

A Geocentric Organizational Culture of a Global Corporation: A Phenomenological Exploration of Employees' Experiences

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Abstract: The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how employees with different national identities experience a geocentric organizational culture of a global corporation.

A global corporation values both profitability and social acceptance; its units mutually negotiate governance and represent a highly interdependent network where centers of excellence and high-potential employees are identified regardless of geographic locations (Perlmutter, 1985). These companies try to build geocentric, or “world oriented” (Marquardt, 1999, p. 20), organizational cultures. Such culture “transcends cultural differences and establishes ‘beacons’ – values and attitudes – that are comprehensive and compelling” (Kets de Vries & Florent-Treacy, 2002, p. 299) for all employees, regardless of their national origins. Creating a geocentric organizational culture involves transforming each employee’s mindset, beliefs, and behaviors so that he/she can become “a world citizen in spite of having a national identity” (Marquardt, 1999, p. 47). National identity refers to one’s “self-location in a group and ... *affect* towards others in the group...[such as] feelings of closeness to and pride in one’s country and its symbols” (Citrin, Wong, & Duff, 2001, p. 74). National identity fosters a love for one’s homeland and its people, creates a sense of uniqueness and feeling of belonging, and generates a willingness to act in the interests of the group (Kelman, 2001). National identity cannot simply dissolve or be dropped (Citrin et al., 2001). However, how employees with different national identities experience this geocentric organizational culture remains unknown. A lack of this knowledge is regretful because this knowledge can assist human resource development professionals (HRD) in organizations in building geocentric organizational cultures. The purpose of this phenomenological study was to explore how employees with different national identities experience a geocentric organizational culture of a global corporation.

The Roots of Organizational Culture Research

The concept of organizational culture has been around for only 40 years but became propagated only in the past 25 years (Martin, 2002). The concept was first introduced to the U.S. management literature by Blake and Mouton (1964). In the 1960s, managers were balancing concerns for people, production, and hierarchy. Blake and Mouton (1964) suggested a new meaning of the manager’s task – “developing and maintaining a *culture* that promotes work” (p. ix). Pettigrew’s (1979) work is considered the first publication on organizational culture in the U.S. academic literature. For Pettigrew, organizational culture embraces such concepts as symbol, language, ideology, belief, ritual, and myth. Organizational culture relates to organizational functioning (e.g., leadership, control, norms, and purpose) and provides a system of meanings that gives people a sense of reality and direction for actions. In 1980s, the phenomenal success of Japanese businesses and the decrease in U.S. production moved researchers to re-examine knowledge on organizational management, which resulted in three bestsellers. In the first bestseller, Ouchi (1981) studied the Japanese approach to business and its

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applicability to the U.S. business. Ouchi defined organizational culture as a “set of symbols, ceremonies, and myths that communicate underlying values and beliefs of that organization to its employees” (p. 41). In the second bestseller, Peters and Waterman (1982) researched 62 U.S. businesses to identify characteristics of the best companies. Organizational culture is discussed in two ways: (a) a company itself as a whole and (b) values that are conveyed in stories, slogans, legends, and myths. In the third bestseller, Deal and Kennedy (1982) popularized the term corporate culture. Because culture affects all aspects of an organization, successful corporations carefully “build and nourish” their cultures (Deal & Kennedy, 1982, p. 5) that includes their business environment, values, heroes, rites and rituals, and cultural network. As these three works turned into bestsellers, organizational culture became a frequent headline in popular business literature and a tool for businesses to increase their competitiveness in the global market (Denison, 1990).

A Geocentric Organizational Culture

A geocentric organizational culture is a corporate culture of global corporations. A global corporation is the fourth and the last phase known today in a for-profit company’s global status evolution, which is preceded by domestic, international, and multinational phases. Global companies strive to be both profitable and socially accepted. Perlmutter (1969) borrowed the term symbiosis from biology where it “connotes reciprocal relations between organisms which live in close proximity, of similar and different species. The relationships are mutually advantageous, and essential to survival” (p. 280). Therefore, the global corporation seeks to establish a new, win-win, form of relationships with other entities. The underlying premise is a possibility of finding a balance between making profit and being socially responsible, a niche and cooperation between small and large businesses, and a cautious use of non-renewable and development of renewable resources. The global corporation is characterized by a geocentric organizational culture that “transcends cultural differences and establishes ‘beacons’ – values and attitudes – that are comprehensive and compelling” (Kets de Vries & Florent-Treacy, 2002, p. 299) for all employees, regardless of their national origins or professional experiences.

