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WHAT IS AN "EXEMPLARY WORKPLACE"? EVIDENCE FROM CUBA[1]

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WHAT IS AN “EXEMPLARY WORKPLACE”?

EVIDENCE FROM CUBA

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Management researchers and practitioners have developed a marked interest for the notion of “good companies to work for”, “exemplary workplaces”, “meaningful work”, “virtuous organization”, “truly healthy organizations” or “authentizotic organizations”. We complement the previous studies, conducted in the context of capitalistic economies, with an analysis of the representation of the “exemplary organization” in the context of a communist country, Cuba. An inductive study with 39 managers suggests that some elements of the exemplary workplace profile are heavily influenced by the local conditions (e.g., transportation system), whereas others may be viewed as probably general (social contribution). We also conclude that the balance between material conditions and social issues is a major determinant of how people evaluate the “exemplarity” of their organization.

Keywords: exemplary workplaces, meaning at work, Cuba

The field of management and organization has a lasting interest for the notion of good organizations. The notion of “good organization” may express several meanings, but these can be broadly divided in two facets: organizational effectiveness and human well-being (Kamoche, 2001). The focus on the human or the functional side of the organization has historically been at the heart of management thought (Barley & Kunda, 1992). We focus on the human side of good organizing and contribute to the emerging literature on “best companies to work for”. This interest emerged in the popular press, with the publication by Fortune magazine, of the list of the American best workplaces. This classification was rapidly exported to other national contexts and allowed to draw a general profile of the “best” organizations. In the academia, interest for these same organizations led to some publications. Kets de Vries coined the term “authentizotic organizations” to capture the essence of these vibrant and meaningful workplaces; Fulmer et al. (2003) compared the economic results of companies in the best workplaces group with a paired sample of equivalent firms to conclude that the best are better in terms of financial results; Filbeck and Preece (2003) found positive stock market impacts of corporate concern for workers.

With this research we add to the best workplaces literature by studying the representation of “exemplary organizations” in an unusual context: Cuba. Until now, studies on the best companies to work for have focused on companies operating in capitalistic economies. With this research, we aim to develop a better understanding of the representation of good places to work for in an economic and ideological context that is in sharp contrast with the contexts where this theme has previously been studied. The exploration of this theme in an unusual context will probably contribute to a better understanding of the nature of exemplary/authentizotic organizations.

With the previous goals in mind we structured the text as follows. We start with a brief overview of the exemplary workplaces/authentizotic organizations literature, to summarize the findings existing in this field. Then we offer an overview of management and organization in the Cuban context. After this theoretical introduction, we move to the empirical study. We present the methods and procedures of our exploration of the topic with a sample of 39 Cuban managers. Subsequently we present and interpret the results. Our work contributes to the research literature by showing that: (1) some features of the good workplace are apparently invariant; (2) other features are shaped by the local setting; (3) the social mission of the firm may provide an anchor for members' sense of pride and affiliation. With these findings, we contribute to a better understanding of the nature of exemplary/authentizotic organizations.

BEST WORKPLACES: WHAT ARE THEY?

Efforts to improve the workplace, in one way or another, are as old as management theory. They can be found in virtually every management theory, in different models and shapes, depending on the dominant ideology (Kunda & Ailon-Souday, 2005). It is not our intention to discuss the history of workplace improvement. We will, instead, center our discussion on the popular and scholarly views of the so-called best companies to work for. We start with the popular view.

The search for the best companies to work for was originally sought by an American company, the Great Place to Work Institute, located in San Francisco, which surveys American and, more recently, European, Latin American and Asian workplaces, giving employees the opportunity to evaluate their company regarding its philosophy, policies

and practices (Levering & Moskowitz, 1993). The publication of the survey's results in the Fortune magazine grants the idea a great deal of attention, with featured companies serving as potential benchmarks to other organizations in search of improvement. Employees in these organizations had a great trust in management, pride in their jobs and company, and a sense of camaraderie (Lyman, 2003). What helps in creating these perceptions is that these companies offer their employees a number of benefits including on-site child care, group homeowner's insurance, group auto insurance, individual and financial counseling, profit-sharing systems, flexible hours, college-planning assistance, home-purchasing assistance, legal services, subsidized cafeterias, take-home meals and personal concierge services (Branch, 1999; Moskowitz & Levering, 2003). They, in short, make their employees' private lives easier and smoother, thus increasing their focus and energy on work issues.

