CROSS-CULTURAL MANAGEMENT OF A MULTINATIONAL ENTERPRISE: A CASE STUDY OF THAILAND AND VIETNAM

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Managing effectively across national and cultural boundaries is a key success factor in international business in the context of globalization. The purpose of this empirical research is to compare the outcomes of the cross-cultural management of a renowned multinational organization from a Western region that has succeeded in its operations both in Thailand and Vietnam, as well as to examine the relationship between organizational antecedent factors and the outcomes of cross-cultural management. Survey questionnaire data were collected from April to September 2011 from the company's employees, who were voluntary full-time staff members across divisions in each country. The survey included measures of job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee engagement and their antecedents. The results indicated that the level of employee engagement of employees in Vietnam was statistically higher than that of employees in Thailand, whereas there was a similar level of job satisfaction and organizational commitment of the company's employees in both subsidiaries. Furthermore, the regression analysis revealed that training and development, employee participation, job security, and collectivist culture predicted employee engagement. As a result, this study addresses managers that have to pay attention to build employee engagement in foreign operations. When employees are actively engaged in their organizations, they will be dedicated to their jobs and enjoy working in a team environment, and this will eventually reward good business performance.

Keywords: Cross-cultural management, Employee engagement, Multinational company

Introduction

Globalization has increased the growing integration of the world economy from the business activities of countless international firms. Advances in technology and falling barriers in trade and investment, as main forces driving globalization, have increased the ease and speed with which companies can manage far-flung operations. These forces have made the cost of international business affordable for all types of firms. Consequently, multinational corporations are currently facing more intense pressure from competition and are compelled to respond to global challenges. Many firms proactively pursue internationalization as a strategic move. However, even though expanding internationally can be attractive and lucrative, operating and managing an international business has become more complex in today's business world due to several factors, which include differences in economic, cultural, legal, and political environments. Internationalizing firms are routinely exposed to four types of risks: cross-cultural risks, country or political risks, currency risks, and commercial risks (Cavusgil *et al.*, 2008). Hence, investing and running business overseas involves more risk than undertaking domestic

business. Among all international business risks, cross-cultural discrepancies are inevitable in particular because human resources are required at all operational levels and across all business units. Therefore, there is a need to manage effectively the cross-culture aspect of human resources for the success of international organizations.

According to Gancel *et al.* (2002), the failure of cross-cultural management stems from a number of reasons: *insufficient cross-cultural awareness*—managers that are not aware of the very existence of the cultural dimension of management; *insufficient understanding*—managers know about the existence of culture, but they do not understand this issue and thus underestimate the impact that culture can have on business and do not have any need to deal with it; *insufficient willingness*—managers knowingly decided not to deal with culture; and *insufficient level of abilities and skills*—managers may be aware of and may even try to manage the culture but fail due to a lack of intercultural competence. Many scholars finally conclude that effective cross-cultural management can become a critical source for increasing business competitiveness, which in turn can lead to success in international business.

Multinational companies have played an important role in international business. As defined by Cavusgil *et al.* (2008), a multinational enterprise is a large company with substantial resources that performs various business activities through a network of subsidiaries and affiliates located in multiple countries. The main reason for the expansion of multinational companies is to create global competitiveness by reducing production costs and exploiting market opportunities offered by trade liberalization and economic integration. The growing role of multinational firms has increased the volume of international trading and has stimulated businesses to become more competitive in the global market. Besides, the emergence of multination corporations has also increased the degree of global interdependence.

International business requires special knowledge, commitment of resources, and considerable time to develop the success of foreign operations. Being large organizations, multinational enterprises are not constrained by limited financial or human resources. Hence, this research places substantial emphasis on the case study of a leading multinational enterprise producing and distributing consumer products from a Western region that has successfully expanded across national borders. The company has been able to create a competitive advantage to outperform its competitors, both locally and internationally, by managing effectively human resources across national and cultural boundaries.

This multinational firm has been also expanding its operations into Thailand and Vietnam over the past decades. Learning from the study of a well-performed multinational organization not only advances knowledge in the field of cross-cultural management as for businesses that are considering entering emerging markets, particular in Thailand and Vietnam.

