

ПОЛЬСКАЯ КУЛЬТУРА БИЗНЕСА

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В данной статье рассмотрены проблемы взаимоотношений польской культуры и бизнеса; показана деятельность бизнес-организаций Польши относительно формирования культуры и влияния польской культуры на развитие бизнеса и бизнес-партнёрства; проанализировано значение польской культуры в рыночной экономике. Польские амбиции связаны с работой, материальными устоями. Многие поляки рассматривают карьеру и успех с точки зрения денег и товаров, поэтому современные поляки трудоголики. Доказано, что нормы и правила обучения влияют на постановку целей, задач, формирование деловых отношений.

В польских компаниях культура является основой конкурентоспособности и построения конкурентных преимуществ, усовершенствования процесса управления знаниями. Польская культура бизнеса способствует развитию деловых отношений, партнёрству.

Цель статьи состоит в том, чтобы раскрыть роль и значение польской культуры в развитии бизнеса, партнёрских отношений, системы управления фирмами и компаниями.

Статья может быть полезна для бизнес-структур, управленцев.

Ключевые слова: польская культура, бизнес, система управления, деловые отношения, бизнес-партнёрство, рыночная экономика.

POLISH BUSINESS CULTURE

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This article studies the problems of relations between the Polish culture and business; shows the activities of business enterprises of Poland in relation to the formation of culture and influence of Polish culture on the development of business and business partnership; analyzes the significance of Polish culture in the market economy. Polish ambitions are connected with the work and material traditions. Many Poles perceive career and success from the point of view of money and goods and are as a result workaholics. It has been confirmed that the educational standards and rules influence the setting of goals, tasks and establishment of business relations.

In Polish companies culture is the basis of competition and main instrument of establishing competitive advantages, improvement of the knowledge management process. Polish business culture favors the development of business relations and partnership.

The article is aimed at the opening of role and significance of Polish culture in the development of business, partner relationships, management systems of firms and companies.

Article may be used by business structures and managers.

Key words: Polish culture, business, management system, business relations, business partnership, and market economy.

1. Introduction

The culture is a complex and ambiguous phenomenon, thus it interests and inspires researchers of many different fields of science. In economics and business studies we use the issue of culture to explain various problems connected with human behaviour

considered from perspectives such as consumption, entrepreneurship, investments, attitudes to work, etc. In management and business studies the term culture is used particularly to explain differences appearing in behaviours of organisation members which result in differences in their organisation business performance. Problems such as attitude to power and authority in an organisation, teamwork and inner-group relations, communication, attitudes to conflict, notion of changes, and many more are influenced by a set of values, norms and patterns of behaviour that characterise a certain group of people (in this case – members of a certain organisation). This is at the same time a way in which we have got used to defining the culture, i.e. as a set of values and other symbolic systems that are specific for a society (Kroeber and Kluckhohn, 1952). Such a definition must be regarded as one out of many, and is situated between very wide understanding of the culture as human civilisation and the very narrow sense of the refinement of the mind (music, art, literature, etc.). The culture understood as a set of values represents sociological perspective and expresses collective and learned aspects of it. As Hofstede stated, the culture is a software of the mind (Hofstede, 2003), which means that we are programmed to behave in a certain way through our experience with other members of our society.

The culture is complex, broad and multileveled. Among various layers of the culture (national, ethnic, religious, generational, etc.) particularly a national culture and an organisational culture are both important and useful as interpretative factors of organisational behaviour. And both refer to similar problems (values and norms influencing human behaviour) but on different levels: on the level of society (national level) or the level of an organisation. This paper focuses on national culture as a condition of business behaviour, especially in Poland.