Manfred Kets de Vries coined the notion of "authentizotic" organizations to describe firms with the "best companies to work for" profile. "Authentizotic" is a neologism, which combines the Greek words "authentekos" and "zoteekos", meaning that an organization is trustful and reliant, and vital to life, respectively. The idea underpinning the authentizotic theory is that organizations can be a source of meaning and growth for their members, instead of stressful and toxic environments that lead~~s~~ to psychological suffering and feelings of alienation (Frost, 2003). Many organizations are so distant from the authentizotic profile that they make their employees think that "work stinks" (Branch, 1999, p. 58).

Basically, authentizotic organizations are those able to develop a set of meta-values that allow their members to develop a sense of purpose, a sense of self-determination, a

sense of impact, a sense of competence, a sense of belonging and a sense of enjoyment (Kets de Vries, 2001). These are the necessary meta-values, according to the author, to develop healthy individuals and healthy organizational contexts.

The search for authentizotic or exemplary workplaces promises to counterbalance the bias towards the negative side of organizational life (Cameron, Dutton & Quinn, 2003). It may be a stimulating endeavor for both researchers and practitioners. The former may develop a new perspective on organizations with the study of new variables and previously under-researched processes; the latter may benefit with systematic and theory-based suggestions on how to create better workplaces. Before discerning the profile of the exemplary workplace according to our sample, we present a brief overview of management and organization in Cuba, with the aims of facilitating the understanding of the context.

MANAGEMENT AND ORGANIZATIONS IN CUBA

Management philosophy in Cuba has been heavily imported from the former Soviet Union. The Soviet management paradigm stated that there is a clear distinction between the nature and problems of socialist and capitalist administration, with the principles of the latter not being applicable in the former. Miller (1971) developed an analysis of the history of management in the USSR and helped to understand how these differences have been enacted over the course of the communist regime's existence. There are many reasons why the nature and problems of administration in Cuba differ from those in capitalist countries and, of course, from the problems faced by today's Russia or China, countries that eventually diverged from the socialist model. In order to facilitate the understanding of management in contemporary Cuba, a brief overview of management

in the country before and after the fall of the communist bloc will be provided in the following sub-sections.

Before the fall of the Soviet bloc. The communist revolution of 1959 established the end of capitalist Cuba and the development of a close relationship with the Eastern bloc. Management practices were learned from the Soviet model and relied on central planning: plants producing the same items were integrated; their trade activity was regulated by a ministry; JUCEPLAN produced a national plan for the ministries, then to *empresas*; production meetings were held and workers presented their suggestions for possible modifications; the plan then retraces its steps upwards to JUCEPLAN; plans were approved by the ministries; they finally were sent back down in the form of goals for each plant. Having adopted the Soviet model, Cuba employed the same principles of centralized macro-management that, similarly to the Soviet Union, transformed the economy into something like a "nation-sized organization" with thousands of subsidiaries and divisions (Lawrence et al., 1990). This large "nation-sized organization" was governed according to COMECON's doctrine that whatever a country was not able to produce could be imported from sister nations at preferential rates. Using the description of Groves et al. (1994), enterprises in Cuba may be thought of as "branch plants of a single giant firm". In this "giant organization", laws regulated the basic functions of management, from resource allocation to reward systems, to the recruitment and promotion of employees. Strong regulatory mechanisms that disseminate and monitor compliance with institutional norms lead to uniformity in managerial practice and nurture egalitarianism as a crucial trait of the communist society (Giacobbe-Miller et al., 2003).

