The Use of Strategic Metaphors in Intercultural Business Communication

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This paper contends that the use of strategic metaphors can help deliver the effective intercultural business communication necessary for global success. Using the Renault-Nissan Alliance as an example, the authors argue that an appropriate metaphor can help provide the global glue which captures the essence of the organisation's activities, encapsulates its strategic intent, incorporates the national and global cultures, and portrays its ethical and business stance. Indeed, as is the case in the Renault-Nissan Alliance, the appropriate use of metaphor allowed the firm to bind a diverse group of stakeholders to a common goal by using the inherent ambiguity and multiplicity of meaning of the metaphor to overcome Asian and Western intercultural differences and at the same time maximise goal congruence.

Key Words: intercultural business communication, strategic metaphors, alliance relationships
JEL *Classification:* M12, M14

Introduction

Over the last decade, research on strategic alliances has received increased attention in the literature. Several streams can be identified: the first dominant theme involves examining the underlying conditions favouring alliance formation (Williamson 1991; Garcia-Pont and Nohria 2002); the second deals with investigating the alliance outcomes and the impact of alliances on the original partner firms (Kogut 1989; Doz 1996; Judge and Dooley 2006); while the third explores issues relating to alliance dynamics (Singh and Mitchell 1996; Ireland, Hitt, and Vaidyanath 2002; Das and Teng 2002). Concurrently, a wide body of literature discusses the difficulties experienced by cross-national alliances. Findings also indicate that many international strategic alliances are either abandoned or

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taken over by one of the partners a few years after their start up (Kumar and Andersen 2000).

To date the literature on international strategic alliances indicates that the critical factors facing an alliance performance and success are: the development of shared values and norms among culturally divergent alliance partners (Lyles and Salk 1996; Kumar and Andersen 2000); the importance of managing relations between the people of the alliances in the early implementation stages (Doz and Hamel 1998; Kelly, Schaan, and Jonkas 2000); and finally establishing a trust-based relationship (Kok and Wildeman 1999; Nielsen 2001). Inter-partner diversity (Parkhe 1991; Adler and Graham 1989; Das and Teng 2002), culture clashes and associated language differences are frequently cited as the most common reasons for alliance problems and failure (Child and Faulkner 1998; Kelly, Schaan, and Jonkas 2000).

As global corporations mature, cross-cultural issues can become quite confusing (Pooler 1992). Global strategic alliance management skills, built through experience, become a core organisational competency. This type of advantage at a time when mergers, joint ventures, and alliances are a prerequisite for global competitiveness and effectiveness, will launch a select few organisations into the elite realms of global leadership (Quill 2000). Cultural dissimilarities when managed efficiently and creatively will enhance innovation and dynamism leading to better group performance (Cox 1993; Jehn and Bezrukova 2004).

Intercultural Business Communication

Research on the relative importance of national context and organisational characteristics highlights two divergent perspectives. The first believes that organisations are 'culture free' (Kerr et al. 1960; Mouton and Blake 1970; Eisenstadt 1973; Prentice 1990). It argues that competitive forces in the form of markets, industrialisation and new technology override differences in a national context (Pugh et al. 1968; Child 1973; England, Negandhi, and Wilpert 1979). The contrasting view contends that organisations are in fact 'culture bound' (Dore 1973; Maurice, Arndt, and Warner 1980). It argues that national contextual factors definitively determine management practice (Crozier 1964; Adler and Ghadar 1990; Hofstede 2001). However, while a large number of researchers have looked at cultural variables that affect intercultural business, the emphasis is typically not on the intercultural business communication process or linguistic issues but instead on cultural attitudes (Haire, Ghiselli, and Porter

1963; Laurent 1983; Hofstede 2001; Trompenaars and Woolliams 2003).

Studies in intercultural competence and cross-cultural communication in MNCs have increased in the last 20 years (Beamer 1992; Chen and Starosta 1998; Piekkari and Zander 2005). In the business literature, national differences are often cited as the source of intercultural communication conflicts and breakdowns arising between headquarters and local site staff. Intercultural business literature tends to focus on miscommunication or differences in discourse conventions often attributed to cultural attitudes and variables (Hofstede 2001). While a large number of researchers have looked at cultural variables that affect intercultural business, the emphasis is typically not on the intercultural business communication process or linguistic issues but instead on cultural attitudes.

Varner (2000) in setting out an intercultural business communication theoretical framework drew a clear differentiation between intercultural communication and international business communication. She defines intercultural business communication as a unique construct, which aims to include business as a distinct variable, therefore differentiating it from other intercultural communication processes. She argues that business – such as an organisation or a business activity – must be an essential variable of the communication hypothesis in so far as intercultural business communication includes business strategies, goals, objectives and practices that form an essential part of the communication process and help create a new environment out of the synergy of culture, communication and business.