Marquardt (1999) developed a Global Success Model for HRD professionals to assist organizations to move towards global status. The model incorporates six components: global corporate culture, global people, global strategies, global operations, global structures, and global learning. Global corporate culture integrates five dimensions: global vision, global mindset, global values, global activities, and globe-able heroes. Global vision is “borderless and multicultural” (Marquardt, Berger, & Loan, 2005, p. 148) and refers to a company’s goals and direction. Global mindset is the ability to view across and beyond nation or culture, division or function and to balance local and global. Global values “provide purpose and meaning for what one does” (Marquardt et al., 2005, p. 148) and include such values as global thinking, cultural sensitivity, and empowered global people, among others. Global activities refer to activities and events that help fostering global vision, global mindset, and global values. Globe-able heroes refer to members of global organizations whose qualities are respected by others; organizations also implement activities, such as mentoring, training, and development, to develop future globe-able heroes.

Kets De Vries and Florent-Treacy (2002) collected data from professional consultations, action research projects, and interviews with over 500 executives to identify how leaders create global organizational culture. The results of the study suggest that these leaders understand that all people share a “basic motivational need system” (p. 300) that ensures people’s survival. At an organizational level, two of these needs, attachment/affiliation and exploratory/assertive, become

highly relevant. Attachment/affiliation refers to people's need of feeling connected or belonging to a group or a community. Exploratory/assertive refers to people's need to be useful, find meaning, be creative, and experience pleasure. To meet these needs, leaders of global companies try to instill three meta-values: (a) community: the leaders encourage "good-citizenship behavior" (p. 300) by nurturing such behaviors in their employees as support, commitment, and collaboration; (b) pleasure: companies try to create work atmosphere where the employees enjoy working; and (c) meaning: companies send a message to the employees that by working for the company they improve the quality of life of others; therefore, their work has societal value.

Tolbert, McLean, and Myers (2002) proposed a Global Learning Organization model to guide U.S.-based organizations in creating a globally inclusive organizational culture and move towards a geocentric worldview. This globally inclusive organizational culture is characterized by four components: (a) executives responsible for creating the organizational climate; (b) systems and procedures that increase "diversity, creativity, and global thinking" (p. 465); (c) employee promotion and development processes that are consistent with the organization's global approach; and (d) prioritization and maintenance of cultural awareness.

Mourdoukoutas (1999) discusses such characteristics of a global corporation as vision, competitive strategy, coordination mechanisms, communication channels, and incentive strategies. When discussing a vision of the global organization, he suggests, "the global corporation must develop a system of values that is a common denominator of ethics practiced by its stakeholders, stockholders, managers, workers, and the international and local communities" (p. 49). The author argues for using Aristotelian ethics and values (i.e., wisdom, courage, self-control, and justice) for developing the visions and common values. He contends argues that Aristotelian ethics have never been a part of any religion and aim at fostering harmony between an individual and his or her social environment.

Method

Phenomenology was used because this study explored the phenomenon of a geocentric organizational culture of employees with different national identities who work for global corporations. Phenomenological research aims at knowing the world in which we live and questioning the way we experience the world (van Manen, 1990).

Sampling Strategies

Participants were selected using convenience, criteria, and snow-ball sampling strategies. Convenience sampling refers to "selecting individuals or groups that happen to be available or are willing to participate at the time" (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2007, p. 114). Selecting individuals who worked for corporations that were located in South Florida, where the researcher resided, and had been identified as global in the literature facilitated face-to-face interviews. Criteria sampling refers to selection of individuals that meet a predetermined set of characteristics (Patton, 2002). Participants in this study had to meet the following criteria: (a) work for a global corporation for at least 3 years and (b) come from different national backgrounds. These criteria helped select "information-rich cases" (Patton, 2002, p. 230) to study and understand the phenomenon. Snow-ball sampling strategy, where the participants were asked to recommend their colleagues for the participation in this study (Patton, 2002), helped identify the participants who meet the convenience and criteria sampling strategies.