A national culture has become an important topic in management science since 1980's, however its importance is still growing. Why? It would be a truism to answer that the world is becoming smaller and more international if it were not that we all really experience it in our day-to-day life. This 'internationalism' applies to our personal contacts, technologies we use, our travelling, economies and enterprises. The growth of global business leads to increased permeability in the traditional boundaries, which in turn leads to a growing diversity of participants – global transfer of work both in terms of the creation of new jobs and the global sourcing of certain parts of an individual's or unit's work. (Brewster et al., 2007). Thus, even on the level of SMEs businesspeople are very likely to meet and cooperate with representatives of different cultures. This is not surprising then that there is a close link between successful global business and cultural awareness and sensitivity (Lane et al., 2000).

Cultural differences can also pose significant barriers to implementation of a business venture or the use of modern management techniques or concepts. One may say that modern business provides us with the universal language of systems, structures, processes, etc. Indeed, students of business all over the world are taught with almost the same handbooks with unified contemporary management theories, models and solutions. However, all these issues are perceived and understood through a filter of a national culture (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2005). Thus, a specified technique or organisational solution may lead to completely different effects depending on a notion of this solution which is specific for members of a society. Although the cultural differences may not be visible and important on the surface or in a quick interaction, they deeply affect commitments, relationships, decision making, etc.

The idea of this article is to give a reader a very general insight (general due to a limited space of the publication) into the way how the Poles feel, think and act regarding main problems appearing in management. The characteristic of Polish business culture presented here is a result of many years' analysis and observations conducted by the author as well as her studies of literature on this subject.

The article consists of four parts. First, very briefly, the main concepts of cultural dimensions are presented to introduce the terms used in the next paragraph. The third paragraph then contains the characteristics of the Polish culture referring to the main areas of business behaviour. The fourth and the last part of this article concludes the whole with some consequences of the Polish culture to intricacies of management in Poland.

2. Dimensions of the culture

In fact all societies must struggle with the same problems, such as recognition of the good and the evil, the truth, love, family, social relationships, ambitions, power, etc. But the same problems may be solved in different ways in a society which leads to the origins of cultural differences (Mole, 2009). Most of culture models created to identify the main differences among groups and societies consist of dimensions referring to main problems appearing in the social context. As in this paper the culture is considered as a factor of business behaviour, only few models regarding this aspect will be presented further. Due to the limits of the paper's space only short and basic presentation of these models will be given. More details will be presented in a paragraph concerning the Polish culture.

One of the most popular models of cultural dimensions has been created by the Dutch researcher Geert Hofstede. His framework describes the culture on a basis of 4 variables (Hofstede, 2003):

- power distance (small to large) refers to the extent to which the less powerful members of organisations accept and expect that power is distributed unequally;
- individualism vs. collectivism is the degree to which individuals are integrated into groups and in return for protection given by a group are obliged to be loyal to the group;
- masculinity vs. femininity - the distribution of social and emotional roles between the genders which triggers domination of 'masculine' or 'feminine' values;
- uncertainty avoidance (weak to strong) which may be defined as a society's level of tolerance for uncertainty and ambiguity reflected e.g. in a number of rules and laws introduced in a society.

The basic four-elements model was extended later by M.H.Bond with a dimension of 'long-term orientation' (vs. short-term orientation) which describes society's time horizon.

The second model that is considered as very influential for behavioural analysis in business studies has been created by another Dutch researcher Fons Trompenaars. His framework consists of seven items (dimensions) (Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner, 2005):

- universalism vs. particularism – describes how people judge other people's behaviour: what is more important, rules or relationships;
- individualism vs. collectivism – the dimension very similar to Hofstede's one;
- neutral vs. emotional – refers to an extent to which people can display their emotions;
- specific vs. diffuse – expresses how separately people keep their private and working lives;
- achievement vs. ascription – the dimension refers to the question whether the status of an individual is given (by origin, religion, age, hierarchy) or results from his/her own performance;
- sequential vs. synchronic – the dimension describing how people deal with time; do they do one things at a time or do several things at once;
- internal vs. external control – refers to the degree to which humans are able to control their environment or are controlled by it.

