

# CAUTION: Cultural Values at Work!

**Asma Abdullah highlights the importance of discerning the personal values of the individual before training and education**

*“The common approach to a corporate training event is to focus on skills and the "how to's ". The assumption that there is one person who knows what to do and teaches another person "how to do it" suggests that skilful behaviour, when performed in proper sequence or with well-chosen timing, can bring about positive meanings and outcomes. In conducting human resource development-oriented courses, I am finding this assumption to be no longer appropriate.”*

The development of skills must be triggered by an awareness and even transformation of one's values at the individual level. The heart of personal change is not on acquiring skills and competencies but the attachment of meaning and value we give to our actions.

To be able to relate and work with people from different cultures, we need to look at how they perceive, believe, think, and evaluate the world, self, and others and their relationship with God. It is only when our actions are congruent with our values that we can begin to maximise our assets and minimise our liabilities - enabling us to function from a position of strength and commitment.

The influence of culture and how it shapes our behaviour is clearly accentuated when we communicate with people who are not like us in terms of language, religions, customs, etc. While common principles of management such

as planning, organising, co-ordinating and controlling, and certain elements such as technology, structure and processes, are universal phenomena, specific managerial functions are culture-specific and reflect the culture and historical developments of a particular society or culture. The main difference is the human behaviour within those ‘universal’ principles.

At the workplace, it becomes even more important that we understand these differences and specifically how our cultural values influence our daily functioning, personal productivity and work habits.

Very often, the evolution of our work culture is based on how these values are expressed through shared practices by those who are in positions of power and influence. For example, if managers value hard work, discipline and spiritual well-being, it is likely that they will bring these values into the

organisation to influence its corporate culture and shared practices.

To promote a work culture which is congruent with the values and aspirations of their staff, therefore requires managers to explore the revered values of their workforce and develop shared practices which are congruent with those they have acquired at an early age.

To understand values, we have to recognise that they give meaning and purpose to our lives. Values are the unseen aspects of our culture which influence our thoughts, feelings and actions and drive our work patterns and habits.

For values to be instilled, they must be meaningfully communicated to the individual at any early age by parents, significant elders, etc. These values are a set of clear and uncompromising statements about what is critical to him. They must also be freely chosen by the individual and cannot be externally imposed upon him. Values need to be acted out and made visible as efforts towards an intended destination.

It is therefore essential that we become aware of our personal and cultural values - our own 'baggage' - because they have a significant influence on our work lives. To enable us to understand these values and how they are 'programmed' in all of us, let us examine the following three sets of values:

**Personal/Individual/Family:** We acquire a set of values regardless of our ethnic group at an early age through the process of socialisation by our parents, teachers, and many significant others in our lives. Values relating to honesty, discipline, sincerity, trustworthiness, integrity and others are expected to be

internalised in all of us as we become fully mature and normal human beings. These values are often considered as universal.

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**Ethnic/Cultural:** We are collectively programmed to adopt a set of values commonly identified with a racial group. These values are therefore unique to us and our ethnic culture. They form the basis of symbols and rituals which we share with members of our primary group, the family and significant elders. Over the years these values are integrated and they influence our own value system and govern our daily behaviour.

**Organisational:** We adopt a set of work values which may not be congruent with those at the ethnic/cultural level, in order to become more effective and productive at the workplace. These values are often demonstrated through common practices which the organisation specifically considers as part of its shared rituals and symbols and are reinforced by policies and procedures. They determine our success as a functional contributor at the workplace and as a member of that workgroup.

Hence, in addition to the personal and cultural values, an individual upon entry into an organisational setting has to learn to internalise a new set of work-oriented values through common practices which are seen as organised rituals in the life of an organisation. Rewards, incentives and pressures are often used by management for employees to accept these new values as they remain within the organisation.

While employees willingly accept most of the new work values, they may find some that are not in harmony and therefore incongruent with their own revered values at the individual and ethnic/cultural levels.

To understand these different interpretations requires us to go a step further by looking at the underlying assumptions of these values in different cultures. (See box below)

- *A belief that we (humanity) must live in harmony with the world around us rather than control the environment to suit our needs.*
- *An understanding that the basis of doing business is trust and relationship rather than obtaining a contractual agreement.*
- *Communication tends to focus more on vocal tone, body language, facial expressions and eye contact in order to build and maintain relationships rather than merely focusing on facts and information.*
- *A strong sense of social responsibility and a feeling of shame mean people are less likely to do negative things because of adverse social consequences rather than be driven by a sense of guilt.*
- *A tendency to be holistic in terms of development involving both material and spiritual dimensions rather than focusing mainly on material development.*
- *A preference for combining personal and professional lives when evaluating people rather than separating their personal lives from their professional lives.*
- *An emphasis on co-operation, as the main quality of life depends on the spirit of interdependence and harmonious relationships with others more than on competition, individual achievement, assertiveness and pursuit of material success.*

These differences in our cultural assumptions must be understood as they influence the priorities that each culture places on the values they instill in their members during the early process of socialisation and acculturation. Failure to look at them causes us to evaluate people from another culture according to one's own set of cultural assumptions.

Based on these cultural differences and the manner in which values have been programmed into us from a young age, it becomes essential that we examine the importance and significance of values at the individual and ethnic/cultural levels of the target audience. This is especially so when we conduct courses in the area of skills development. It is therefore advisable to begin with where the group is, what they cherish and value

and want to bring to be workplace to enhance productivity and relationships.

People, we know, are often motivated to perform when their actions are congruent with their own individual and cultural values. This is especially so in most Asian societies which consider work to be anchored in spiritual beliefs and ancient wisdom.

So, in transferring skills and techniques it will be more appropriate to begin by triggering values at the individual and cultural levels. Communicating new concepts and

ideas can be made much faster when we incorporate their individual/personal and ethnic/cultural values to help develop appropriate 'how to's' relevant to the group and to its culture.

The challenge for those who work across cultures is to be able to understand, appreciate, and respect value differences and make a genuine effort to explore what's beyond these values and get into the realm of underlying assumptions.

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