Metaphor, Organisations and Strategy

The use of metaphors in business communications can be viewed from a number of perspectives. For the purposes of this section, the literature is divided into three main areas: firstly, the role and purpose of metaphors from a linguistic perspective, secondly the use of metaphors in organisational change, and finally the use of metaphor in competitive strategy.

METAPHOR: A LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVE

A metaphor offers patterns of interrelationships, which are normally nonexistent: that is, a creative metaphor is a novel and original way of building a bridge between two different, usually separate, apparently anomalous conceptual domains. If examined closely, they usually express a logical inconsistency, incongruence or a contradiction (Black 1962; MacCormac 1985; Morgan 1986; Ortony 1979). It is the contradictions within the metaphor, which increase its value in communicating new concepts, new visions and motivating innovation and new product development.

Since the Lakoff and Johnson study (1980), metaphors are no longer viewed as Socratic verbal ornamentation, a system of stylistic strategy used to embellish speech. Linguists now believe that metaphors 'actually mirrored the cognitive processes that underlie abstract concepts' (Danesi and Perron 1999, 164). Johnson and Lakoff argue that abstract perceptions are derived from a systematic ingestion of concrete perceptions through metaphorical reasoning or mapping, and rename the output of this process as conceptual metaphors. They traced the source of conceptual metaphors to image schemas (mental orientation; ontological thinking and the third one, a mixture of the aforementioned two schemas), which are defined as culture bound. A conceptual metaphor is the product of a cultural groupthink. It produces a process of cumulative cultural models of ideas and provides the 'conceptual glue' that keep a system of culture together with a view to creating another one (Danesi and Perron 1999).

METAPHOR AND ORGANISATIONAL CHANGE

Metaphors and metaphorical analysis are not solely used in linguistic and literary studies, but have formed for the last few decades an important part of business and social science literature. The value of using metaphors and metaphorical language has been quickly recognised by business analysts and strategists as a way to provide valuable insights into organisations. Though there still exists a continuum of conflicting views about its use, purpose and interpretation (Palmer and Dunford 1996; Cornelissen, Kafouros, and Lock 2005), the impact of metaphor use in business studies has today firmly established itself.

In organisational change settings, a metaphor is a straightforward method used to simplify the complex description of an organisation. It can be used to perform a variety of analyses within the organisation such as 'decision-making, leadership, organisation development, policy, strategy, information technology, organisational culture, organisation design and production management' (Palmer and Dunford 1996). Overall it is used as a means to describe, convey large amounts of information and understand organisational practices and problems (Palmer and Dunford 1996). As table 1 indicates, the range of metaphors used for organisational change has been impressive if at times perplexing.

TABLE 1 Metaphors in organisational change

Machine and organisms	Morgan 1980
Cultures, political systems, brains and psychic prisons	Morgan 1986
Jazz bands and missionaries	Akin and Schultheiss 1990
Clouds and songs	Gergen 1992
Soap bubbles	Tsoukas 1993
Strategic termites and Spider plants	Morgan 1993

Adapted from Palmer and Dunford (1996).

METAPHOR AND COMPETITIVE STRATEGY

Hunt and Menon (1995) argue that the four most commonly used frameworks in the competitive strategy literature are all based on metaphors. They highlight the evolutionary market/firm, game theoretic, strategic alliance and marketing warfare frameworks as the dominant examples of the use of metaphors in the strategy literature. They go on to explore the dimensions of metaphoric transfer for the four principle competitive strategy metaphors as outlined in table 2.

For management researchers, competitive strategy metaphors use language to convey information and ideas, which can be transferred into tacit knowledge, a way of thinking and viewing the world, which cannot be easily articulated (Morgan 1986). In essence, a metaphor captures the deficiency of the incapability to convey discrete symbol systems (language) about an object, event or experience.

In dealing with cross-cultural communication in an international context with multiple stakeholders, a strategic metaphor helps to achieve uniformity of purpose and development of emotional links with a global organisation. A strategic metaphor is a linguistic construction of carefully chosen words, which conveys the essence of the organisation's strategic intent and its core values. Due to the different cognitive perspectives of stakeholders to an organisation, they take the same or different meanings from the strategic metaphor.

