WORKING IN THE UAE: EXPATRIATE MANAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

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INTRODUCTION

The United Arab Emirates (UAE) has undergone much commercial advancement in recent decades necessitating the importation of many expatriate leaders to manage its expanding network of industries. Many experience difficulties with cultural differences while on assignment. The purpose of our article is to provide information about various aspects of the UAE culture that effect expatriate management of local staff. This article is useful for expatriates expecting to undertake employment in this country. We hope that the findings may shed light on the aspects of the local culture so expatriates will be aware of them and their management in the UAE. Our study explores expatriate leaders' understanding of the UAE culture and the differences between the UAE culture and their home country culture so that they may be able to better manage those differences.

UAE culture

The UAE culture possesses many similarities with Arab culture generally with Islam as the predominant religion. Islam supports commerce but frowns upon financial activities deemed contrary to fair and honest dealings (Wilkins, 2001a). The Quran holds a dominant place within Islamic society strongly influencing social customs (Kabasakal and Bodur, 2002). Management practices in Islamic cultures are based on historical Islamic traditions (Ali, 1990) and set moral standards of behaviour (Kabasakal and Bodur, 2002). In the UAE, which is a relatively traditionalist country, Islam maintains a strong force in determining all aspects of life (Peck, 1986).

Islam still has a strong influence on management practice and thought and the conduct of business (Ali, 1990). For example, the religion permits trade but does not support undeserved revenue resulting from activities such as gambling (Wilkins, 2001a). In addition, bribery is a frequent part of business activity contradicting religious teachings (Ali, 1990). Wilkins (2001a) states that daily life is considered to be controlled by God resulting in a relaxed attitude to timelines and schedules. These are often ignored, with the belief that the will of God dictates when tasks should be completed. This gives rise to a poor record relating to the timely completion of objectives.

Our research

We utilised interviews with 25 executive leaders to identify the effect of UAE culture on expatriate leaders' management of local staff. This study gathered information from people working in UAE private and public sector organizations. The interviewees were Indian, Sri Lankan, Australian, British, Pakistani, Russian, Nepalese, Iranian, the Philippino, Indonesian and American. Participants worked in the UAE from two to thirty

years. Tenure in their current organization ranged from one month to 25 years with three years being the most common. Their current positions included training managers, assistant outlet managers, assistant training managers, assistant operations managers, quality coordinators, heads of human resources, chiefs of security, facility managers, presidents/CEOs, directors of supply chain management, project managers and store managers.

Discussion

It is interesting to find that participants agreed on the importance of understanding the UAE culture in managing local staff. Misunderstandings related to the UAE culture mentioned by some participants were often found to relate to local resentment at reporting to a foreign manager, communication difficulties, different approaches to time management, and reluctance to face bad news. The phrase "Inshall" was viewed by a few interviewees as taking some getting used to with the chance that many expatriates may not understand the locally accepted impact of outside influences on timelines. The notion that events are God's will is expressed in the phrase "Inshall" (Quinn, 2001), implying that delays are outside mortals' control and are in contrast to the Western idea of scheduling. The following responses highlight this:

> …. They don't like to give undertakings that tasks will be completed on time; they will respond 'Inshall' which means 'God willing'. You have to get used to that. Don't try to force them to give a direct yes or no answer.…. I think sometimes if you want a direct answer …. you don't get it because they don't want to say no, they will just delay their answer …. we sometimes have deadlines to meet and we need that immediate answer.

Additional comment from a participant:

> I believe that understanding the UAE culture is critical. I think that by understanding the way that people in the organization think and perceive events, you can work around things and avoid misunderstandings that can lead to dissatisfaction.

Leaders should expect locals to use the phrase "Inshalla" when they are unwilling to commit to completing a task within a certain time frame. "Inshalla" can be translated to mean that the task will be completed when circumstances allow. Leaders should expect that task completion can be delayed by any number of factors. The reasoning behind this is that God's will determine if and when tasks are completed. On rare occasions it may be that tasks are not completed at all.

Local people do not like to hear bad news directly so, to reduce the effect, it is usually better to approach delivering bad news tactfully. Managers should not be up front in providing disappointing news. This relates particularly to evaluating staff performance. Local people are sensitive to negative comments. If a manager can sandwich the bad news in between positive comments this will help to ease the impact. This will demonstrate to locals that the manager is utilising a local style to manage staff and will assist in gaining cooperation. A director concurred, stating:

> In Australia you can be more open about mentioning problems. You can approach people directly about a problem without beating around the bush. In the UAE Arab people don't like bad news so you have to be moderate in how far you push.

