Chapter 10
Practical Examples of Handling Mistakes at Work in Different Cultures

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Abstract A useful way of analyzing how mistakes are handled in organizations across different cultures is offered by looking at them through the prism of Huib Wursten's Mental Images, a framework that takes Hofstede's four classic value-dimensions and combines them into six different styles of organizational culture. In addition to that, Japanese organizations provide a seventh and different style.

In each of these styles, culture influences (A) what is regarded as a mistake and (B) how mistakes and errors are handled in terms of (1) attributing responsibilities, (2) assigning guilt, (3) using shame as a form of punishment and as a way to atone for guilt, (4) making corrections, and (5) taking measures that will avoid the repetition of similar mistakes in the future.

These seven business culture styles (Contest, Well-Oiled Machine, Network, Social Pyramid, Traditional Family, Solar System, and Japanese) are described in terms of how they differ in the way that they identify and deal with mistakes. Several practical examples taken from real-life situations are described in detail.

Organizations must increase their awareness of how culture influences the kind of mistakes that are made in each institution, in order to avoid their occurrence and recurrence. Special attention is required to identify blind spots in organizational culture, which elude detection. Institutions that operate in different geographies and employ multinational teams need to become aware of how different national cultures have impact on their way of working, so that they may become more effective and efficient in each operating environment.

Keywords Contest · Mistakes · Error · Failure · Individualism · Japan · Network · Organizational culture · Performance orientation · Power distance · Social pyramid · Solar system · Traditional family · Uncertainty avoidance · Well-oiled machine

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10.1 Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to provide a series of examples as to how a conceptual model can be used in practice, relating it to work situations in international organizations. The focus is on explaining how the use of this model can help executives and professionals better understand how mistakes are perceived and handled in different cultural environments, in practical terms.

The basic underlying logic of the seven basic "types" (or "styles") of culture is briefly explained and then linked to how managers most often behave when handling mistakes at work. The explanations and examples are based on my own extensive experience working across cultures since 1976 and on the extensive descriptions provided by Hofstede and his associates in (2); Hofstede et al. (2002); Hofstede (2003a, b).

Wursten (Wursten and Lanzer 2013) has described a framework of cultural "Mental Images" based on Hofstede's previous work (Hofstede 2003a, b) that may be extremely useful for looking at different cultures by grouping them into clusters according to similar patterns in their value-dimension scores. These Mental Images are known as *Contest*, *Network*, *Well-Oiled Machine*, *Social Pyramid*, *Traditional Family*, and *Solar System* cultures. It should be noted that the culture of Japan stands separately from these six types of culture, with a pattern of its own (regarding value-dimension scores). For a detailed description of the Mental Images, please see Wursten and Lanzer (2013) and Lanzer (2018). For an explanation of Hofstede's model of value-dimensions, please see Hofstede (2003a, b) and Lanzer (2017).

Contest cultures have a low Power Distance (PDI) score, a high Individualism (IDV) score, a low Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) score, and a high Performance Orientation (PER) score.

Well-Oiled Machine (WOM) cultures also have low PDI and high PER. What differentiates them from Contest cultures is that they score much higher in UAI. IDV is not a differentiating factor for WOM cultures.

Network cultures have also low PDI and high IDV, but the differentiating factor is low PER. UAI is not a differentiating factor for Network cultures.

Social Pyramid cultures score high in PDI, by contrast with the previous three types. They have low IDV and high UAI. PER is not a differentiating factor for them.

Traditional Family cultures are also high in PDI and low on IDV. They differentiate from Social Pyramid cultures because they are low in UAI, by comparison. Once again, PER is not a differentiating factor for them.

Solar System cultures are unique due to the fact that they are high in PDI, IDV, and UAI. PER is also not a differentiating factor for them.

Japan is different from all the previous combinations because it is high in PDI, PER, and UAI while low in IDV. It is the only culture among the 100 that have been researched by Hofstede and his associates that has this combination. The other six categories have at least four different national cultures sharing a category.

Table 10.1 Wursten's model of culture styles

	Power distance (PDI)	High individualism (IDV)	Performance orientation (PER)	Uncertainty avoidance (UAI)
Contest	Low	High	High	Low
LOW	Low	ND[a]	High	High
Network	Low	High	Low	ND
Pyramid	High	Low	ND	High
Family	High	Low	ND	Low
Solar system	High	High	ND	High
Japan	High	Low	High	High

[a]*ND* not a differentiating factor

In Table 10.1 you can see a summary of how the four dimensions combine differently for each culture type.