Participants

The 12 participants in the study included nine men and three women. Their age ranged from under 30 to over 60. Two participants had one bachelor's degree; seven had one master's degree; two participants had two master's degrees, and one participant held a doctorate. Most of

the participants (11) had managerial positions. Their years of employment at their global companies ranged from 3 to 21. The participants were born in different countries and regions, including North America (4), the Caribbean (2), Central and South America (3), Europe (2), and Asia (1). Eleven of the twelve participants attached their national identity to one or more country. Nine participants attached their national identity to their country of birth; one participant attached his national identity to his country of birth, the Dominican Republic, and to the country of residence and work, U.S.; one participant did not attach his national identity to his country of birth, Pakistan, and described himself in terms of the country of residence and work, U.S., and also as Asian American. One participant said that he did not identify himself with any one particular country.

Data Collection and Analysis

To collect data, a semi-structured interview guide was used. Such an interview guide usually serves as a framework that outlines questions to ask and issues to discuss with each interviewee (Patton, 2002). The interview guide included main questions and probes. Once the participants agreed to participate in the study, they were contacted by email to set a mutually convenient time and place for the interview. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in quiet, comfortable, and private locations. Interviews lasted between 45 and 80 minutes.

Data were analyzed inductively, using Moustakas's (1994) Modification of the Stevick-Colaizzi-Keen Method of Analysis of Phenomenological Data. This method consists of two phases: individual and composite. During the first phase, each individual transcript was analyzed following these steps: (a) each statement was considered in terms of its significance for description of the phenomenon; (b) all relevant statements were identified and recorded; (c) all overlapping and/or repetitive statements were excluded; (d) the remaining statements were considered "meaning units of experience" (Moustakas, 1994, p. 122); (e) these meaning units of experience were related and clustered into themes; and (f) the meaning units of experience and themes were synthesized into a *textural description*, or *what* was experienced and illustrated with verbatim excerpts from the transcript. During the second phase, based on the textural descriptions of the transcripts of all participants, a *composite textural description* was developed and illustrated with verbatim excerpts from the transcripts. This composite textural description documented what participants experienced as a whole. These analyses were performed using Microsoft Excel and Microsoft Word.

How Employees Experienced a Geocentric Organizational Culture

The research question asked *how*, or in what way, the participants experienced a geocentric organizational culture of a global corporation. The participants in this study experienced a geocentric organizational culture of a global corporation as on in which they felt *connected*, *valued*, and *growing* personally and professionally (see Figure 1).

Connected

In a geocentric organizational culture, the participants felt connected to the companies via business goals of achieving high profits and attracting more customers. For example, Jose said, "the pursuit of a certain number in terms of sales... [is] much of a driving force of what we do" (lines 391-393). Eva observed, "We have this thing, you see behaviors, like, salesman from Brazil who behaves the same as a salesman from China or Russia: everyone needs to reach your numbers, so you gonna be aggressive to get your numbers" (lines 287-290). Erica explained, "We are [a] high tech company, so the whole concept of being able to take the concepts that we are doing and being able to apply them and develop different applications for our customers is really pushing the organizational culture" (lines 238-241).

The participants also felt connected by the companies' social responsibility that frames how they behave towards their customers, other employees, and the community. "Company have [*sic*] a set of parameters how we need to behave, you know, that's our principles" (Jose, lines 265-266). Miguel explained:

We have to do business in a very ethical way and in case you do something wrong, you are directly responsible. You can say, "I work on behalf of this company" "No sir, you are doing this, at the end of the day you are supported by somebody in the company, but the primary responsibility is on yourself". (lines 400-404)

Both business goals and social responsibility represent the elements of a geocentric organizational culture that help create consensus among employees of a corporation (Martin, 2002; Schein, 1983). These elements guide employee behaviors toward a common goal and outline accepted and expected behaviors (Drennan, 1992), regardless of the geographic location where employees work, the presence or absence of a supervisor or a team, or the nature of a problem that might arise on the job. These elements make employees feel connected to the company.

Valued

In the geocentric organizational culture the participants felt valued by the company because the participants' creativity was welcomed and they could share their creativity with others. Nick talked about creativity in terms of "expertise, the knowledge, the products" (line 240) that he feels that his corporation welcomes from employees all around the world. Erica mentioned how relatively easy it is to pitch ideas: "there wasn't really many roadblocks, you know, like there often are in a very large company" (lines 384-385). To Bob exchange of ideas and coming to consensus is "a general rule" in his corporation. He explained, "they like to have things discussed, socialized, and agreed on and you know, there is very much a culture 'I need to get everyone to buy what I am doing' here" (lines 388-390).