Metaphor and Communication

A metaphor is nonetheless a means of communication in so far as its purpose is to convey a series of messages through a process of association and images. As a process enabling the connection of different cultures, it is an ideal way to communicate and bond all stakeholders in an alliance or joint venture regardless of their national or organisational

TABLE 2 Dimensions of metaphoric transfer

Metaphor	Source	Ontology	Concepts	Theories	Values
War	Military science	Nations, armies, divisions battalions, non-combatants, combatants, allies, military academies	Strategy, tactics, missions, intelligence deployment, action diplomacy, echelon, fortification, espionage, preemption rules and level of war, mobilization	Theory of absolute war, theory of cold war, voluntary theory, Douhet theory of war	Victory, defense, retaliation, honor, duty to country, territory, conquest, economic gain
Game	Sports	Teams, players, fans, coaches, trainers, writers, commentators, referees, scores, audience, bookies, sponsors, leagues championship	Offense, defense, cooperation, team-spirit, score	Zero-sum game theory, finite game theory, infinite game theory, prisoner's dilemma	Sponsorship, gamesmanship, competition, exercise, pleasure, relaxation, release of energy, physical fitness
Organism	Biology	Cells, humans, plants, animals, ecosystem, genes	Life-cycle, growth, adaptation, nutrition, niche, environment, resources, progress	Evolutionary theory, natural selection, adaptation theory	Life, growth, survival
Marriage	Sociology, home economics	Spouses, family, household children, orphans, relatives, step-relatives, father, mother, sister, brother, neighbors, marriage, marriage counselors	Kinship, relationship trust, reproduction, partners, divorce, extra-marital affairs, alimony, child support	Marital theory	Commitment, love, harmony, financial security, protection

Adapted from Hunt and Menon (1995).

cultures. It provides a common language and a basis for communication within the organisation.Through metaphor, an organisation can develop a common language to express a common vision and strategy. It is a very effective tool to engage multi-cultural teams and mono-cultural teams operating in different cultural contexts, building up cross-cultural teams (Gibson and Zellmer-Bruhn 2002). The higher the power distance, the more likely teamwork metaphors will be used (Gibson 2001).

Most strategists consider metaphorical language to be greater than literal language (Srivasta and Barrett 1988) because it can capture all organisational stakeholders' experience and emotions better and can 'communicate meaning in complex, ambiguous situations where literal language is inadequate' (Palmer and Dunford 1996, 694). In business communication, metaphors are mostly used to introduce the concept of change, and metaphorical discourse is to be found mainly in strategy change literature. In this context the use of a metaphor is usually considered as an act of 'pure creativity' since its primary function is to stimulate the creative process and use one's imagination to 'evoke and suggest new ways of doing things' (Cleary and Packard 1992; Palmer and Dunford 1996). They become a valuable communication tool to share concepts and visions and redirect both internal and external communication of purpose. Whatever the nature of the metaphors, they are continuously referenced to, and language driven by them is continuously used in the organisation to direct problem formulation and solution processes (Boland and Greenberg 1988).

A commitment to addressing cross-cultural and intercultural issues through changes in structures and processes significantly increases the likelihood of success, a sustainable competitive success and facilitates competitive agility in the global arena. An essential element for success in an alliance, a joint venture or an MNC intercultural communication strategy is to develop a strategic metaphor. This provides the global glue, which captures the essence of the organisation's activities, encapsulates its strategic intent, the national and global cultures, and portrays its ethical and business stance. The chief strategist as part of the intercultural business communication process to all stakeholders uses the strategic metaphor to bind the activities of the MNC and aim for global success. Each stakeholder can take the same or different meaning from a strategic metaphor since its purpose is to stir different personal emotions from various stakeholders, be they shareholders or employees.

The Case Study

To be a global competitor in the car manufacturing industry, companies need a strong geographic market presence in all continents. Today six car manufacturers – General Motors, Ford, Toyota, Renault-Nissan, Volkswagen and Daimler – have achieved sufficient critical mass to separate them from the remaining volume manufacturers. When Renault first approached Nissan, it was naturally seeking to acquire a global dimension, which would allow the company not only to promote its products and its business values, but also to secure greater profits for its shareholders.

Renault had already experienced a very traumatic divorce with Volvo in 1993, subsequent to political and legal unrest in France. The progressive wear and tear of that relationship had left Renault with a bittersweet taste and a fear of 'remarrying'. Once bitten, twice shy, Renault courted Nissan with a very different approach. Nissan was and is considered a symbol of Japanese society and culture in the same manner as most French people equate Renault with their sense of *Frenchness.* Therefore, the challenge faced by both companies was to reassess not only their own internal (organisational culture) environments but equally, to reassess their own external (national culture) environments while keeping communication channels opened both at local and international levels.

