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Strategic Positioning of Middle Managers in the Egyptian Private Sector

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Abstract:

Reports from and about Egypt point to decline on several pillars of the Global Competitiveness Index(GCI)even through the growth years between 2004 to 2011. In this paper, we argue that there is insufficient diffusion of managerial knowledge from top and senior level executives to middle managers, and thus the focus is on strengthening the middle management as the venue for sustainable growth and firm performance. This paper is a conceptual qualitative research. We pose two propositions to address the fragility of middle management. The first contributor is lack of congruency in education and training for job requirements that increased the gap between top and senior managements' knowledge-base and that of middle management. For the second reason, we attempted to discount the effect of culture by positing the proposition that education is a mediating variable, and with improved education cultural differences in management converge over time; both propositions are supported by the literature. We also propose framing the role of middle management from the perspective of agents to their principals, namely top executives; this relational frame stresses the importance of trust and loyalty in both directions.

Keywords: Middle management, management and culture, Hofstede's culture dimensions, strategy

1. Introduction

Muhammad Ali of Egypt had established a financial, agricultural, industrial, and intellectual platform for Egypt by 1830s (Sayyid-Marsot, 1984). Thirty years later in Japan, the Meiji Restoration (Jansen, 1994; Ravina, 2005; Vogel, 1981) took place, and 1868 marked the transformation of the Japanese society (Matsuo, 1983). It is interesting to note that the Meiji Restoration proceeded without ideological clashes (Ravina, 2005). Internal and external events over the years hence drove the two countries onto divergent paths. By the 21st century Japan is a global model for business/managerial success while Egypt is burdened by many ailments. The success story of Japan is attributable to pragmatic business strategies and strong middle management. This paper is a conceptual qualitative research; thus, it relies on secondary data and literature reviews.

2. Literature Review

Over the period 2010-2013, Egypt's Global Competitiveness Index (GCI) ranking on the pillar of higher education and training deteriorated from a low of 97 to 107 to 109. (ENCC, 2013). Academic and vocational institutions (post-secondary or high-school education) obviously do not prepare their graduates in developing the sense of business expectations, other than the obvious which is making profits. A curriculum may focus primarily on accounting, or economics, but courses like operations management, management science, management strategy, or project management may be missing altogether. This note is extended to engineering curricula where students may also benefit from business related courses on operations management and project management. In a comparison to Japan's education reform, the Meiji Restoration in 1868 created a new education system (Ravina, 2005).

2.1. Education and Performance

Bloom and Van Reenen (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2010) examined the correlation between their devised measure of management practices and firm performance; the components of their measure were productivity, profitability, growth rates, survival rates, and market value. They (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2010) used secondary data for company accounts data on 3,380 firms, and asserted that "Education is strongly correlated with high management scores, whether one looks at the education level of managers or of workers." They stated that "it is plausible that managers with an MBA or college education are more likely to be aware of the benefits of modern management practices [and] ... more surprisingly perhaps, is that worker-level education is also positively associated with management scores, suggesting that implementing many of these practices may be easier when the workforce is more knowledgeable;" they added: "our belief is that more basic business education—for example around capital budgeting, data analysis, and standard human resources practices—could help improve management in many nations, especially in developing nations." Their proposition is that "countries can improve average management practices and therefore aggregate productivity ... by promoting factors that increase average management quality in each firm (say through better business education) and therefore raise productivity within the average firm." (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2010).

2.2. Skills Development as an Investment

Training is regarded as a short-term activity that is an expensive investment with long term payoff. The implication of training links an “enabling environment” as the enterprise budgeting for training, legal, institutional or taxation conditions which would encourage enterprises to provide training to workers, and effective labor market policies and programs (Evans & Lim, 1998). “One of the most recent activities in this area is the attempt to devise accounting measures that treat skill-development (“training”) as an investment rather than a cost.”(UNPAN, 2008) Top management has an overarching role in organizational learning which in turn is a function of the business culture (Lyles & Salk, 1996).

