

A COMPARISON OF BRITISH AND FRENCH MANAGEMENT CULTURES: SOME IMPLICATIONS FOR MANAGEMENT DEVELOPMENT PRACTICES IN EACH COUNTRY

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Introduction

Management development (MD) is increasingly considered as an important and autonomous function in the field of human resources management. Although it does not seem easy to find a generally accepted definition of this function, practices seem to converge world-wide. MD programmes are set up with such common objectives as improving employee's qualification, managerial skills, career planning, personnel mobility, or for reducing high-flyer's turnover, motivating ageing middle-managers, and even contributing towards modifying a dominant culture.

Some aspects of MD may be seen as capable of being standardised. Job descriptions, creation of performance appraisal questionnaires, creation of a corporate labour market, and organisation of career mobility are some examples of these standardised activities. They are culture-free, at least within Europe, and require mainly organisational and legal skills.

These only form one among many components of the most visible features of management development. Most of the other areas cannot be so easily standardised, but let us mention one strategic activity, training. Training is increasingly consuming large budgets and is concerned with meeting a wide range of needs. These include developing managerial attitudes, improving communications, providing skills in problem solving and negotiating, modifying leadership styles, building creative teams and even changing

organisational culture. Much training addresses the needs in particular company contexts. But needs are often expressed in general terms, they tend to be vague and sometimes contradictory and they require elaborate answers if they are to be effectively met. In this field, success is far from being guaranteed by the direct application of standardised programmes.

And what about internationalised firms, which are confronted with the different national cultures of their managers? There is evidence of difficulties following mergers and acquisitions and these are directly related to cultural incompatibilities (Olie, 1990). In these particular contexts, MD managers must make difficult choices. How far should they go in their intention to standardise training programmes for managerial development? At what level will they find the balance between establishing standardised programmes in all their subsidiaries, world-wide, while at the same time running the risk of not achieving their goals because of a failure to address the right issues and questions at a local level in each subsidiary company? The financial advantages of the standardised training package may be lost as a result of unexpected and costly outcomes, such as the reinforcement of stereotypes or other such traditional 'non-desirable' behaviours (Lichtenberger and Naulleau, 1992).

But how important is it to take into consideration the socio-cultural backgrounds of managers of different nationalities when they work together? What are the most relevant items to address when adapting MD programmes? In this article, we will examine some of the issues which are affecting the way management is organised and practised in two countries: Britain and France. We will start with a description of the two national views of management, drawing our analysis from historical and sociological material. In the second part, we present some recommendations to help focus MD programmes on the context of each country.

Managers' Roles and Practices are Deeply Embedded in the Social and Cultural Environment of the Actors

Management as an academic discipline seldom addresses this issue, even if it is recognised that there are some distinctive national management cultures, such as a Japanese one or a German one, to mention the most cited models after the US who are still perceived as the 'fathers' of management.

There are, however, some recent studies addressing the question (Lane, 1989; D'Iribarne, 1989). They share the view that there are distinctive national coherences linking major components such as primary socialisation, education and vocational training systems, social structure and important aspects of organisational life and managerial practices. As Lane suggests, although different countries are 'being confronted with similar problems and opportunities, management and labour continue to interact in nationally distinctive ways to cope with these challenges', disproving the long-standing idea of an international convergence of managerial practices.

We will apply this approach to describe some of the distinctively British and the French approaches to management which are important to bear in mind when designing MD programmes.

A Look at History is Necessary to Understand Distinctive Managerial Cultures

Britain and France are 'old' countries, each with a strong traditional concept of social order. Management has not been adopted at the same rate nor has it followed the same patterns in the two countries. History may help understand better some contemporary national characteristics of the managerial cultures. To assist in this exploration, let us first consider the ways in which the élites reacted to the development and diffusion of management in their respective countries. We will then consider the reactions of other social groups to help describe the compromises that were made in both the French and British systems in the process of accommodating the concept of management.

