

NATIONAL CULTURAL ARCHETYPES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR ORGANISATIONS

Some years ago, whilst windsurfing in the South Island of New Zealand, a group of us; a Brit, a Canadian, a New Zealander, and an Australian were sitting overlooking the lake sharing some well earned beers. Talk turned to our work in different countries. We came from a range of occupations, but our experiences of working in our own countries and those of France, Canada, the USA, Singapore, Japan, Britain, and Scandinavia were remarkably similar. There were it seems strong national archetypes.

These experiences become more common and more important as the world becomes more global. There's nothing new about working in different cultures – forests of books have been written on this. However this particular conversation reminded me strongly of cross national work carried out a decade or so ago.

In the mid 1980's the US telecommunications company AT&T became increasingly unhappy with their Quality Assurance program. People weren't getting behind it in the expected way. Conscious of the Japanese origins of the quality assurance movement, some of the senior managers began to wonder whether this failure might have something to do with culture norms of the US workforce. No one doubted that US workers could produce quality work, what the managers did doubt was whether the existing quality assurance approach was the right way. Somehow it didn't seem to push American buttons as much as it pushed Japanese buttons. Maybe, they speculated, the particular approach to "quality" flowed from Japanese cultural norms and thus failed to motivate US workers like it motivated their Japanese counterparts. Rather than embark on a hopeless task of turning Americans into Japanese, they wondered whether the task could be reoriented to match the American culture.

Enter Clotaire Rapaille, a French Jungian psychologist. Rapaille had already made a fortune applying his deep knowledge of national cultural motivational archetypes to multinational marketing campaigns. [See <http://www.archetypediscoveriesworldwide.com>] He was famously associated with translating the failure of French cheeses in the USA to phenomenal success by identifying a crucial cultural difference. The French, he discovered, associate cheese as something alive, for Americans it's just a block of dead stuff. The marketing strategy was changed and the rest is history.

Rapaille was recruited by AT&T to determine whether different cultures had different concepts of “quality”, and if they did whether these could explain the way in which American workers were responding to a Japanese sourced method of quality management. What he found was this :

In Japan, “quality” is associated with “perfection”. Quality Assurance mechanisms, with their low levels of tolerance and emphasis on predetermined standards, are consistent with that national archetype. However, in the USA “quality” was identified as something that “works better than previously” – the US is a culture of incremental improvement based on trial and error. Consequently the same management processes and procedures that produce high levels of achievement in Japan will in the USA produce something that works better than previously.

The lesson for AT&T was not that American workers couldn’t achieve high levels of performance, but to achieve it you had to manage the process very differently than in Japan. You couldn’t for a start use the word “quality assurance”, or the various mechanisms developed in Japan around that concept.

[For more details see “Incredibly American : Releasing the Heart of Quality” by M. R. Zukerman and L. J. Hatala, published by the American Society for Quality Control (ASQC).]

Further research discovered other archetypes.

In France where the quality assurance movement had also proven difficult to sell, quality was associated with “luxury”. In Scandinavia and Germany, where it had been more successful, quality was associated with “up to specifications”

Meanwhile at the other end of the world, Telstra (AT&T’s Australian equivalent), and the Westpac Bank were struggling with the limited success of both the quality assurance process, and US sourced management methods. Two OD consultants, John Evans and Colin Pidd were hired to repeat the archetype study in both Australia and New Zealand. What they discovered surprised them. Firstly there *was* a distinct archetype. Secondly that it was the same in both Australia and New Zealand. And thirdly it was a “national” archetype in that it transcended both ethnicity and gender. Indeed they discovered that migrants adopted the archetype within a year or so of arrival.

The archetype was that “quality” in Australia and New Zealand implied a strong personal identification. For me to produce a quality pint of beer, or quality glass for that beer, or serve it in a high quality way, there has to be a little bit of me in that beer, glass or service. This makes complete sense to migrants like myself, who regularly comment on how much more personally things are taken here compared with other cultures. So you don’t get high levels of performance in Australia or New Zealand by relying purely on specifications, you have to find way of making people feel part of the overall picture, part of that product or service. Calls for perfection, calls for improvement fall on deaf ears, unless people can associate themselves personally with it.

From these ideas, Colin and John developed a methods tailored for the Australasian market. For instance, the explore the consequences for leadership, organisational development and how to handle people being promoted from the shop floor. [See my website]

The organizational development consultant Dick Axelrod (<http://www.axelrodgroup.com>) and I were talking one day about these things. Dick told me of a conversation with the Japanese manager of a Japanese automobile assembly plant located in the southern USA. The manager mentioned to Dick that when he set a tolerance range in Japan - indicating the range by spreading apart his finger and thumb - Japanese workers would hit right in the middle, whereas here in the States the engineers would give him anything within the tolerance range. “So what do you do ?” asked Dick. “Oh that’s easy” replied the manager smiling. And with that he reduced the gap between his finger and thumb until they almost met.

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