In my experience as an executive working for international organizations for 28 years, and as a management consultant to multinational companies and nongovernment organizations for 16 years, I have often used this model (as early as in 1993) as a tool to help novice audiences understand culture differences, and apply these concepts in the solution of people management and communication issues, notably when working across cultures (Lanzer 2012, 2015, 2017, 2018; Lanzer and Chandansingh 2016; Lanzer and Pereira de Souza 2015, 2016; Lanzer et al. 2014). Since the focus of this section of the book is more on practice than on academic research, let me begin by clarifying what I mean when I use the term "mistake" in my practice and in the scope of this chapter.

What is a mistake? It is an action that yields an unwanted outcome. In other words, an action, decision, or judgment that produces an unwanted or unintentional result. These are simple and straightforward definitions, but in real-life situations, there are people looking at what has happened and making the judgment calls to decide if they are looking at a mistake (unwanted result) or not.

Such judgment calls are affected by the observer's cultural values; and these values will heavily influence how the situation is perceived and assessed, plus any actions decided upon for correction and prevention of future repetition.

Using Wursten's framework is convenient because it reduces the complexity of analyzing how mistakes are handled across more than 100 different cultures that have been subject to research thus far, to looking at seven different patterns emerging from that analysis. Like any typology or classification of phenomena into a set of styles, it does not aim to preclude deeper analysis of specific situations as warranted, looking at each occurrence's unique characteristics. Therefore, the framework should be used responsibly and with due moderation.

10.2 If at First You Don't Succeed

My experience has shown that in Contest cultures, the emphasis is placed on striving, confronting, and competing for achievements that will bring rewards and social recognition. Children are taught at a very early age that they should behave competitively. They are taught that life is a competition with winners and losers; if you make a mistake, it might be costly; however, you can always try again.

Everyone deserves a second chance; and this means that there is a succession of competitions. The show must go on; and in this case, the show is the plethora of competitions that are seen everywhere, all the time.

Contest organizational culture styles are most often found in Anglo-Saxon cultures; they are typical of the United States, the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada.

In Contest organizations, competition is fierce. Yes, there are winners and losers. Winners are hailed extravagantly and losers despised. But victory is not permanent, and neither is defeat. The competition never stops, so both winners and losers must live to fight another day.

Mistakes are often treated quite harshly, even dramatically, and that might seem to outsiders as a draconian approach. However, there is always the assumption that this is not definitive. Punishment, however harsh, shall be followed by a second chance, and even a third one, for the worst scenario would be that those who made mistakes were to be completely abandoned. Rather, the underlying assumption is that even though they may be thrown overboard, they could still be invited back onto the boat again. Or more often than not, the thinking is that they will climb aboard another boat, since there are so many of them moving around at all times. In any case, people will live to compete again, feeding the continuation of the Contest process.

Contest organizational cultures focus on results and "the bottom line": when all is said and done, what is the net outcome? This is key to defining, in a way that is perceived as fair and just, who is winning or losing the competition. Measurement is therefore considered to be quite important.

If a mistake affects the final desired results, it will be treated very seriously. If the impact is small, the mistake might be easily overlooked. The key issues are: Did the mistake affect the results? and How quickly can the competition continue?

This means that managers do not dwell very long on mistakes; the competition needs to continue as quickly as possible. Organizations foster an attitude of optimism and looking forward to the next Contest round. Such a positive attitude feeds the continuation of the Contest. Critical thinking is often regarded as pessimistic. It is discouraged, for it might lead to people losing the motivation to continue competing.

Dismissing people is a frequent happening at Contest culture organizations, and it happens swiftly. One day you are hailed as a hero and suddenly you make a mistake and you are fired. The firing, or dismissal, is immediate and can seem even brutal, because it all happens so fast. People are asked to pack up their personal

belongings in a box and leave the premises within the same day, if not at the very instant. You can see it often in American movies and TV: people walking out of their workplaces carrying a box as if they were refugees fleeing from a war zone.

Cruel as it may seem, the culture assumes that jobs are comparatively abundant and easy to find. Firing happens fast, but hiring is also a speedy process. The labor markets in Contest cultures are quite dynamic.

The overriding concept is that competitions are constant and abundant. For that to continue happening, the culture needs people who are constantly motivated to continue competing.

The worst that can happen is when people in these cultures decide to stop competing. This is the exact opposite of what the culture needs in order to continue nourishing its values. Therefore, organizations will do their utmost to encourage people to never give up.

When people make a mistake, what organizations want to hear from them is (a) acknowledgment, (b) apology, and (c) asking for another chance, to stay in the competition and to keep trying.

When these three conditions are met, organizations can display some mercy and generosity. People will be praised for taking responsibility and being honest (acknowledgment); they will also be praised for showing regret and expressing that they feel sorry (apology); and they will be praised especially for showing that they are ready and willing to return to the competition and try again.