THE PRE-ALLIANCE PROCESS

Korine, Asakawa, and Gomez (2002), following an in-depth study of the formation process of the alliance, identified four stages: the conceiving, courting, commitment and closures phases. The initial conceiving phase strictly involved the two CEOs alone and was designed to develop trust and mutual respect at the highest levels within the two firms. Only after this trust and understanding had been established did the firms move to the more formal courting stage. As part of this phase in July 1998, Nissan and Renault embarked on a set of talks, with approximately 200 staff members conducting joint team studies for several months to explore the possibilities of complementing each other and creating potential synergies by sharing critical information on each other's strengths and best practices. The results of their findings revealed that an alliance between the two companies could have a positive outcome for both parties. These joint team studies showed that Renault would be the best partner for Nissan for building a mutually beneficial, complementary relationship in terms of regional business activities and for obtaining a variety of cross-cultural synergies. The intention was to promote collaborative ventures, not through a mere merger or business tie-up, but through a new approach to a corporate alliance.

It was decided at the onset that the corporate alliance, would rely on a strategy based primarily on trust and equity of participation, the implementation of which came through the exchange and deep involvement of middle management executives in the alliance process. Early in the pre-stage negotiations, Renault had identified in Nissan similar working values and similar business ethics. Nissan is viewed in Japan as a strong symbol for the working class economy while Renault itself, in France, epitomised the history of a working class taking pride in valuing not only the work of its employees but the men who produced that work. Though Renault acknowledges that this joint-venture was initially a capital transaction (it made a substantial financial commitment to Nissan), it also recognises that their alliance must be based on a partnership between two different corporate identities, representing strong brands and very attached to the mutual development of their own company.

GOVERNANCE AND STRUCTURE OF THE ALLIANCE

As part of the commitment phase the two firms began to put in place structures and processes to allow them to operationalize the principles of the alliance. Renault-Nissan set up a Global Alliance Committee, co-chaired by the CEO of Renault and the Chairman of Nissan, plus ten other top executives (made of an equal number). It was agreed that, this committee should meet at least once a month, alternatively in Paris or Tokyo. Their task was primarily to drive the main strategic orientations of the alliance and aims for a merger of all cultural synergies, which could only benefit the alliance. To ensure success at a micro level, Renault-Nissan agreed to set up a joint co-ordination Bureau, responsible for the coordinating and implementation of the decisions taken by the Global Alliance Committee. At the operating level, they appointed several cross companies teams – with equal input – for each geographical zone, which aimed to implement actions such as research and development, supplier relations, productions platforms and powertrain families, distribution and financing of sales. A third and final committee – functional task team – was created. Its function was to support quality, cost control, scheduling, market analysis, human resources, tax implications and legal resources. The cross companies' team members were also responsible for analysing non-operational effects on the development of the group and the harmonisation of standards and practices.

In addition, the number of board members was reduced, and a new system for the appointment of 'corporate officers' was introduced to distinguish management decision-making and execution of operations. To strengthen Nissan's management, a Renault Executive Vice President,

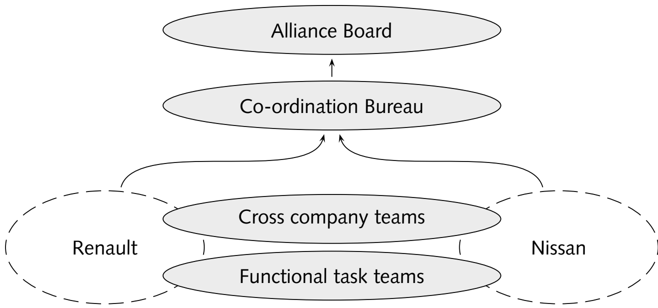

FIGURE 1 Management structures and governance of the alliance

was appointed Chief Operating Officer and became a member of the Board of Directors of Nissan. As part of its new management system, Nissan received another two executives from Renault. Nissan reduced the number of members on its Board of Directors from thirty-seven to ten as part of its effort to improve management efficiency.

It was also agreed that Renault would send thirty Renault executives on assignment with Nissan and appoint the chairman of Nissan to the Renault Board of Directors. Once, this was concluded, both companies were left to face their first real challenge, that is implementing all the above conceptual partnership structures at an operational level. The challenge was to put into practice the above strategies while safeguarding the cultural ethos of both companies and to improve intercultural communication.

Following more discussions, it was decided that partnership structures should adhere to the following principles:

- they should be simple and understandable by both companies;
- they should be transnational;
- they should facilitate confidence and transparency;
- they should be based on the spirit of a win-win scenario;
- no party should be favoured or disadvantaged;
- no party should lose its cultural identities and/or brand;
- continuous dialogues and communication, despite geographical distance, should be encouraged to promote a spirit of partnership at all times.

