**PEELING THE CULTURAL ONION ON THE GERMAN APPROACH TO BUSINESS**

A few days before she was scheduled to make her first trip to Neumann Technologie, Natalie was sent a PowerPoint slide deck by the German site leader, Hans-Juergen (Exhibit 1). Hitech Diesel Solutions (HDS), Natalie’s employer, had recently acquired Neumann Technologie, a German company located in rural Bavaria. Natalie reviewed the slides with mixed reactions. On the one hand, she realized that the slides provided some important cultural clues about what she might encounter. On the other hand, the information felt overly prescriptive, too structured and rules-bound. Natalie had never heard of a brief like this being sent to anyone at HDS. In fact, experienced international professionals outside HDS had never seen such an artifact either. Why would Hans-Juergen, the site manager of a newly acquired subsidiary, send these slides to her? She was the assigned Cultural Integrator for this site, so was he trying to tell her something or was he simply being German? What were the likely sources of cultural misunderstandings?

**Natalie’s Leadership Development Process**

An undergraduate organizational management major, Natalie landed a position in the global human resources group of HDS immediately after college. During her first five years with HDS Natalie worked on a variety of HR projects, but Neumann was her first international project. She knew that most top managers at Fortune 500 companies had at least one expatriate experience during their careers and she had been anxiously anticipating her first international assignment. The Neumann project was a clear indicator HDS was getting her ready for a top position. While she was excited, she was also somewhat apprehensive because she knew that working cross-culturally came with a unique set of challenges.

In her role as Cultural Integrator, Natalie was responsible for overseeing the implementation of all of the core human resource systems at HDS. This implementation included both the technology-based systems, such as payroll, and the social systems, such as the well-defined HDS corporate approaches to leadership, diversity, and talent acquisition. Natalie expected to spend about one week per month for the next 18 months on-site in Germany.

Natalie knew that her effectiveness as Cultural Integrator rested on her ability to make positive personal connections with her new co-workers. HDS strongly believed that self-awareness supported effective self-management. Thus, Natalie was trained to leverage her personal strengths and minimize the traits which could be liabilities. HDS provided training on the use of the StrengthsFinder® Profile (Buckingham & Clifton, 2001) to help employees better understand their five most powerful “signature themes” and how to leverage these themes for personal development, the development of others, and the overall success of the organization.

She revisited her top five themes and tried to determine the practical implications of her entry into Neumann’s organizational culture: 1) **Competition** – competition is rooted in comparison and the drive to outperform peers and in competing to win; 2) **Restorative** – energized by problem solving, enjoys the challenge of analyzing symptoms and finding solutions; 3) **Strategic** – able to sort through the details and identify patterns, evaluate obstacles and identify a clear path forward; 4) **Ideation** – fascinated by ideas and why things are the way they are; and 5) **Command** – takes charge with no discomfort with imposing his/her view on others.

**HDS Leadership Styles**

Leadership style was a key element in shaping corporate culture, and Natalie’s role as Cultural Integrator clearly included re-crafting the corporate culture at Neumann. Natalie reread a recently commissioned study exploring the prevailing leadership styles at HDS and wondered how HDS leadership attributes would align with the approaches to leadership at the German site. According to the report (Joyner, Mann & Harris, 2012):

“There is a strong analytical and technical focus to the leadership group. Many of these individuals will be action-oriented, and will often be assertive, independent, self-confident and competitive. They will want to control their own activities, and will be reluctant to delegate any meaningful authority. Because of their focus on tasks and things, these leaders do not have a strong need to engage in the social and interpersonal elements of work. The majority will work at a faster-than-average pace, will be impatient with routines, will embrace variety and change as opposed to consistency, and will work with a sense of urgency. They appreciate freedom – freedom from repetition, freedom of movement and mobility, and freedom to change priorities as the situation dictates. They are often impatient for results, and are intolerant of delays – they are driven to “cut through the red tape” and get on with things. They may not naturally value being part of a team or a group. When communicating and working with others, these leaders tend to be reserved, formal and quiet, with a serious and disciplined approach. When making decisions, the majority of the leaders will strongly emphasize objective thinking, and tend to be logical, practical and realistic when deciding upon a course of action. There can be a tendency to overlook or discount the “emotional” or “human” components of decisions, and the consequences of those decisions on others, including co-workers.”

**Preparing to Peel the Onion**

On the plane to Germany for her first visit, Natalie again reviewed the Do’s and Don’ts slides and found that she was actually kind of peeved. The HDS management style was much less formalized than the slides indicated were the norm at Neumann. She wondered about her own “fit” with the site culture and about the potential differences in approaches to leadership between the German site and HDS. She also started thinking ahead about actions and strategies that she could use to begin shifting the Neumann culture toward greater alignment with the prevailing HDS culture. How would she begin the process of developing cultural synergy? What were those crazy Germans doing sending all of this information to their new American owners anyhow? Why all the rules? These next 18 months were going to be very challenging if she didn’t quickly get a handle on the potential sources cross-cultural misunderstanding in her new job.

**References**

Buckingham, M. & Clifton, D. (2001). *Now, discover your strengths*. New York: The Free Press.

Joyner, F., Mann, D. & Harris, T. (2012). Engineering as a social activity: Preparing engineers to thrive in the changing world of work. *American Journal of Engineering Education. 3*(1), 67-82.

Exhibit 1: Do’s and Don’ts for Neumann Visitors

