

## Chapter 2

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# Management Culture

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This chapter is premised on the argument that an awareness of Maltese management culture is fundamental to the study of local work organisations since human culture and value-oriented interpretations are more significant factors than the dependence of size, technology or pressure from the organisation's ecological environment in the making and shaping of working life. Furthermore, senior managers are one of the most influential groups in the creation of organisational meaning for their members. However, locally, relatively little has been written on organisational culture, and still less on management culture; and those few local sources of information available usually consider organisational structures as systems, thus neglecting other perspectives.

Considering this lack of informed knowledge on management culture in Malta, the fieldwork at the basis of this paper (Mifsud, 1998) was guided by two major research questions:

1. Is there a culture (or cultures) of management particular to the Maltese islands?  
and, if so:
2. What are the major features of this/these management culture/s?

In this context, management culture is generally taken to mean a complex set of beliefs, values, assumptions and symbols that define the way senior management conducts its work and, particularly, in the way in which its relationships with other managers, superordinates and subordinates are constructed.

The research site chosen in order to examine and flesh out the above questions is a large limited public company with the shareholders represented by a Chairperson and a Board of Directors, and with its senior management in salaried positions with no direct ownership of the assets of the organisation. Foreign owned or directly controlled organisations or family owned and managed organisations were excluded from this study as it was deemed that these organisations would have other features –such as a transnational corporate ethos or family loyalty - that would nuance the formulation of management culture in Malta (see Davies & Naudi, this volume).

In this case study, the main methodological framework used was the 'Grounded Theory' approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This provides a three-stage procedure for data analysis. In the first stage (that of open coding), key categories of information are developed from interview transcripts. In the second stage (axial coding), the original codes were reassembled in such a way as to present a new coding paradigm in which 5 central trends could be identified. In the final stage (selective coding), a 'story line' integrating the 5 axial codes was developed. This story line proposes a set of theoretical propositions on Maltese management culture.

The main data collection instrument was the one-on-one, open-ended interview, supported by interview guides and prompts used to lessen the risk of premature closure of an interview. This style of interviews was considered as the most adequate instrument to conduct this study because it is ideally suited for the examination of culture since different levels of meaning need to be explored. Moreover, it is the method most participants accept more readily because they are already familiar with interviews in general. Added to this, this particular company was chosen because I had already worked for some months within the company and initial contact and approval from the company's management was deemed to be more likely than in other companies. This also benefited the research in that I could also readily perceive differences between

the management culture and my own sub-culture. In total, 5 senior managers took part in this study. Another 2 senior managers did not take part in the interviews but acted as 'respondent validators', whereby information gathered in the interviews was verified for factuality.

Hofstede's (1991) sub-concepts of culture – symbols, rituals and values – as well as his analysis of culture from the aspects of 'power distance' and 'uncertainty avoidance' were used to ease the structure of the interpretation of the results.

'Symbols' as the outermost layer of culture. They consist of those words, gestures and objects that have a particular meaning that is most often recognised only by those inside the culture. 'Rituals' are defined as those collective activities which are technically superfluous but which are considered as socially essential and are carried out simply for their own sake. Although rituals and symbols are visible to the outsider, their full significance would only be apparent to the insider. 'Values' are at the core of culture. They lie at the basis of choices and preferences made by the in-group.

Hofstede defined 'power distance' as a measure of the extent of inequality in a society in terms of power, prestige and wealth. It is also a measure of the importance that is attached to these inequalities by those within the culture. Cultures high on power distance would have strong, often easily visible, demarcations between those at the top and those at the bottom of the chain of command. In contrast, the members of cultures low on this dimension operate together with ease and may have few, if any, symbols – such as clothes, means of transport, or housing - which demonstrate hierarchical differences.

For Hofstede, 'uncertainty avoidance' is concerned with the extent to which ambiguity and uncertainty are tolerated. Cultures high on this dimension will seek methods of avoiding uncertainty often by creating bureaucratic approaches with formal rules to cope with all possible eventualities; in contrast, the members of cultures low on this dimension operate easily in informal, non-predefined social

spaces, with flexible procedures.

