

Expert Interview

HR Interventions in the Cross Cultural Context

Culture is called as "**the way of life of a society**". It includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion, arts, rituals and so on. Cultures are distinct and so companies operating under different cultures exhibit distinctiveness in their vision, values, operations and transactions. How do we cope while working with an organisation that follows the culture of a different nations?. Here is an interview with **Mr. Parthasarathi Mishra**, which was jointly done by Prof. Abhipsa Mishra and Dr. Abhijit Mohanty of ASTHA School of Management on "HR Interventions in the Cross Cultural Context".

Back Ground of the Expert:

Currently, he is the Board Member of Amnaya Corporation US, Ex. Chief Human Resource Manager, Tata Steel Ltd, Kalinga Nagar, Gopalpur & OMQ, was a Senior VP & Head HR, Board Member in Group Co. Reliance Naval & Engineering Company Ltd., Head HR & Administration Essar Project India Ltd., Director –HR , Board Member Bateman Engineering Ltd.

Citation/ Reward/Award received:

- Received the best participating consultant award while in Japan from Toyota production systems, Tokyo, Japan.
- Has been declared as the most influential HR leader in India by the world HRD congress for its silver jubilee year in 2017.
- Declared as the awardees “for outstanding contribution to HR Profession to be conferred in Kolkata on 8th Nov. 2017 by world HRD Congress”.
- Received the award “100 HR innovators in India” by world HRD Congress on 16th Feb. 2018 in Mumbai.
- Received 101 HR Super achiever awards from “World HRD Congress held on 15th Feb. 2019 IN Mumbai.
- Received the “Krupajal Samaan” on 17th Nov. 2018 in Bhubaneswar by KEC group of Institutions.
- Received the HR leader of the year on 22nd June 2019 in Kolkata by HRD India.

Prof. Abhipsa: Sir, with your vast experience in various countries of the world, would you like to say something about the Japanese organizational culture in particular?

Expert: In Japan, I worked and received training on the Toyota production system. One word best describes Japan: "*Superb.*" There is no alternative word for it. If you visit a company like Toyota, you will notice that it is highly disciplined. They wear the same uniform throughout the company. It makes no difference whether you are a CMD or at the bottom of the hierarchy.

If you wish to introduce a culture, you must introduce a unitary and uniform culture. Let everything be the same for everyone in the organisation. If you go to the company's canteen, you will find that it is the same for everyone. There are no officer's canteen, supervisor's canteen, or employee's canteen. Everyone is required to eat in the same canteen.

Japanese companies have a very flat organisational structure. In Japan, there is no concept of cubicles or separate rooms in the workplace. The manager or department head sits in the centre of the table, and everyone else surrounds him. There is no distinction between the employees. Yes, your designation is unique, your work is unique, and your skill set is unique, but you are not. There are managers, supervisors, and employees, but there is no ego.

When it comes to the operation of labour unions in Japan, the law is distinct. Once an employee is elected to a union office, they are no longer entitled to compensation from their employer. The unions have enormous funds from which they pay the salaries of their officers. The union is productive in areas such as organisational development, training, and skill enhancement. They develop training schedules for their staff. In addition, they determine which training institute will offer which training programme. The Union office and HR office work closely together, but the union is primarily responsible for determining the training requirements for their employees.

In another instance, on the assembly line of the Toyota Production shop, I observed two clocks displaying different times. One indicated Japanese Standard Time, while the other was stopped at 7 minutes. Then, I was curious about the significance of the second clock.

According to one of the workers, the second clock is connected to the assembly line and begins ticking when the assembly line stops. Those seven minutes indicate that the assembly line has been halted for seven minutes since morning. Through this, they hoped to demonstrate to the employees on the floor what they had lost by not working for that period. If they had worked in those seven minutes, they would have produced seventy automobiles, which could have been sold in the international market, which could have brought money to Japan and the company's account, and allowing for the distribution of larger bonuses among the employees.

In this country, women are extremely safe. Midnight is a time when a lady can freely roam the city. I have personally observed that there is no difference between male and female employees. There is no such caste, creed, gender, or religious discriminations among the employees.

Prof. Abhijit: How do you see Japanese organizational culture different from the current American organizational culture, with special reference to your organisation ?

Expert: Whereas, Japanese offices are more open and have a flat organizational structure, the American organizations are more closed and stratified as they follow more of a bureaucratic structure. There lies a high power distance and stringent hierarchical order of management.

Japanese are very much meticulous and workaholics. You can find them working beyond their office hours. They are very patriotic and social in nature. They love their country and always think about their country's growth. They always take care of their families, companies and country. They are not individualists; they think how the Japanese people will stay ahead of others. Whereas, Americans have different mindset altogether, they are very much individualist and self-reliant. They always like to dominate other people. They always feel that they are the masters and others are slaves.

Prof. Abhipsa: How has been your HR Journey in India?

Expert : In India, I worked for many companies right from Government, MNCs and private companies in India. I was fortunate to start my career as an Assistant Director. I worked as a leader from the day one. My area was into consulting. In Indian companies I have

worked in various areas like OD, training, HR system implementation, digitalization etc. I worked in steel sector, project and engineering sector, ship building sector.

The concept of Industrial Relations (IR) in eastern part of India and western part of India are quite different. Dealing with Industrial Relations issues in eastern India is very tuff.