The third model described here in the aim of further presentation of the Polish business culture origins from a work of R.R.Gesteland. He refers his framework particularly to problems which appear in intercultural negotiations and business meetings. Thus, in this model a culture may be described with following items (Gesteland, 2008):

- deal-focused vs. relationship-focused approach, which refers to a way and effort people make to create business relationships;
- egalitarian (informal) vs. hierarchical (formal) business behaviour, that, obviously, refers to attitudes towards hierarchy and status;
- monochronic vs. polychronic time behaviour – the dimension similar to the one presented in Trompenaar's framework;
- expressive vs. inexpressive behaviour.

Gesteland's model has been created under strong influence of Edward T. Hall concept presented in his significant book titled *The Silent Language*. E.T. Hall introduced to the anthropology and cross-cultural analysis concepts of (Hall and Hall, 1990):

- proxemics, i.e. man's use of space as a specialized elaboration of culture;
- polychronic vs. monochronic time;
- high-context vs. low-context culture; in a high-context culture many things are left unsaid and a message is hidden in a whole social context; in a low-context culture words are more important than other means of expression and a communicator needs to be very explicit.

The presentation made in this paragraph does not exhaust the full complexity of the cultural dimensions models. However, the choice was dictated by the need of explanation of the main terms used in the characteristic of the Polish business cultures in the following part of this article.

3. General characteristics of the Polish culture

From the multiplicity of problems which may be discussed under the title of 'Polish business culture' I have chosen the most visible aspects and patterns characterising a typical behaviour of Poles in a context of management, business meetings or organisational life.

The first problem refers to power and authority in an organisation. In most of Polish companies and institutions the power distance (PDI) is large. According to a survey conducted in Poland in accordance with Hofstede's methodology PDI is 72 which is significantly more than in countries such as these from Anglo-Saxon cluster (PDI 33), German cluster (PDI 27) or Scandinavian cluster (PDI 28) (Nasierowski and Mikula, 1998). At the same time Polish culture is considered as formal and hierarchical (Mole, 2009; Lewis, 2009) which in this case may be regarded as a kind of supplement and correlation to the large power distance.

Both dimensions are visible in Polish organisation through various symptoms. And so, as many observers state, centralisation of decision making is high. In many institutions every single decision must be made on the top of a hierarchy. As a result the process of decision making usually takes long. Centralisation and hierarchy are manifested and indicated by behavioural signals of one's status and positions in an organisation. Thus, at meetings or other gatherings the senior person (i.e. the oldest present in a room) is expected to dominate (Mole, 2009). Usually respect for authority is obeyed ostensibly, particularly employees located on lower positions in an organisational hierarchy try to show an attitude of servility. Such attitude may be, however, accompanied by inner suspiciousness and mistrust as a result of distinguishing between official and unofficial power ('we' and 'they' confrontation). That means that informal leaders or trade unions activists receive more authority than formal ones. This is a paradox that being individually suspicious of powerful people (e.g. managers) organisational members do not really feel the need for participation in decision making. As power distance is approved by the followers as much as by the leaders Polish managers do not feel the need to consult their decision neither (Hickson and Pugh, 2001).

Large power distance in Polish culture is manifested also by various privileges and attributes of status. Powerful people in an organisation have thus some special rights and rules, they have an access to distinguished, exceptional resources. University's

organisational culture provides perfect examples of such phenomena. At our faculty, in a canteen there is a special 'lobby room' for staff members which is better furnished than the rest of this place. The staff members have special right to be served without queuing. Although the canteen does not employ any waiter or waitress the staff members sitting in the 'lobby room' are served by the kitchen staff. The academic culture is peculiar and it seems that the power distance in it is even larger than on average in Poland but symptoms of authorities' privileges are met in the most of organisation. Distinguished parking places, toilets, better equipped offices to name just a few.