UAE cultural aspects

Participants indicated that aspects of the UAE culture affect their managing locals, perceiving that the focus on group culture was responsible. One possible reason for this is that working in UAE, with its Arabic influences, requires a strong awareness of the more traditional group aspects of the UAE culture. One interviewee stated that management decisions require the inclusion of the local staff in the process in a collective way to give them a feeling of involvement. This encourages their participation and engagement and maximises the chances that the decisions will be supported. This focus on group aspects can affect staff management by expatriate leaders. With most of them coming from cultures where the individualistic style is dominant, awareness of this will assist these leaders to refocus their style to suit the local culture. Expatriate leaders need to be aware of the dominance of group culture in the UAE and how this affects management situations. For example, locals immediately join together in discussion groups in meetings when faced with the need to address an issue. Also, when a local individual needs to approach their manager to discuss a problem they will usually bring two or three colleagues to support them, even where the issue does not necessarily relate to them directly. Leaders need to align their practices with this group culture to gain support from their staff in situations such as these.

Anwar and Chaker (2003) state that Arabic society is more collectivist than individualist with a greater emphasis on group aspects. Nations with a collective culture produce organizations with a group culture. Ali et al. (1997) found that societies with traditional values preserve their collective culture despite industrial and economic progress. Naor et al. (2010) indicate that organizations with a group culture foster teamwork.

A comment:

> You need to think more than you act. If you are making management decisions you have to look behind the decisions and make them more collective so they will be acceptable to the local staff. If the staff feel they are involved they are more willing to contribute.

Arabic language

Language was nominated as having the greatest affect on staff management. This may have been due to its high profile. It is usually the first factor that comes to mind when considering cultural factors that may affect staff management. Ability to communicate effectively with local staff governs how well they can be managed so language ability would be seen as the most notable aspect. Verbal communication was mentioned as an important aspect of the UAE culture in managing local staff. Because the culture relies more on verbal communication between organizational members, this would be noted by expatriates and put into practice as one aspect of managing staff. Having an awareness of non-verbal communication can

improve the effectiveness of managing local staff. For example, shaking hands with local women is not acceptable. Another noteworthy form of communication is silence. In response to a question or statement this can usually be taken as a sign of tacit agreement or approval. Disagreement will usually be spoken. Managers should, therefore, not be too concerned when they receive no verbal response to their requests to take some type of action.

Expatriate leaders working in UAE found that the Arabic language affects their management of local staff due to its prevalence. Chang (2008) observes that learning the local language of the host country is beneficial for work. Many local Arab managers have poor English skills, particularly written English, relying on their staff to draft written correspondence. With Arabs displaying a preference for verbal interaction rather than written correspondence (Wilkins, 2001b), expatriate leaders with a command of the Arabic language are better placed to work with local staff. Significant resources are, therefore, needed to ensure that expatriates are provided with the best possible opportunity to learn the host country language. Knowing the language does not necessarily mean comprehending the culture, however (Caligiuri et al. 2001).

Successful acquisition of the local language facilitates expatriates' ability to achieve the objectives of their roles. Participants identified a lack of knowledge of the Arabic language as a significant factor making it difficult to deal with locals. Languages can take a long time to master, however, as learning them involves a number of factors such as individual ability, education, the importance the organization places on language ability, and other environmental factors. Language is especially difficult to learn because individuals must also be able to learn local expressions (Miroshnik 2002). The Arabic language may also be more difficult for someone from a non-Middle Eastern country to learn due to the differences in the written characters used in the language itself. Expatriates should as a minimum learn some basic phrases such as greetings, salutations and other commonly used expressions. Locals appreciate when non-locals appear to have, at least, made some effort to speak a little of the language. This helps to open doors. Leaders will find that learning some of the language will engage locals more which will encourage expatriates to expand their Arabic vocabulary. They will usually find that the top local executives will have a good grasp of the English language with many having received a tertiary education overseas or even locally. For junior staff, expatriates may find the language gap to be a little wider. In this case, making use of a translator will help to smooth the way.

Communication

Language ability facilitates communication and, therefore, assists in building working relationships. This, in turn, assists in achieving objectives (Chang, 2008). Interviewees nominated communication as a cause of cultural misunderstandings and language difficulties were identified as a major part of this. Interviewees suggested that they made use of translators to overcome this problem. Differences between sectors, industries or organizations may account for difficulties in communication with some being more reliant on Arabic than others. Variations in communication can complicate expatriate leaders' roles by reducing their effectiveness in delivering information to their UAE national staff.