This system represents President Castro's vision, who believed "that only through centralized planning and collective ownership of all production means could a programme for equitable development succeed" (Brandwayan, 1993, p. 362). Cuba´s central planning produced important gains in social welfare (e.g., life expectancy, public health system), educational system and economy (Brandwayan, 1993). Until the mid-1980s, the country's 10.5 million inhabitants thus enjoyed a steadily increasing standard of living. However, in the 80's, the international situation changed rapidly.

After the fall of the Soviet bloc. The difficulties resulting from the combination of the American embargo, tightened after the Helms-Burton law of 1996 (Cuban Liberty Democratic Solidarity Act), and the fall of the Soviet bloc, forced the regime to adopt a plan of economic emergency, which was labeled "special period in peacetime". The enormous challenges confronted during the *periodo especial* have been described by Lara (1999, p.232) as follows: "Behind these four words [special period in peacetime] lies the greatest crisis that the Revolution has had to confront in its history". The fall of the Soviet Union hit the Cuban economy due to the two-way trade between the country and other communist regimes – for the three decades before 1989, 85% of Cuban commerce was with COMECON nations (Kaplowitz, 1995), with the economy being kept apart from the logic of market economy. Between 1989 and 1993, GNP was reduced by almost 50%. The special period was thus a time of material difficulties and forced change (Benzing, 2005).

The Soviet-style management thinking (Gorton, Ignat & White, 2004), in use for decades, was no longer a valid approach to gain access to the resources needed to sustain and develop a debilitated economy. Thus, over the space of a decade, significant

changes took place not only at the economic level but also and inevitably, at the managerial one. Economic change, leveraged by the need to acquire resources in the global market, is illustrated by the rapid growth of the tourism industry, which became a prominent economic sector. Between 1986 and 1994, the number of rooms increased 480%, from 5,000 to more than 24,000. To accommodate this important transformation, changes in the managerial mindset became necessary. The dysfunctional consequences of central planning, heavy bureaucracy and technological obsolescence characterizing most Cuban organizations, became evident when new organizational effectiveness criteria were introduced.

Cuban enterprise managers have been aware that they will require knowledge and new skills in such business areas as including marketing, advertising, industry analysis, quality control and international negotiation if they are to compete in world markets. Government efforts were made to “import” and learn new management techniques and experiences from abroad. The Unified System for the Selection, Development and Training of State Managers (SUTCER) was established to act as the focal point *inter alia* to disseminate new management techniques among institutions of higher education. Three years later, SUTCER was dissolved after conducting a successful program with United Nations Development Program support. Foreign experts have participated in the management reform process, through technical assistance programmes undertaken in cooperation with bilateral and multilateral institutions. These programmes include training workshops, study tours and advisory services (Brandwayan, 1993).

Despite possible increases in the level of managerial knowledge and autonomy (Cunha & Cunha, 2004), the communist ideology prevailing in Cuba still refuses the liberal

ideology, founded on private ownership, the free market and individualism. In fact, the country adopts the opposite forces as the right ones: state ownership, a tightly controlled market, and collectivism, with companies being instruments of the government rather than independent entities. In sum, despite recent changes, the government still tightly commands the economy. Castro, as the revolution's founder, "is reluctant to undo his handiwork and is vigilant against opponents at home and abroad" (Robinson, 2000, p. 116). It seems that the country is characterized more by "continuity than change", and that "the present political leadership and structures will continue to function and evolve albeit slowly after Castro's disappearance" (Suchlicki, 2000, p. 123). An example is that, in February 2005, the Cuban tourism ministry issued a new regulation that restricts workers' contacts with foreigners to an absolute minimum, prohibits them to receive tips or gifts, and tells them to watch their foreign employers and report actions that may threaten Cuba's revolution. According to the news, private enterprise has been curbed and managers of state enterprises have been stripped of much of their autonomy (BBC News, 2005/02/26). This is the context where our study took place. In the following section, we present the method.