The large power distance and formality affect the process of interpersonal communication between people located on different positions in a hierarchy. There is considerable emotional barrier which usually makes subordinates unlikely to contradict or even to just approach their superiors. This is a superior who is expected to initiate the process of communication. This symptom is particularly distinctive in the academic culture of Polish universities. Students are rather passive during lectures; they consider a teacher as the one who creates a content of a lecture and who directs a development of students. Even if they disagree with a teacher they will not express such disagreement. At the same time communication in Poland is formal which is manifested mainly with the importance of the polite titles 'pan' (for male) or 'pani' (for female) which should be used in addressing to interlocutors. It is necessarily to do so at least at the beginning of the relationship, however usually it may take time to start less formal communication. And there is the need for common decision about it, particularly for addressing each other by the first name without using the polite mode.

Communication process itself should be also considered as culturally influenced. Among various dimensions of culture particularly the distinction of high-context and low-context way of communicating is regarded as a very important factor of behaviour. Polish culture consists of a mixture of both, and appearance of one or another depends on a situation. In business situations such as meetings of business partners or negotiations, Poles tend to use low-context communication (Gesteland, 2008). It means that we say clearly what we think. If we do not want to sign a contract we will say it. However in personal (private) relationships typical style of communication is of high-context. The reason for this comes from the need for protection of harmony in these relations. Very good example has been presented by one of the Dutch students who conducted his internship at NCU. Once he was invited for a party by his Polish peers. They talked to him in the morning when he did not feel very well, thus he replied that probably he would not come due to his bad self-condition but anyway he would consider joining the party. In the evening the Dutch felt much better so was ready to go but no one called him anymore. The answer given in the morning meant actually refusing to his Polish friends. However for the Dutch who comes from very low-context culture this response literally expressed his approach.

High-context and low-context communication is very often connected with an approach which members of a culture have to making business relationships. High-context communication accompanies relationship-focused culture as it provides tools for creation of positive and harmonic personal relations, even in business. And on the other hand, low-context communication is symptomatic for deal-focused cultures. However, in particular cases these connections may be modified as it is in the case of the Polish culture. It has been explained in the previous paragraph that in personal relationship Poles protect good climate through high-context communication. Surprisingly, even though communication in business situations is usually low-context in Poland, Polish businesspeople appreciate personal relationships with their business partners. Although while talking about a deal they use an explicit communication style, other norms of behaviour express their willingness for establishing strong relationships, based on mutual trust. Thus, for example, they spend much time on meals and parties aimed to entertaining their business partners.

Such an attitude may be regarded also as connected with Polish hospitality. Polish business people do efforts to make really personally based relationships. As a result, generally, 'who you know' counts in business in Poland. Many matters are conducted through networks of personal contacts (Gesteland, 2008; Mole, 2009).

The tendency to build strong personal relationships applies also to work environment, i.e. to work-teams created within an organisation. Such teams are usually characterised by mutual trust and positive interpersonal contacts. Members these teams are loyal to other members, obey group norms and even may favour a group interest over an individual one. These norms and patterns of behaviour may lead to a conclusion that Polish culture is collectivistic, however it would not be the whole truth. The Polish culture is full of paradoxes and in this case it must be regarded that Poles also behave according to individualistic values. Thus, usually an individual interest prevails, Poles like to express that they have opinions different than others, and suburbia of Polish cities are built with various styles (every building is different manifesting individuality of an owner). Collectivistic nature of Poles occurs then only in some groups, when their members actually manage to create strong relations. In fact, IDV (the index of individualism) in Poland is between 56 (Nasierowski and Mikula, 1998) and 60 (www.geert-hofstede.com) and as such indicates 'low' individualism of Polish culture.

