20 Typewatching Across the Crosswalks of Cultures in Malaysia

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OVERVIEW

Malaysia epitomizes a potpourri of cultures that straddles the East and West. The East is reflected in a multitude of ethnic-based behaviors and religious beliefs while the West's influence has been through the colonial heritage of the Portuguese, the Dutch and the British. Today an amalgam of these is evident as Malaysia attempts to synthesize the old and the new, aiming to maintain the tradition of Eastern values while assimilating the technology and models of Western development.

This study of managerial profiles of 800 middle, senior, and top executives drawn from seventeen public and private corporations in Malaysia began in 1987. Data were collected during organization diagnosis and training. Consent was obtained from the participating organizations subject to two conditions:

1. That there was to be absolute anonymity of subjects and organizations.
2. That issues outside of a personal nature but relevant to management may be fed back as concerns for respective managements to resolve.

Initial interest focused on leadership development. Leadership is central to all organized ways of living in the human community. Because organizations either in the public or private sectors play such a central role in the socioeconomic life of any community, research first emphasized leadership and its varied manifestations in organizational life.

An assumption was that if styles of leadership could be "mapped" in relation to preferred values, attitudes, methods of organizing work, decision making, and inclination on human interactions, they would be helpful indicators of leadership directions an organization undertakes. The *modus operandi* would also be influenced by management styles, which, within the respective functional areas, may see concentrations of more specific styles.

A critical aspect that ensures the ability of an organization to cope with change and therefore to alter its business directions accordingly can be related back to the cognitive and emotional orientation of its management. Therefore such data could have some predictive value in terms of identifying specific organizational cultures.

More recently researchers have underscored the point that national cultures impact on organizational cultures in no small way. It is the aim of this paper to present the temperament profiles of a sample of Malaysian managers against a backdrop of Malaysian value orientations.

A major premise here is that personality type is a relatively stable, consistent, and enduring profile that characterizes the unique nature of a person. However, a nation's culture does certainly affect an individual's personality. The more pervasive the national culture, as seen in shared meanings and values, the more it impacts on personality type. In other words, culture functions as an overlay on individual personality. Thus, while recognizing individual uniqueness, it is often expedient to understand similar meanings and values shared by a group.

THE MYERS-BRIGGS TYPE INDICATOR

The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) is an extremely useful and practical tool for achieving that understanding of the differences of others. It was designed to implement the theories of the Swiss physician turned psychologist, Carl Jung, who developed a most comprehensive theory of the human personality. Jung postulated that for the most part, our fundamental psychological characteristics are innate, consistent, and not as random as is generally believed. Further, there are observable differences in the ways people view the world around them and evaluate what they perceive. The theory also reminds us that we should not habitually assume that other people's minds work in exactly the same way as our own—thus emerges our privileged uniqueness, what the originators called "Gifts Differing."

All 800 participants completed Form G of the MBTI. Since the participants in the study are generally effectively bilingual, with English being the commonly used language especially in the private sector, it was felt that the original version of the MBTI would be appropriate in understanding personality differences.

MANAGEMENT PROFILES

For the purposes of this presentation, we shall focus on composite dimensions deemed relevant in the management world. When combined, these two dimensions produce four distinct personality preferences that would be different in terms of needs, behaviors, values, and attitudes. These four patterns in turn have generally been accepted as basic to individual leadership styles, which, when dominant, contribute to predictably distinct organizational cultures. Research on such temperaments originated by Keirsey and Bates has been supported by other investigators. The temperaments are categorized as SJ, NT, SP and NF profiles. Figure 20.1 profiles the sample of Malaysian managers.

The SJ Profile—the Traditionalist

the analysis showed that 555 subjects, 69.4% of the managers surveyed, manifested what is referred to as sensing-judging personalities, who, when predominant, contribute toward an SJ culture. It is said to emphasize work activities that are specific, a penchant for factual details, an inclination to dwell on micro issues, it reinforces the need for control and certainty, for jobs which are specifically delineated with work roles clarified. This organizational culture prizes clear goals for people to follow. Work procedures and adherence to established rules are the norm. This sort of culture also places a premium on hierarchy and gives obeisance to rank and title.