METHOD

We collected the data in the summer of 2004 in the context of an executive education program taking place in Cuba. Thirty nine top and middle managers participated in the study. They worked in several industries in the agricultural, industrial and services sectors. In the context of the discussions, participants were asked to describe what, in their opinion, would qualify an organization as an exemplary workplace. Six focus groups were formed to extract the profile of this ideal type. Each group defined the relevant dimensions and a plenary discussion involving the six groups took place to

stabilize the dimensions agreed by all the groups. The focus group is a research technique that collects data through group interaction on a topic advanced by the researcher (Morgan, 1996). The technique is derived from Merton's focus group interview (e.g. Merton & Kendall, 1946), and aims to generate information that will be lost with the use of more structured approaches. It seems suitable for articulating tacit knowledge and for generating deep level data. The focus group seemed adequate for this particular research because of the difficulties for outsiders to develop a relevant structured data collection approach to the Cuban exemplary workplace. Additionally, the collective discussion stimulated in the focus group may help individuals in their efforts of sensemaking. The appropriateness of this technique to the present research is also reinforced by Morgan's (1996, p.139) observation that "what makes the discussion in focus groups more than the sum of separate individual interviews is the fact that participants query each other and explain themselves to each other." These discussions, then, allow researchers to observe the creation of knowledge and the emergence of shared understandings, resulting from what Chilton and Hutchinson (1999) described as a group mind.

To complement this stage, participants were then invited to evaluate their organization in terms of the dimensions derived from the focus groups. Analyses of the real workplaces were written. The responses were analyzed in order to capture the major patterns. Given the small sample, we decided to pursue a purely qualitative approach in order to extract deep meaning rather than statistics. This decision resulted from our interest for naturally occurring meanings and "concepts-in-use" rather than for any kind of quantification (Gephart, 2004).

A total of 116 pages constituted our working material. Data analysis evidenced that some subjects were quite benevolent with their organizations, while others took a more critical stance. Given the nature of the study, namely the focus on workplaces rather than individual attitudes, we cannot explain the origin of these different forms of appreciation. What emerges as an interesting conclusion is that, regardless of the previous observation, there is considerable agreement around some dimensions of the exemplary workplace, whereas other dimensions appear as more contested. We discuss these aspects in the following section.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Following the logic of the research, we divide this section in two parts. First, we present the dimensions characterizing the exemplary workplace, as extracted from the focus group discussion. Next, we analyze how the participants evaluate their companies as compared with the ideal firm benchmark.

The exemplary workplace. The description of the ideal workplace stabilized around a group of ten characteristics organized in four major categories (Table 1). Both categories and characteristics were defined by the participants. The four major dimensions were the following: value system, organization and society, work system and personal system. Under these labels, two of the categories included several distinct characteristics. The value system category referred to the application of a values-based management policy. Organization and society referred to the degree of societal recognition obtained by an organization. The work system captured the internal aspects of organizational functioning, namely the existence of fair compensation practices, good training policies, adequate material conditions and practices of organizational

participation. The personal system considered the relationship between people and the organization. Four characteristics were distinguished: the quality of the transportation system, healthcare, leisure and entertainment, and employment security. Next, we discuss how participants explained the choice of these characteristics.

Values and ideology are a central and explicit fact of life in the Cuban organization. The links between the Communist Party and the work and organizational system are crucial, as explained in the theoretical section. People are assigned to organizations by the state, they are affiliated with ministries rather than with individual organizations, and managerial positions depend on political criteria. The values of the revolution are present in work organizations and, despite changes in the management landscape, capitalism and capitalistic attitudes are not acceptable. The adoption of Western management techniques after the special period, such as management by objectives, quality management, and differential rewards, were viewed as necessary for "perfecting" companies. To counterbalance the functional focus of these techniques, however, values-based management systems have become the fad *du jour*. Being anchored on explicit, revolutionary, and managed values, is viewed as a requirement for an exemplary workplace.

Another important characteristic is the degree of societal recognition achieved by a company. Companies exist to serve the people. Participants expressed this with the same vehemence that managers of Western companies proclaim that their company's goal is to create shareholder value. The goal of an exemplary company, according to the Cuban managers participating in the study, is to improve the quality of life of the people and the community around them.

