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Cultural specificity and leadership

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Abstract

This paper presents in a succinct manner the relationship between culture and leadership and it provides recommendations for cultural adjustment of the leadership style, with reference to the main activities carried out by formal leaders. Adaptation requires proper consideration of the Romanian cultural specificity elements, highlighted by the cultural matrix defined by the dimensions of societal culture, as presented in literature. This last aspect is related to the necessity of exploiting the semiotic resources in theories that refer to the organizational field.

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1. Introduction

There are multiple theories regarding leadership and also numerous classifications. Empirical and theoretical studies, an extremely vast literature that tries to answer to a simple question: “What special qualities have some people to influence the others?” The answers are not consistent. It’s an absolutely normal situation, given the many variables that influence this choice. Situational theories refer exactly to the necessity of adequacy to context. The statement “man in the right place” describes exactly this position.

Culture is one of the variables which we alluded to in the next paragraph, and the ability to feel, think and act in accordance to what it transmits can be an advantage in one's position as leader of a group. Obviously, there are also other variables among the mentioned ones, to which the leadership style should be adapted; for

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example, size and structure of the organization, or the nature of activities, but our article favours culture-leadership relationship.

2. Semiotics, culture and leadership

2.1. Conceptual approaches

The term of culture knows multiple meanings. In this paper we consider the perspective of interpretive anthropology, where culture is a system of symbols in which the individual assigns significance to their own reality, starting from a referential meaning. The symbol systems create a significant framework that sets the human's relationship with themselves, with others and the world. They are both the product and the determinant of social action. The representatives of this view, including Marshall Sahlins, Clifford Geertz, Max Weber and Claude Levi-Strauss, insist on the arbitrary aspect of cultural phenomena, which is a symbolic perception of the world, Cuche, pp. 91-92, 2003; Geraud et al., 2001, pp. 91-94, Preucel, 2006, pp.37-41; Onea, 2011, pp. 21-23.

In the following lines we will focus on the view expressed by Clifford Geertz, perhaps the closest one to the theme of this article. He thinks on the symbolic forms and their interpretation as a "stylistic" one, as an active process of meaning's construction. „The concept of culture I espouse...is essentially a semiotic one. Believing, with Max Weber, that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of law but an interpretative one in search of meaning. It is the explication I am after, construing social expressions on their surface enigmatical", Geertz, 1973, p. 5. For him, the culture is "a system, broadcasted historically, of meanings embodied in symbols, of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by which people communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge and attitudes towards life", Dupriez et al., 2000, p. 33; Burduş, 2006, p. 83.

The GLOBE study, an extensive intercultural study, which analyses the influence of culture on the leadership style among other items, defines the *leadership as* "the ability of an individual to influence, motivate, and enable others to contribute toward the effectiveness and success of the organizations of which they are members", House et al., 2004, p.15.

2.2. Semiotics, culture and leadership

Semiotics has an explicit relevance of leadership by providing theoretical, methodological and practical elements related to culture. Semantics and pragmatics, semiotic levels, provide information about values, and the syntax reveals its usefulness through the system of logical categories. This view is emphasized by Levi-Strauss, 1978, who anticipated the importance of structural linguistics in social sciences in general, and on culture, in particular. In fact, structuralist approaches have dominated the organizational reality, including theories of management, Lounsbury et al., 2003.

Social values, elements that structure life and groups' work, should be taken into account, even in the situation when change is wanted. We are mentioning this because ignorance or ignoring them can lead to generation of barriers or misinterpretation of attitudes and behaviours of group's leaders. Structuralism again shows its importance here, addressing the semantic reconstruction of a system, based on the previous one.

General theories that refer to the style of leadership must be reviewed and adapted to the context. The meaning considered by the group, on the acts developed by the leader-aspirant, may differ from the one assigned by the leader-aspirant, as social codes are the ones which govern. For example, the field theory, proposed by Lewin, based on the idea that the meaning is highly contextualized; it offers a useful framework on motivational forces behind the charismatic leadership, Fiol et al., 1999; Brodbeck et al., 2000.

The concept of culture is by itself of semiotic type, because it makes reference to interpretation, to the meaning. Perception of individuals on the proper way of leadership varies depending on the culture, because the meaning given to the attitudes and behaviours exhibited by the leaders is linked to cultural decoding. Power, influence and effectiveness get a specific content, depending on the culture. Hence, the need for knowledge and adaptation to this specificity occurs. In addition, leaders must understand that the mix of modern / post-modern values etc. leads to diversity even within the same organization, diversity that generates different ways to build / assign meanings to leadership behaviour and symbolic actions, Ayers, 2005.

We may conclude on the above mentioned ideas that, depending on the specific cultural characteristics, we have different traits considered positive in leadership. Thus, a particular style of leadership may be appropriate in a cultural area; a different style, in another area.

