brought people of different nationalities much closer together. This implies that people of different cultural inclinations are now working together more and more, associating and communicating on a daily basis. While this may be exciting and interesting, and offering an organisation's customers broader and better perspectives on learning and life, it may be challenging, frustrating and uncertain. Challenges emanate from uncertainty on how one should relate to a person of another culture; what one should say when coming across someone along the corridor first time and thereafter; whether there are cultural taboos that determine what one should say or do to a person of another culture, and so on.

Failure to understand these cultural dimensions can lead to disharmony in the workplace which will have a negative impact on productivity and customer satisfaction. This paper seeks to determine how Hofstede's cultural dimensions can be applied with reference to the three dominant nationalities at Botho College namely Batswana, Indians and Zimbabweans. The findings of the research will be used to determine how different nationalities can relate and how employees and management can harmoniously co-exist and effectively handle the expectations of these dominant groups.

Botho College staff can be categorised into eight distinct nationalities namely Botswana, India, Zimbabwe, Kenya, Ghana, Cameroon, Malawi, and Nigeria. Such a diverse background is what is necessary for any reputable higher education institution in as far as it leads to the production of a graduate with a global perspective.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Hofstede's cultural dimensions

With access to people working for the same organisation (IBM) in over 40 countries of the world, Dr Geert Hofstede identified certain distinct cultural dimensions that accounted for differences between the cultures of different individuals from different countries which organisational management and employees must handle well in order to peacefully co-exist within the organisation (www.geert-hofstede.com). From an analysis of employees at IBM, Hofstede concluded that organisations are culturally-bounded and identified five work-related cultural dimensions that have an impact on work-related cultural values in different countries. These five cultural dimensions regard five anthropological problem areas that different societies deal with in different ways and determine the behaviour and relations of employees of different cultural backgrounds in an organisation. According to Hofstede and Minkov (2010), these dimensions represent different ways different national societies

cope with inequality, uncertainty, relationships between individuals and groups, the emotional implications of having been born a boy or girl (gender issues), and the future. These are outlined below.

2.1.1 Power distance

According to the Hofstede website www.geert-hofstede.com, power distance refers to the degree of existing and acceptable inequality among those employees with and those without power, that is, the leaders and the led. A high employee power distance is an indication that unequal distribution of power is acceptable in that society and that those without power clearly understand their actual place in the system (Hofstede, 2003). On the other hand, if employees' power distance is low, it implies equitable sharing and dispersion of power, that is, members of that society view themselves as equals. Nationalities with low power distance means supervisors and supervisees regard each other as equal and only separated by chance, opportunity, and luck and so on. They harbour such thoughts as "tomorrow it will be me; life is a wheel; what goes round comes round". Societies associated with high power distance have these characteristics (www.geert-hofstede.com):

- Big gaps in remuneration, authority and respect;
- Centralised organisations; and
- Strong power hierarchies. There is a clear dividing line between managers and subordinates.

Societies associated with low power distance possess the following characteristics:

- Flatter organisations
- Equality between leaders and subordinates

2.1.2 Individualism

This refers to the strength of connections people have to members of their community. Hofstede (2003) argues that a high individualism score indicates a loose connection with people or lack of interpersonal connection and little sharing of responsibility among members of society. Socialisation is only with family and a few close friends. There is high value for people's freedom, that is, people in this society prefer to be left alone. Members of a society high on individualism have high enjoyment of challenges and high expectation of rewards for hard individual work.

In societies low on individualism, nationalities emphasise more on harmony than honesty and in order to create harmony, people prefer to work with others for the organisational rather than individual good. Such people prefer closer supervision and interaction between supervisor and supervisees. There is high preference for lighter individual tasks and team assignments where team effort is recognised and rewarded.

2.1.3 Uncertainty avoidance

This is the extent society members feel insecure when confronted with the uncertain or the unknown (www.geert.hofstede.com). High uncertainty avoidance society fears the unknown and therefore avoid ambiguity where possible. They are governed by rules and order and they seek a collective 'truth'. On the other hand, low uncertainty avoidance society enjoys the unknown and values differences. There are very few rules and people are encouraged to discover their own truth.