Literature Review

Cross-cultural management is obviously important and has a great effect on the success of overseas business operations. Cullen and Parvoteeah (2008) have reported that international business management is inseparable from the sphere of patterned cultural behaviors because culture is represented in terms of the pervasive and shared beliefs, norms, values, and symbols that guide the everyday life of different groups of people. International managers have to decide to choose and adjust their strategies aligned with each country's culture. Appropriate business strategies can be used to reduce possible risks and impacts, of cross-cultural discrepancy and deliver successful outcomes for their own enterprises.

According to Cullen and Parboteeah (2008), culture can be generally classified into three major levels: (i) *National Culture* - the dominant culture within the political boundaries of the nation-state; (ii) *Business culture* – the norms, values, and beliefs that pertain to business in a culture (i.e. acceptable ways to conduct business in a society); and (iii) *occupational and organizational culture*. Occupational culture refers to the norms, values, beliefs, and expected ways of behaving for people in the same occupational group, while organizational culture is the set of important understandings that members of an organization share. All of the levels of cross-cultural differences affect all interactions of business as well as business performance.

Smith *et al*. (2008) presents a conceptual framework on the factors affecting cross-country differences. This framework is associated with economic development, political/social history, and national cultures (norms, values, and beliefs), which has a powerful influence on social norms and the role of an organization, as well as social character traits (values, role definitions, motivations, and perceptions). These have influenced organizational citizenship behavior (OCB) and have had an important impact on organizational outcomes such as organizational performance, team performance, and individual performance ratings. In the meantime, moreover, there are several antecedents that also affect OCB, such as organizational contexts, attitudes, etc.

Outcomes of Cross-cultural Management

The evaluation framework of organizational outcomes has been developed according to various approaches. For instance, organizational effectiveness has been considered as an organization that achieves its short-term goals/ends and/or long-term goals with accomplishment of the required or an above-standard of organization. As a consequence, evaluations should focus on many aspects of an organization and its processes, for example, its finance and employee satisfaction (Cameron, 2005). A number of studies, in addition, have also clearly shown that organizational commitment and employee engagement are closely associated with the effectiveness and business performance of organizations (Meyer and Allen, 1997; Saks, 2006; Wagner and Harter, 2006; Hackman and Oldham, 1980). These critical factors can be used to reflect the outcomes for organizational management and key success indicators of firms.

Employee or job satisfaction is defined as employees' positive attitude towards their job and overall work situation which results from perception and other assessments. This satisfaction is motivated by task fulfillment and the goal achievement of the organization (Hackman and Oldham, 1980). All employees that will have job satisfaction need to be motivated properly. Job satisfaction can create intrinsic enthusiasm on the part of the employee and drive him or her to accomplish his or her work. As a consequence, job satisfaction is "an important workplace construct and one that is of concern for effective management" (Boles *et al*., 2001).

Studies of work satisfaction have been carried out in the past decades. For example, Mowday *et al*. (1979) conducted research on the relationship between employees' work satisfaction and business performance. The study of Shalley *et al*. (2000) found that 2,200 technical professionals having higher job satisfaction levels were associated with lower intention to leave the company. Low levels of job satisfaction among employees are related to various undesirable behaviors, such as quitting their job, as well as psychological components associated with turnover. These behaviors also included thoughts of quitting and the intention to quit (Hom *et al.*, 1992). When job satisfaction is low, employees are statistically more likely to quit than those with higher levels of satisfaction. Levels of job satisfaction are the major causes of labor strikes, persistent tardiness, and work stoppage and labor turnover. These labor issues are

directly associated with higher costs in employment (Voros, 2000). Low job satisfaction also reduces employee productivity (Keller *et al*., 1996).

Meyer and Allen (1991) have defined organizational commitment as a heightened emotional connection that employees feel for their organization's goals and values—employees are determined to participate in the activities of their organization. Engaged employees also tend to work with dedication. According to Meyer and Becker (2004) and Meyer and Allen (1997), many studies over the past decade have shown a positive correlation between organizational commitment and firm performance. An increase in organizational commitment is highly likely to contribute to an increase in an organization's benefits, as with the following: (i) improving employee motivation can directly reduce absentee rates, and increase employees' enthusiasm; (ii) reducing the employees' turnover rates (highly-committed employees experience significantly fewer thoughts of quitting and they tend to stay much longer in their employment); and (iii) highly-committed employees exhibit good job performance because they are more willing to fulfill their obligations to their organization. Therefore, organizational commitment is crucial for creating a productive workplace on the part of every executive. It also helps employees to become more motivated and reduces counterproductive work behaviors that prevent the organization from accomplishing its objectives.