The following sections of this paper critically discuss the manifestations of Maltese management culture as derived from the data, in terms of Hofstede's three sub-concepts of culture.

### **Symbols**

It is fairly evident that the position of Senior Manager within the organisation is symbolically used to nurture a high social status in relation to the insiders of the organisation and, to a lesser extent, to outsiders who come in contact with the same organisation. The title of Senior Manager is indeed, in part, a symbol created through the structure of the organisation to further entrench Senior Managers' authority. One participant maintained that formalities were maintained during management meetings (when customers were present) as well as on the office floor because formality breeds discipline. He added that during social functions there was no need for commitment to these formalities. The hierarchical structure of the organisation serves to reinforce the authority of the office (or position) of Senior Manager:

"In the case of legal authority, obedience is owed to the legally established impersonal order. It extends to the persons exercising the authority of office under it by virtue of the formal legality of their commands and only within the scope of authority of the office" (Weber, 1996:124).

The participants indicated that their preferred managerial style is, to varying extent, that of 'open door management', to which they made direct reference on a number of occasions. One of the participants described his style of management as being democratic, although a certain adherence to discipline has to be retained. He also argued that Senior Managers should be considered as leaders of a team. Other senior managers involved in this research also made use of this concept of 'team' quite freely. However, there are limitations to open door management that Senior Managers

themselves impose on the style. Participation may exist in the execution of work, but it does not seem to be present at the decision making level. During the interviews, the participants never even obliquely implied that their staff plays an active role in decision making.

Also, whilst most participants also indicated that they practised some style of worker participation in the decision making processes, it was evident that this participation was likely to be limited to holders of those management positions next below those of the Senior Manager. Even then, the participants retained that only they could or should decide on whatever is the issue coming up for resolution, although Senior Management is unlikely to involve itself directly in the running of operations. This gives rise to the proposition that the Senior Manager as 'ultimate decision maker' symbolises the use of *A-legitimate authority*:

"Higher offices are assigned the duty of supervision; lower offices, the right of appeal. However, the extent of supervision and the conditions of legitimate appeal vary" (Bendix, 1960:424).

Senior Managers may also employ delaying tactics (such as deferring decision-making processes) until they can more conveniently take a final decision. It would seem that Senior Managers assess the situation requiring a decision through their own perspective and not through the mental schema of their subordinates. Senior Managers seem to rationalise this behaviour on the basis that only they can 'see' the wider implications of a decision, and that therefore decision-making is their prerogative.

This reflects the notion of Senior Management playing a 'lording game' where Senior Managers build a power base by exercising and extending unchallenged legitimate power over those without it or having less of it (Mintzberg *et al.*, 1995). It seems that only employees' trade unions – where they are recognised as legitimate bargaining agents - can manage to penetrate this symbolic façade, simply because unions are not part of the organisation's hierarchy; yet, at the same time, they legitimately represent claims from

certain sections of employees of the organisation.

In this study, the importance attached to the use of A-legitimate authority by Senior Management to symbolically build its social status is congruent with Hofstede's (1991) analysis that cultures with high power distance are typified by very hierarchical relationships where subordinates are reluctant to question the decisions of their boss. The condition breeds a diffusion of responsibility amongst subordinates which exculpates them from any responsibility for the outcome or consequences of their work. This creates a vicious circle wherein the Senior Management culture is further reinforced.

Casual observations by the researcher when travelling to and from the research site also highlights this point. For example, the Senior Manager's office is likely to be situated away from both front line staff and customers and can only be accessed physically by entering 'deeper' into the organisation's physical territory. This translates the abstract notion of high power distance concretely into relatively longer physical walking distance. Moreover, this office is likely to be larger in size and on the upper-most levels of the physical building to other offices, embellished with higher quality furnishings in comparison with offices for staff in lower positions in the hierarchy. But, most symbolically of all, there is no direct physical access to the office as it is likely to be annexed to a secretary's office. With such a spatial condition, the secretary is more likely to play the role of gatekeeper and deny or regulate access as he/she deems fit.