The Élités of the Two Countries have Responded Differently to the Introduction of Management Practices and Ethos

Management as a discipline, with its set of techniques, practices and values, was introduced, in both countries, between the two World Wars. The concept has an American origin¹ and it had to deal with existing strong social and political structures within both countries. Reactions to the introduction of management have taken, historically, various forms in Europe. In France and Britain they have been, on some points, opposed to one another.

Britain's tradition of the gentry class has not been easily challenged by what Merkle² (1980) describes as 'the managerial ethos' and which was elaborated by the promoters of the Scientific Management Movement. Managerial ethos views the organisational order as a meritocratic one, based on performance and expertise. The roles, attitudes and behaviours that it promotes, on the whole, lie at the opposite end of the scales of values espoused by the gentry class.

The ideal of 'applying the virtues of science to organisational life' (Merkle, 1980) in the way Taylor (1947) and his followers were promoting has not been easily accepted by the British élites. They were at odds with some fundamental values which are to varying degrees still shaping the British approach to management. Let us mention some of the most typical.

There has emerged over time in Britain a long-standing distaste for industrial activities. Commerce, trade, industry and profit-seeking have all been consistently considered as vulgar, rough and unrefined activities, alien to the

¹ The word 'management' was first introduced in France before the First World War, but its use has been spread out only in the '70s. It retained its American flavour in Britain until the '60s.

² According to her comparative study on the diffusion of Taylorism in Britain, France and Germany, 'Taylorism did not pass the luncheon meeting' in Britain.

gentlemanly ideal of honour, humanity and 'noblesse oblige'. Most of the British self-made businessmen and industrialists of the 19th century had dreams and ambitions of leaving behind their industrial activities for more socially prestigious occupations such as politics, land owning or a good position in the city. Some succeeded in fulfilling these ideals.

In his study on the decline of the industrial spirit in the period between 1850–1980, Wiener (1981) has demonstrated particularly well how the second generation of these businessmen and industrialists massively abandoned their parents' activities in order to become 'gentrified'. Owing, administering and developing a business for itself has seldom been part of the gentleman's ideal. For the British élite, managing a business has always been perceived as secondary to other more valued activities.

This disregard of the élites for industrial life is consistent with their lack of enthusiasm for the development of applied sciences, engineering and technology. As a consequence, these activities have been traditionally left to the 'sons of the skilled working class' (Wiener, 1981) and have not been seen either as the career paths to top positions in organisations or as the condition of further industrial and economic development. The élite view of education consistently remained classical, firmly resting on humanities or 'pure' sciences. The gentleman's core values construed production as 'honest craftsmanship', 'service rather than profit', 'dedication to quality over quantity', all of which are a far cry from the reality of rationalisation, productivity and permanent development of new products and processes, markets and customer service. 'Gentry', patterns of behaviours and attitudes were in fact very distant from the 'struggle for life' behaviours described by the managerial ethos.

Compared to the British élite, the French ruling class did not react unfavourably to the introduction of management practices and managerial ethos. There has never been such a disregard for industrial activities in the French tradition as in the British one³. From 'Colbertism' in the 17th century monarchy until the 'Politique Industrielle' of the 5th Republic, élites have consistently valued industry as a primary source of wealth. For this reason, organising mass-production activities could be positively received. Profit only has never been overtly valued by the élite, and industrial activities were often pursued more for the social prestige they provided than for crude money-making. This aspect has probably been one of the most frequent objections raised against the managerial ethos when it developed in the 1930s. It may explain why management practices were confined, for a long time, around the technical organisation of

³ As a comparison, if the dream of a British self-made man was that his son could be a member of the gentry and leave the business of his father, we could say that the dream of the French self-made man would have been that his son entered the most prestigious engineering schools of the country and that he then joined some important industrial or engineering companies (or worked for the technical department of the civil service before entering these companies). We still miss a systematic study like Wiener did on the destiny of the second and third generation following the foundation of an industry or business. It is nevertheless possible to give many names of descendants still managing a business founded three or four generations ago.

production, i.e. the industrial side. It was not until the 1970s that the cost-accounting and budgeting aspects of management practices began to be seen as important. Until then these practices had long been felt as alien to the ethic of the ruling class.