2.1.4 Long Term Orientation

This refers to the extent society is concerned with future benefits versus benefits, that is, what is in it for us now versus what is in it for us or our children years to come. Society with high long term orientation regard family as the basis of society. Such society view parents and men as having more authority than young people and women. Such members have a strong work ethic and place high value on education and training. On the other hand, societies with low long term orientation promote equality, treat others as they would want to be treated and seek self-actualisation.

2.1.5 Masculinity

This is the extent society values and maintains traditional male and female roles. High masculinity means men are tough and are the provider to the family. They are assertive and have unquestionable authority over women. Low masculinity means roles are blurred, that is, they are not obvious since men and women perform equal tasks.

2.2 The importance of Hofstede's cultural dimensions

Hofstede's theory of cultural dimensions exposes the impact of a society's culture on the values, norms and behaviours of its members and the theory has been extensively used in many fields as a model for research particularly in the fields of cross-cultural psychology, international management, and cross-cultural business communication (www.geerthofstede.nl). He developed his theory through a world-wide survey of employee values at IBM by examining and observing cultural differences among the organisation's employees from all over the world.

Hofstede (2003) argues that if not properly understood, culture is more often a source of conflict than synergy and cultural differences are a nuisance and often a disaster (www.geert-hofstede.com). He further posits that despite glaring evidence that people from different cultural backgrounds behave differently, we tend to pretend that all people are the same. Due to this lack of cultural awareness there is a tendency to minimize cultural differences, leading to misunderstandings and misinterpretations between people from different countries.

Despite the convergence phenomenon resulting from the global village culture, cultural differences and diversity are still prevalent and awareness of these differences is therefore important in order to have respectful cross-cultural relations. Awareness of these cultural differences prepares people for what to expect from associates from different cultures and how to behave towards them.

2.3 Practical applications of the theory

According to Hofstede (2003), when it comes particularly to international business, promoting cultural sensitivity will assist employees to work more effectively and more harmoniously even if they come from different countries. More specifically, Hofstede's theory is applicable through the following in the following:

- International communication

Wardrobe (2005) argues that employees in a multicultural organisation are usually professionals from different countries who interact on a daily basis and cross-cultural communication becomes vital whereby employees become aware of cultural differences since what may be well acceptable and normal in one culture may be totally unacceptable and even offensive in a different country. Hofstede's cultural dimensions affect all levels in communication, that is, verbal (words and language), non-verbal (body language, gestures, symbols) and etiquette dos and don'ts (dress, dining, protocol, customs), and also written communication (Wardrobe, 2005).

- International negotiation

According to LeBaron (2003), understanding of cultural dimensions can increase success in the negotiation process and reduce frustration and conflicts if properly applied since in international negotiation communication style, expectation, issue ranking, and goals will change depending on one's culture. For example, American negotiators may want to reach an agreement quickly and sign a contract because time is money, whereas Chinese and Japanese negotiators spend time on preliminaries (non-business activities) such as small talks, hospitality and drinking coffee and so on with preferences to protocol and form in order to establish a solid relationship first (LeBaron, 2003). When negotiating in western countries, the aim is to work out a mutual understanding and agreement (sign a contract) and then shake hands to signal the conclusion of the agreement and the starting of working together (www.geert-hofstede.com).

- International management

Builtjens and Noorderhaven (2006) believe that in international management and cross-cultural leadership, decisions taken are based on the country's customs and values hence managers of multi-cultural organisations need to train their employees in order to make them sensitive to cultural differences, with protocols across countries.

- International Marketing

Mooij and Hofstede (2010) postulate that Hofstede's cultural dimensions model is very useful in international marketing as it identifies national values both in the business context and in general. They argue that as organisations try to adapt their product and service offerings to local habits and preferences, they need to understand the specific cultures of their target market and this is determined by their culture which influences their dress, food, cars, music and dance, the cultural artifacts they use, and so on. For example, when marketing cars in a country where uncertainty avoidance is high, there is need to emphasise on the safety features of the car. When marketing a cell phone in a country where individualism is high like the USA, one need to show an

advert of an individual using the gadget to save time and money whereas when marketing it in a country where individualism is low like China, one need to emphasise on collective experience (Mooij and Hofstede, 2010).