In every business culture before starting to talk about business partners have small chats to 'warm up', get to know each other and create good atmosphere. It is worth knowing then, which topics may be the most appropriate for that purpose. Poles, as each nation, are very proud, thus every statement giving compliments to Polish achievements (e.g. Solidarity movement and the stake to the collapse of communism), Polish landscape or famous and successful people will be appropriate. While talking about the Polish pride it is necessarily to mention about peculiar combination of it and the inferiority complex, which is peculiar for Poles. Although very proud, simultaneously Poles often express their disbelief in own abilities and worth. To give an example, at the university we hear sometimes that foreign students studying in Poland are asked by their Polish peers why they have selected Poland instead of other country, which is to say: other countries are better than Poland. However, at the same time any statement saying that in Poland something is wrong or not as it should be, will lead to a rather hostile reaction.

The problem of conversation topics as a part of business relationships leads to an issue of humour, particularly during a business meeting. Although humour may be treated as a very good tool for 'breaking the ice' and creation of good atmosphere, members of some cultures consider business as a serious matter thus from their perspective humour is not appropriate in this kind of social relationships. This is the case of Japanese culture. When they listen to e.g. an American presenting his propositions, and the Americans always start their presentations with jokes or funny anecdotes, a Japanese interpreter may say: 'now the American is telling a joke, when he finishes we start to laugh' (Ferraro, 2002). Apart of the adequacy of humour in business situations, jokes and anecdotes are risky as they usually refer to context of a particular culture. And as a result things which are funny for us may be completely not funny for others or even considered as rude or insulting. Many jokes express real fears, anxieties, or in contradiction sources of pride of a nation. It is in Polish culture. The Polish business culture is also rather 'serious' which means in this particular case that Polish business people are unlikely to introduce much humour in their presentations or formal conversation. However, if their partners joke it shouldn't create any problems for mutual relations or understanding. On their side, Polish business people prefer rather 'hard' data like facts and figures. They use them in their own presentations and expect the same from others. (Gesteland, 2008)

A culture may be discovered through a language (peculiar sayings, proverbs, etc.) of its members as a language is like a mirror for values, attitudes or habits. Thus, Polish hospitality mentioned before in the context of building relationships in business is

expressed through a proverb: 'a guest in a house, a god in a house'. Other examples that I would like to give in this article refer to another sphere of business behaviours which are goal setting and aiming for objectives. The first one is 'słomiany zapał' or 'słomiany ogień' which is relatively difficult to translate. A very direct translation is 'straw enthusiasm' or 'straw fire' (can be expressed with the English 'a flash in the pan') and its meaning is connected with rapidly emerging enthusiasm which also quickly passes (like a fire in a haystack). It seems that this phrase illustrates well a very frequent attitude of Poles. We are usually very enthusiastic about new ideas, full of energy and hope for future results. However, as these results usually are possible to achieve in longer time perspective, we quickly lose our patience and temper. This is best exemplified by one of the Polish charity organisations – 'The Great Orchestra of Christmas Charity' (Wielka Orkiestra Świątecznej Pomocy). This organisation is the most successful charity of all in Poland. It seems that the reason for this is connected with a fact that they operate (i.e. collect money from citizens) only one day per year. It is always the second Sunday of January when its volunteers appear in streets in every town and every village and ask people for supporting their current goal (each year they collect money for different purpose connected with health care). The organisation is the most efficient and successful in terms of amount of money they are able to collect. It seems that they manage to achieve this because they perfectly adopt to Polish nature expressed through 'straw fire' – people see the result (amount of money collected) on the same day in the evening.

Concerning goal setting it is also necessary to refer to a particular kind of ambitions which characterize Poles. Probably due to the Polish inferiority complex mentioned before we have very high ambitions. It is manifested in several different ways. A very peculiar one is that Poles try to get to the highest mountains, the deepest holes or the farthest points. That is why among famous Poles we have many mountaineers and explorers whose achievements were connected with being the first in the world in a certain place (e.g. a mountain). I have realised that characteristic of the Polish culture when I was in the north of Norway. I decided to visit the Nord Cap which is considered to be the furthest point in northern Europe. It happened in September, out of tourist season thus there were very few visitors but all of them were from Poland.

