

### A MEETING OF MINDS

Sara Macedo, an Abu Dhabi-based researcher, on cultural understanding in the workplace.

As the UAE government seeks to encourage the private sector to absorb more nationals into its workforce through the Emiratisation Initiative, there may be issues rooted deep within the motivational assumptions of organisations in the UAE that it will need to address. Once these assumptions have been brought to the surface, research may start that could further inter-cultural understanding and inform a more responsive work environment.

The Emiratisation Initiative is part of the wider governmental strategy of strategic security for the country and its national population. However, an unintended outcome of the initiative has been to create barriers to its own fulfilment. Identifying the factors that create such an environment has become a necessity.

The most visible of these factors is the frustration felt by both UAE nationals, the beneficiaries of the initiative, and the overwhelmingly Western senior management, who are responsible for facilitating it. The former section of the UAE population cites lack of managerial interest and dedication to providing training and relevant organisational experience. The latter, however, point to a lack of a work ethic in young graduates. The underlying theme linking the two appears to be a lack of informed, inter-cultural management practice.

American and Western motivational models presuppose that one strives to maximise personal utility. Not so in the Gulf, where Bedouin culture and the hierarchical social structure promote collectivist values over the pursuit of self-maximisation. The Western work ethic promotes an individualism that focuses on and rewards achievements attributable to a particular person. Emphasising individ-



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ualism causes people to focus on their own and others' unique abilities and characteristics, both positive and negative. In contrast, Arab culture promotes shared objectives, interchangeable interests and commonalities among members. These dialectical work ethics are a source of discord between workforces. Integration and alliance of UAE and Western management thought must be achieved in order for the Emiratisation Initiative to be both a nominal and an actual success.

Emiratisation is an initiative that is of strategic importance to the development of the workforce in Abu Dhabi. It aims to secure strategic employment for UAE nationals, and facilitate knowledge exchange between the incumbent Western senior management and UAE nationals. As today's youth progresses through an organisational hierarchy, they ought to be able to share their organisation's corporate vision whilst preserving their cultural values of collectivism, tribalism and Islamic belief.

It is widely acknowledged that culture, when invisible, tends not to be an issue. If the language is the same, the dress and the religion are similar, management styles are able to remain intact. Indeed, one's own culture tends to be the most invisible of all. When culture becomes visible, it becomes a problem. In the UAE, not only is the language, religion and dress different from the home countries of Western senior management, but the local frames of reference in terms of social and organisational life are poles apart from those used by Western expatriates. It is these frames of reference which must be determined, contrasted, and merged to shape the corporate culture and management style of Western organisations operating in the UAE.

Frames of reference are founded upon our reactions to situations that we encounter in our lifetimes. They can be imbued from parents, friends and cultural environments. The impermeability and cohesiveness of both the UAE and the respective Western expatriate communities create environments that promote collective myopia and affect an individual in the forming of his/her own frames of reference and understanding. Those individuals who have little personal experience of the "other" society depend upon other members of their own groups to form the relevant frames of reference or expectation of behaviour.

The protectionist measures afforded to UAE nationals under the Emiratisation Initiative have, through this collective thought, fostered resentment, frustration and campaigns of misinformation between local and expatriate communities. Whereas other nations' employment-quota pro-

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grammes have aimed to address the under-employment of minorities, the Emiratisation initiative could, by default, create a top-heavy imbalance between organisational employment and social demographic ratios in favour of UAE nationals.

A culturally appropriate motivational framework that provides for the three cultural cornerstones of collectivism, tribalism and Islamic belief to meet and be compatible with organisational norms should be developed, as they have been shown to be the drivers for personal achievement in UAE nationals.

The understanding of these personal drivers, and frames of reference, may help to reduce the UAE nationals' feeling of emotional dissonance and increase their organisational commitment. This would then be perceived by expatriate Western management theories as an increased work ethic. The realignment of cultural sensitivities is vital in the creation of a viable work environment for both nationals and expatriates.

The existing environment of fear and distrust between UAE nationals and Western senior management is one of these frames of reference that must be addressed in order to give the fundamental goals of the Emiratisation Initiative a chance.

The Emiratisation Initiative is not only aimed at large Western organisations in the UAE. It is also aimed at smaller, UAE national-sponsored trading companies with over 50 employees which sometimes face a different problem – a second frame of reference called “double-think”. *Gulf News* wrote in 2005 that the “time is nigh for empowering nationals”, but so few of the UAE-national owners of these trading organisations seem willing to

empower their compatriots and adhere to their quotas when they see the lower-profit margins caused by the higher salary and benefit demands.

Change should begin at the organisational level, as the current generation of UAE-national graduates should be able to embrace an organisational culture that can be used as a basis for strategic direction in the future and the development of their country. This organisational culture should not be based on the existing environment of social ostracism, hoarding of knowledge and remuneration structures based on ethnic origin, but on social inclusion, mutual trust, empathy and patience.

Organisational level changes should not only be informal, as in social and cross-cultural awareness, but formal as well. Organisational personnel policies within the UAE generally embrace US-based motivational management theories with little amendment for the cultural setting and appreciation for the role of Islam in society and culture.

There are numerous studies of organisations that have amended their personnel policies, recruitment approaches and management styles when entering environments that are rather different to their own, such as China, Africa and indeed even intra-European mergers and acquisitions. The question must therefore be asked, “Why have personnel policies remained US-centric when the aspiration is to ‘think global and act local’ and therefore amend existing formalities to take account of cultural, social, religious and motivational differences?”

Many organisations claim to promote an “international, culture-free personnel policy”, but perhaps it is more appropri-

ate to view these claims as promoting a personnel policy that is only international in the eyes of its architects. One concern voiced by large multinationals is the increasing cost of locally tailored personnel policies that create fragmentation of and uncertainty within the greater corporate vision. Surely, part of any multinationals' corporate vision is to position itself in the global environment to be able to recruit from the largest and most diverse pool of resources, thus increasing the networks, outlook, style, knowledge and insight of their personnel?

The Western expatriate in the UAE and the UAE national are subject to different and very separate social settings and expectations. It is increasingly, and sadly, only within the corporate environment that these two very different cultures come together. It may be that cultural friction is magnified in the corporate environment where one's own management style is interpreted as a cultural characteristic, and a lack of enthusiasm or interest in training or being trained is read as part of a wider culture's arrogance and conceit.

These misinterpretations may be diminished by cross-cultural training, social events and the like, but will not be eliminated without deeper investigation and assimilation of the assumptions and frames of reference used by both the Western expatriate and the UAE national. This research may provide a more cohesive and informed, locally responsive corporate environment that would allow for the exchange of knowledge, and a way towards genuine adherence to the Emiratisation Initiative, thus preserving the cultural cornerstones of a country of which we are either residents or nationals. 🍌