Employee engagement similarly refers to the internal characteristics whereby employees will perform well and be engaged in the organization they belong to when they have positive attitudes toward tasks, their peers and themselves (Saks, 2006). Harter *et al.* (2002) believed that, in general, employee engagement is constantly related to good business performance. Bates' (2004) study, in particular, clearly showed that employee engagement can be adopted to predict outcomes of employee performance and organizational success, including financial performance.

Kahn (1992) previously explained that high levels of engagement can lead to positive outcomes for both individuals (quality of work) and organizations (productivity). Saks (2006) additionally reviewed research related to the field and found that employee engagement profoundly influenced the positive business outcomes for every organization in many aspects, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, turnover rate, and organizational citizenship behavior. For this reason, engagement in a workplace creates positive work-related experience and a state of mind towards employees that have a healthy work force and positive work performance. Moreover, highly-engaged employees are less inclined to resign from their jobs—they are reliable and maintain a good relationship with their employer. Employees feel more energetic and dedicated when they have a positive attitude toward the work environment. Maslach *et al*. (2001) also found that employee engagement was a mediating variable that linked the relevant factors concerning the work environment and other outcomes, such as turnover rate, job satisfaction, and commitment.

Antecedents of Cross-cultural Management

One important theory related to cross-cultural management can be found in Hofstede's research (1984). His findings revealed that an organization can be seen as a small unit of the national culture. In a behavioral study of employees in a multinational company, he divided national cultures into four dimensions: power distance represents inequality; uncertainty avoidance refers to a preference for structured situations rather than unstructured situations; collectivism indicates strong cohesiveness in groups; and masculinity is the result of widely-accepted male ways of thinking. His research showed that a national culture has a major impact on employees' work-related values and attitudes. These four dimensions refer to cultural characteristics that can be

used to predict the behaviors of an aggregate population and yield many advantages in managing the culturally-diverse workforce in today's organizations. Hofstede's theory is partly adopted in this study in order to investigate the impact of culture on aspects of cross-cultural management, such as job satisfaction, organizational commitment, and employee engagement.

Although cultural factors affect the outcomes of organizational management, a number of studies have referred to factors outside cultural factors, such as that of Hackman and Oldham (1980), who demonstrated that job characteristics (such as skill variety, task identity, task significance, autonomy) provided employees to be more engaged. In contrast, perceptions of job insecurity might tend to diminish attachment to work and organization (Pfeffer, 1994). Regarding Mathieu's study (1991), moreover, it was found that the prestige of the organization can be used to meet the self-esteem needs of employees and provide employees with the important factors required to continuously create organizational commitment. Sayeed's study (2001) also revealed that most committed professional managers paid attention to their corporate image rather than financial returns or benefits. Additionally, management practices such as wage payment systems, appraisal and reward systems, employee involvement, and training and culture-related development will affect employees' organizational commitment (Sakda, 2008).

Methodology

This exploratory and empirical research examines the cross-cultural management practices of a successful multinational enterprise operating in Thailand and Vietnam. This research also aims at identifying the relationship between antecedents and outcomes of cross-cultural management. In order to achieve these objectives, the following research methodology was employed.

Sample and Data Collection

The participants of this research were full-time staff members employed for at least one year across divisions in the selected multinational enterprise based in its Thailand and Vietnam branches. The staff had to have been working in the organization long enough to be able to specify, recognize, and get acquainted with the company's culture, management practices, and work environment. The data collection method was a self-administrated questionnaire. The research period was between April and September 2010.