A fundamental value of an SJ style is that people should get along with the job and must be single-minded in accomplishing what needs to be done. Goals must be realistic, down to earth, economical, and devoid of fuzziness. In essence this SJ style is often said to be supportive of a pyramidal hierarchy which is permeated with assumptions of schedules, rules, and regulations. The SJ manager is valued in any organizational culture that prizes stability as fundamental.
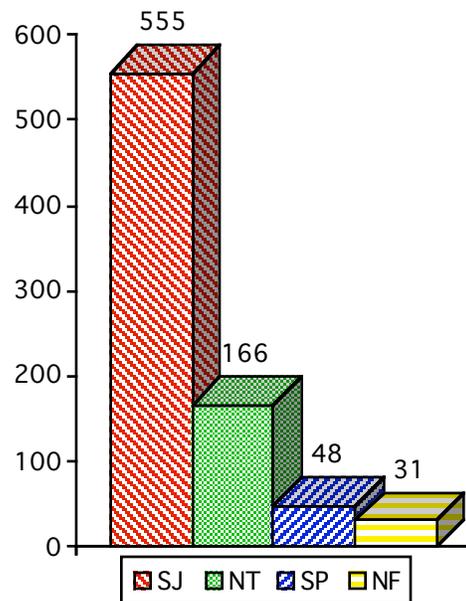
The NT Profile—the Visionary

A total of 166 respondents were categorized as intuitive-thinking personalities who contribute toward an NT culture. This NT style is inclined to approach things from a macro perspective. The inclination is to be comfortable in dealing with global concepts and broad issues but generally in a rather impersonal mode. Efficiency and competence would be the driving force in this NT organizational culture.

Figure 20.1
Profiles of Malaysian Managers

A fundamental value of an NT personality is that people must be creative and original. The objective is to set goals that are innovative and that help create new products and services, establish new horizons, and find ways to do new things and new businesses. A hallmark of this NT style is the reliance on the rational and logical. NTs prefer to build conceptual frameworks, develop prototypes, and to tinker around with models and plan approaches for change. An NT style and the culture it fosters is such that it focuses on possible directions for the organization's future against the backdrop of its mission.

The SP Profile—the Troubleshooter

That only 48 subjects accounting for 6% of the managers in the study were grouped in the SP or Troubleshooter category is instructive enough. As a manager, such an individual values action, immediate response to problems, and an open and flexible style. Troubleshooters feel challenged to pinpoint breakdowns in organizational functioning and with a sense of urgency can take responsible for fixing the situation. The expedient needs of the organization hold high priority for the SP personality. Should a dominant SP culture evolve with risk-taking being the order of the day, less attention can be paid to planned approaches and priorities in organizational functioning.

The NF Profile—The Catalyst

The NF types are represented by a mere 3.8% of the Malaysian mangers and they are generally those who value identity and worth in themselves and others. They tend to be charismatic and insightful, displaying a high degree of commitment and enthusiasm in their work groups. A preponderance of NF types generating an NF culture would see an organization cherishing the human asset and focusing on the growth needs of the individuals in it, with less regard for known facts and technical realities of the situation.

THE CULTURE-PERSONALITY INTERFACE

Inasmuch as Jung discovered early enough that individual behavior was not as random as was otherwise believed, researchers on culture are also recognizing that cultural dimensions across the globe are not as random as well. Variations in cultural attributes do follow some predictable patterns. (Adler, 1991). As Edgar Schein (1984) wrote,

> To really understand a culture, it is imperative to delve into underlying assumptions, which are typically unconscious but which actually determine how group members perceive, think and feel. Such assumptions are themselves learned responses that originated as espoused values. But as the assumption is increasingly taken for granted, it drops out of awareness.