Four characteristics were distinguished in the work system dimension. A fair compensation system was considered essential. Fair compensation systems, including some variable component associated with performance, was viewed as important to motivate people. Good training systems were also taken as part of the good workplace. Training was considered essential for professional development. Good material conditions were also selected for inclusion. Material conditions referred to the physical work environment in general, but technology and raw materials were considered as the critically important aspects of this dimension. The final characteristic was organizational participation. The right to participate is established by law, but it was taken as important enough to be included in the ten features of the exemplary organization.

The final dimension, personal system, aggregated four aspects of the individual life in the organization. One dimension refers to the transportation system, since public transportation is practically inexistent (Pritchard, 1999). Good companies provide their workers with effective means for commuting. Healthcare should also be guaranteed by the organization. Leisure and entertainment were also considered. Interestingly, this dimension was often related with work: participants considered that organizations should offer their top performers the possibility of spending a holiday in coastal tourist facilities. The final characteristic was employment security.

As noted above, these ten dimensions were taken as inclusive and acceptable to the participants. None of the dimensions is especially surprising in the sense that most of them resonate the characteristics of “good companies to work for” in Europe and the

United States. Other characteristics are comprehensible given the difficulties of life in Cuba, namely problems with transportation, access to raw materials, tools and technologies. Despite the apparent predictability of the extracted responses, some aspects are worth mentioning in our search for the meaning of “exemplary organizations”. First, the importance attached to organizational values and societal impact. This salience may obviously be a consequence of the political regime, but it stresses one aspect that tends to be undervalued or taken for granted in the West: managerial ideologies are influenced by the state and politics. Recent criticisms to the dominant managerial ideology and practice should then be viewed not only as a consequence of “business school business”, as suggested by Pfeffer and Fong (2004), but as a consequence of more ample and powerful social forces, including the nature and ideology of political regimes, the legal and institutional contexts – including the law, managerial values, heroes and role models (Mintzberg, Simons & Basu, 2003). Role models in US/Europe and Cuba show a major difference: the successful individual versus the martyr, whose sacrifices have benefited the organization as a whole. Second, it is interesting to observe that one feature seems to be crucial for the construction of exemplary workplaces both in the Cuban as well as in the capitalist context case: social missions (Levering & Moskowitz, 2005). Good companies seem to create meaning to their workers by engaging in activities that transcend the limits of business and have a positive impact in the community. Third, the reference to leisure and entertainment holds similarities with references, in the great companies surveys, to celebrations and sporting facilities (e.g., swimming pools, sand volleyball courts). With the profile of the exemplary workplace in mind, we now turn to the real workplaces of our respondents.

Real workplaces. Descriptions of exemplary companies tend to differ from the majority of the "not so good to work for" companies. In the Fortune 2005 European study, it was mentioned that some firms hired architects to make sure that people would spend their workdays in pleasant places (Levering & Moskowitz, 2005). In Cuba, there is also a difference between ideal and real organizations. For example, difficulties with transportation and material resources are more urgent than the beauty and functionality of the physical landscape. In this section we analyze how respondents view their companies in terms of the ten dimensions obtained in the first part of the study.

Proclaimed as the fad *du jour*, values-based management is viewed by some respondents as difficult to implement. Others take it as "an abstraction" that is not practiced. Most of the respondents describe their organizations as using management by objectives. Values-based management is then viewed as a novelty that is cherished in theory but whose implementation appears as difficult. People appreciate the idea but are not sure about how to practice it.

Societal recognition was considered as a dimension of which the vast majority of firms could be proud. Respondents classified their firms as pursuing a social mission which gave them a good societal recognition. There was one single exception: one of the respondents considered that the organization's services were evaluated by the customers as low quality ones. This produced a negative impact that spoiled the organization's image. The other respondents gave examples of close connections with local communities (e.g., opening the firm's medical services to the local population) and some said that their organization's customer was "the people" or that the firm's mission was "to develop the nation". A respondent said that his company was highly valued

because “we make bread and cakes”. Another pointed out that “our company concentrates all the expectations of prosperity for the village where we are located.” Sense of contributing to the community was viewed as a major source of individual meaning and collective pride. This sense is similar to the pride dimension used to select the best workplaces to work for.