With letters of request to conduct this study sent to the management of the country, 400 questionnaires were distributed to the company in Thailand and Vietnam (200 sets per branch). The researcher received 125 returned questionnaires from the company in Thailand and 143 returned questionnaires from the branch in Vietnam. After eliminating incomplete answers, however, the number of completed questionnaires that were usable for the analysis was 118 and 136 for the Thai and Vietnamese branches respectively. The final response rate and detail analyses of the demographic variables are provided in Table 1.

Table 1. Participants and sample descriptive statistics.

	Thailand	Vietnam	Total
No. of participants (Response rate)	118 (59.0%)	136 (68.0%)	254 (63.5%)
Age: mean (S.D.)	33.0 (6.48)	30.2 (6.67)	31.48 (6.48)
Gender: Female	66.9%	55.5%	64.6%
Education Level:			
Below bachelor	4.0%	26.2%	14.6%
Bachelor's degree	60.3%	67.6%	65.2%
Higher than bachelor	35.7%	6.2%	20.2%
Managerial position:			
Non-management	64.0%	74.0%	66.7%
Middle management	35.1%	17.8%	26.9%
Top management	0.9%	8.2%	6.4%
Work experience:			
1-5 years	59.5%	73.8%	67.2%
6-10 years	22.5%	17.5%	19.8%
More than 10 years	18.0%	8.7%	13.0%

Measures

The data collection instrument for this research was a questionnaire that was adopted from several researchers and partly developed by the author with the assistance of the HR heads of the target company. The developed questionnaire aimed to measure the cross-cultural management outcomes and antecedents of the selected multinational enterprise in its operations in Thailand and Vietnam.

The dependent variables were questions related to three cross-cultural management outcomes, which consisted of the concept of organizational commitment developed by Meyer and Allen (1997), and employee engagement and job satisfaction derived by Saks (2006). Each dimension was based on a 5-point rating scale, where respondents were allowed to choose from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A higher level of outcome in each dimension was indicated by a higher mean score.

The two independent variables were questions related to cross-cultural management antecedents, organizational culture, and organization context. For organizational culture, the dimensions representing organizational culture were adapted from Hofstede's theory of work-related culture value (1984). Since the masculinity dimension that justified such culture might have been inappropriate for this study, the researcher decided to study only three dimensions. To measure the organizational contexts, the combined questionnaire was adapted from Hackman and Oldham (1980) and Sakda (2008). Each item was similarly measured on a 5-point rating scale, where respondents were also allowed to choose from strongly disagree (1) to strongly agree (5). A high mean score represents strong culture and/or strong context in the organization.

The questionnaire used for this research measured validity by consulting experts and specialists in the field; furthermore, pre-testing with 30 samples was done in order to verify the reliability by using Cronbach's alpha-coefficient method. According to the reliability tests, organizational commitment, employee engagement, and job satisfaction demonstrated Cronbach

Alpha-Coefficients of 0.81, 0.84, and 0.73, respectively. That is, all of the variables had reliability higher than the typical acceptable level of .70 (Hair *et al.*, 1998).

Data Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to describe the profile of the respondents and to summarize the variables; additionally, inferential statistics were used to test the hypothesis. In order to accomplish the research objectives, the statistical analysis was divided into two hypotheses testing:

- In order to test the mean differences of the variables related to outcomes as well as characteristics related to cross-cultural management between the branches in Thailand and Vietnam, an independent-sample-*t*-test was used for the comparison;
- In order to better understand the relationships among the variables, Pearson's product moment correlation coefficient analysis was performed to generate the correlation matrix and a multiple regression was applied. This statistical method was considered appropriate, as all concerned variables were measured on an interval scale. As there were multiple items for each construct, the average of the multiple items was used in the multiple regression.

For the purpose of statistical testing, all tests were conducted at a .05 level of significance.

Results and Discussion

The results of the study of cross-cultural management of the multinational enterprise operating in Thailand and Vietnam can be addressed as follows:

Cross-cultural Management Outcomes

The analysis and comparison results of the outcomes of cross-cultural management in the present study are presented in Table 2. Data from Table 2 demonstrated that job satisfaction and the organizational commitment of employees in Thailand and Vietnam were not statistically significant, whereas the level of employee engagement in Vietnam was higher than that of Thailand. These findings might be a reason why the business results (in terms of sales growth rate) of the company in Vietnam were better than those of Thailand during the past few years. According to several previous studies, employee engagement is related to employee performance, organization outcomes, as well as revenues (Saks, 2006; Bates, 2004; Wagner and Harter, 2006).

