

Management Development & Culture: Arabia

By Terence Ward

Western HRD professionals operating in the Arabian Gulf region are challenged not only by the unique culture found there but by the rate at which that culture is changing.

In the last decade, the oil producing countries of the Arabian Gulf have set as their top priority the training and development of their nationals to operate and manage their newly built industrial complexes. Their primary objective is to develop qualified managers and skilled technicians, while reducing dependence on expatriate manpower.

In the state-owned oil companies and the Government, huge financial resources are being allocated for training. The 1982 training budget for the Arabian American Oil Company (ARAMCO) was \$380 million. Even with the reduced oil production and corresponding revenues, the training budgets in the region have been maintained at continued high levels.

Impact of culture

Recent HRD literature on international training points out the need for a knowledge of the host country's culture. Management development courses in the Arab world that ignore cultural considerations have little value.

Many, if not all, of the subjects comprising management training (leadership, motivation, decision making) are pro-

ducts of Western industrial society. Unless imported packaged training programs from the West are adapted to fit the value system and customs of Arab culture, they have seriously limited relevance to the participants. Such programs can encourage a style that may backfire on them when they return to the job.

One simply cannot change the names in case studies from Adam or Michael to Ahmad or Mohammed and feel content with the adaptation. How relevant is a New York-designed personnel administration program to a Saudi superintendent whose employees include eight separate nationalities with differences in pay scales and benefit application?

Adaption

Accepted local traditions and industrial practices of the region must be taken into account. The instructor cannot discuss leadership styles, for example, unless he or she clearly understands the pervasive role of human relations in the Arab environment where managers are expected to assume a paternalistic role. They must establish strong personal contact with every member of the staff, know their personal background and resolve their personal problems. Although this custom inspires strong loyalty and trust, it also demands strong interpersonal skills and a willingness to invest time with each subordinate.

Course content should be framed within the paternalistic and personalized approach expected of supervisors or managers. A lecture on leadership styles, for example, might be met by reverential silence and obvious confusion, since the approach would not be compatible with accepted supervisory and managerial behavior in the Arab culture.

As pointed out by Harris and Moran, there are problems in "assuming that our management philosophies or strategies are exportable in their entirety. *They are not.* Leadership is learned and based on assumptions about one's place in the world. Managers from other business systems are not 'underdeveloped' American managers."¹

Relevancy

Adapt course content by including managerial problem situations rarely

found in a Western setting. Some of these examples include:

- The conflicts between the older, less educated nationals and the rapidly promoted young university graduates who supervise them;
- The strong individualism of employees and its effect on team building efforts;
- The manager's additional burden as a paternal figure expected to listen to and solve problems not related to work;
- The communication barriers within a multinational work force;
- The expanded training and development role the manager must assume;
- The difficulty of disciplining effectively when government labor officials are overly protective.

These, and other relevant issues, can be explored through case studies that offer participants a frame of reference in the work environment. It also enables them to come up with pragmatic solutions to these current managerial problems.

Creating consensus

Traditionally, teachers have great respect and esteem in the Arab world. This cultural trait is positive reinforcement for the IIRD professional conducting management training courses in the region.

Although most participants usually are fluent in English, some knowledge of spoken Arabic is valuable for building a foundation of trust and respect.

Another important point: Using slang can pose serious communication problems in other cultures. Those who rely on sports terms like "hitting the home run" or "throwing the long bomb for a touchdown" predictably will "strike out."

Trust in turn leads to a more responsive group, serious and enthusiastic, willing to exchange ideas openly. If a group is handled properly, strong emotional bonds develop during the course, building a team and family spirit far more magnified than one could expect in the West.

Politics, religion and unions are among the topics that are to be avoided in any discussion. The encouragement of competition and conflict to generate interest should also be approached with caution. The participants will respond only up to a point: Sensitivity and a natural resentment of criticism and possible loss of face

makes them stop far short of any open confrontation. The solutions to problems presented in the course should be directed toward seeking out a mutually agreed consensus, and building confidence through reinforcement and praise for appropriate answers. If the acknowledgement is given in Arabic, it has an even more positive impact.

Finally, the course material for supervisory and management training courses in the Gulf area should be revised continually to reflect changing conditions. A five-year-old case study, for example, devised to illustrate a particular problem and its solution now may be too simplistic. A revised case study would have to be more sophisticated, reflecting the rising educational level and experience of the participants. The rapid strides made by Arabs managing and staffing multi-million dollar enterprises in the private and public sectors challenge trainers to continually upgrade the content of their programs.

Reference

1. Moran, R.T., & Harris, P.R. (1982). *Managing cultural synergy*. Houston: Gulf, 72.

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