Case Socometal

Rewarding African Workers

Instructor’s Manual

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**Case analysis: Socometal**

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At first glance, the facts described in this case concerning the relationship between Diop and Bernard could have occurred anywhere in the world. We observed a number of incidences with a similar relationship between those from Western countries and those in technically or economically less-developed countries. In other words, most of the phenomena regarding relations in this case are not uniquely reserved to Africa but are generally based on what we previously defined as the problem of multiculturalism.

However, of the many similar situations we studied, the African experience demonstrates the uniquely complex role of a team manager who has to manage and anticipate several types of multicultural phenomenon. Many of the problems between Africa and the West are linked to the history of more-or-less violent clashes impairing the perception of both parties—a “cultural hiatus” existing between countries, regions or even civilizations (Mercure et al., 1997). In other words, we agree with Philippe D’Iribarne in saying that every person is a carrier of cultures (national, religious or professional) relating to the social environment in which he or she was reared (D’Iribarne, 1989). Africans, generally, behave according to the rules of what is called a circulatory model (Mutabazi, 2001): a model that we refer to as the
major organizing principle of African societies—where goods, people, services and information have to circulate between individuals and their communities. It is an ideal model of social government characterized by an integrative vision of humankind and all its human actions, and thus a model in which the company has legitimacy only when understood in its social context. The main goal of individual work, teamwork or any other community-shared work is to contribute to the integration and development of men and women in the communities (Mutabazi, 1999). In all the African countries studied, this circulatory model is inherited from their ancestors and is still firmly rooted in their communities today. This is a relied-upon method used to mobilize individuals in collective work such as farming, fishing, arts and crafts, and transporting the sick to a hospital.

Table 1 Comparison of the Western imported and African circulatory models

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Imported model</th>
<th>Circulatory model</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Segmented approach to life and to collective action</td>
<td>Integrative approach to life and to collective action</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rationality: segmenting and organizing life around work and continual research of wealth</td>
<td>Relationality: organizing life around family and social networking individual’s families, tribes...</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Individual development is central</td>
<td>Community development is central</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Primary objective: economic profit</td>
<td>Primary objective: social profit</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Time is money: avoid wasting it (financial security)</td>
<td>Time is others: It is never lost; it is a social investment (social security)</td>
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These two models side-by-side constitute a dual reference point for Afro-Occidental team members. The imported model must be understood by Africans and is often also important to further rationalize work. However, the circulatory model must also be understood by Westerners because it is the vehicle by which work is accomplished.

In contrast to the bureaucratic models often imported and imposed by the West onto African
countries, the circulatory model promotes neither the control of nature nor inter-individual competition, but rather the harmony of relations between man and nature on one hand and social relations on the other. This idea of harmony contrasts with—but does not oppose—the “always more productivity gains and individual enrichment” which characterizes many imported models imposed on African workers. For the African worker, the community, not necessarily the collective work, takes precedence over the individual. He invests most of his time and energy in the development and maintenance of social ties. Whether he lives in the countryside or the city, his personal development depends not on the work he does nor on the salary he earns, but on the other members of the community and their network of relations.

It is not uncommon for a Western business management team to adopt a company culture not constructed for any real democratic accommodation between the two cultures. In light of previous scholarship emphasizing the comparison of national and company cultures, our analysis of similar management situations in France and Africa shows that it is not enough just to know of the strengths or weaknesses in order to build an efficient multicultural team (Adler N., 1997; Bollinger D. and Hofstede G., 1987; Hofstede G., 1994; d’Iribarne Ph., 1989...).

The approach to time management is one of the main areas in which malfunctions between Western and African cultures occur. Where time is saved or wasted in the West, it is lived and shared in Africa. Where it is essentially invested in material or economic production in the West, it is devoted to the development of social ties in Africa, ties without which no African can durably and successfully complete any undertaking. In other words, in Africa time belongs to everybody and is never wasted, especially when invested in the development or upkeep of friendly relations (Bourgoin and Bollinger, 1984).
Turning back to the Socometal case, the differences between African and Western approaches to production and worker relations were not taken into account by the expatriates or the Senegalese executives. Though everyone perceived the new order as a common challenge, no shared vision emerged on how to meet the deadline. When Mr. Bernard declared, “it will take a miracle,” he revealed his ignorance of African societies, their specific time investment priorities, the ability of their members to change dramatically when problems arise and, finally, the available conditions for collective mobilization. While members of the managing team had worked together for a long time, the methods normally practiced did not authorize any of its members to look for new ideas from outside of the management circle. The fact that there was no real acknowledgment of their different cultural characteristics, as well as the ignorance of their respective conceptions of team management, did not allow the Socometal managers to identify ways in which to mobilize the workers in the face of the challenge presented. In other words, Mr. Bernard’s behavior was not as caricatured as it would appear.

N’Diaye’s problem-solving approach found widespread support in part because of his demand for a pay raise for everybody, which addressed the problem of low worker salaries. However, in order to convince Diop and the foremen, he essentially utilized several principles of the circulatory model, and chiefly the reciprocity of rights and duties. In turn, the foremen used the corresponding rules of sociability to push their colleagues to increase their normal work rhythm. In fact, the wage demands alone would not have brought about the collective mobilization of all the Socometal workers.

In another study of a Congolese subsidiary of a multinational corporation, individual bonuses were offered to workers and were subsequently rejected by the workers, who went on strike
for several weeks. Contrary to the approach initiated by N’Diaye, the bonuses offered to the Congolese subsidiary in an effort to increase daily production were not suitable. In this case, the bonus was an incentive for greater individual work development, regardless of the fact that this practice was diametrically opposed to the central rules of the circulatory model. The strike can be explained by the fact that a bonus system risked spreading inter-individual competition to the detriment of social relations between the workers’ original communities. A vast alliance network connected these worker relations across the region in which the factory was located.

Unfortunately, some local leaders misappropriate public goods/funds for the benefit of their own clan of origin, or to line their own pockets. Because their actions are opposed to the circulatory model they share with local citizens and workers, they are compelled to use intimidation or violence to mobilize staff (Bayart, 1989). N’Diaye succeeded because his approach was in keeping with the values and rules of sociability at the very center of this model. The solution he presented Diop and the foremen aimed both at the success of their common business goals and a monetary benefit for all involved. Several principles and rules of the circulatory model, such as mutual aid, are economically and socially useful or necessary for the survival of their members. Thus, imported models can create ambiguity and tensions between bosses and local workers, obstacles to teamwork and consequently costly malfunctions for local society and companies.

Socometal’s results of high levels of production and a successful collective mobilization shows that the circulatory model is not opposed to a company’s economic and production demands. N’Diaye demonstrated that several of these sociability principles act as powerful and effective levers which managers could pull more often in order to integrate differences
and to transform them into positive forces for their companies. In fact, the ignorance or denial of these principles is all the more costly as they favor behavior (such as absenteeism, work delays, abuse of the telephone or over-long meetings) that is inflexible when confronting the differences between African and Western cultures and business models.

Taking into account the privileged relations which exist between France and Senegal, the establishment of the head of Socometal was based on the comparative study of its members’ profiles by a North American firm. But the members of this team themselves only had a very vague vision of their differences and the links between their cultures and their deep requirements in the way of managing five types of work relations in a multicultural context. Furthermore, most of the expatriates saw the Senegalese, Diop included, as having a lack of technical skill, industrial experience or professionalism and ability to manage the production requirements. The expatriates were in turn perceived with a generally more flattering image, though distorted, as we will discuss.