Unlike job satisfaction, which can be defined as an individual's attitude toward his or her work, or organizational commitment that refers to an employees' attitude and attachment toward their organization, employee engagement is the degree to which an employee is attentive and absorbed in the performance of their role (Saks, 2006). Employee engagement is also defined as a fully-engaged employee and as someone that has cognitive understanding of the organization's strategic goals and values, has an affective attachment to the organization's strategic goals and values, and has a willingness to do more than the minimum in his/her role (Towers Perrin-ISR, 2006). Hence, employee engagement is a culmination of affective commitment, goal alignment, and organizational citizenship behavior. In short, job satisfaction and organizational commitment

could be related to organizational performance but at a lower level than that of employee engagement.

Table 2. Means and *t*-test results of outcomes of cross-cultural management.

Outcomes	Thailand		Vietnam		*p*-value
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	
Job satisfaction	3.86	.56	3.90	.44	.64
Organizational commitment	3.27	.50	3.35	.37	.16
Employee engagement	3.57	.59	3.74	.30	.01*

* Statistically significant at the p<.05 level (2-tailed)

Antecedents to the Cross-cultural Management

The comparison results of the organizational culture and organizational contexts as the antecedents to the cross-cultural management in the multinational enterprise's in both the Thai and Vietnamese branches are shown in Table 3. Data from the table indicate that the employees in Thailand viewed that the image of the company was better than that of the employees in Vietnam, whereas the collectivist culture and employee participation in Vietnam were stronger than the average results gathered from employees in Thailand. The other dimensions of organizations contexts were not statistically significant. This may be because both operations are still working under the same management practices designed and assigned by the global headquarters.

Table 3. Means and *t*-test results of antecedents to the cross-cultural management.

Variables	Thailand		Vietnam		*p*-value
	Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**	
Organizational cultures					
Power distance	3.73	.73	3.62	.56	.20
Uncertainty avoidance	3.69	.60	3.74	.59	.52
Collectivism	3.46	1.00	3.72	.72	.02*
Organizational contexts					
Organizational reputation	4.36	.52	4.01	.51	.00*
Job security	3.76	.76	3.80	.49	.62
Compensation	2.96	.68	3.03	.59	.43
Rewards and recognition	3.46	.75	3.60	.56	.11
Employee participation	3.48	.88	3.74	.63	.01*
Training and development	3.50	.77	3.53	.57	.67

* Statistically significant at the p<.05 level (2-tailed)

According to the study results, it was observed that Vietnam culture has dominated organizational outcomes. For instance, the higher collectivist culture in Vietnam enhanced team collaboration, which led to a higher level of employee participation. According to Allen and Meyer (1991), employee perception in participative management makes employees realize their own duties in the organization. Furthermore, organizations those allow employees to be involved in the decision-making process, both in planning and operating, and distributing decision-making power to all levels, develop employees that will commit to them (Hrebiniak and Allutto, 1992).

However, since Thailand's branch was established several decades before the one in Vietnam, the image of the company in Thailand was perceived to be better than in Vietnam

according to the employee's point of view. Nonetheless, it seems that the higher organizational reputation did not affect any of the cross-cultural management outcomes in this study.

The correlation between cross-cultural management antecedents and outcomes

The correlation matrix of the variables in the regression model is given in Table 4. As can be seen, all of the measures of cross-cultural management outcomes were significantly and positively correlated among themselves (*p*-value <.01). Both job satisfaction and organizational commitment were moderately and equally related to employee engagement, yet a weaker association was found between job satisfaction and organizational commitment. In addition, the measures of cross-cultural management antecedents were also significantly and positively correlated with the measures of all of the outcomes. It was noted, however, that only uncertainty avoidance culture had less or no correlation with some of the measures of organizational contexts.

Table 4. Pearson's correlation of outcomes of cultural management and organizational factors.