Interviewees believed that communicating with national staff in the UAE is different to communicating with their home country staff. This may possibly be the result of different job requirements to those the expatriates are used to with, perhaps, greater responsibility, more seniority or different duties affecting communication. Different cultural attributes of the staff and differences in industry cultures may also have a mitigating effect. This creates problems in communication which affects the way they manage their local staff. An Australian manager highlighted the differences, saying:

> It's wrong to say there's only one culture in Australia. In Australia you can face a woman and tell her she made a mistake. You need to do it politely, of course, but directly. In the UAE you have to step back, you can't tell her directly.

Custom of female dress

Many of the participants mentioned that the custom of dress, particularly among women who were almost completely covered, including their faces, was surprising. Williams et al. (2013) note that the custom is for Emirati women to wear an abaya, or black, full-length covering garment, and a sheyla, a thin headscarf to cover the hair, in public. Dealing with females can be more difficult when they wear a burqa, which covers them completely except for their eyes Interviewees may not have been used to seeing women completely covered in the UAE. Some interviewees believed the custom had an effect on staff management. The culture in UAE is more traditional and strict and in keeping with its Arabic heritage so the conventional custom of female dress is still dominant. The remainder did not consider this as much of an issue. This may be because they may have had more of a focus on outcomes and were not concerned with the way females dress, preferring instead to concentrate on the objectives of their job.

Those who have been there longer may have become accustomed to the female standard of dress. Those not used to the style of female dress may actually find it intimidating unless they are sure of the appropriateness of addressing females attired in this way. Managers who find approaching women difficult because of their style of dress may opt to approach males instead. This will limit their management options, particularly where females are concerned. Local males also have a particular style of dress, with a white full length robe and accompanying headdress that does not cover the face. This attire makes it easier for expatriates to deal with local males. One commented:

> The UAE is a country which is rapidly advancing with inputs from all over the world. This would seem to be placing pressure on the local customs and traditions and yet the local people seem to be able to maintain these in the face of all this change pressure. UAE appears to have preserved its heritage. You can see this because the local women wear abaya and sheilla. However the Indian females here in the UAE dress totally differently from the local women. As you can see they wear their own traditional clothes called Sari. Also, women have more freedom in India to interact and be approached whereas in the UAE they cannot be approached directly.

Time management

Differences exist between attitudes towards time management in the UAE and other cultures. Other cultures, particularly in Western countries, place a greater emphasis on timeliness while the UAE has a more relaxed approach to time management. Organizational culture in the UAE is based on the national culture which has a more casual attitude to time. Badawy (1980, p. 57) went further, stating "At worst, there is no concept of time in the Middle East; at best an open-ended concept". In the UAE the attitude towards time management is long established and habitual. Therefore the attitude to time management in UAE has retained its customary focus. For example, tender submission deadlines are sometimes missed because of the relaxed attitude to time management.

Time management is not the primary focus for local staff. They take their own time to complete tasks as this has been a part of the culture for a very long time. Managers should expect their staff to not adhere to deadlines for tasks unlike in the West where timelines are of paramount importance. It may be prudent for managers to build extra time into their project timelines, where possible. This will give them some latitude to accept the inevitable delays caused by the culture. Those not doing so run the risk of clashing with their staff over uncompleted tasks and delays. This will undoubtedly cause tensions which will harm their working relationships and make it increasingly difficult to manage their local staff and achieve their objectives.

Some interviewees believe that the concept of time management affects the way they manage local staff. This may because time management is also a well-known feature of Arabic culture. Awareness of this would be expected to have an effect on their managing UAE local staff. Nonis et al. (2005) argue that an understanding of the link between cultural attitudes towards the management of time and organizational outcomes is critical to managing effectively. If expatriate leaders maintain an awareness of the local UAE attitude towards time management they would be able to manage it better.

Effects of Islamic principles

Almost all the respondents believed that the Islamic religion and the Quran govern work principles and the way they manage local staff. This may be due to the UAE still maintaining its long-established religion and values. The country follows Islamic principles strongly. Almost all interviewees indicated that they believed that the culture is based on religion, citing prayer breaks and Ramadan in their responses. Expatriate leaders should be prepared to allow locals an opportunity to pray once in the afternoon, in keeping with their religious obligations, particularly during this time but also throughout the year. Allowing a little extra time in the daily schedule to accommodate this break will help to facilitate good working relationships. Managers need to remember they are working in a culture dominated by Islam and should not attempt to impose their own cultural values on the local staff in this way to achieve business objectives. The UAE organizational culture is motivated by the national, Islamic culture which has a strong work ethic, supporting the principle of staff working hard and professionally as the basis for personal and social satisfaction. The Islamic work ethic affects Emirati organizations (Yousef 2000). Nations based on an Islamic culture reflect the principles of their religion in their attitudes towards their work ethic which, in turn, reinforces their faith (Ali and Al-Owaihan 2008).