### **Rituals**

The participants were unanimous in acknowledging that there exists a high level of cooperation between Senior Managers. The participants in this study were highly aware of the need to communicate with other departments, especially with their counterparts, the other Senior Managers. The notion that no Senior

Manager can work effectively unless in cooperation with and from other Senior Managers emerged very clearly from the interviews. This relationship may be the ritualistic foundation upon which Senior Management culture is continually brought to bear as a sense-making device, especially when one considers that departmental strategies have to be coordinated for Senior Management to be seen as operating as one entity. In this respect, to some extent, their positional interest mutually binds the Senior Managers together.

Senior Managers are also bound together because they require a solid social network to do away with (and compensate for) bureaucratic procedures in the execution of their work, when they so deem fit. Moreover, to some degree of intensity, Senior Managers draw upon each other for support and close ranks to ensure a positive outcome. While formal meetings may be considered to have ritualistic elements in their form, other rituals do exist. These are 'played' at an informal level and may, in fact, be more significant for the Senior Manager than the formal ones. Although the data reveals the importance of these rituals, it does not reveal how these formal and informal rituals are acted out.

In discussing the role of Senior Managers in relation to each another during interviews, a fairly consistent trend emerged. Here, the participants identified both a formal and an informal style of communication. They showed a clear preference for talking to one another or utilising an informal setting (rather than writing) as they thought that this is a more effective way of communicating opinions and getting things done.

All this intra-group communication within Senior Management makes for a solidarity which further supports and reinforces the dominant management culture. This recalls Hofstede's notion that both formal and informal management meetings are:

"Social rituals and uncertainty avoidance rituals . . . [which] support social cohesion and relieve stress because they concur with the people involved . . . Meetings partly serve a ritual purpose in

all cases and serve no other purpose in many cases” (Hofstede, 1980:116).

To some extent, the work of Senior Managers is ritualistically fragmentary, mainly because they are often sporadically involved on a large number of fronts. This is reminiscent of Grint (1995) and his argument that management is apparently a reactive and fragmentary task and not a holistic or proactive occupation. If one subscribes to the argument that Senior Management’s work is largely ritualistically fragmentary, then it follows that this serves members of the Senior Management corps not to emanate pride in their work derived from single outcomes over which they rarely have total and continuous charge, but rather to value pride as a result of the overall progress made over a period of years. Since Senior Managers are more likely to be involved in a series of projects on a long term basis, the outcome of which cannot usually be attributed to one particular senior manager, the motivation of Senior Management is likely to spread over a considerable time span. This strengthens the boundary created around the members of the culture in use since they would have to implicitly accept relying on the in-group for a relatively longer duration of time to draw self-satisfaction. This process makes the members more liable to tacitly accept their culture in use without raising questions on its effectiveness for the group or the organisation and even for the individual member himself/herself.

### **Values**

Typically, the discussion of organisational matters with lower grade staff tends to be avoided. Senior Management is more likely to interpret an issue or a situation through its own mental schema rather than to try to interpret a situation from the different perspectives of the employees below it. This is indicative of a staunch and compact management culture, since the members of the in-group (Senior Managers) take this approach for granted and



do not seem to question the tacit assumptions of their style of managing. Indeed, Senior Management seems to implicitly project that its decisions are perennially factual and unchallengeable.

It also emerged that Senior Managers are more likely to consider it their prerogative to develop the overall perspective of the organisation in terms of processes and performance and to claim that only they are in a position to do so. Participants in the study clearly implied that Senior Management considers the employees' perspectives to be limited. Thus, both explicitly and implicitly, Senior Management does not acknowledge that the employees' perspectives can be different from its own. By setting the emphasis on 'limitations', Senior Management further reinforces its beliefs that:

- (1) Senior Management's perspective is the correct one;
- (2) There is, therefore, hardly any need to seek the employees' opinions, and there is never the need to obtain their approval. Indeed none of the participants claimed to actively and consistently seek opinions from staff, with the possible exception of their immediate subordinates;
- (3) Senior Management's perspective does not allow questioning from outside its own group;
- (4) The employee is not in a position to criticise decisions taken by Senior Management and is rather expected and restricted to focus on the implementation of such decisions;
- (5) Senior Management, therefore, actively reinforces its culture whilst keeping it strictly outside the examination of the in-group or of any out-group.