Considering the work system, some tensions can be observed regarding compensation practices. Compensation systems in Cuba are, in general, egalitarian and job-based. One participant described the compensation system as “weak – as a consequence people lack motivation.” Other described salaries and rewards as “below expectations, a result of the country’s economic situation.” The exceptions to the traditional system are the firms involved in processes of “organizational perfecting”, where some experiments with variable pay are allowed (Pérez, 2001; Cunha & Cunha, 2003). Training is viewed as normal activity for most companies. Some respondents, however, stressed the limitations of the training process, viewed as narrowly focused on the job rather than on the worker’s interests and competencies. Due to the nation’s economic state, material conditions were qualified by most respondents as far from ideal, the American embargo being presented as the major cause for the situation. Organizational participation is mandatory by law. Union representatives, project committees, production councils and other mechanisms operate the practices of participation. Some participants described the process as “mechanistic”, meaning that participation mechanisms do exist but that they often are not much more than a formality. A European expatriate in Havana told one of the authors that long periods of time were frequently spent in meetings, from which nothing with real practical usefulness subsequently resulted.

At the level of the personnel system, transportation was considered a major element: difficulties with transportation significantly disturbed individual and organizational life. Healthcare and employment security were, in general, viewed as appropriate. Leisure activities were not programmed in most companies, but in some cases there was an involvement of the organization in the preparation of the workers' vacation lodging.

The results indicate a difference between exemplary organizations and real workplaces. This discrepancy could naturally be expected, given that exemplary organizations are by nature, rare exemplars, in Cuba or elsewhere. The goal of the study was not to measure the gap but to inductively derived some patterns and regularities that could contribute to the understanding of authentizotic organizations, in theory and practice. Several ideas can be extracted from the results, regarding authetizotic organizations as well as other domains of management and organization. First, management fads and fashions may be publicly lauded and applauded in public but difficult to grasp in practice. Public enthusiasm with values-based management, for example, was viewed by some as abstract and difficult to operationalize. Second, the organization's social mission is an important source of pride and identification. It can take several forms and shapes but people tend to be proud about working for an organization which is an object of external esteem and recognition, that contributes to the well-being of the respective community. Third, genuine organizational participation is more easily said than done, even when the ideology is apparently favorable to it. The difficulties of participation in advanced democracies have been noted (De Jong & Van Witteloostuijn, 2004), with our results suggesting that genuine participation may be as difficult in communist organizations as it is in capitalistic ones, or even more, since negative opinions or questioning the status

quo will be regarded as subversive. The reasoning may be as follow: if the State takes care of people, the state is friend; so, why should people question State decisions?

Fourth, work and play may go together. The need to complement labor activities with leisure is perhaps less visible in the capitalistic nations, where the notion of organizations as economic markets of a transactional type (Ferraro et al., 2005) obstruct the management of play and parting as part of good work. Of course celebrations exist, but they may be rituals of exception rather than normal activities (e.g., Harris & Sutton, 1986). The understanding of organizations as human communities (Burroughs & Eby, 1998) helps to understand the relevance of leisure and entertainment as an important element in the profile of exemplary organizations. This need is in line with Kets de Vries' (2001) observation that fun is an important dimension of the authentizotic organization. Fifth, people attach value to organizational protection. Employment and healthcare were appreciated by the managers in our sample. This is an interesting observation in these times of temporary contracts, flexible arrangements and contingent workers: even knowing that employment security is guaranteed in their legal contexts (as long as workers are politically correct), our informants expressed their positive appreciation of this source of certainty. This may be interpreted as a product of socialization and a quest for a minimal standard of living in a society where poverty affects the population, but evidence of the positive results of employment security (Pfeffer, 1994, 2001) should not be clouded by the arguments for workforce flexibility. Given that changes in this field have not led to a new sustainable logic of employment relations (Rubery, 2005), this finding gains pertinence.