The concept of accountability in organizations is a cornerstone of Contest cultures. The term, by the way, is difficult (if not impossible) to translate into languages other than English. Determining accountability is key to identifying who made a mistake and to determining winners and losers; in other cultures, this may not be as important as it is in Contest.

On the other hand, perfection is not as important in Contest cultures as it is by contrast, for instance, in Well-Oiled Machine cultures or in Japanese organizations. In Contest cultures, there is a certain tolerance for making mistakes, especially if they have little impact on results. Keeping the competition going is more important than putting most of your energy in avoiding mistakes.

This notion supports many company programs aiming to foster innovation, such as Sony Corporation's "Fail Fast" program (Kelly and Li 2011) in the early 2000s. The program encouraged product developers to take more risks in early stages of development, leaving perfectionism aside, abandoning ideas that were not working (rather than insisting on them), and shifting to start something new. It was supported by Howard Stringer, later appointed CEO, and a host of Contest culture consultants who championed the acceptance of mistakes as necessary occurrences in the path to innovation. However, their approach clashed with the company's Japanese culture of avoiding uncertainty and seeking perfection.

Paul Arden (2003) advocated that ambition is more important than being satisfied with mediocre performance. The issue here is that in Contest cultures, there is a certain tolerance for mistakes when they are considered a by-product of seeking innovation. The ambition in Contest cultures is to excel in breakthrough innovations, even if mistakes are made along the journey. The ambition in Japanese-styled

organizations is to avoid mistakes even at the cost of innovation breakthroughs, which is why these organizations support incremental innovation programs more than seeking breakthroughs.

Part of the Contest culture mentality is to think in a short-term perspective, with an eye on quarterly results and stock markets. This is consistent with the notion that mistakes can happen, and going for the next round in the competition is more important. You should aim for the short term, knowing that there will be other rounds and other chances to continue competing.

Another supporting concept for Contest cultures is the notion that corrections can be made quickly. Thinking in the short term allows for frequent follow-ups and frequent corrections of mistakes. The idea is that this also supports flexibility and rapidly adapting to change.

The avoidance of the repetition of mistakes is not as important as getting back into action (Peters and Waterman 2015). Having "a bias for action" is considered in Contest cultures to be one of the keys for obtaining excellence.

This was evident also in the handling of the global financial crisis in 2008, when Contest culture advocates in the United States and United Kingdom pressed the American Federal Reserve Bank and the European Central Bank for quick short-term corrective actions, while Well-Oiled Machine culture advocates in Germany and Switzerland stressed the need for reviewing existing structures and processes in order to avoid the repetition of similar problems in the future. These differences in culture perspectives affect not only microeconomic management issues within organizations but also macroeconomic issues in terms of public policies.

As a consequence of mistakes, guilt has greater weight than shame when it comes to Contest cultures. These cultures are more individualistic (rather than collectivistic), and therefore feelings of guilt (failing in regard to your own standards) tend to be stronger than feelings of shame (failing in the eyes of your reference group).

10.3 Was the Mistake Caused by a Faulty Process?

The emphasis in Well-Oiled Machine (WOM) organizational cultures is more on process rather than on results. Certainly results are important in these cultures, but the typical response to a mistake is: What went wrong with the process and caused this mistake to happen? Was the process faulty by design, or was execution the problem? How can we fix the process (or structure, or procedure) in order to make the process "fool-proof," thereby avoiding the mistake ever repeating itself?

These organizational cultures are more typically found in countries with Germanic national cultures: that is to say, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland. Still, they may be found in other parts of the world, with less frequency.

WOM cultures operate on the premise that the most important thing is for the organization to have an overall order superseding everything. Organizations need planning, structures, regulations, policies, and procedures that will allow work to be

done smoothly. If everyone does their job according to the rules, tasks will be carried out efficiently according to plan. When something goes wrong and/or a mistake happens, the first question is generally: Was there something wrong with the plan? How can we correct the plan?

The assumption is that people in general have a natural desire to perform well and avoid mistakes. If a mistake does happen, then surely the plan (or structure, process, etc.) must be at fault and needs to be corrected.

Individual accountability is also enforced, with a strong link to discipline. If an individual strays away from the established process and makes a mistake, it becomes very difficult to justify that deviation from an established norm. Such deviations can be punished very strictly, but the person is not regarded as "a loser" as is the case in Contest cultures. Rather, the social punishment is the loss of credibility. A person who shows lack of discipline is considered unworthy for promotions or displays of recognition in organizations.