But on the whole, management found a favourable reception in the French élite for a historical reason which we will develop shortly. There is a long-standing tradition of the application of the sciences to the organisation of social life. This tradition dates back to the Lumières who opposed the virtues of scientific thinking and the arbitrariness of the despotic monarchy. Saint-Simon⁴, Auguste Comte and their followers have strongly promoted the development of industry and trade as the basis for a more equitable social order, i.e. a more 'rational' order, as opposed to the traditional 'ascribed' social order. In the turmoil following the Revolution and the Napoleonic wars, the élite strenuously adopted this 'view of the world'. Any many values promoted by this tradition of Scientism are closed to the values of the 'Scientific Management Movement'. That might be the reason why the first works of Taylor created such a strong expectation in the French industrial élite: management could be the science of organisational life, staffed by experts, and based on the application of rationality.

The values of meritocracy born out of managerial ethos were not alien to the French élite, although difficult to accept. The traditional respect for diplomas combined with an educational system built around the principle of equal access to all citizens and meritocratic competitive exams has had a strong influence on legitimacy patterns in organisational life. Diplomas have been, and still are, a basic requisite for legitimacy and authority in the large French organisations. But the idea of permanent performance appraisal inherent to the managerial ethos has been consistently rejected by the élite. According to this still prevalent old pattern, performance on the job does not give, *per se*, access to positions of power in French companies. This fact is in strong contradiction with accepted management practices and ethos.

We have described the reactions of the élite to the introduction of management practices and ethos, but other groups in the social structure may have reacted quite differently, either positively or negatively, to the introduction of managerial practices. Here again it is interesting to analyse how the various groups in both Britain and France reacted differently and how, in the end, compromises were reached between the new management values and the old traditional ones in each country.

Britain: a Compromise Around 'Scientific Humanism'

If management practices and philosophy were strongly resisted by the ruling élite, they did not find support either amongst other social groups such as entrepreneurs, trade unions or professionals.

⁴ According to the 'Scientism' ideology of Saint-Simon: 'L'administration rationnelle des choses remplacera le gouvernement des hommes'.

Management particularly lacked a powerful positive voice amongst engineers or technicians who never gained a recognised status as in France and Germany. Partly for this reason, this technical middle-class could not use ‘Scientific Management’ to promote its position in organisational life, as has been the case in the other two countries.

For other social groups and for different reasons, Taylorism offended fundamental values. For the entrepreneurs, particularly those with strong religious values, such as the Quakers, this approach lacked ‘a human view of the workers’ and offended the religious perception of what industrial activity meant, and it was at odds with *laissez-faire* individualism because, in order to operate, it required systematic and rational analysis as well as external intervention. As in most countries the trade unions did not react favourably to Taylorism. The immediate perceived benefits of its introduction – better wages – could not be compensated by what was perceived as harshness and lack of subtlety. It also strongly contradicted the highly valued craft traditions of most trade union members.

The attitudes of these three groups towards the new scientific approach to management resulted in maintaining the ‘status quo’. The typical British attitude of ‘the devil you know is better than the one you don’t’ prevailed until the Second World War. It was only when a debate started on how to halt Britain’s declining competitiveness that the ‘status quo’ could evolve towards an acceptable compromise among the social groups we have mentioned.

This compromise took the form of a ‘humanistic’ Taylorism: scientific methods were applied to improve productivity, plant organisation and working conditions in the factory. The pursuit of welfare became an economic necessity founded on scientific principles and not only on moral or religious grounds. Such a situation led to a British version of scientific management. This state of affairs continues currently to reinforce the ambivalent status of the British manager – whether or not he is an educated amateur or a trained professional – and to feed the uncertainty surrounding management education in areas such as, the curriculum, the type of qualifications, the balance between theory and practice and its location in the higher educational sector (Reed and Anthony, 1992).