3. Research Methodology

This article adopted a qualitative research methodology. Cohen (2000) posits that a qualitative research is primarily an inductive process which is not heavily imbedded into statistics and relies, to a large extent, on observations of the data collected, tracing existing relationships and trends developing. The paper used a case study design in which one case, Botho University, is studied in order to understand the cultural behaviours of employees along Hofstede's cultural dimensions.

A sample of 30 lecturers from Botho University consisting of 10 of Indian nationality, 10 of Zimbabwean nationality and 10 Batswana was chosen from a total teaching staff compliment of 170 representing 17,6% of the total population. The research used purposeful sampling (non-probabilistic sampling) which is selecting information-rich informants for study in-depth for one to understand crucial cultural aspects of respondents' behaviour without needing to generalize. Purposeful sampling was meant to increase the utility of information obtained from a small sample. Respondents were chosen because they were knowledgeable and informative about the phenomena being investigated.

According to www.bothouniversity.ac.bw, Botho University is Botswana's largest private tertiary education provider operating in the country since 1997. The institution offers Accounting and computing programmes from certificate level to a Master's degree level. It is the first private tertiary institution to be accredited by the Tertiary Education Council (TEC). All its programmes are also accredited by the Botswana Training Authority (BOTA). It has centers in three locations, namely Gaborone, Francistown and Maun. With over 4000 students and 250 highly qualified and internationally oriented staff comprising mainly Batswana, Indians, Zimbabweans and Kenyans, the institution is widely recognized and respected in Botswana as a premier quality tertiary educational provider. Botho University offers students from across the country and abroad a chance to study at any one of its three campuses in Gaborone, Francistown and Maun. Botho University offers students a well-rounded learning experience.

Direct observation was also employed as the author is a senior employee of the organisation having been with the organisation for the past six years which made it easy for him to observe vital phenomena over a prolonged period. To avoid bias and reactivity in observation, the researcher adopted a naturalistic and participant observation where the researcher observed participants in their natural settings, their everyday social settings and their everyday behaviour. The researcher balanced participation in order to absorb the situations with sufficient detachment to be able to analyse and observe in a detached way. Again, observation was used together with interviews to collect data on the sensitive, unspoken aspects of the research. Interviews were also used to probe further and confirm what was observed. Therefore, the behaviours of Indians, Batswana and Zimbabweans in terms of Hofstede's cultural dimensions were observed over a period.

4. RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS

The results are summarised in the table below and then discussed.

VARIABLE	INDIANS	BATSWANA	ZIMBAWEANS
Power Distance	High	Low - medium	Very Low
Individualism	Low	High	High
Masculinity	High	Low	High
Uncertainty Avoidance	Low	High	Very High
Long Term Orientation	High	Low - medium	Low

Power Distance

Indians rank high in power distance, Batswana low-medium, while Zimbabweans rank very low on this dimension. This means they view power hierarchy as normal and obvious. Botho University management needs to come up with decisions affecting Indian subordinates without consulting them and should exude authority in the process. On the other hand Indian subordinates should not disagree with decisions made by their superiors since this is least expected. They should send reports and minutes of meetings to the leader only and do not copy junior people. Subordinates should always acknowledge the leaders' power and consult their leaders at every turn. They should always tell their leaders "You are our saviours; without you, we will reach nowhere; without you this organisation will have collapsed a long time ago, and so on". This will motivate the leaders substantially.

For Zimbabwean and Batswana employees, Botho University management should strive to make them work more in teams and committees rather than individuals and heap praise on the team for a job well done with all attempts being made not to single out individuals for special mention as this will extinguish team spirit. Management should involve all employees in selecting leaders, for example, asking everyone in the department one by one who they think should be appointed HOD. Even if the views of the majority do not eventually rule the roost, members feel motivated that at least they were consulted and may even think that the one eventually appointed received the highest nominations. Management should also involve as many of these subordinates as possible in decision-making even if the involvement is cosmetic.