Firing does not happen as easily as it does in Contest cultures; it is actually quite rare. The notion of an overall order includes keeping everyone on board and avoiding exclusion by severance. WOM cultures are also quite egalitarian and that also means that everyone is entitled to a second chance. However, the criteria for judging people vis-à-vis their mistakes are different. If the person who made the mistake was following established norms, blame is shifted to the faulty norms, plans, or structures, and the person is exonerated from blame. Such a person deserves many new chances, since he/she is absolved. If lack of discipline is detected, then blame falls squarely on the person.

As in other individualistic cultures, guilt is more important than shame. This means that regardless of the pain involved in losing credibility in the eyes of others, having failed to satisfy your own highly demanding standards is a stronger punishing factor.

The strong respect for norms means that exceptions are not accepted. While in other culture exceptions can almost become the rule, in WOM cultures they are almost nonexistent. All of this can sometimes stifle creativity and innovation, but it does not preclude them. There needs to be a set time and place for creativity and an established procedure. As long as those boundaries are respected, innovation may flourish. And if mistakes happen within those innovation-seeking boundaries, they are not regarded as such.

Avoiding mistakes in any other environment is a priority. The motivation is not to avoid negative impact on results but to avoid upsetting the overall order. This is achieved through detailed planning and organizing and disciplined execution and also by relying on experts.

Expertise is highly valued in WOM cultures. Experts are more highly revered than people in positions of authority or people who are top performers. However, experts need to cope with the fact that this recognition comes with a price: they are expected to never make mistakes. If people who make mistakes are despised, then people who were regarded as experts and make mistakes are strongly despised. Their expert status may be immediately lost, and they might lose the credibility they had accumulated over years of study and hard work.

Correcting mistakes is important, but in WOM cultures, corrections are supposed to be done carefully, not necessarily in a hurry, to avoid making things worse. Rather than "a bias for action," WOM culture organizations have "a bias for thinking twice before jumping." A badly made correction can do more damage than the initial mistake, so treading carefully is crucial. As previously stated, the priority is placed on correcting the faulty process, more than quickly fixing something that might happen again unless the process is verified.

10.4 Never Exclude Anyone

Network organizational cultures are typical of the Scandinavian countries and of the Netherlands. These organizations are more egalitarian than most and tend toward decentralized decision-making structures. They are characterized by frequent discussions without reverence to hierarchy and by reaching decisions through consensus.

The main distinction between Network cultures and the previously described Contest and WOM cultures is that the latter two put greater emphasis on performance, compared to the former. Network cultures show significant care for people issues, work-life balance, and quality of life, more than the other two organizational culture types.

This creates room for mistakes to happen (because there is less emphasis on performing to the highest possible standards), and it strongly influences how mistakes are handled.

Network cultures have a certain reputation for tolerance. This refers not only to social behaviors, but it also applies to assessing performance and to deciding on what is regarded (or not) as a mistake, to begin with.

Performance levels regarded as unacceptable in Contest and WOM cultures may be tolerated in Network organizations; mistakes are often regarded as "not material enough to be regarded as such." For instance, if a sales clerk often takes longer than the standard to make a gift-wrapped package, and the end product turns out to be usually rather sloppy, these might constitute reason enough for dismissal in Contest cultures. In Network cultures, there is less pressure on speed and lower standards for gift-wrapping. Therefore, a mediocre performer might continue to underperform without sanction for quite a while.

In Network organizational cultures, missing a deadline is also not regarded as a major problem, compared to Contest and WOM. If delivery is late by a day or two, this is often considered acceptable. This is simply because Network culture organizations tend to consider that people should not be required to make significant personal sacrifices in order to deliver according to client expectations. This does not mean to say that Network organizations have poor standards; it is simply that they do not enforce those standards with 100% rigor. They tend to leave a little bit of room for tolerance and for accommodating exceptions.

By contrast with WOM cultures, Network organizations expect people to assess any given situation and make a personal judgment call on how to handle it, following procedures automatically or deciding to make exceptions to the rules. In Network cultures, people are expected to make exceptions, as long as they can justify them. Justifications are often based on humanitarian reasons, rather than to obtain better results or out of respect for authority figures.

There is also a lot of sympathy for "underdogs." This means that, when personal accountability for a mistake is to be ascertained, the culture influences people to be merciful and lenient toward those who are perceived to be less fortunate. If someone is regarded as "a social case," that means that such a person somehow deserves support from everyone in society, including their peers, supervisors, and direct reports. In practice, all of this means that it is very rare for people to get severely punished or even fired for making mistakes, even if they make them rather often. Frequently managers cite protective labor legislation as being an obstacle to severance of underperformers; but the actual fact is that culture values play a more influential role in the process.

Network cultures are also individualistic, so once again guilt plays a stronger role than shame as a negative feeling. This is even stronger in Network cultures because whenever people are publicly exposed to shame, people around them tend to quickly side with the person being shamed, feeling sorry for them. When someone is publicly put to shame in Network cultures, everyone around them feels the pain; therefore, such situations are better avoided.