Training is a worthwhile investment when middle management is framed from the perspective of agency (Bloom & Van Reenen, 2010). Investment, in general, includes both the financial commitment of the firm and the feeling of belonging that this training imparts to the recipients. Hence, training and skills development build mutual trust essential for productivity. An agent has innate motives to maintain and upgrade their skills for professional longevity and to acquire rewards. Empirical research gives credence to the positive relationship between training and performance(Kozlowski, et al. 2001; Locke, 1996; Ford & Weissbein, 1997; Egan et al., 2004; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001) because “knowledge acquisition is a mediating (intervening) variable between organizational features and various types of performance.” (Lyles & Salk, 1996) When “organizations are viewed as social communities’ long-term relationships allow a social context to develop in which expertise can be communicated and shared.” (Lyles & Salk, 1996)

2.3. Management and Culture

Management researchers investigated the role of cultures in business and management (see work by Hofstede and similar (Hofstede, 1993; Hofstede et al., 2012; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993), and the argument that ensued suggest that management is facilitated if it is an outcrop of the culture in which the business is embedded. Research also suggests that management behaviors seen positively in one culture are not always viewed as such in another(Parnell & Hatem, 1999). Hofstede’s sociological model of management-culture interactions, as with most social models and despite its success, has been controversial. Hofstede’s studies assume homogeneity in the domestic population as a whole, and ignore the influences of the community(Jones, 2007) Some scholars criticized Hofstede’s model on the grounds that it does not concern culture per se, but instead reveals organizational members’ perception of values and behaviors.(Fougère & Moulettes, 2007)

Papers were written specifying particular cultures with managements styles. There are management-culture researches on east Asian nations, Japan, Middle East/Arabian (Kasasbeh, 2016; Smith et al., 2007; Abbas, 1996), Islamic Work Ethics (Abbas, 1996), Africa (specifically Nigeria)(Oghojafor et al., 2012), developing and emerging economies (Suklev & Debarliev, 2012), Scandinavia (Strand et al., 2015), South America / Latin (Minkov & Hofstede, 2010; Hofstede et al., 2010)), for example. A valid observation, notwithstanding, is that Japan borrowed or imitated Western management but remained Japanese (Oghojafor et al., 2012). The confluence of culture and managing styles is an ardent endeavor of management researchers because the primary challenge is management practices change much faster than any conceivable change in a culture over the same period of time; the changes in the management systems continuously reflect the changes in environments, both internal and external or global ones. If a meaningful and sensible managerial structure is attained within a culture then top management, through their middle management, need to prepare for cultural adjustment to meet changes required by the new management models. These pursuits are sensible since management principals are universal.

2.4. Juxtaposition of Cultures: Egypt, Middle East, and Japan

The Egyptian culture is a blend of Arab and Middle Eastern influences. Hofstede’s model depicts some attributes that are confirmed by Parnell and Hatem (Parnell & Hatem, 1999), these are: high-power distance, moderately strong uncertainty avoidance, low individualism and moderate masculinity. The high-power distance suggests that employees are likely to accept an unequal level of power and expect to be directed by their supervisors. The higher than moderate desire to avoid uncertainty suggests that employees prefer the security afforded by their length of employment in the same organization, awareness of their career paths, and specified job descriptions. The low individualism suggests that relationships are to be emphasized at the expense of the task, and a team focus is likely to fit this orientation. (El-Kot & Leat, 2008) Masculinity refers to the orientation of society favoring competition, achievement, and excellence in perfection, than femininity would expect. In summary, relationships and friendship are a cornerstone of the Egyptian work culture; which is not altogether different from guanxi, the interpersonal relationships between individuals in the Chinese culture (Gu, 2013).