It was not until at a very advanced stage in the formation of the alliance that formal contractual positions began to be addressed. Instead the two main focuses during these four phases remained the same at all times: both CEOs put the alliance process itself at the centre of their respective strategies and both CEOs used the process of the alliance as an opportunity to initiate strategic changes within their firms prior to the signing of the agreement. Korine, Asakawa, and Gomez (2002) point out that both CEOs took a long-term view on the alliance project, not only to secure its viability but also to ensure that they could deliver. They further indicate that for the majority of strategic alliances organisational commitment and identification based-trust need to be established (2002, 49). It is with this in mind that Renault and Nissan saw in the alliance formation an opportunity to launch change within their own organisational structures, review Nissan's problems and the occasion to build up Renault's profile in the automotive world. Korine, Asakawa, and Gomez (2002) identified three steps both companies had to undertake to give birth to the alliance: build up a deep knowledge of each other through the formation of the joint team studies; break down Nissan's resistance to change; and infuse entrepreneurial spirit into Nissan by implementing new management structures and developing new strategic views.

The set up of the Global Alliance Committee and the use of joint team studies prior to the signing up of the agreement allowed the establishment of a common language and protocol. Everything appeared to be very positive and well planned. However, one of the main problems, as identified by both companies at the time of negotiations, remained not only the cultural confrontation of two organisational cultures but also the cultural confrontation of their employees. The question became how to sustain this beautiful marriage and avoid cultural war?

The Renault-Nissan Alliance Metaphor

Both companies had to transcend their own national culture and stereotypes to reach what Airaudi (consultant for Renault and specialist on Japan) refers to as the 'conquest of the inner frontier'. As a result, both parties could then appreciate and assess what was needed to change two such complex organisations. In other words, Renault recognised that the success of the adventure did not solely depend on the economical and legal aspect of the venture, but it had to succeed at a more human, quasi-anthropological level (Housson 2000).

Communication difficulties arose not only because of there being two different languages in use (two different systems and registers of languages) but more importantly because conceptual frameworks, favoured by the French, are not easily accepted by the Japanese since *ideograms* already represent a visual and concrete concept in the Japanese written language (Housson 2000). Cartesian semantics clashed with the subtle ambiguities of Japanese communication processes and the complexities of silence and its cultural interpretations in various negotiation and social contexts. From an organisational point of view, both the French and the Japanese are fundamentally opposed on the question of an essential cultural ideology: the role itself of the company. The western ideological quest for value added, turnover, and increasing profit is not at the heart of the Japanese organisational philosophy. In Japan, an organisation's purpose is to reinvest whatever and however small the profit is in the company. Its *raison d'être* is to survive, that is to reinvest itself within itself on a continuous basis.

Since the early days, both companies recognised and worked on the assumption that the national cultural aspects of the two partners were profoundly different. Both companies understood that they both feared the usual cultural clichés of French idiosyncrasies (arrogance, individualism, egocentrism, intellectual pretentiousness, anarchism management style, inability to follow instructions, allergy to authority etc.); while on the other hand Renault's employees were equally challenged by the same subconscious prejudices of their Japanese counterparts (insularity, fear of invasion, unilateral mindset, fear of conceptualising etc.). To overcome this cultural challenge, it called upon a team of consultant psychologists, who advised them to acknowledge and accept the friction arising out of such negative emotions without censoring them. Both parties undertook to reach this inner frontier without attempting to colonise the other culture and instead identify the affinities or positive singularities of the other party, that is to acquire a sense of self and subsequently a sense of the other.

A key element in achieving this goal was the importance paid to language, linguistic and cultural issues but more specifically the use of metaphor to create the emotional climate for success. Two specific examples of the use of metaphor stand out. The first of these, the strategic metaphor, 'The Renault-Nissan Alliance' was designed to ensure that the transaction was to be a marriage of equals (a true partnership) while the second 'Renault Créateur d'Automobiles' (a marketing metaphor) was primarily concerned with highlighting the synergies, which the alliance would subsequently bring to the parties.