Corrections of mistakes can be made quickly and on the spot, due to the usually decentralized decision structure. However, the speed of decisions to correct may also be affected by the need to seek consensus among stakeholders. If the situation falls clearly within the mandate of an individual, the decision can be made quickly. However, if it involves different stakeholders, it will be necessary to consult all of them, perhaps slowing down the process. If a quick decision is absolutely necessary, subsequent endorsement of that decision should be requested, humbly, explaining why the consultation was not possible earlier. Such a posteriori endorsements should never be taken for granted, for failing to consult stakeholders a priori is something not easily forgiven.

Avoiding the repetition of mistakes is not as important as it is in WOM cultures. Rather, in Network organizational cultures, there is a bigger concern on learning from the mistake. If the person who made the mistake has learned from it, possibly painfully, then it is considered that it is highly likely that this person will never make the same mistake again. Therefore, it is better to keep the person on that same job; this should ensure that the mistake would not happen again.

10.5 My Friends Can Make Mistakes

Social Pyramid organizational cultures have relationships and respect for hierarchy as their main distinctive characteristics. The underlying assumptions are that (a) power distribution is uneven in organizations; (b) you should assert the power of

your position to those below you, while respecting the authority of those in positions above you; and (c) having friends in high places will do wonders to help you climb up the hierarchical structure.

The Social Pyramid organizational culture is quite typical of Latin America and Africa; it is also found often in Portugal, Greece, and in many countries of Eastern Europe, including Russia. There is a Brazilian popular expression that nicely summarizes the typical attitude toward mistakes found in these organizations: *aos amigos, tudo; aos demais, os rigores da lei* (to my friends, everything; to all others, the rigors of the law).

This means that when mistakes are made, the way they are handled depends significantly on the relationships involved, more than the actual facts. If the person who made the mistake is regarded as a loyal friend, people will be tolerant and lenient toward what has happened. If, however, there is no significant relationship in place between the people involved, those deciding about how to handle it will be much more strict and rigorous.

Power structures also have a huge influence in these organizations. Therefore, a mistake is whatever your boss considers it to be a mistake. Never mind if you achieved the results expected; never mind if you strictly followed the procedures. Your boss's opinion counts more than anything else. Regardless of discipline and getting results, your boss might think you made a mistake if (a) your actions implied a lack of respect for the boss's position; or (b) your actions might be interpreted as lacking in loyalty (to the boss, to the company, or to your reference group).

Since power holders are seen to have absolute power, fear of that perceived power leads people to often hide mistakes from their superiors. A basic challenge for senior management is to identify problems at the beginning, before they grow into a bigger issue. Often they are only made aware of mistakes when it is too late or when they have turned into bigger problems that are much more difficult to handle.

In such relationship-oriented cultures, shame carries much more weight than feelings of guilt. "Saving face" is of paramount importance in such environments; and when someone makes a mistake, their primary concern is how that will affect their image vis-à-vis their reference group and their superiors. Discipline toward compliance is not regarded as crucial. Being caught by your friends or your boss when making a mistake is much more important.

Paraphrasing the Zen Buddhist riddle: if someone makes a mistake in the middle of the forest and nobody sees it, is it still a mistake (in a Social Pyramid culture)? Actually, it depends on whether the mistake will be identified later and traced back to the person responsible. There might be better dividends to obtain by confessing to your boss and friends, thereby showing honesty and courage, rather than risking being found out later. The key mechanism is still: "what will others think" (shame), rather than "what do I think about myself" (guilt).

When determining whether a mistake has been made and how to handle it, observers within a Social Pyramid culture will typically ask: who were the people involved? If they were authority figures or celebrities, mistakes are likely to be easily downplayed and perhaps forgiven. If, on the contrary, the people involved are on the lower levels of the social hierarchy, there is a higher probability that they might

be treated harshly. If they happen to be friends with the power holders, that will also affect how things are handled.

Conflicts can quickly turn personal, causing emotions to flare. This is perceived as a serious threat to group identity. Because of this, conflicts within the same group are avoided, in order to maintain harmony. Dissenting opinions within groups are suppressed. Conflicts do occur between different groups, rather than between individuals in the same group. The implication for handling mistakes is that typically opinions will be framed as "the people in production" versus "the people in sales," rather than between two different engineers within the production department, for instance.

In any case, since decisions are usually centralized at the top, it will be up to those power holders to decide on how to handle most mistakes, and their decisions are less likely to be challenged. Therefore, one way of avoiding conflict is to quickly escalate, delegating upward. The boss will decide, so we don't have to fight.

