



BY DAVID COHEN  
For Workplace News

Have you seen the hit movie *My Big Fat Greek Wedding*? It's the kind of movie anyone can relate to because the experience is universal.

That's the point of this month's article — cultures are sometimes vastly different but human beings have a lot in common, especially when they work for the same company.

For those of us defining behavioural competencies in a national or international organization, that makes it tricky to balance sensitivity with common ground. To do the job right, you must be unwavering about your core competencies and values, and flexible or adaptable about how those competencies get expressed as behaviours.

I recognized this clearly one hectic week when I was traveling from Atlantic Canada to Pennsylvania and then on to Jamaica. In each culturally distinct region, I worked with a different multinational organization. This reinforced how important it is to know exactly what you mean when throwing around words like teamwork, integrity and trust. They sound the same but can be expressed in very different ways.

The second key realization was how little local cultural differences

## My big fat corporate culture

matter to the overall organization. Despite what you may expect, a Canadian company operating in Jamaica is consistent in both countries. Just as an American company runs with the same principles in both Pennsylvania and Ontario.

This is because leadership sets the example when it comes to core values and the competencies that stem from them. Despite differences in the local setting, within the walls of the organization, expectations for success are based on corporate culture.

If I, as an employee, want to make it to the top ranks in that company, I must be "socialized" by learning the correct way of behaving. That means I need to learn how to live the leader's or the organization's values. If I can't succeed under those values, that doesn't mean I'm a failure; I just need to find an organization whose values and behaviours are more aligned with mine.

For big companies, trouble arises when local norms conflict with organizational values. In such a case, which "culture" gets the upper hand? Should the multinational organization be sensitive to the local culture or should it run right over it?

The answer, again, is to be true to core corporate values while being flexible in expressing those values.

Take the issue of recognition. A Canadian company I work with

thinks it's important to celebrate employee success. It's a smart tactic, since studies show that recognition ranks higher than money in retaining talent. In Canada, that recognition is done in a reserved way, without bringing too much public attention to the key employee.

Surprise displays of recognition might make a Canadian wish that a trap door would open up below their feet. In the United States, however, such reserve would be interpreted as recognition that was less than whole-hearted.

So how does a Canadian company recognize its key employees consistently around the world? Should the Canadian definition of recognition dominate everywhere employees work? The important or core consideration is that recognition gets expressed. As to how it gets expressed, that should be up to the local cultural norms. Focus on the value like a laser. Let the behaviours express themselves naturally.

What about value conflicts? A Scandinavian executive working for a European subsidiary in Turkey had a young protégé who was always challenging the status quo. To the executive, this was a sign of high potential but to the Turkish managers this was a show of disrespect. The executive wanted to groom this young man as a future leader, but local management fired him.

The European executive confused core values with the way they needed to be expressed to be successful in the local culture.

A North American company with a worldwide hiring policy opened a new operation in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Equal opportunity was a core value so men and women should have access to the same jobs. Local leadership resisted, concerned about the physical jeopardy that female sales representatives would be put in when traveling.

But the corporate parent, sensitive to its core values, insisted. To resolve the conflict, bodyguards were hired to accompany female sales reps whenever necessary.

A behaviour is a value if it transcends geography. When the behaviour is related to a custom which does not violate a value, it should be modified to fit with local reality. That's another reason why it's so important to be upfront and clear about values and behaviours when building competency models. They are the heart and soul of corporate culture; and the bright markings of a corporation's employee brand.

Here are four rules to keep in mind when building competency models interculturally. Make sure that the models:

- reflect company values as lived by the leadership group;
- express the desired behaviour in a variety of situations;
- can be adapted to local culture without compromising impact; and
- don't violate local culture by validating or defining them in terms that culture uses. ●

---

*David S. Cohen is President of Strategic Action Group, Ltd. and author of The Talent Edge: A Behavioral Approach to Hiring, Developing, and Keeping Top Performers. His email is david@sagltd.com*