From a purely financial and legal perspective the Renault-Nissan

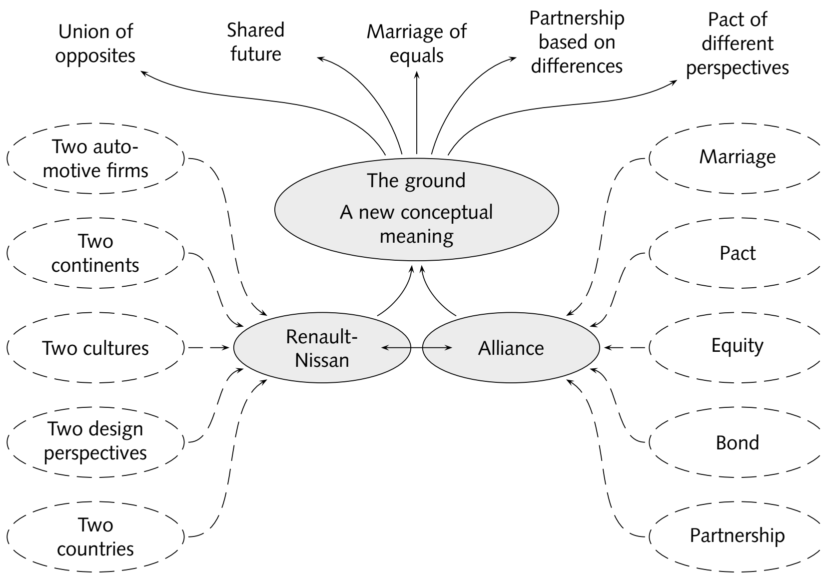

FIGURE 2 Analysis of the metaphor Renault-Nissan alliance

agreement effectively gave Renault a controlling interest in Nissan. The size of the initial shareholding acquired (36.8%) and the subsequent rise to 44.4% make Renault the dominant shareholder in Nissan for the foreseeable future. From a strictly accounting perspective the new firm Renault-Nissan BV amounts to an effective takeover of Nissan by Renault. Despite these realities Renault has continued to place enormous importance on portraying the transaction as an alliance. A key part of this portrayal is the firm's insistence on continuing to use the 'Renault-Nissan Alliance' metaphor.

'Renault-Nissan Alliance' is a conceptual metaphor. The first point to notice is the use of the dash between the words Renault and Nissan, which is used to portray both organisations as a single and united entity. Consider an ontological analysis of the word alliance. In the western world, the connotations of the word alliance are: a marriage, the union of two persons based on a legal relationship. In French, it also signifies a wedding ring. In military terms, it implies the agreement of two parties joining their respective efforts to face a common enemy, presenting a united front to win against the opposition, the enemy. In business terms, it stands for a partnership based on trust, equality and equity. In religious terms, it refers to the pact concluded between God and the

Hebrew people and in rhetoric, it refers to the meeting of two different group concepts. At the other end of the spectrum, we must also look at the temporary connotations associated with the word alliance such as, marriages end in divorce, military alliances end, partnerships fail.

Now consider a mapping of the words: Renault-Nissan. The connotations associated with Renault-Nissan are two competing car manufacturers for a share in the Asian market, competition between the European market and the Asian market. It juxtaposes two different cultures, the West and the East, French and Japanese. It stands to represent the strengths of each party involved, that is creative design and engineering innovativeness.

To support and encourage this process, the alliance raised the notion of a global citizenship, which purports to complement the respective identities of all parties involved. To realise this notion of a global citizenship, they drafted an Alliance Charter, the purpose of which is to be used as a symbol and rallying point for all the citizens of the alliance tautology. To overcome cross-cultural challenges, conflicting perspectives, national cultures prior to the Alliance, reinforce the concept of an alliance and subsequently maximise communication post the alliance, a strategic metaphor was developed. Alongside this concrete statement of intent was the decision to adopt English as the lingua franca of the new organisation.

PROMOTING INTERCULTURAL COMMUNICATIONS AND COOPERATION

Despite significant restructuring, both companies actively promoted intercultural communication firstly through personnel exchanges and secondly through the Alliance Business Way Program. Personnel exchanges fell into four categories: namely Renault and Nissan expatriates employed by the company during their expatriation; alliance projects such as engines and transmissions and RandD; employees exchanged within a regional framework, where for example Renault employees have been assigned to European Nissan affiliates.

The importance of the Alliance Business Way Program cannot be underestimated in terms of promoting a performance-oriented culture, and should be regarded as a concrete measure to support intercultural communication and as a mechanism to support the values of the Alliance and of the strategic metaphor. The programme has two strands. The first concentrates on cross-cultural training to understand cultural backgrounds and working styles, consisting of a number of conferences with the theme of 'Working with Japanese/French Partners'. The focus of the conferences is centred on communications, project management and how to overcome resistance and problems while maintaining a positive partnership and pursue a common objective. The second is a series of Team Working Seminars, focusing on team and individual efficiencies by developing team's processes and enhancing team communication.