Family relatives of power holders enjoy privileged status in these cultures and often get away with making frequent mistakes without any consequence to their standings.

If one such privileged individual is found to be making mistakes rather frequently, this creates an embarrassment for the organization, since it exposes the fact that performance is actually secondary. To avoid that embarrassment, key players will often go out of their way to protect the boss from losing face. They might surround the mistake-prone relative with safeguarding mechanisms to help that person's performance. For instance, the boss's son might be given a "safe" job where his incompetence will have little impact or will not be evident; or he might be assigned to work with a very competent assistant who will do all the work and allow the boss's son to get the credit.

These mechanisms will also be used to avoid the repetition of mistakes. If a mistake has involved a key figure losing face, the primary concern tends to be: "how can we avoid the losing face to happen again," more than "how can we avoid the mistake happening again." Relationships and hierarchy will always be at the center of people's concerns.

10.6 Is This a Mistake or an Error?

Solar System organizational cultures are a bit more complicated to read by outside observers, because they show certain characteristics that create contradicting pressures. In such cultures, there is significant respect for hierarchy, similar to the Social Pyramid cultures; but there is also significant value placed on individual responsibility, freedom of expression, and direct communication, similar to what is observed in Contest, Network, and Well-Oiled Machine cultures.

This creates a tension between respecting the boss and speaking up to occasionally challenge her/him. Solar System cultures also show significant concern for avoiding uncertainty, something that only increases the stakes regarding the tension between Power Distance and Individualism.

The implications for handling mistakes are very interesting. Determining what is regarded as a mistake or not is not as straightforward as in egalitarian organizational cultures (Contest, Network, and WOM); it is affected by the respect for hierarchy. Therefore, people do ask: "who was involved?" And if the reply is that a figure of authority was involved, this might mean greater tolerance and also a concern for "saving face," similar to what happens in Social Pyramid cultures.

However, relationships and group loyalty play a lesser role; and high Individualism means that there is some support for expressing dissenting opinions and applying rules and criteria regardless of hierarchy. Typically, discussions ensue (also supported by Individualism). In such discussions, people walk a fine line between communicating openly while respecting hierarchy and avoiding loss of face by superior officers.

In retrospect we can say that in egalitarian and individualistic cultures such as Contest, Network, and WOM, discussions about mistakes focus on "what" and "how": What happened? How did it happen? How can we fix it? What needs to be done? How can we avoid it happening again?

By contrast, in collectivistic and hierarchical cultures such as the Social Pyramid style, discussions about mistakes emphasize the "who": Who did this? Who else was involved? Who will decide what to do? Who will be affected by the fix we implement? Who will decide on avoiding repetition? Who will be in charge of implementing corrective and preventive measures?

In Solar System cultures, we see a combination of the two approaches. "What" and "how" are important from an individualistic perspective; but "who" is emphasized from a hierarchical perspective.

The outcome might be decided by resorting to an overriding conceptual framework and making the discussion more about theories, concepts, and principles, rather than about whether or not the boss is right. The underlying principle is to avoid personal confrontation, shifting the focus of discussion to a theoretical debate. Questions often asked include: Is this an error or a mistake? What are the criteria for differentiating these two? Do we have a detailed policy describing what to do in cases like this one? Often there are, indeed, very detailed policies in Solar System organizations, to avoid the uncertainty of having to decide on a case-by-case basis.

Solar System organizational cultures were thus named because what often happens is a reinterpretation of policies and strategies at each level of the organization. The top boss (or top team) is "the sun" in the Solar System, around which the planets (direct reports) move in orbit. Each planet, however, has its own satellites. Directives emanating from the top boss are thus often reinterpreted by the middle managers, resulting in movements that might be seen as contradicting the seniormost directives. These reinterpretations are supported by Individualism; and middle managers demand respect from their immediate reports (consistent with the high Power Distance).

The overall outcome is that there are constant discussions across different levels of authority, challenging authority (but not too much). Superior officers need to assert their authority frequently, but also leaving some room for individual freedom to be expressed. These discussions often take the form of elaborate power games

and diplomatic conversations, carefully treading the fine line between respecting hierarchy and allowing room for Individualism.

Solar System organizational cultures are more frequently found in France, Belgium, Italy, and Spain; but they may also be found in Poland and in Argentina.

High Individualism means that guilt plays a stronger role than shame; but there is also concern for saving face to preserve hierarchical status (less than to preserve relationships and group harmony). One might say that the importance of guilt and shame vis-à-vis making mistakes come out even, depending very much on the specific situations.

Corrections are made rather quickly, though sometimes the respect for hierarchy will lead people to escalate unnecessarily. At other times, decisions might be made at lower levels, asserting "planet" authority. Abundant documented policies are usually the guidelines for escalating or not.