No.	Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12
1	Job satisfaction	1											
2	Organizational commitment	.36**	1										
3	Employee engagement	.51**	.51**	1									
4	Organizational reputation	.45**	.32**	.32**	1								
5	Job security	.42**	.21**	.45**	.43**	1							
6	Power distance	.37**	.27**	.46**	.37**	.27**	1						
7	Uncertainty avoidance	.16**	.30**	.18**	.23**	.23**	.01	1					
8	Collectivism	.21**	.16**	.39**	.16**	.19**	.34**	.18**	1				
9	Compensation	.30**	.40**	.41**	.20**	.25**	.39**	.05	.22**	1			
10	Rewards and recognition	.35**	.31**	.52**	.30**	.39**	.54**	.03	.37**	.61**	1		
11	Employee participation	.32**	.23**	.46**	.22**	.37**	.31**	.15*	.22**	.22**	.38**	1	
12	Training and development	.28**	.39**	.55**	.23**	.33**	.33**	.18**	.25**	.45**	.46**	.27**	1

** Correlation was statistically significant at the 0.01 level

With regard to the analysis results in Table 2, only the employee engagement outcome in each branch of the company was different, and researcher further investigated to find the variables affecting employee engagement by using multiple regression analysis. According to the hypothesis testing, the antecedent variables affecting employee engagement consisted of job security (Coefficient=.15, *p*-value=.006), collectivist culture (Coefficient=.15, *p*-value =.004), training and development (Coefficient=.20, *p*-value=.000), and employee participation (Coefficient=.28, *p*-value=.000). The regression model was significant (*p*-value = .000) and had an R^2 of .52. That is, 52% of the variation in employee engagement can be explained by the variation in the cross-cultural management antecedent variables in the organization.

The results of the multiple regression analysis revealed some organizational culture and context variables that enhance employee engagement in the organization. Among these variables, employee participation had the highest association with the engagement. As reported by Pfeffer and Viega (1999), promoting employee participation could lead to higher job responsibility and encourage a sense of creativity and ownership in solving problems and achieving the targets as part of the organization. The second variable that affected engagement was training and development, since an intensive training could stimulate the feeling of importance of employees to the organization and promote self-development (McElory, 2001).

Additionally, the collectivist culture that had been dominated by the national culture was the third variable associated with engagement. Since a collectivist culture has been defined here as the tendency of people to regard themselves as part of a group or team (Hofstede, 1984), it is likely from the evidence that collectivism can promote employee participation in the Vietnamese operation. That is, national culture influences organizational culture as well as some management practices in the international business organization.

The last, but not least, variable that supports employee engagement was the stability of the workplace in the organization. The provision of employment security, particular in this day and age of organizational changes, characterizes the engagement by an organization with his or her employees; and norms of reciprocity and social exchange theory dictate that employees should return the engagement. This characterizes the exchange nature of the psychological contract between the employer and the employee. That is, in exchange for the employee's engagement to the organization, the employer provides employment security (Pfeffer, 1994). Hence, job security in the workplace tends to enhance the engagement to work of employees.

Conclusion

In the competitive world of globalization and diversity of the workforce, effective cross-cultural management is the key factor determining the success of multinational enterprises. This statement is supported by cross-cultural management research in a leading consumer goods multinational enterprise that has been successful in Thailand and Vietnam. The results of the study reveal that national culture has an influence on organizational culture and affects some management practices in the international business organization. It was found that the level of employee engagement in Vietnam was higher than that in Thailand, whereas job satisfaction and the organizational commitment of employees in Thailand and Vietnam were similar. Consequently, employee engagement could be regarded as one of the most essential characteristics of the organization, as it was the factor effecting the effectiveness and survival of the organization. This is because the organization not only needs to recruit qualified employees but also needs to maintain these employees by promoting a sense of belonging and employee engagement, since these are the useful attitude towards organization achievement.

Furthermore, the multiple regression results also suggest that employee engagement can be enhanced by the existing collectivist culture, by creating job security, by encouraging participation of employees, as well as by providing extensive training and development for them. The results of the study hence could be applied to the management of multinational companies by emphasizing the promotion of employee engagement in overseas branches. The top management of the multinational firm should put effort into training and development in order to strengthen the organization's collectivist culture, and emphasizing employee participation and career stability. Engaged employees will definitely collaborate to achieve good organizational performance.

Acknowledgement

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