STRUCTURES AND GOVERNANCE

The Alliance Charter and the communication of the Alliance metaphor significantly aided Goshn's revival plan for Nissan. In terms of the Alliance structures, over 350 personnel drawn from both companies are involved in management and governance structures of the Alliance. Its management structure consists of an Alliance board responsible for developing the long-term strategy and initiating global joint activities. The next level consists of a Co-ordination Bureau based in Paris and Tokyo, coordinating the work of Cross Company Teams and Functional Task Teams (see figure 1). This management and governance structure reinforces the Alliance Charter principles and values. Such a structure not only formalises the Alliance, but culturally signals the importance of cross learning, mutual respect and maintains the balance between both parties. In essence the structure supports the view that the Alliance is the construction of a group with dual nationality not a merger. As Douin (2002, 3) commented: 'This meant establishing a subtle balance between two companies. This balance was guaranteed by the Alliance charter, which is a symbol of support for values which are held in common such as ambition and the desire to succeed, performance, mutual trust and respect, balance and loyalty.' Essentially, by focusing on common even universal values, the Alliance begins the process of becoming culturally free (Kerr et al. 1960; Mouton and Blake 1970; Eisenstadt 1973; Prentice 1990). Therefore, over time, management practices throughout organisations become more alike, bound by common values, irrespective of the national context. Using personnel exchanges and the Alliance Business Way Program assists in the development of intercultural communications, but over time also means that the focus for both parties will be on their common values and a culture that is performance orientated, which ultimately binds every person in the organisation at personal level and personalises risk and reward for every employee irrespective of nationality.

Discussion

Conflicting national and organisational cultures are blamed for the failure of international alliances. However, the Renault-Nissan experience provides strong evidence that where these differences are explicitly recognised and accepted, and where appropriate processes and structures are put in place, national and organisational culture obstacles can be surmounted. The harmonisation of culture, which Turnheim (1996) speaks of, can be accomplished in the form of structures, policies and practices. This harmonisation of cultures ought to take place through a process of cross-cultural communication, in the early implementation stages, to maintain a competitive advantage based on organisational culture. The Alliance Charter drawn up between Nissan and Renault gives a structure as to how this harmonisation can be achieved, building on trust, truth, human respect, business ethics, confidentiality, and fairness to ensure balance between both parties.

Reconciliation of cultural differences can be approached in a number of different ways. The most common one is to adopt one partner's culture as dominant. The other alternative is to separate or limit the activities of the partners so as to minimise cultural interaction and hence the likelihood of cultural clashes. These not only limit the prospect of cultural conflicts but also reduce the potential of the partners learning and benefiting from each other's culture and business experience. The most integrative approach remains to face up to, manage cultural differences by involving partners at all levels, and participate in cross-cultural development programs. More recent research has claimed that it is not the initial cultural clashes per se that create problems, but people's divergent beliefs and values of the organisation which give rise to problematic situations. They maintain that a strong adopted integration strategy should be culturally compatible and that it is the acculturation processes that managers should turn their attention to with a view to either assimilate, integrate, separate or 'deculturise' (Vaara 2000).

Effective cross-cultural communication combined with managerial pluralism and the acceptance of substance over form in the design of organisational structures (in particular the senior management team) are prerequisites for success in bringing together two organisational cultures. Strong and efficient cultures which Christensen and Gordon (1999) described, are typically characteristic of Japanese firms such as Nissan Motor Co. Renault culture is also very efficient, but both companies are used to different management styles. They both needed to be aware that a successful enterprise would only grow if they acknowledged and respected each other's respective cultures and were committed to co-operating and working closely together. In establishing the Global Alliance Committee and the cross-cultural teams, it appears that senior management was aiming for an 'insiderisation' approach to managing the new partnership. Their aims were to motivate and develop a shared vision with an emphasis on team building, restoring the self-esteem of both companies with the intention of raising their visibility and credibility on the international automotive trade scene. This pragmatic approach to cultural issues convinced both partners to reassure their workforce by cultivating the employees' sense of the *métier* (trade), thereby creating a sense of pride and participation in the new epic venture.

Cohabitation not colonisation is the effective long-run model for exploiting the Alliance. This in turn requires a high degree of transculturality and the creation of a new corporate citizenship, the birth of a new nomadic brain. Trompenaars (1998) believes culture is the way in which a group of people solves problems. Again, the Alliance Charter cites trust as the building block towards joint problem solving. Academics and researchers must urgently address the poverty of the informing conceptual frameworks that guide management in creating post-alliance organisations. In particular, there is a need for more longitudinal field-based research to provide theoretical insights into the true nature of international alliances and in particular to improve our understanding of the dynamic of what are often colliding national and organisational cultures. It is only with these practical and theoretical insights that architects for change can achieve true cross-cultural fluency and create the emotional climate for communication and co-operation.

