



Developing a Culturally Synergistic Approach to International Human Resource Management

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This paper offers international human resource (IHR) professionals guidelines how to decide which IHRM approach to choose. In choosing among an adaptive, exportive, or integrated IHR approach, IHR managers may want to consider three decision criteria, e.g. forces for global integration and local adaptation, the cultural component of HRM, and the power dynamics within the MNC. To develop an organization that values cultural differences, IHR professionals may choose a culturally synergistic approach to IHRM. This approach has the potential of designing new combinations of HRM practices and simultaneously attends to the three decision criteria.

A large U.S. based company acquired several years ago a small, successful Belgian company. While headquarters (HQ) initially managed the merger in a very decentralized approach, they recently moved towards a more centralized approach. It was the strong belief of the company's president that the global world has no geographical boundaries, which led to the implementation of several uniform policies, not only in the core domain of R&D but also, in the area of human resource management (HRM). An example here

was the corporate message that turnover in the Belgian plant was too low. It was HQ's belief that a dynamic and result-oriented company has a turnover of approximately 15%. Because turnover in the Belgian affiliate was even lower than 5%, the Belgian HR department was informed about the following decision. They had to work out a performance appraisal system with forced choice to weed out the bad performers. All employees had to be evaluated during the following year and the evaluation scores needed to reflect a Gauss curve. Those employees who had the lowest scores were presented with a choice: improve or be fired. The Belgian HR team hired a consultancy organization to implement the appraisal pro-

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cess. The results of this international HR decision were anxiety among most of the Belgian employees, an intensification of rumors and an increase in uncertainty about the position of the Belgian unit within the whole company.

This story indicates one of the major questions of international HRM: when to impose HR policies and when to adapt them to the local context? The story further illustrates the negative consequences when HQ doesn't consider the cultural component of a HR practice or when they are not sensitive to the power position of an affiliate. Therefore, the purpose of the paper is to provide HR practitioners with guidelines of how to decide when to adapt and when to impose, as well as how to implement a culturally synergistic approach. We develop these guidelines by first synthesizing the different theoretical models of strategic international HRM. From these models, three different approaches to IHRM can be identified: an exportive, an adaptive and an integrative approach. We discuss these three options, with its different advantages and disadvantages. To decide which IHRM approach to choose, we present three criteria that drive the decision: local versus global forces, the cultural component of HRM practices, and power dynamics. We discuss why and how these three criteria may help the decision making process and then apply them as guidelines to the Belgian case. In the second part of the paper, we introduce a culturally synergistic approach to IHRM. Based upon the models of cultural synergy (Adler, 1997; Hoecklin, 1995) and problem solving (Schein, 1999), we first discuss how this

approach has the potential of designing new combinations of HRM practices instead of only transferring best practices from HQ to affiliates and vice versa. We further develop this IHRM approach by identifying its different steps and formulating guidelines of implementation. A culturally synergistic approach offers the potential of considering simultaneously the need for global integration, the cultural embeddedness of HRM practices and the importance of the affiliates' power and autonomy. Its purpose is to support IHR managers in developing an organization that values differences.

HOW TO DECIDE ON IHRM? OPTIONS AND CRITERIA

Which Options Do IHR Managers Have?

In developing guidelines on how to decide on IHR policies, we start from the models of strategic international human resource management (SIHRM). This work (Adler & Ghadar, 1990; Evans & Lorange, 1989; Milliman, Von Glinow & Nathan, 1991; Schuler, Dowling, & De Cieri, 1993; Taylor, Beechler, & Napier, 1996) has mainly taken a macro, strategic perspective focusing on the determinants of SIHRM systems in a multinational company (MNC). The early models focused primarily on strategy as the main factor, arguing that the central issue is not to identify the best HRM policy per se, but rather to find the best fit between the MNC's overall strategy and its HRM policy (Adler & Ghadar, 1990; Milli-

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