One participant stated that if you don't understand the Islamic basis of the culture you risk offending the local staff by not allowing them breaks to pray. Another agreed on the need to not offend people but suggested that staff take advantage by taking longer than necessary prayer breaks. Another one commented that they believe that Islam governs work principles but that occasions such as Ramadan should not be used as an excuse to not work hard due to tiredness from the fasting which is required at this time. The holy festival of Ramadan requires knowledge of particular behavior. During this time, which usually lasts about one month, Muslims are required to fast during daylight hours. This obviously includes working hours. Expatriates need to respect this and refrain from eating and drinking in front of local staff at work. Expatriates failing to do so run the risk of alienating their staff which will lead to a deterioration of working relationships as locals will feel that the expatriate is not respecting their religion.

Some of the comments supporting the notion that the Islamic religion and the Quran govern work principles include "If you're working in an Islamic environment you need to be mindful of the religion by giving staff a break to pray". Another manager supported this view saying, "you need to give staff freedom to worship". Another participant said that Islamic principles govern work principles citing an occasion where a project due to be conducted during Ramadan had to be extended to after Ramadan due to the shorter working hours that staff work during this time. Another one agreed that Islam governs work principles saying that:

> Every person has the right to pray or whatever. You have to respect the country's culture and the religion of Islam. For example, at Ramadan time, staff local work less hours so they may go home early. We find other staff to cover for them. We have flexible hours for staff during Ramadan.

Limitations

Interviews responses to the custom of female dress may have been affected by sensitivity to this topic. Respondents may have considered it a little too personal to provide answers that were fully truthful for fear of causing offence. They may have considered that it would be better to offer guarded responses in an effort to avoid any risk to their jobs despite being guaranteed anonymity. It is also possible that this question may have been open to two interpretations, being either that the respondent does not work with female staff or that they believe that the custom of female dress has no effect on their staff management.

It is also important to recognise that, although interviewees are products of their own and their organization's cultures, they are also individuals. In other words, it must be recognised that each individual should not be expected to conform entirely to the norms of the culture to which they belong.

Expatriates' interest in the culture, willingness to immerse themselves in it and build relationships with locals is an important consideration (Tarique and Caligiuri, 2009). Some expatriates are more willing than others to engage themselves with the local culture than others which may have created differences in responses.

Implications for practice

Expatriate cross-cultural management is a concept that relates to a number of different aspects including communication, particularly related to the context of UAE culture. It provides greater comprehension of the

effects of national culture on expatriate leaders' management of UAE local staff. This study adds to the field of cross-cultural management and human resources by focusing on cross-cultural leadership and cultural awareness.

This research offers knowledge relating to the identification of cultural factors that expatriate leaders face in the UAE and determines how these can be addressed. The findings of the research are used to facilitate a better understanding of the UAE culture that will assist in overcoming the barriers that cultural differences present. This will assist organizations with expatriates in the UAE or those intending to send leaders to the UAE by assisting them to manage locals in the UAE. This study offers improved HR knowledge that supports expatriate leaders and which can be used to facilitate their managing and understanding local staff in the UAE culture.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The aim of this study is to investigate expatriate leaders' perceptions of the factors affecting their management in UAE organizations. Based on their responses the following recommendations are offered as a possible basis for strategies to be used in managing in the UAE cultural context:

Individual adjustment

Expatriate leader management is assisted by an understanding of what is required of them in their position and working hard to achieve the outcomes expected. Knowing what is required of them in relation to the laws and customs of the country itself and making an effort to abide by and respect these also assists expatriates to adapt. Showing a respect for the religion would also be welcomed by locals. Fitting in and engaging in behaviour seen to be within an acceptable range according to the customs of the host country also helps. Acknowledging the group aspects of the culture will also greatly assist expatriate leaders in their dealings with UAE locals. Keeping these aspects in mind will strengthen expatriates' ability to manage within the culture, improve working relationships, and maximise their potential in their UAE assignment.

CONCLUSION

Factors affecting expatriate leaders' management mentioned during interviews were Islamic religious practices, time management, custom of female dress, and understanding the UAE culture. In this research study, expatriates discussed their perceptions of the UAE culture and the issues they faced in managing local staff. Participants nominated language as the most significant challenge affecting their ability to manage working in the UAE. As discussed, language is one of a number of aspects affecting expatriates' ability to succeed as it facilitates greater understanding of the culture in which they are working.

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