The Middle Eastern management culture attributes show closeness to the Japanese management on count of uncertainty avoidance and individualism according to Hofstede’s model. We refer to research of comparative analysis of the Jordanian and Japanese culture (Sabri, 2015) since Jordan and Egypt are not delineated in the Hofstede’s model. Japan ranked on the top of the masculinity dimension while Jordan ranked near the top-middle range, also Jordan ranked near the top on the power-distance dimension while Japan rank on the middle of the scale. To gain more granularity on the dichotomy of the later two dimensions in both countries, Sabri(Sabri, 2015)used the Aston scales (Clark, 1990; Inkson et al., 1970; Pugh & Hickson, 1976A; Pugh et al., 1968; Pugh & Hickson, 1976B; Child, 1972; Pennings, 1976; Donaldson & Luo, 2014) for measuring organizational structure on the specialization, formalization and centralization of authority dimensions This analysis revealed that there is “a contradiction between the supposed ‘full bureaucracy’ or pyramid-structure assumed in Hofstede’s model, and an unaccounted form of a ‘personnel bureaucracy’ structure, that is high on concentration of authority and low on structuring of activities that were deduced from the formalization and specialization dimensions of the Aston group’s model”. Sabri’s work of comparing the Japanese structure to the Jordanian structure

would run parallel, if not very close, to a comparison between Japanese and Egyptian structures. This research also suggests that Hostede's scales are not linear.

2.5. Excerpts from Reports from and about Egypt—the Motivation for this Work

We focus on middle management and frame the research problem from the perspective of fundamentals, namely, education and culture. We formed the opinion of a weak middle management based on reports from and about Egypt before and after the political changes of 2011; support for our opinion is provided by the excerpts given below (Morsy, 2014; UNICO, 2012; ENCC, 2013; Salinger, 2008).

- “Egypt, even during the high growth period of 2000-10, did not experience a reallocation of excess labor towards modern, productive sectors similar to what occurred in other emerging markets, notably in South East Asia. (Morsy, 2014)
- “A puzzling feature for observers, however, was that the uprisings occurred after a decade of relatively strong growth performance in the region. In Egypt in particular, growth rates surpassed 5 per cent between 2004 and 2011. A closer look at Egypt's growth performance shows that both labor productivity and income per capita increased at a much slower pace than real GDP.... Moreover, despite high output growth, unemployment remained above 8 per cent throughout the decade.”(Morsy, 2014)
- “... a notable deterioration in [Egypt's] overall economic competitiveness as Egypt's ranking, in both absolute and relative terms, slid to 118 out of 148 countries in 2013-2014, continuing the declining trend that began four years earlier as it fell sharply from 70 out of 131 in 2009-2010, to 81 out of 139 in 2010-2011, to 94 out of 142 in 2011-2012, and to 107 out of 144 countries in 2012-2013. ... the root of the continued decline in the basic requirements sub-index is in large part due to factors related to weakening institutions (57 to 74 to 96) in addition to those related to worsening macroeconomic policies (129 to 132 to 138) (ENCC, 2013),(see also El-Araby, 2009).
- “If Egypt is to succeed in expanding its participation in Qualifying Industrial Zone and EU-focused textile and garment exports, smaller companies will also need training and support to develop middle management, acquire these skills, and invest in these innovations.”(Salinger, 2008)
- “Companies also have limited capabilities inter alia with respect to making samples, merchandising, middle management, industrial engineering, and the ability to handle more intricate “fashion” requirements of manufacturing.”(Salinger, 2008)
- “... a large IT divide between urban and rural areas, as clearly seen in Egypt.”(UNICO, 2012)

Definitions for terms used in this paper are in order. We define “top managers” to refer to individuals, groups, or network of individuals who are in a position to control and affect fluidity of funds across an enterprise or enterprises. Top managers are typically the source of business strategies; and typical of middle eastern countries (Sabri, 2015) either themselves or their representatives as members of the board of directors, the top executives and senior managers. We define “middle managers” as the tier between the senior managers and operations, where senior managers are the tier below top managers. Middle management is “at the crossroads of various information channels where it deploys strategy down to operations and provides feedback to senior management.”(Witcher & Chau, 2014) Middle management is any person who is not directly transforming “raw materials” into “products”, and is given tasks of hiring, terminating, assigning and coordinating tasks of subordinates; middle management is simultaneously reporting to superiors about projects advancements, and implementation of strategies. Middle managers understand the jobs below them, and the deliverables of those jobs, in addition to appropriately reporting to upper management. A middle manager may be informed of strategic plans but not being a direct contributor to strategic planning, or in a position to modify or change strategies.