The participants also felt that each of them could contribute to the corporation because they had certain unique knowledge of the culture and language of their native countries that ultimately gave them advantage over other employees. For example, Marie thinks that the fact that she is French and worked for her corporation in France prior to coming to work in the U.S. helps her and her team a lot. She gave an example of a recent project that also involved "the central team that is located in France and it turned out that I knew the key people in this central team in France, so I was able to contact them in France" (line 343-345). Miguel is responsible for eight countries, including Panama. He told a story about how he has to be a chameleon when talking to potential customers in Panama. Miguel knows that Panamanians do not like to be considered Central American, but Miguel's business card said that he represents the Central American region:

If you talk to a Panamanian, [he/she says] "No, we are not Central American." [Miguel responds] "Well, can I give you my business card?" and it says "Central America and Caribbean" And they say "Central America and Caribbean, and where is Panama? We are not Central America; we are different." So you have to be very careful, "I am sorry, I mean, it's a misunderstanding, everybody says that you are a part of Central America; I know you are not a part of Central America. Sorry about that. It's industry standards, they have to put it in my business card." (line 128-143)

Miguel added that knowledge of the region gives him "an advantage" (line 143) because he knows how to sell to different customers and, hence, he feels in his "comfort zone" (line 142).

Creativity and unique contribution due to national identity represent the elements of a geocentric organizational culture that reflect the underlying assumption that ideas ultimately come from employees (Dyer, 1982). In a geocentric culture, people are treated as capable and motivated; they are trusted to find the best solutions and to take care of individual, team, or organizational problems. Relying on new and creative ideas of employees helps global companies feel safe when introducing an innovation and, hence, maintain their competitive advantage. Therefore, these elements foster employee involvement in the organization and make employees feel valued.

Growing

In a geocentric organizational culture, the participants felt that they are growing personally and professionally through the professional development opportunities provided by their companies, cross-cultural awareness, and perspective consciousness (Hanvey, 1976). To Jose, providing professional development opportunities is also one of the best attributes of the company:

I am not sure that I can say that this is one of the things that is in the top of the list of the priorities in this company, but it is high up there, and to me personally that's a great thing to do. I think ... that's something that makes this company a good thing to work, providing good professional development opportunities. (line 311-315)

Amir has been in the corporation for 11 years, and he still thinks that there are plenty of opportunities for professional development:

So it still has a lot of opportunities for growth in different areas, like learning different things. For example, from engineering I can shift to the business side and right now I am in the middle of the two, and also I feel like going into research and development, there are a lot of opportunities there too. (line 87-90)

Edward said that to do the job well, he needs to know how people from different cultures do business: "You learn to understand how people are to understand their request" (line 405).

Haans explained:

If I go to the Bahamas and I want to do business, I will need to adjust to Bahamian style of business. And things in the Bahamas are very slow; it's an island, very nice, beautiful weather, very nice beaches. But if you go there with Dutch or American or "let's do business", you know, "move on" and "push, push, push", forget about it, they will not close anything. (line 351-355)

Participants discussed how working for a global company resulted in them becoming more aware about themselves in relation to people from other cultures. Eva said that working for her corporation raised her "awareness of how Brazilians behave" (line 309). Working for a corporation that is no longer American made Nick realize that he does not have "any type of authority or the edge or more influence than anybody else" (line 197). He added, "it's been a wake up call, it's been very, very healthy" (line 198).

Professional development, cross-cultural awareness, and perspective consciousness represent the elements of a geocentric organizational culture that show an organization's assumptions about the nature of human character, activity, and diversity (Schein, 1983). In a geocentric culture, people are considered good and active; their work is evolving and intertwined with learning and joy; diversity is the best and only way for organizational survival in the external environment and for internal stability. Therefore, these elements foster employees, regardless of their national, cultural, educational, or professional background, to continuously grow personally and professionally.

Implications for Research

This study included employees of four global companies with headquarters in different parts of the world (U.S., France, Germany, and Japan/Sweden). However, the participants were interviewed while working in the companies' offices located in only one country – U.S. Organizations, including global companies, are influenced by the local culture (Hofstede et al., 1990). Therefore, similar phenomenological studies may include employees employed by the same four global corporations and be conducted in another country(s) or region(s) of the world. Consequently, the results of these several studies could be compared to examine whether employees' experiences with a geocentric culture vary depending on the location of their offices. This research might help understanding how a geocentric culture is shaped by national and regional cultures.