If we take Hofstede's definition that culture is "the collective mental programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from one another," we could recognize how cultures can shape our perceptions of the world. Thus, within a certain culture, certain behaviors and values are favoured and others repressed.

The convergence-divergence issue regarding comparisons across cultures has seen researchers such as Adler taking a stand that, while organizations worldwide are growing more similar, the behavior of people within organizations is growing more dissimilar in maintaining their cultural uniqueness.

ATTRIBUTES OF MALAYSIAN CULTURE

The creation of an independent Malaya in 1957 and later Malaysia in 1963 saw the emergence of a multiracial, multicultural, and multireligious experiment in nation building. The legacy of British colonial rule had, in the interest of economic development and commercial progress, allowed the large scale immigration of Chinese and Indians, who, at the turn of the century, helped work the tin mines and rubber plantations in Malaysia. With independence there was clearly the need to integrate the immigrant population, who had by this time shed their transient characteristic, given the political events in China and India. The compelling factors for national integration were profound, given the fact that the immigrants made up 45% of the national population, with the Malays and other indigenous people making a slight ethnic majority.

It is not the aim of this paper to delineate cultural differences of the three major ethnic communities in Malaysia, but rather to illustrate how the tapestry of cultures created over time a great fusing centripetal force. While the three ethnicities in Malaysia identify with their own groups, culturally they are not so different, according to Hofstede and his fellow researchers (Hofstede, 1980; Hofstede & Bond, 1988). Ismail's

(1977) research on value systems of Malaysian managers also found that successful Malay managers were similar to their more successful Chinese and Indian counterparts where value systems were concerned.

It appears pertinent here to examine two well-researched frameworks in cross-cultural studies, namely, value orientations and work related values, and see how they could impinge on psychological type.

If we take Kluckhohn and Strodberg's (1961) typology of value orientations—relationships to nature, relatiionships with other, orientation to time, orientation to activity, belief in human nature, and the conception of space, we could already reach some tentative conclusions about culture's consequences on psychological types. Malaysians, as part of the South East Asian/East Asian communities believe in living in harmony with nature and having a time orientation which extends from the present to the future. They see people as a mixture of good and evil, as seen in their yin-ynag complementarity in life. They prefer to focus on a "state of being" rather than doing or controlling. Group sharing of chores and rewards (*gotong-royong*) is a generally accepted norm which in turn affects their conception of space as being more public than private.

The nation's feudal and colonial experiences have reinforced the people's innate reverence for elders and traditional leaders, and this has extended itself into a preferred autoritarian leadership style. Tradition is a source of wisdom. Added to that, a sense of externalized discipline imposed by higher authority is given more weight than internalized norms of behavior. This would serve to explain a "shame culture" as opposed to a "guilt culture." The same culture further puts a premium on "saving face," a term used when one consciously protects the other from public embarassment, ridicule, or reproach. An affirmation of God's will has further resulted in an innate conservatism, an acceptance of events, and a general unwillingness to change. No one feels hurried in getting a job done since time is not necessarily of the essence. Like its prized commodity, rubber, time is elastic.

Hofstede's (1980) research on work-related values across some 50 countries perhaps could give an even more focused picture of how shared values may affect psychological types. He identified four work-related dimensions in examining national cultures. The first, Power Distance, indicates the extent to which a society accepts the fact that power in organizations is distributed unequally. Uncertainty Avoidance indicates the extent to which a society feels threatened by uncertain and ambiguous situations. The third dimension, Individualism, recognizes a loosely knit social framework in which people are supposed to take care of themselves and their immediate families only. The opposite of Individualism is Collectivism, which is characterized by a tight social structure in which people distinguish between in-groups and out-groups, with identity and loyalty in the direction of the in-group. The fourth dimension, Masculinity and its opposite, Feminity, delineates the stereotypical dominant values in a society. Masculine societies are said to be assertive, materialistic and focus on dominating the environment. On the other