As organisations and industries become more knowledge-intensive there is a growing need to recognise that it is intangible assets, resources in the form of ideas, brands, innovation etc., which are the source of long-term competitive advantage. International alliances which fail to retain and nurture the knowledge and human capital of the post-merger organisation will not achieve success in the long-term. In the modern organisation of the 21st century, the marauding conqueror view of global expansion must give way to more enlightened ideas such as the meeting of minds and shared meaning that characterise the learning organisation. Comparative advantage in the long run will come not from capital, products or even superior manufacturing and marketing processes, but from the ability to master and manage the continuous stream of cross-cultural challenges which globalisation brings with it.

In order to cope with the complex international environment pressures, Bartlett and Ghoshal (1989) stressed the importance of developing not one strategy (transnational, albeit multidimensional), and urged organisations to commit to a global, multinational and international strategy simultaneously. They must become, in Bartlett and Ghoshal's words, a transnational company. Again, the Global Alliance Committee and cross-cultural teams reflect this thinking, concentrating on establishing an integrated networking structure, committed decision-making and highly innovative capabilities.

Metaphors are often used in the language of business to maximise effect and delivery. The purpose of a metaphor is to view one thing in terms of or as a substitute for another. Its concepts are crucial to uncover or trigger latent needs and emotions. Methapor is often used to identify a belief of value or a value system within which people can operate. In that sense it requires a cognitive function. A strategic metaphor provides the strategist with words to shed light on his /her cognitive function which outlines simplicity of purpose and creates a platform to address competing needs. The strategic metaphor encapsulates the strategic intent of the organisation, its competitive position in the market, its core competencies, and its approach to business ethics and in dealing with society as a whole. Furthermore, it reinforces a culture of success, by attempting to create a personal emotional connection with key stakeholders such as employees, investors and customers. Moreover, stakeholders take their own interpretation from the strategic metaphor thus satisfying their needs. In an international alliance the strategist can use the different interpretations to communicate the positive aspects of the alliance to all stakeholders, while maintaining some degree of freedom to pursue all strategic paths to ensure the success of the alliance.

In seeking to understand the Renault-Nissan's use of metaphor, it is important to note that it can be argued that the deployment of metaphorical language in its stead ignores the fact that people may interpret it from heterogeneous cultural and conceptual backgrounds. Fluid it may be for the 'national culture', but alien it may be to another. A simple illustration of this point is 'Snow-white corporate ethics' could have many interpretations – overt honesty, ethics can melt over time, white can turn to grey very quickly when convenient, snow is malleable etc. However, the subtleties are likely to be lost on an Indian, a Nigerian, a New Caledonian who have never seen snow. In addition, issues of translation may also raise concerns about the applicability of the metaphor. The question that arises is does this lack of uniformity not cause a problem? A strategy that can be this easily manipulated by heterogeneous groups may be seen as being fundamentally flawed the 'global glue' might be of no more use than sellotape. As such it could be argued that a metaphor, which attempts to involve all the cultures in an alliance, a joint venture, an MNC, might be overly optimistic?

Quills (2000) argues that cultural differences ought to be viewed as opportunities to achieve synergy and to enhance effectiveness, not as obstacles to overcome. To create a synergistic organisation, that values and uses difference, management must employ an intercultural communication framework and develop an organisational intercultural competency. A strategic metaphor can help towards achieving this goal. Today, Nissan and Renault are equally aware that, while both companies are coming from very different backgrounds, they must remain enthusiastic and willing to work through their cultural differences – the Charter alone is evidence of this dedication. As outlined earlier, the reality of the transaction between the two firms was an effective acquisition of a controlling interest by Renault in Nissan. From the outset, however, senior management in both firms were prepared to set aside that reality and instead move forward on the basis of an alliance of equals based on acceptance of their differences. The adoption of the 'Alliance' label for the transaction was a powerful and lasting first step in creating the emotional and organisational climate for real partnership. While some would suggest that the reality of Renault's shareholding leaves it as the dominant partner in the relationship, the use of the Alliance strategic metaphor has been an important part of the successful deployment of processes, structures and strategies that have allowed the important intercultural communication to take place right from the beginning. While some commentators might interpret the use of the 'Alliance' strategic metaphor as a cynical manipulation designed to camouflage an underlying reality, the authors would suggest that in fact the strategic metaphor has allowed the two firms to avoid the pacman approach, to escape what was a potential fatal source of cultural conflicts and create a new reality based on a partnership of trust, respect and equals.

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