France: a Compromise Around ‘Scientific Commandment’

Compared to Britain, the introduction of management practices and philosophy found support from various social groups in France: the ruling class, with the restraints we have mentioned, top executives of private companies with their fascination for the works of Fayol (1979), and finally the social group of ‘cadres’ which was initially composed of engineers and which has included, over time, a broad level of intermediate managers.

The interest of top executives for management was best echoed by the writings

of Fayol⁵, a contemporary of Taylor. In his search for a rational foundation for the administration of private companies, he focused his works on applying a systematic analysis of the functions and roles of command. His basic interest was to improve the command capabilities of top executives, dividing their roles into sub-functions like planning, organising, coordinating, controlling. He also tried to define the optimum size of the span of control of a leader (to how many persons he can give orders and control their activities). All these works spontaneously attracted interest from top executives who found useful ideas but also arguments to legitimate their own position. Fayol's work can be analysed as an attempt to rationalise the roles to top executives while at the same time maintaining and reinforcing their traditional positions, giving them more 'rational' arguments to enforce their authority and power over the intermediate levels.

At another level, the existence of a professional class of engineers has been a key to the introduction of managerial practices following the Taylor model. They opposed, for a while, the ideas of Fayol because they did not address the organisation of production at the worker level. The French engineering society played a major role in the diffusion of the most practical aspects of Taylorism with the time-and-motion measurement techniques. Taylorism did not however challenge the traditional hierarchical organisation of large French companies. The bureaucratic organisation was, in many cases, even reinforced by 'scientific management' which gave more power to experts. The meritocratic values supported by the philosophy of management were carefully left aside until the Second World War.

Only in the 1960s did the meritocratic values spread into French companies with the establishment of new career paths, not only based on entry diplomas and on length of service but also, officially, on performance. This phenomenon has given a strong identify to the social group of 'cadres', as Boltanski (1982) has described.

This group of intermediate executives introduced marketing practices, cost-accounting, budgeting and planning practices, as well as promoting new leadership styles which were less administrative and autocratic than in the traditional French way.

This movement has run parallel with the creation of graduate schools of management following the model of engineering schools, and contributing strongly to legitimising management activities. But these schools also contributed to institutionalising the role of manager as expert, in the French tradition of regard for diplomas, while at the same time reinforcing the reluctance to promote executives according to their performance on the job, thus contradicting one of the most basic values of the managerial ethos.

Most French companies are still living off this compromise between the over-

⁵ His main work, the *Traité d'Administration Générale et Industrielle* was published in 1916.

official adoption of management techniques and values and a covert, informal use of more traditional practices.

British and French Managers Today, or the 'Gifted Amateurs' versus the 'Bright Cadres'

We have so far discussed how far social forces in the two countries have shaped the contemporary management culture and influenced attitudes towards management training. In this section we will present a set of managerial dimensions common to both the countries but which have acquired different meanings and practices in each country and therefore need to be taken into account when designing and implementing MD programmes in each country. The points of difference have been emphasised to sharpen the contrast.

1. The Hierarchy of Managerial Functions

Britain	France
The most valued functions are finance, accountancy and law. The statuses of production management and R&D are lower.	There is no strict hierarchy of functions. In the most traditional French companies, R&D and production management are, however, the valued functions.
Principally, functions with a professional status outside company are the most valued.	Principally, functions with high intellectual content are the most valued.

2. Access to Top Management

The principal criteria are:

Britain	France
The 'right' social network	Diplomas, usually from 'Grandes Ecoles'. Strict hierarchies of diplomas.
Practical achievements and job performance	Importance of the 'old boy' network.
Social skills	Political skills
An accountancy or legal qualification is an asset.	In large companies, appointing of managers to top management coming from the civil service ('pantouflage').

Managers with technical qualifications are under-represented in senior management positions.

3. Education and Training of Managers

Britain

Not of primary importance
Emphasis is on pragmatism and learning by doing.
Training might be seen as a sign of weakness.
Empirical approach valued.

Low status attached to applied studies, for example in engineering and technology.