To prevent repetitions of mistakes, Solar System organizations turn to robust conceptual thinking as a foundation for policies and procedures. Discussions can be quite heated (supported by Individualism) at the beginning, when supporting theories are being debated. Once a concept is agreed upon, things can move more quickly toward detailing and implementation. However, we must remain aware of the fact that preventive policies will still be subject to interpretation, in practice. Constant supervision may be required to ensure alignment is still there after a while.

10.7 Contingency Rules

In so-called Traditional Family organizational culture styles, hierarchy and relationships are very important, often even more than in Social Pyramid styles, with which they share many similarities. The main differentiating factor, according to Wursten (2017), is Uncertainty Avoidance: it is higher in Social Pyramid cultures and lower in Traditional Family styles.

The Family style is typical of most Asian cultures (Thailand and Pakistan are exceptions where the Social Pyramid style is often prevalent). In summary, the difference is that in Family styles, there is less formality and structure. Often there is no organization chart in the classic sense of the term, but rather a somewhat fuzzy set of reporting lines that were never clearly documented or communicated. Everybody knows who their direct boss and direct reports are; everything else is not necessarily clear. Even the CEO's authority may not be clear-cut. Informal power relations, especially in family-owned companies, often override formal mandates. An uncle who is not even part of the company might be making all the important decisions and relaying them informally through relatives inside, bypassing top management.

Written policies, when they exist at all, are often vague and broad guidelines, lacking in detail. This means that decisions are taken by the (often informal) power holders, based on their relationships more than anything else.

Since these power holders are perceived to have absolute power, mistakes are often hidden from them, from fear of harsh punishment or dismissal. The only factor acting as an incentive to reveal mistakes is that it may show loyalty to your superiors, especially if someone else gets the blame. But if blowing the whistle (a very popular expression in Contest cultures) means exposing some power holders, what usually happens in practice is that people prefer not to run the risk of retaliation; therefore, they choose to remain silent. Anonymous whistle blowing sometimes works as a mistake-identifying mechanism, but the challenge is convincing people that they can truly remain anonymous and safe from retribution.

When mistakes do come to the attention of decision-makers, their task is to examine every situation carefully according to its specific contingencies. The process is similar to what has been described for the Social Pyramid organizational culture style, but in Traditional Family organizations, it is even more fluid and relativistic, because of enhanced informality. This is also linked to what Michael Harris Bond has identified (Bond 2015) as a distinct value-dimension, which Hofstede later incorporated as a "fifth dimension" in his own framework.

This fifth dimension measures the degree in which a culture adopts a flexible, long-term-oriented, and relativistic stance when complying to norms, versus a more disciplined, short-term-oriented, and normative stance. Although this dimension was not part of Wursten's original work, it has been found that the Asian cultures that were classified as Traditional Family styles all score high on this dimension as well, meaning that they value flexibility and a contingency-based approach when handling mistakes.

Every mistake is then assessed and corrected looking primarily at who was involved, what were the circumstances, who shall decide on correction, and what could be the consequences (impacting whom) of corrective action. Existing norms, contracts, and previous commitments play a secondary role. Each situation stands on its own to be assessed. Decisions on correction and prevention will be made bearing in mind who is involved at present and will be involved in a possible recurrence. Hierarchy plays a central role in assessing who will be affected by decisions.

Since Uncertainty Avoidance is lower than in Social Pyramid cultures, this means that there is a greater tendency to accept risk. This aspect also influences the attitude of leaving norms and contract commitments aside, assessing each situation without a bias toward precedents or even existing regulations.

Shame and saving face are much more important than individual feelings of guilt. In the end, it is all about what others (especially authority figures) will think of me, rather than assessing my behavior against my own standards.

10.8 Avoiding Mistakes Through Rituals

Japan (and the typical Japanese organizational culture) does not fit in under the criteria that Huib Wursten defined when creating the six styles we've seen so far.

Japanese organizations have respect for hierarchy, but not as high as can be observed in Social Pyramid, Solar System, and Traditional Family organizational culture styles. They have a rather unique bottom-up, level-by-level consensus-seeking decision-making process, through which decisions rise slowly to be eventually decided upon by senior management. Yes, there is greater respect for hierarchy than in egalitarian cultures, but there is room for each level to influence decisions (collectively, not individually). Collectivism and valuing relationships are high; this, in itself, is not a differentiating factor. Making decisions in this circular, bottom-up way is unique (Hoffman 2015).

Performance Orientation (Hofstede's "Masculinism" dimension) is the highest measured by research. Japanese organizations are known for demanding utmost dedication from its members and breeding workaholics, even more than Contest and WOM cultures.