This process seems to have led to a situation where Senior Management has created an invisible and self-righteous boundary around its members and thus distanced itself from other members of the organisation, consolidating the argument that, in such cases, 'group think' prevails:

"... new insights fail to get into practice because they conflict

with deeply held internal images of how the world works, images that limit us to familiar ways of thinking and acting” (Senge, 1990:174).

Senior Management seems to consider strategy in terms of the planning process of the departments of the organisation as coming within its sole domain, while leaving the implementation of plans largely into the hands of management lower down the hierarchy, with Senior Management simply monitoring progress from time to time. This practice of staff orientation to limit strategy to planning overlooks an important aspect - strategy as a facet of culture - because the way Senior Managers formulate the strategy of a plan rests on their assumptions of how Senior Management should manage, involving the features of ‘a collective mind’:

“In effect, when we are talking of strategy in this context [as perspective], we are entering the realm of the collective mind - individuals united by common thinking and/or behaviour. A major issue in the study of strategy formation becomes, therefore, how to read that collective mind” (Mintzberg *et al.*, 1995:19).

From what can be gleaned from the data, one may argue that a stable management culture exists in that strategy-as-planning involves the collective input of individuals in this position. It also projects a traditional management accent towards a task-oriented culture within Senior Management in which the planning process of department and organisation strategy lies strictly within the confines of their hierarchical position. This flies in the face of contemporary management thinking which focuses on human resources for the creation of a competitive edge by drawing on the participation and empowerment of workers (e.g. Caruana, this volume). Also, to incorporate employees effectively in the decision-making process, the organisation requires a much flatter hierarchy than its current one. The ‘authority’ of the position of Senior Manager would have to be curtailed, as it devolves from management to employee.

Such a drastic change in organisational culture requires first an

equally drastic change in orientation of values towards individualistic ones, both on the part of Senior Management and of all other employees. Considering the importance of the Senior Managers' perception of their employees, one question used in the first interview guide made reference to 'Theory X and Theory Y' management styles (McGregor, 1964). This question elicited an interesting pattern of response evident in all the participants' answers. The data illustrates that Senior Managers could not be led into stereotyping their employees into one category or another, but they classified employees rather intuitively according to age, level of education and experience. Younger employees were considered to be more likely to fall within the 'Theory Y' mould; namely that they would expect more interesting and challenging work and likely to leave the organisation if better opportunities, in these terms as well as wages, arose.

The perception of the participants as to how human resources are best developed shows a marked trend in Senior Management's outlook to consider formal education as the main means of developing its human resources. It seems relevant to point out that all the participants have long and wide experience in management. In addition, some have university qualifications or other tertiary level education. Senior Management is more likely to promote exposure in the field to develop its human resources.

However, while individual Senior Managers may be aware of this shift in their employees' values, the dominant management culture indicates that Senior Management still tends to prefer employees with field experience in contrast to new graduate employees with no work experience and who are likely to be more prone to individualistic values. This concurs with claims that:

"Graduates and their employers agree that a University education fosters personal development . . . encourages independent thinking . . . . But employers add that it [University education] also contributes to expectations for career mobility which are not always realistic" (Baldacchino, 1997:10).

One may argue that, indeed, Senior Management is perhaps cautious in employing and developing graduates, who may not easily integrate in the current culture of the organisation and who may, at times, even run counter to it, thus threatening the dominant values and assumptions of Senior Management. It is interesting to note that Baldacchino (1997) also states that:

“Educational qualifications are not regarded by employers as the key element in determining recruitment to many jobs and remain subordinate to non-academic criteria such as motivation, flexibility, discipline and perseverance (*ibid.*:9).