Individualism

Indian employees at Botho University rank low on this dimension implying a collectivist society. Management should ensure that Indian subordinates always work with others and are supervised more closely than Batswana and Zimbabwean subordinates. They must ensure that tasks given are elaborately explained and are not difficult to accomplish. Management should always engage these employees at a more personal level, enquiring about their families and creating an environment where family ties thrive. They must create an environment where these subordinates can reveal a lot of personal information about themselves and family since they expect anybody with an interest in them to have interest in the welfare of their family – nuclear and extended. This can be done by affording them an opportunity to live and work with their spouses, allowing them leave to be with family, availing to them effective and reliable communications means to link up with family regularly, and so on. Management should allow them room to observe their traditions and if any change has to be introduced, it must happen gradually without abruptly unsettling them. There must be consistency at all times.

Zimbabwean and Batswana employees at Botho University rank high in individualism implying only professional connection with fellow employees. Management should ensure that any socialisation activities for these employees include family members and few close friends. Such activities should be of the employees' choice as these people value their freedom seriously and prefer to be left alone to choose who they want to interact with. Management should give these employees individual assignments within the committees and reward people as individuals and as committees without emphasizing on the individual. For example, a Motswana or Zimbabwean footballer selected Soccer Star of the Year will credit his success to teammates rather than to himself even though he would want the fat cheque to be his alone.

Management of Botho University, in dealing with Zimbabwean and Batswana subordinates, will need to acknowledge solo effort though in a diplomatic way. They need to show great respect for privacy and should not ask for too much personal information such as marital status, whether one has children or not or how many children one has, salary from previous employment, and so on. These employees also need to be encouraged and allowed to express their own ideas without fear and should not be penalised for trial and error. This is the kind of environment where their creativity will blossom leading to high levels of motivation.

Masculinity

The three major nationalities at Botho University have varying degrees by which they value and maintain traditional male and female roles. Indians and Zimbabweans rank high on masculinity while Batswana rank low. This means that for both Indians and Zimbabweans, male employees are providers of the family while female employees play a supporting role. Management therefore needs to ensure male employees are rewarded enough to enable them to play the role of providers to the family. Higher rewards may have to be paid to male employees compared to their female counterparts though these rewards may not necessarily be financial. This is,

however, controversial. In the 1970s in Zimbabwe for instance, the then colonial government paid male employees higher salaries than female employees with the same qualifications and experience using this cultural dimension as an excuse.

Botho University, so as not to offset the masculinity cultural value, needs to ensure the appointment of more male Indian and Zimbabwean staff members to individual and team leadership position than their female colleagues while recognizing outstanding female employees so as not to demotivate them. When teams are being constituted comprising of Indians or Zimbabweans or both, management should ensure that there are more males in the teams than females and they should give distinct roles for males and females. Management should ensure that meetings are chaired by a male staff member to give an impression of effectiveness.

As for the low masculinity nationals like Batswana where male-female roles are blurred and the boy-child and the girl-child occupy equal status in society, management (and other employees) should avoid the use of masculine-oriented jargon such as guys, he, and so on as it easily infuriates and demoralize the gender-sensitive female staff members leading to lack of harmonious co-existence with male employees. Appointments to individual and team leadership positions should be based on merit rather than gender. Predefined criteria such as work experience, academic qualifications and so on should form the basis for promotion than gender considerations. Job designs should not discriminate along gender considerations meaning male and female employees must be treated equally without disadvantaging one sex. For example, a consideration by one manager that female lecturers cannot take 19:00 hours classes because they should not knock off late when thieves are active, was viewed as gender discrimination and therefore discouraged. If such a consideration is applied, then it should not be announced to make it overt.