3. The Research Problems

Most Egyptian top and senior managers are well educated and experienced with the practice of Western management—the benchmark of management. Those managers understand the characteristics and nature of their Egyptian culture from that of the West yet their managerial knowledge and experience have not fully diffused to middle managers; alternatively, that knowledge of Western management has not been adjusted to fit the Egyptian culture (its ontology, epistemology, and methodology). The dilemma of the Egyptian middle managers is they have to develop a dual contextual style one that relates to the top executives' style of management and another to communicate with the employees in the style that is embedded in the Egyptian culture. Consequently, that middle management is not capable to transmit valuable experiences to their subordinates and employees. Thus, we argue that top management has overlooked the strategic importance of investing in middle management, and that in turn diminished the effectiveness of middle managers to transform the visions of top management to tangible and sustainable progress.

To address the possible causes of blockage of diffusion of knowledge through the firm, the following Research Questions (RQ) arose:

- RQ1: What are the gaps in education curricula to satisfy the reality of present and future business needs and methods?
- RQ2: Is training and mentoring compatible with and at the level of top management's business maturity such that a dialogue can occur between top management and middle management?
- RQ3: Given that management science is universal, what factors mitigate variability in cultural influences on management styles?

Elbanna (Elbanna, 2008) and Elkot researched intra-firms relations as within teams(El-Kot & Leat, 2008; El-Kot, 2005) supervisor/employee, interpersonal trust at work(Leat, 2009),and managers involvement in strategy planning effectiveness (Elbanna, 2008). Elbanna (Elbanna, 2008) argued that management involvement during the strategic planning process and the discussions and debates that ensued on the future strategies and objectives of the company were “likely to generate participants' commitment, and an implicit contract between the participants.”(Elbanna, 2008) However, Elbanna's results “show that there is no significant relationship

between management participation and strategic planning effectiveness. This finding is somewhat surprising given the frequently made claim that the broad involvement of members of the organization is positively associated with organizational outcomes." Elbanna reasoned that this unexpected observation is attributed to some unknown moderating (interaction) variables, and "that management participation is a much more complex issue both as a theoretical concept and as an empirical construct". The notions of "full bureaucracy" implied by Hofstede's model and "personnel bureaucracy" identified by Sabri (Sabri, 2015) can create professional conflict or resistance-to-change which is not uncommon (Hallier & James, 1997; Van der Velde et al., 1999; Giangreco, 2005) when these two bureaucracies are not aligned leading to the unexpected discrepancy in Elbanna's findings.

4. Power Distance Dependence on Trust and Loyalty

The unexpected result in Elbanna's (Elbanna, 2008) research can be attributed to the self versus group conflict, and traced to the quality of trust (Raes, 2011) and loyalty (Dooley, 1999). For example, Parayitam (Parayitam, 2007) showed that cognitive and affect-based trust are moderating variables and causes of conflict amongst decision making teams, and likely the strategy planning effectiveness. Based on these observations we propose:

- Proposition 1.: Power distance (of Hofstede's model) is moderated (interaction) by trust and loyalty prevalent in a business culture. Power distance tends to be closer where trust and loyalty are higher.

Given the two contributions by Sabri and Elbanna, namely, the notion of 'personnel bureaucracy', and the non-significant correlation between management participation and strategic planning effectiveness, one surmises that other factors differentiate Middle Eastern from Japanese culture. In Japan workers were motivated for two reasons: gains realized during times of economic growth were reflected in the worker's paychecks, as incentives and profit sharing, and second, workers could count on lifetime employment—the case for many large Japanese companies perhaps up to 2000 (Iida, 2008). For these reasons, and possibly more, the Japanese worker enjoyed a sense of connection or belonging (Ravina, 2005).

Mintzberg (Mintzberg, 1973) posits that a manager's jobs are remarkably similar from one setting to another and can be described by common sets of behaviors and roles. A technical definition of Mintzberg's concept of management would be consisting of three main categories of these roles: interpersonal roles, informational roles, and decisional roles. With globalization, cultural attributes are now overlaid on this definition. Since interpersonal and informational aspects of the technical definition are embedded in culture, we then propose loyalty and trust as variables that bind interpersonal, information, and culture. Thus, management and delegation, in general, can be viewed through the lens of a principal and an agent relationship. In this framing of relation, the principal expects and trusts the agent to execute with the principal's best interest in mind, while the agent expects and trusts to be rewarded. The same rational can be applied between middle management and the labor force. Elbanna's work can now be viewed through this principal-agent lens and the non-significant correlation between management participation and strategic planning effectiveness can be interpreted as lack of trust. In the Japanese business culture trust is inseparable from loyalty.