The proposed model can also be informed by collecting data from employees with different demographic characteristics. Because this study focused on experiences of employees with different national identities, the researcher had the diversity of national backgrounds as one of the selection criteria. Other demographic characteristics were not a part of the selection criteria. Most of the participants in the study held mid-level management positions. A similar study with participants who have top management positions and/or non-managerial positions might shed a light on whether an employee position in the global organization shapes his/her experiences with the geocentric culture.

The proposed model and the instrument developed and used in this study can also be used to create a survey to aid global companies in examining, building, and sustaining their geocentric cultures. In HRD research, only one other instrument (Marquardt, 1999) has been developed to assess whether a company has reached the global status. The instrument contains only seven questions to examine the culture of the global company. Marquardt's (1999) instrument was developed based on his research of global companies as a whole; therefore, the proposed model can add the employee perspective on a geocentric culture in the development of a more comprehensive instrument. Such an instrument can also help measure the strength of each component of a geocentric culture and explore cause and effect relations among the components and between the components and other variables, such as, employee organizational identity, job performance, innovation, and creativity.

Implications for Practice

Human resource development professionals are responsible for building, shaping, and enhancing organizational culture by providing organizational development interventions that lead to the optimization of employee potential and improved organizational performance (Gilley, Egglund, & Gilley, 2002). The findings of this study can be useful for HRD professionals to increase the effectiveness of organizational development initiatives related to a geocentric organizational culture. The proposed model and the suggested questions can guide HRD professionals to design organizational development interventions in corporations that are already global and in corporations that are in transition to become global.

The proposed model can also be used in global companies to improve the socialization process for its newcomers. Socialization is a learning or adjustment process during which the newcomer learns certain domains of the organization and during which the organization creates an environment conducive to such learning (Korte, 2009). The effectiveness of the socialization process has been linked to many other factors, including employee job satisfaction, attitude, turnover, or organizational commitment. Therefore, HRD practitioners can use the proposed

model to create processes and procedures that can help newcomers learn a geocentric culture of the global company.

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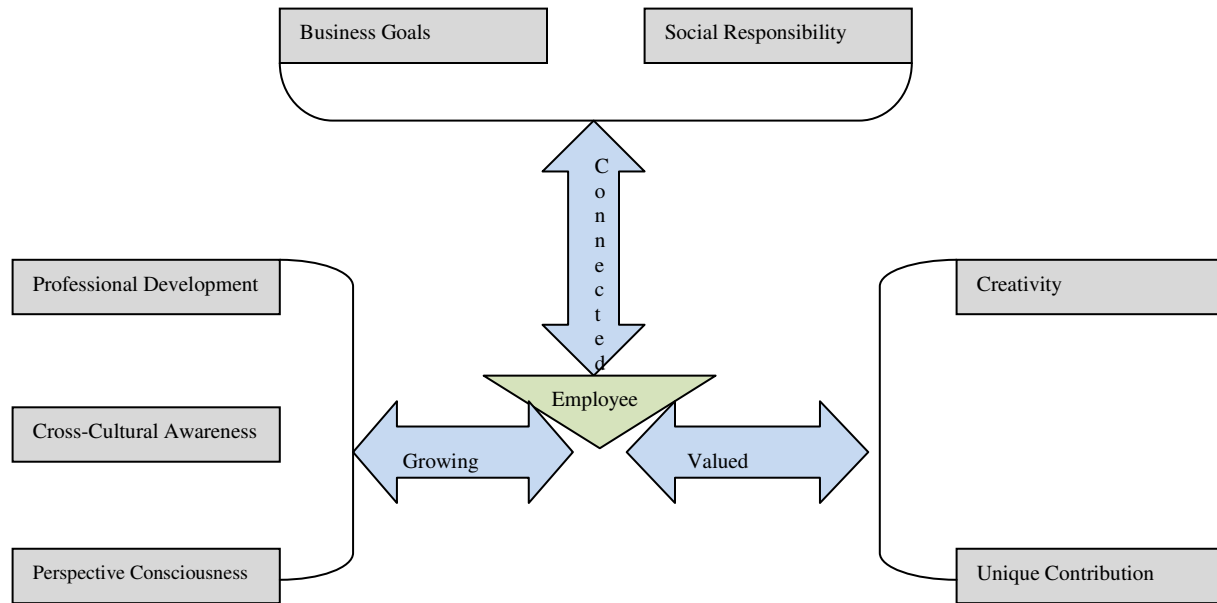


Figure 1. A model of a geocentric organizational culture of a global corporation: An employee perspective.