Furthering the case for Japanese-style uniqueness is the equally high Uncertainty Avoidance, a very evident aspect of Japanese organizations. This is typified by avoiding risk and adopting rituals as a path to ensuring consistency.

It is interesting to note that in Japanese cultures, there is a rather high flexibility and relativism. What this means in practice is that there is an apparent contradiction between avoiding uncertainty and treasuring performance (and striving for short-term results) in assessing situations and a pull toward contingency attitudes taking into account the long-term perspective, relationships, and hierarchy. Situations must be assessed on a case-by-case basis, like in Traditional Family organizational cultures (asking the "who" questions); but the need to avoid uncertainty and achieve results brings in the observance of rituals to attain a certain balance between these forces.

The implications for identifying and handling mistakes are many.

The value placed on excellent performance and on avoiding risk translates into the adoption of ambitious and highly detailed quality standards. Japanese organizations have enjoyed a global "best-practice" reputation for quality since the 1980s. Quality Circles and Total Quality programs spread from Japan and were imitated all over the world. However, in many organizations, such programs failed. They usually were not as successful as their originators in Japan, and more often than not "Japanese culture" was named as the crucial differentiating factor.

Japanese-style organizations (they do exist outside of Japan) treat their approach to quality as a series of rituals. These rituals allow the identification of mistakes early on, before they become larger problems.

However, as we've seen in the example of Toyota in the United States (Alvarez 2016), the need to save face can come in and, at a senior level, allow for behaviors that result in trying to hide mistakes from regulators and from public view. Quality rituals were followed at the operational levels; but at senior levels, managers decided to shun their own standards and take a contingency approach. After a while, they could not maintain that approach any longer and were forced to recant and apologize. The Toyota brand suffered considerable damage, and it took years to regain trust in the eyes of the American public.

When such mistakes happen in Japanese organizations, public shame serves to atone for guilt. Executives apologize in public, following a ritual that is closely watched to ascertain how deep and low will said executives bow (the deeper the bow, the more profound the apology).

Corrective and preventive actions will follow the quality rituals previously described (Karatsu 1988): proposals will be created through a bottom-up, level-by-level consensus approach, until decisions are made by senior management. This means that decisions can take much longer than, for instance, in Contest organizational cultures, but implementation is usually smoother, quicker, and with the benefit of more employee engagement, due to the great amount of participation at middle and lower levels.

10.9 Conclusion

When it comes to identifying and handling mistakes across cultures, the challenges for international organizations are many. They start and finish with understanding their own organizational cultures at Head Office; they go on to adapting their practices according to the cultures under which they operate in different countries, taking stock of how those local cultures affect the identification, correction, and prevention of mistake recurrence. Adapting practices, by the way, does not mean that organizations must let go of their corporate standards. What it does mean is that the path to meeting those standards may be different according to each environment.

The process ends, as culture awareness increases, with becoming aware of an organizational culture's "blind spots." Since cultural values affect everything we do, including our perception of reality, organizations much learn how to identify their own culture bias, which is likely, at first, to prevent them from seeing certain issues in their own culture and also in the culture of others.

For instance, in Network cultures, people may readily identify culture differences regarding hierarchy; but they often overlook the importance of having a bias toward quality of life and caring in detriment of striving for high performance. In Contest cultures, their bias for action makes it more difficult to give situation analysis enough time before jumping to conclusions. Respect for hierarchy in Social Pyramid, Solar System, and Traditional Family cultures can sometimes lead to underrating contributions from young talent sitting in the lower levels of their structure. Well-Oiled Machine cultures tend to overlook the importance of constant supervision to ensure compliance, because they tend to think that everyone will have the strict self-discipline that they enjoy at Head Office. And Japanese organizations tend to miss the fact that in many cultures, most people may value their families more than they value their jobs.

I recommend that managers and professionals begin by seeking to understand their own national and organizational cultures, to become aware of how their personal culture bias might shape their perception, especially when looking at certain situations in a culture that is different from their own. Management effectiveness can increase significantly when managers understand their own culture values and also those of their stakeholders from different cultures.

In terms of handling mistakes, understanding the underlying logic of each culture style will help managers to understand why people approach mistakes differently and use diverse arguments for prevention, identification, and correction of mistakes. This will help them make more effective and efficient decisions when planning, when designing policies and procedures, and when troubleshooting critical incidents concerning mistake-handling.

Understanding your own culture bias may also help you communicate more effectively and clarify your own arguments when discussing mistakes across cultures. Effective communication may be enhanced by increasing your ability to stand in your stakeholder's shoes and also by allowing you to clarify your own point of view to others. As a result, I expect that managers will become more effective in handling mistakes whatever the culture environment they operate in.

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