On the basis of this research analysis, the researcher believes that motivation, flexibility, discipline and perseverance are likely to refer to Senior Management’s need for a compliant subordinate culture.

Indeed, employees with a long experience in the organisation would have become accustomed to the prevailing management culture and can thus be developed with much less risk of ever posing a threat to its stability. For example, one participant states that employees who have joined the organisation recently are more likely to leave if better job opportunities arose; but presumably also because they have not yet integrated sufficiently well within the compliant subculture of the organisation. This fits in with the prevalent management culture which believes in commencing on the development of its human resources in earnest; but only once employees have been with the organisation for enough time to ensure that they have been properly socialised into the pattern of behaviour that complements the prevailing management culture.

It could perhaps be conjectured that the development of the human resources of a department is construed according to the position of the employee in the hierarchy of the organisation and the identification of those employees most amenable to the management culture of the organisation. This would ensure that they follow the same pattern of advancement through the corporate ladder as the Senior Managers have done before them, so that when

they reach the top posts they are also socialised and moulded in the same mode of behaviour and the same pattern of culture. Such ideas and strategies are very different from those propounding a more open, 'learning organisation' approach (De Bono, this volume).

### **Maltese Management Culture in Practice**

By viewing the symbols, rituals and values of the culture in use by Senior Management in relation to one another as intricate parts of the culture, the researcher postulates that this culture embodies, on an affective level, a strong traditional Maltese orientation and work ethic; while, on a cognitive level, it is imbued with traces of traditional Western management concepts.

Of the traditional Maltese orientations to work, Zammit (1996) identifies, amongst others, a social solidarity with fellow workers; a personal identification with one's work; a paternalist, compliance-based relationship between management and employees; as well as the Maltese work ethic: honour, thrift (*għaqa*) and industriousness (*bzulija*).

Social solidarity with fellow workers is transmuted into a management culture with a strong social bonding with fellow (read equal ranking) managers. In this study, the rituals of Senior Management suggest that social solidarity is very high. The much reduced communication with other members holding different hierarchical positions in the organisation, in comparison with the fairly strong and regular communication with members in the same hierarchical position, supports this proposition.

The personal identification with one's work is another aspect of the management culture in use. Thus, by identifying the position of Senior Manager with his/her personal self, the Senior Manager aspires to a higher social status, at least in relation to other employees in the same organisation. Whilst in the wider society perceived social status may be more difficult to negotiate, within

an organisation there exist enough elements of a 'total institution' (Goffman, 1961) whereby members, especially those in a power position, are able to negotiate a successful definition of the situation. At this point, it is pertinent to point out that the high power distance that is maintained by Senior Management is likely to be subservient to the value of acquiring and maintaining a higher social status in relation to other members of the organisation.

There are indications that the paternalist-compliant relations traditionally found between management and employees has been 'corrupted' by traditional Western management. Traditional Western management thought here refers primarily to Henri Fayol and his five key elements of the management function: planning; organising; commanding; coordinating and control (Gray, 1987). According to Kennedy (1991:50), these key definitions of management activity have remained accepted wisdom until Mintzberg's revealing studies in the 1960's. Yet, Fayol's model still remains the dominant management paradigm to be found in business and management schools and organisations in the Western world (Mintzberg *et al.*, 1995).

Whilst this traditional management thought has undergone cultural permutations within different Western societies, the data available is too indicative to identify which cultural variation has been endorsed by Maltese management culture. One may speculate that, given Malta's recent colonial history and a local education system which relies heavily on Anglo-Saxon textbooks, it may be that the cultural variation in question is likely to be of an Anglo-Saxon origin (see Baldacchino, this volume). On the other hand, given Malta's close geographical position and traditional commercial links with Latin mainland Europe, the cultural variation may well be of Latin origin (Sultana & Baldacchino, 1994).