Polish ambitions related to work are, in contradiction, rather materialistic (Hickson and Pugh, 2001). It means that somebody's career and success is considered in terms of money and goods he or she can buy. It may be said, in quite an exaggerated way, that an ambition of an average Polish citizen is to have a bigger house and more expensive car than a neighbour has. Such materialism may be a consequence of the Polish history and particularly a time of communism. A generation which is in power now is a generation born in 1960' and 1970'. These people still remember the time of permanent crises of the central planned economy when everyone had the same (usually not much). They (as well as the author of this article) were kids then and associated communism not with violation of individual freedom and human rights but with a lack of basic goods, queuing for everything and dreaming for toys. When a transformation into the market economy occurred these people realised that they their work has a direct connection with material effects and that they may change their situation and erase bad memories from the period of shortcomings. That is why contemporary Poles are often workaholics.

The way how members of the Polish culture pursue to different aims is described, among others, by a saying 'dobra, dobra', which means 'OK, OK' or 'easy, easy'. I have realised that this saying is very often used by Poles when I spoke to a Frenchman who had spent some time in Poland. He adopted very few Polish phrases but 'dobra, dobra' was among them. Thus, it seems to manifest Polish attitude to most of problems: 'do not worry, everything will be all right!' Indeed, Poles have a tendency to underestimate or minimize problems. It would be regarded as rather dangerous mixture if we took into account the ambitions of 'getting into furthest point' described above. However, 'dobra,

dobra' phrase contains also another meaning: Polish resourcefulness. It is also expressed through a word 'kombinować' which is almost impossible to translate into English (and probably to other languages) with one word or phrase. It means an attitude of finding a solution in every circumstances; avoiding obstacles, creativity, smartness, being a dodger.

And finally, in the context of setting goals but also regarding attitudes to time, it should be stated that the Polish culture is polychronic and short-time oriented (Gesteland, 2008; Lewis, 2009). Short-time orientation is expressed through the phrase 'straw fire'. Poles are impatient in waiting for results of their activities but also are rather future-oriented (they do not look back to bigger extent). On the other hand, polychronism of the Polish culture implies that on average Poles are late 10-15 minutes for their meetings and these meetings may take longer than it is expected.

Regarding the time, as the last item in these short characteristics, I would like to underline a norm which also may cause some problems in intercultural co-operation: dinning times. What is different from many other cultures is that in Poland we do not have a lunch break. The main meal (lunch) is served around 4-5 PM. And in the evening we have something small. The problem which may occur in cross-cultural environment is that foreign visitors in Poland may be hungry at 12-1 PM (if they are used to eating at such time) and on the other hand may be astonished that their Polish partners do not want to eat much during dinner organised late in an evening.

4. Consequences of Polish culture for management

Many consequences of the Polish business culture have been already indicated. Attitudes to authority lead in Poland to centralisation, long decisional process, barriers for communication, etc. Norms and rules of communication influence the way how people make business relationships. Time-orientation and ambitions create environment for goal setting and pursuing. Dimensions of national culture, as it has been stated earlier, determine also the possibilities for implementation of 'universal' management tools or concepts. Thus, for example, in the research projects conducted at our faculty we considered Polish culture as a factor influencing following management concepts:

- competitiveness and building of competitive advantages by Polish companies; they focus on short-time oriented strategies (Stankiewicz, 2002);
- a process of knowledge management in Polish companies; in this case preferences for 'hard data', hierarchical dependency in organisations and relying on team-based personal relationships appeared as the most significant (Stankiewicz, 2006);
- Positive Organisational Scholarship; among various problems the lack of trust between people located on different positions in an organisational structure create an organisational climate limiting positive relations in organisations (Stankiewicz, 2010).

There is no doubt that a national culture creates specific conditions for behaviours which are important for management. However, an outsider through an observation or reading appropriate publications may receive only a superficial insight into a foreign culture. Nevertheless I hope that I managed to give at least very general knowledge about the main Polish values and norms which will make a reader resistant to surprises caused by his or her Polish business partners.

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