Uncertainty Avoidance

The findings of this study rank Indians low on uncertainty avoidance while Batswana are ranked high and Zimbabweans very high. This means that to effectively manage Zimbabweans and Batswana and make them a settled lot, Botho University management should clearly and concisely outline management expectations from them and state clearly what will happen if such expectations are met or not met. Job requirements must be clear and instructions must be spelt out to these employees in great detail to enable them to know exactly what management expects them to do. Management needs to be very formal when dealing with these employees and clearly outline rules, procedures and policies because such employees rely heavily on specific instructions in carrying out their operations at work and follow religiously standard operational procedures and instructions in performing tasks (Wu Ming-Yu, 2006). Communication on what is happening, and what will happen, should be as effective and clear as possible and nothing should be taken for granted. When addressing these employees, management should use hand gestures and facial expressions to show emphasis as well as raised voice, changing tone to express emotions. Such tactics lead to these employees clearly understand what will be happening leading them to support and get along with management positions even on issues that may be unpopular with them. Organisational structure must be clear leaving no room for guess work and assumptions, for example, the Team Leader reports to the Head of Department who reports to the Dean who reports to the Pro-Vice Chancellor and so on. If the Team Leader is seen reporting to the Dean, a Motswana and Zimbabwean HOD will be heavily demoralized especially the Zimbabwean, who will spend sleepless nights thinking that probably the Team Leader is on the verge of taking his place. One football coach working in South Africa confirmed this when he said in a football team comprising many nationalities in the Absa premiership, when the coach starts warming up players on the substitute bench, Zimbabwean players on the pitch are affected so much that it even disturbs their concentration each of them fearing that he is about to be substituted. For Zimbabweans mostly, anything that remains unclear and unexplained to them poses a serious challenge to their performance and they will only effectively focus on their jobs when assured that all will be well. For instance, when their contracts are close to expiring, they should be informed well in advance that the contracts will be renewed otherwise the renewal will happen when they already have alternative employment if jobs are easily available.

As for Indian employees whose uncertainty avoidance is low, Botho University management should manage them more informally than formally, for example, even giving them verbal promotions. Extensive use of rules and regulations should be avoided as this unsettles them. They will think that they are in prison. Rigid structures in the organisations should be replaced with loose ones that only lead to order and prevent chaos. When addressing them, one should minimize use of hand gestures and facial expressions to emphasise issues and

express emotions as this will create an impression of chaos and collapsing of systems which will destabilize their minds, leading to panic and stress.

Long Term Orientation

This study found out that Indians have a high long term orientation, while that of Batswana is low to medium, while that of Zimbabweans is low. This means that for Indians future benefits outweigh current benefits, while for Batswana, a mixture of benefits now and benefits in future will be a tenable situation. For Zimbabweans on the other hand, what is crucial is “what is for us now?” This explains why a lot of companies in Zimbabwe paid their employees per week rather than per month. To effectively manage Zimbabweans, Botho University management needs to focus more on what these people can benefit from now rather than the future, for example, allowing them to encash leave days quarterly instead of annually (while Batswana encash biannually), receiving gratuity as part of monthly salary (while Batswana receive their severance pay at the end of the year), receiving recognition for part completion of a three year qualification instead of after graduation and so on. Employment benefits such as car insurance, medical aid, and funeral assistance do not appeal to Zimbabweans unless there is real promise that the car will be stolen, the employee will get sick in a few weeks, or one will die this year. For Indians, emphasis should be more on future benefits rather than current benefits, for example gratuity when the employee is retiring, insurance to secure one’s property into the future, medical aid to cover one in the event of unexpected illness and so on.

For Indians, financing activities that entrench family values such as family fun day will motivate them and lead them to enjoy their stay at work and be happy with their management and fellow employees, and so sponsoring them for further education and training to prepare them for top positions in future. These will to a certain extent also be attractive to Batswana provided that they really have confidence that such education and training will translate to future benefits. As for Zimbabweans, such education and training will have meaning if the expected benefits are clearly stated and quantified and evidence is availed to them of employees at Botho University who have benefited or are benefiting and the size of the benefit in monetary terms and other quantifiable terms, otherwise they may be happier with a situation where the tuition fee availed by the employer is converted to cash and paid to the employee now.

5. Conclusion

Botho University is a multi-cultural business organisation that employs people from at least six different nationalities, but most notable are India, Botswana, and Zimbabwe. This scenario poses challenges for management when it comes to managing and looking after employees from such diverse cultural backgrounds. This research has discovered major differences in cultural behaviours of Indians, Botswana and Zimbabweans along the cultural dimensions of Geert Hofstede namely power distance, uncertainty avoidance, individualism, masculinity, and long term orientation. Failure by an organisation to consider cultural differences of employees in terms of these cultural dimensions leads to demotivation of staff, frustration, stress, conflict between employees and management, and between different employee groups. This disharmony will have far reaching consequences on the performance and productivity of employees if unchecked. Botho University management therefore needs to consider the cultural values of their Indian, Botswana and Zimbabwean employees along Hofstede’s theory and respond accordingly in order create harmonious working relations in the institution.

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