2.3. *Cultural dimensions, cultural clusters and leadership*

By cultural dimensions we understand cultural differentiation criteria. There are different systems of cultural dimensions, revealed by researchers. Depending on cultural proximity, based on these dimensions, cultural clusters were established. It is estimated that the countries included in these clusters have similar values and the organizational practices should be adapted to them.

We will refer to two of the best known researches that reflect this issue, the one of Hofstede, 1994, 1996, 2001, 2006, and the GLOBE study, House et al, 2004; Grove, 2005; Javidan, 2006; Bibu, Brancu, 2008, with focus on Romania's case.

Hofstede, 1996, mentions, pursuant to the studies he developed, that the leadership style is mainly influenced by two cultural dimensions: power distance and individualism-collectivism. Depending on the scores on these dimensions he distinguishes the following positioning:

- *Participative style co-administration*, for collectivist countries, with low distance power, here Germany is also included; although it is characterized by collectivism, the developed practices encouraged and have prioritized this style;
- *Paternalism*, indicated in collectivist countries, with high power distance;
- *Autocracy or bureaucratic style*, especially in countries characterized by individualism and high power distance;
- *Management by objectives MBO, delegation*, appropriate in countries in which individualistic values and low power distance dominate in.

In Romania, characterized by high power distance and collectivism, the paternalistic leadership style is considered appropriate. In practice, especially in larger organizations, the autocratic style is frequently met, a style accepted and expected however, due to the high power distance.

The GLOBE study emphasizes more the analysis of leadership styles and their relationship with culture, highlighting both typologies and comparisons on cultural clusters. Related to the first issue, we mentioned that the study revealed six prototypes of leaders, whose characteristics were drawn from the category of the ones recognized as being effective, but considered a basis for the theories that highlighted the importance of the culture-leadership relationship, just through the interpretation given by the individuals to the leaders' behaviours, attitudes and action positions Table 1.

According to this study, Romania is characterized by the following values: medium power distance, high uncertainty avoidance, relatively high institutional collectivism, high group collectivism, egalitarianism of gender, high level of assertiveness, relatively low level of human orientation, low level of performance orientation, relatively high expectation of orientation toward future, Catana et al., 2006; Finley et al., 2006; Bibu, Brancu, 2008; Onea, 2011. The results illustrate similarity with other countries from Eastern Europe, whose best leaders are those who dominate the following dimensions: charismatic / value-based and team-

oriented, Kreitner, 2009, p.104. We notice, therefore, consistency between values and the appreciated leadership style.

Table 1. Leadership Dimensions

Leadership Dimensions	Style description	Labelled subscales
Charismatic/ Value-Based	that reflects the ability to inspire, to motivate, and expect high performance outcomes from others on the basis of firmly held core values	visionary, inspirational, self-sacrifice, integrity, decisive, performance oriented
Team oriented	that emphasizes effective team building and implementation of a common purpose or goal among team members	collaborative team orientation, team integrator, diplomatic, administratively competent, and a reverse scored malevolent
Participative	reflects the degree to which managers involve others in making and implementing decisions	reverse scored: “autocratic” and “non-participative”
Humane Oriented	reflects supportive and considerate leadership, but also includes compassion and generosity	modesty, humane oriented
Self-Protective	focuses on ensuring the safety and security of the individual or group member	self-centered, status conscious, conflict-inducer, face-saver, procedural
Autonomous	independent and individualistic leadership	autonomous

Source: *apud* House et al., 2004, vol.I, p. 675.

Depending on the specific cultural profile, we can mention general ideas about the agreed type of leadership. Thus, we believe that the Romanians:

- prefer leaders who take responsibility for them, adopting a paternalistic attitude and who are concerned about their safety;
- appreciate teamwork, diplomacy and the environment that emphasize their qualities / skills;
- tolerate competition pretty good, but they appreciate a positive climate and harmonious relationships at work;
- prefer a structured environment, an organized one, which they know what to do in; leaders should have the capacity to stimulate them in their work and to exploit their creativity;
- appreciate the leaders who can motivate individually, even if the work is done in groups because of some “values conflicts” such as high degree of collectivism, high assertiveness and relatively low human orientation.

3. Conclusions

The social life of individuals is based on a specific system of values. These values, which represent the core element of culture, are structuring attitudes, mentalities and behaviours. Behind them are staying meanings that can be decoded with difficulty by people who are not part of the group. Leadership, as an important element in the organization, may be viewed positively if it takes into account the expectations of those whom it is addressed to. These expectations can be interpreted correctly only if the leader is concerned to decipher the meanings of the symbols provided by the interested factors. It is therefore about the meaning and interpretation, with everything related to production and use, in an attempt to adequate the leadership to the values and needs of others. Starting from the leadership-culture relationship, we are in an area where semiotics is an important resource that can be exploited theoretically and practically, in approaching the current problems and challenges of the organisations.

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