Table 20.1
Selected Ranking of Hofstede's Dimensions

Country	Power Distance	Individualism	Masculinity	Uncertaianty Avoidance
Malaysia	50	8	17	26
USA	16	11	50	36
Japan	21	44	28	50
Britain	12	6	48	42
Indonesia	43	12	6	22
Philippines	47	10	21	40
Singapore	40	1	13	24
Thailand	31	22	13	10

Note: N = 50. 41 -50 = high, 31-40 = moderately high, 21-30 = moderate, 11-20 = moderately low, 1-10 = low

hand, Feminine societies are said to be nurturing, gentle, and focus on the quality of life. The following chart, excerpted from Hofstede's research, could serve to highlight Malaysia's cultural dimensions in comparison to eight other countries.

Malaysia had the highest score in the sample of 50 countries where power distance was concerned. It also was low in Individualism (hence high in Collectivism), more Feminine than Masculine, and moderate in Uncertainty Avoidance. It is instructive enough to see here how the four dimensions could interface with psychological type, the end product being unique, culturally-bound temperaments.

CONCLUSION: THE MANAGEMENT CHALLENGE

The foregoing discussion on Malaysian cultural patterns appear to support the research profile of Malaysians as being overwhelmingly SJ in temperament. As a case in point, the connotations of high power distance—superiors are inaccessible, powerholders are entitled to privileges, power is a basic fact in society—coupled with other values such as respect for elders and tradition would appear to make the Malaysian SJ even more SJ!

One observation than can be made about this study is that, contrary to generally perceived public opinion, there seems to be marginal differences in personality orientations between existing public sector and private sector, middle and senior managers. The SJ Traditionalist manager represents the majority in both public and private corporations.

It is apparent that if Malaysian organizations want to survive, and survive well in the future, its leadership has not only to make a crucial paradigm shift but also when doing so, to work out an integration that would balance the need to be strategic and effective with the inclination to be operational and efficient. Token regard for the human element and a superficial recognition of the need to consciously develop human potential will not do in this time and age. All this would indicate the need for a more composite balance among the four leadership styles, i.e., the SJ, NT, SP, and NF styles so that organizational navigation can benefit from a synthesis of attributes.

If a preponderance of leaders in management are too steeped in the preservation of traditions as to what worked in the past, and will continue to work, and opposed to what must be done to make it work in the future, directions for tomorrow will falter. The SJ personality style has in the past worked well for gargantuan organizations that offer standardized functions to service new and insatiable markets that consume anything mass production can churn out, with its attendant mass service and economic batch quantities.

Today much of what was taught and practised in business since the fifties is now under severe test. Strategy, adaptability, flexibility, and innovation are credo and in the vogue of management terminology. It is a Japanese success story of a combination of strategy and adaptability alongside unwavering perseverance and operational precision that appears to be a model for the world. Would this indicate a succeeding synthesis in leadership style?

Successful architects of change need to have a high degree of objectivity and extraordinary insight as well as the courage to challenge cultural assumptions (Kluckhohn & Strodtberg, 1966). The smaller percentage of NT personalities could provide a good input that would help establish new business directions for organizations in Malaysia. Should this emerging subculture be allowed to develop alongside the dominant SJ traditional culture, a healthy balance between creative strategy and operational efficiency can be struck. The many business experiences in the last five to eight years in Malaysian economic history provide invaluable lessons for organizations and in particular their leaders.

The conclusions to be drawn from this paper are at best tentative. We need more data to enable us to understand culture's consequences on psychological type. More focused research examining the strengths (as seen in strong vs. weak scores) of the four MBTI dimensions rather than just typecasting individual profiles would be in order for a deeper understanding of the subtle interface between culture and psychological type. The ability to understand our leadership styles and how they affect the running of organizations is crucial. Awareness of competing realities coupled with a conscious attempt to develop our less preferred styles would facilitate our centredness and balance as leaders. This in itself is enough for us to undertake further study on this subject.

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