France

Considered as very important.
Strong emphasis on analytical and deductive qualities.
Low training in social skills.

Theoretical approach valued.

High status attached to applied studies, for example in engineering, technology and those subjects taught in the *Grandes Ecoles*.

4. Leadership and Patterns of Authority

Britain

Paternalistic attitudes are common. Consensus is important for decision-making.

Fragile nature of the top manager's authority since it is derived from his social position rather than based on merit or technical competence.

Leadership style is more oriented towards persons than towards tasks.

Conflict avoidance is prevalent.

Pseudo participative attitudes are common in decision-making, often coloured with manipulative overtones.

France

'Autocratic' attitudes are common. Reduced participation of intermediate and low management in decision-making.
Consensus is not the point in decision-making.

Authority from top management is not challenged.

Leadership style is more directed towards tasks than persons.

Conflict avoidance is prevalent.

Fragile nature of the authority of intermediate management.

5. Communication Patterns and Styles

Britain	France
Oral communication preferred, with a high premium placed on face to face inter-personal relationships.	Written communication preferred. Face to face inter-personal relations are difficult.
Communication is pragmatic and non-didactic.	Communication is abstract and didactic.
Informality is strong, e.g. use of first names, and a general informality of manner.	Formality is strong, for example the use of family names, and a general formality of manner. Strong perception of 'power distance' (Hofstede, 1980). Hierarchical by-passing is common.

This simple research shows that there are strong differences between the two countries in the realities of management, which need to be carefully taken into account when designing management development programmes. Some programmes, designed to reinforce oral communications in one French company, for example, may easily result in reinforcing a weakness in a British company which is having difficulties formalising its communication procedures. The comparison between the two countries also gives some insight into the design of a bi-cultural management development programme. British participants may be quickly frustrated by what appears as abstract ideas and theories, while the French participants might see the non-systematic and non-formalised approaches as a waste of their time! In this area of development, there are as many differences between the forms of training as there are between objectives and content.

Some Consequences for Management Development

We will restrict our proposals to suggestions concerning our experience of the most specific national needs. Each company has, naturally, its own history and its cultural marks may not be so typical as the one we have described. These suggestions have only a value as trend-indicators.

Management Development Needs in Britain

A major goal would be to increase the integration of the principal management functions in the enterprise:

- By giving more status to lower valued functions such as production management. For that purpose, the Management Development Manager might propose to modify recruiting practices and establish a mobility management programme.

- By diversifying access to top management functions. A key would be to modify career management, allowing more managers coming from technical and production to get to top management positions.
- By giving more status to all aspects of human resource development activities and to demonstrate that successful training improves career prospects, that it is not an activity to help with crises or as something remedial for the incompetent, and that continuous development facilitates organisational change.

Other areas of development include:

- Designing programmes to empower middle managers and technical supervisors to make more potent use of their delegated authority.
- Shifting the emphasis in management style from an individualistic approach and emphasis on control to a concern for promoting quality and team-leadership.

Management Development Needs in France

A major goal would be to reduce the 'perceptual gap' between top and middle management. This could be done:

- By diversifying access to top management functions, such as opening more possibilities for managers without prestigious diplomas but who have excellent performance records;
- By promoting empowering programmes for low and middle management, for example in the following areas of assertiveness; negotiation, how to speak in public, how to run a meeting;
- By promoting social skills programmes for top management on how to listen, how to generate participation and consensus, how to motivate.

Training programmes should also aim at improving face to face relationships. Brain-storming, problem-solving methods and basic organisational tools should be disseminated more systematically to increase pragmatic communication and facilitate participation.

Conclusion

Management development programmes may play a key role in improving the overall effectiveness of our organisations. However, the pictures we have drawn from our two countries show that these programmes have to deal with different, if not opposing, cultural and social situations on many points. Management development programmes have to cope with these differences if they want to fulfil the promises the designers and the companies expect from them. The design of a joint prototype management development programme between the

two countries would be a first step in attempting to harness the strengths of the two cultures while producing, at the same time, a cross-cultural management development model.

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