Thus the traditional Maltese work ethic of honour, practical wisdom and prudence (*għaqqal*) has been transmuted from honour into status and from practical wisdom and prudence into a legitimate authority emanating from positional authority of the

hierarchy. The third aspect of the Maltese work ethic - industriousness (*b'zulija*) lends itself naturally to accepting a largely fragmentary workload whereby the Senior Manager presents his/her work in Fayol's classical terms whilst, in actual fact he/she is:

"Like a juggler . . . [keeping] a number of projects in the air; periodically, one comes down, is given a new burst of energy, and is sent back into orbit. At various intervals, he or she puts new projects onstream and discards old ones (Mintzberg *et al.*, 1995:32).

Furthermore, Boissevain's (1969:49) notion of the traditional Maltese leader as having a "desire to acquire power and an insensitivity, or failure, to perceive criticism", as well as the cultural requirement of being of a higher social status than his/her followers, may well prove to be the twin cultural impetus that unproblematically merges the traditional Maltese work ethic with Fayol's key elements of management. These latter elements may be used as a 'legitimated justification' of Senior Management's behaviour since they create and maintain specific conditions, such as high power distance and the appeal to the recognition of the authority of position, within their overall aspiration to acquire and consolidate a high social status.

In Handy's (1995) terms, Maltese management culture is very likely to be a Dionysius power culture whereby both resources and personal power predominate as this culture serves the figurehead or the leader. Also, and especially with increasing organisational size, there enter elements of an Apollo role culture with its bureaucratic nature and where position power predominates. Handy notes that power cultures are likely to emanate in entrepreneurial organisations and probably from the founder of the organisations. As the organisation matures, it is likely to transform itself into a role or task culture.

Thus, the traditional Maltese work orientations are likely to lay the foundations for a power culture, whilst elements of traditional Western management introduce the values of a role culture. Maltese

contemporary management culture is therefore a hybrid indigenous culture, whereby social status is achieved by wielding both personal and positional power.

### **Identifying Local Management Culture**

From the data collected and analysed, a specific management culture in Maltese organisations with an indigenous accent can be discerned. Three tentative propositions, construing this theory of Maltese management culture, can here be outlined:

(1) This culture is a hybrid between traditional Maltese work orientations and traditional Western management philosophy. In Hofstede's terms, it is essentially a high power distance culture with rigid and very hierarchical superordinate-subordinate relations. This power culture relies on the personal power of the Senior Manager and emanates from the traditional Maltese work orientation (traditionally described as paternalist management) and on position power which is derived from Western management thought which requires a trenchant bureaucratic structure and a modicum of acceptance on the part of subordinates in the hierarchy's authority based on rules and procedures.

(2) This culture is conducive of a detached in-group of Senior Management which may be aware of change in its external environment, but is likely to resist change that weakens its seat of power within the organisation.

(3) Maltese Senior Managers tend to be status seekers: differentiating and distancing themselves from others in the hierarchy to establish a status identity based on unequal relations with others.

### **Conclusion**

This explorative study is not an exhaustive examination of Maltese management culture. In all probability, there may emerge more



symbols, rituals and values of management culture that are not present in the data collected and therefore could not be analysed in this study. Moreover, further research needs to be undertaken in organisations, in order to reveal the existence of other subcultures, document their congruency or otherwise with the management culture in use, as well as to appraise the effects of both organisational subcultures and of gender differences: the five Senior Managers in this study are all male. One should also consider examining the effect of such a management culture on the development trajectory adopted by the organisation and, indeed, Malta itself, considering the purported and increasing globalisation of the economic world.

Organisational cultures and management culture are largely a tacitly lived experience within organisations. As such they are, by definition, aloof from external observers and suspicious to any internal ones. No research can possibly capture and define the management culture of an organisation in its entirety. Rather, the propositions developed from this research could be used more effectively by theorising an imaginary continuum whereby managers intuitively embrace this culture to varying degrees and who may well, at times, run counter to this culture. More importantly, culture should be considered as a collective phenomenon more likely to be intellectually grasped when contemplated as a 'group personality' rather than when compared to a single individual's psychological make-up.

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