CONCLUSION

Our results showed an interesting combination of invariants and variations regarding the prototypical exemplary workplace as represented in the capitalistic settings where previous work took place. We concluded that some features of the good organization arise in response to local conditions and constraints. In this sense, the representation of the "ideal organization" should be considered as a response to local and concrete conditions rather than a general abstraction, a finding which is consistent with previous research (Cunha, 2004). The importance of transportation and the role of material conditions were certainly a response to practical conditions. Despite their immersion in the local context, however, they may exist in different shapes in other contexts. The preoccupation of European companies with the architectural spaces of their buildings may reflect the very same concern with physical workspace. Other features of the exemplary organization appear as universal. The fair treatment and the desire to have a positive impact on the external world is the most visible one. This conclusion reaffirms Levering and Moskowitz's (2005) observation that employees tend to feel positive about their organization's social mission. This finding is also in line with Maignan and colleagues (1999), who suggested that proactive corporate citizenship gives rise to higher organizational commitment, consumer loyalty and organizational performance.

This is a relevant argument for the current shareholder/stakeholder debate (Smith, 2003): companies tend to be viewed by their employees as good places to work when they combine economic and social missions. Proponents of the shareholder debate may argue that the "good workplace" argument is not relevant from a performance point of view, but recent evidence presented by Fulmer, Gerhart and Scott (2003), suggests that the best companies are better from an economic perspective. Filbeck and Preece's

(2003) study points in the same direction, indicating that “the marketplace believes that satisfied employees may lead to satisfied shareholders” (p.791).

We contributed to the theory of the exemplary workplaces with the study of the representation of these ideals in the Cuban context. Given the differences between the sociopolitical context of this country and the one’s where previous studies took place, we evidenced: (1) some similarities between our sample representation and the previous studies (namely in terms of sense of purpose and impact); (2) the need to consider the local features, meaning that universal descriptions may be inadequate; (3) the need to critically reflect on our organizations considering the results obtained, namely in dimensions such as social responsibility, play and employment security. This seems particularly relevant when it impacts the life of people, either in the internal or external organizational environment.

The study can be criticized on several grounds. It is an inductive research with a relatively small sample. As such, we can not claim that we have attained a representation of what an exemplary firm is according to Cuban managers but, rather, according to this group of managers. It should also be stressed that the sample is made of managers. Other professionals, namely people at different levels in the hierarchy, could have expressed different ideas. Future quantitative research may test and refine our findings. It is also admissible that responses may have been contaminated by two distinct psychological processes: (1) during the collective focus group discussions, people may have refrained themselves from being critical regarding certain topics (e.g., values-based management) in order to create an impression of being “politically correct”; (2) in the second part of the study, some of them may have tried, as good

organizational citizens, to pass a positive image of their companies. Despite the criticisms, the study indicates that some core elements of exemplary organizations may cross ideologies and countries, namely people's desire to be fairly treated and to have a positive impact. Recent evidence suggests that the desire for cooperation and positive impact is possible but difficult when we assume that positive action is the exception rather than the rule (Liberman, Samuels & Ross, 2004). The study of exemplary organizations may potentially contribute to management theory and practice by clarifying what people potentially expect from their companies: adequate material conditions plus a meaningful contribution. What is interesting about the "normality" of this conclusion, is the fact that those authors who contradict it, for example presenting human beings as calculative agents involved in self-interested transactions (e.g., Jensen & Meckling, 1994), tend be viewed as realistic, whereas the authors who support it are taken as idealistic (e.g., Csikszentmihalyi, 2003). Referring to people and organizations, our research suggests that it may be time for "realism" and "idealism" to trade places.

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Table 1

Dimensions of the exemplary workplace

Dimension	Characteristic
Value system	▪ Values-based management
Organization and society	▪ Societal recognition
Work system	▪ Fair compensation system ▪ Training systems ▪ Good material conditions ▪ Organizational participation
Personal system	▪ Good transportation ▪ Appropriate healthcare systems ▪ Leisure and entertainment ▪ Employment security