5. Education as a Mitigating Factor of the Influence of Culture

Cultural differences in management styles will converge over time since management principals are universal. With improved education, economics, and technological factors a rational approach to management will become stronger than the impact of culture—this premise, known as the "convergence hypothesis" (Al-Yahya, 2009; (Bergiel et al., 2012; Gupta & Wang, 2004; Gupta & Wang, 2011) leads to the second proposition:

- Proposition 2: Education is a mediating (intervening) variable that enables the convergence of managerial styles through cultures.

Education allows individuals to prioritize and re-evaluate their ideals that are worth pursuing, and brings to the fore the realist paradigm required for management. (Mc Breen et al., 2011) Convergence of management styles is a rational and willful adaptation process. Being a process, convergence is enabled by creative business governance and policies, in combination with institutional reformations; yet subject to constraints and limitations (Pollitt, 2001; Milikić et al., 2012; Gupta & Wang, 2004; Gupta & Wang, 2011).

An example of the convergence hypothesis was partially supported in the work of Salk & Brannen. (Salk & Brannen, 2000) They examined a team of 50 Germans and 50 Japanese managers in an international joint venture setting; the manager's positions ranged from middle to top management; an indication that the subjects had a decent education. The motivation for their research was to investigate the role of national culture in determining individual influence in a multinational team. (Salk & Brannen, 2000) The Japanese and German cultures rank differently on Hofstede's dimensions, with the German culture scores being higher on individualism and the Japan culture scores higher on power-distance, masculinity, uncertainty avoidance, and both cultures are comparable on the long-term orientation and indulgence dimensions (Hofstede's website); both cultures are viewed to have different preferences and work values. The findings indicated no significance for nationality as an explanatory variable for influence. However, national culture remained important to relationships and work attitudes in the work place.

6. Conclusions

The motivation for this work is that recent reports from and about Egypt noted that although the GDP growth rates exceeded 5 per cent between 2004 and 2011 Egypt's labor productivity and income per capita increased at a much slower pace (Morsy, 2014). Our research problem is an attempt to investigate the lack or lag of diffusion of managerial knowledge from top and senior management to the middle management. A challenge to middle management is that they need to communicate and report to top and senior management in the language and style embedded in the scientific definition of management, and then communicate and delegate to

their broad base of subordinates in a language and style embedded in the Egyptian culture. This paper is a conceptual research into the possible causes of the fragility of middle management that is a consequence of the quality of preparation both educationally and task-specific training. Our proposition is that the science of management is universal, and differences in management styles can be accommodated in a culture. The influences of culture can be mitigated by education, training, and skills development for middle managers.

A characteristic of the Egyptian culture is the “personnel bureaucracy” which is based on trust and extending business relationships. We reason that where there are human relationships then loyalty and trust define this relationship. Conflicts may arise where alignment between “personnel bureaucracy” and “full bureaucracy” (i.e. the conceptual pyramidal structure of the organization) are not cognitively clear or are at conflict. The unexpected findings reported by Elbanna (Elbanna, 2008), namely, there is no significant relation between strategic planning participation of managers and strategy planning effectiveness, is attributed to cognitive and affect-based conflicts.

The ecology of business depends on its environment. An “enabling environment” links the enterprise budgeting for training, legal, institutional and taxation conditions to the survival and performance of the firm; thus, the alignment of institutions and government agencies and businesses practices and policies are collectively part of the strategic positioning of the middle management by education and training. Hence, knowledge, via training and education, is a moderating variable for normalizing the variances in management styles. Lastly, we propose reframing the managerial view between top and middle management to that of principal-agent relation; this relational frame stresses the importance of trust and loyalty in both directions. It is not a miracle for Egypt to catch up with the times, it is only the motivation and sincerity of all her institutions and businesses to align their agenda.

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