As far as my HR journey in India is concerned; it was quite challenging and thrilling. Someone needs to become a change agent in order to bring reforms in the organization. I became a change agent in many companies while taking things as challenge. I took the risk and suffered a lot while bringing reforms in the organizations. I had never agreed with the management on such aspects which I felt is not right. I have the guts to stand up and say that this is wrong and we cannot proceed.

When I was with Tata Steel plant at Kalinga Nagar, I did not have a close door office; everybody had a free access to my office round the clock to meet me. If you are not helping local people and do not touch their hearts it will be difficult to set up a plant. You have to be part of the people and there has to be acceptability. So believe in one thing *“promise what you can do and do what you promise”*. And I did that in Kalinga Nagar. You have to build a trust among the employees and with the local people. When there was strong resistance from the local people I committed them to provide jobs. And within a month I could give them jobs after discussing with the management. We have conducted training programme with CTDC, Bhubaneswar for these people. The people were trained and working very important portfolios in Tata steel. *So, it is the connect, trust, truthfulness and approaches that count.*

Prof. Abhijit: How have you dealt with Cross-cultural issues in the organisation(s) , that you have worked?

Expert :Here, I recall my experiences working in the current American company, where I have faced problems involving black and white people. I have worked in companies where white people used to report to me. It can be read from their faces that they are hesitant to report to a black person who serves as their supervisor. But when you prove yourself and your capabilities then you are accepted by all. And we Indians are very good at proving ourselves. So, it is not your colour complexion that makes a big difference or creates any

disparity rather, one has to win the hearts and minds of the people to lead people. You need to be good and do something good for the people with honesty.

In Japan, if you want to work in the maintenance department of a car company, you have to get your hands dirty. He will open the engine, set the engine and then put it back together again. You can't say that you don't understand and don't learn things like that. Because you can't be a good manager if you don't know these techniques and don't understand the skill set.

Besides, being disciplined they are very helping in nature. I remember the first time I went to Tokyo. I was looking for my hotel's location, but the people there did not speak English. I told about five or six people in the centre of Tokyo, in a place called Shinjuku, where I have to stay, but no one could figure out what I meant. But I just asked one person who was leaving with a shopping cart full of food. He could figure out that the place is what I want. Then he walked me all the way to the hotel, set me down, and bowed to me three times.

Language is a barrier in Japan. During my work experiences, I had an interpreter with me. So that interpreter lady was used to translate my conversation to Japanese language and vice-versa. Now things are changing and Japanese people are learning English and more into international arena.

Though I was from India, Japanese people accepted me like anything. Because many times you have to forget and forgo your ego and you had to learn from them. If Japanese people started accepting you then they accept you fully. Trust building takes time but once it is built then it lasts forever. Fortunately, I was able to build that trust and bring in people led culture. For which, I received a gold medal from Toyota production system for better quality control system and people development system.

In addition to my experience at many companies at Japan, I have also worked as a consultant in a Japanese collaborated company located in India named as CEAT tyres. That company had collaboration with Toyo Engineering and we have implemented many Japanese management concepts like KAIZEN, 5S, OD, TQM into that company. We have also implemented a system of everybody taking food in one canteen. Even the Vice

President of the company used to come and stand in the queue. I remember that this company bagged the gold medal in the entire RPG group for best housekeeping.

Prof. Abhipsa: What are the HR interventions that you have innovated and initiated & how did that happen?

Expert : The innovative practices that I have initiated in Tata Steel at Kalinga Nagar were five working days in a week, an Automated Canteen, Low Floor AC bus for all employees including workmen, subsidized canteen meal at Rs.17.50 per meal from Rs.72.00 per meal.

Besides this I initiated in designing of software like booking and canceling of meals through App, swiping up of the cards (biometric punching system) twice a day both during entry and exit. In 2015, I introduced the work from home concept at Tata Steel.

I was instrumental in giving the employment opportunities to 150 displaced tribal girls, made them trained, nurtured and work in different organizations.

Prof. Abhipsa: It is well –known that employees are always skeptical about any kind of change. How do you deal with such issues?

Any change we are doing in the organisation, you need to “*communicate, communicate and communicate*”. Once you are connected with people and understand their issues, people will have no resistance to change. I remember my earlier days when I was with Essar Telecom, lot many employees were retrenched. It was I who provided outplacement opportunities for those several employees to get good employment opportunities in Essar projects and Essar Steel.

Prof. Abhipsa: The whole world is talking about sustainability. How do you relate the current HR practices in the world with the agenda of sustainability?

Expert : Digitalization is the only mantra to achieve the goal of sustainability. I ensured that there should not be any use of paper and no physical file movements. These acts will lead to reducing the usage of paper in the offices and saving the planet earth.

In one instance, I remember the time when I was travelling to Keonjhar, the entire forest was burning. That sight was heart wrenching for me. I felt like “*Jungle Jal rahahai, Mera*

Dil Jal raha Hai". Everybody should have a care and concern for saving the trees and can actually proliferate the true essence of sustainability.

Prof. Abhijit: Which of your professional stints, do you much cherish today & why?

Expert: Being honest, truthful, and speak out from the heart. You should be a human being and your approach should be human. An HR should be a coach, mentor and a counselor to the people.

Prof. Abhijit: What message would you like to give to the HR leaders and managers to face the contemporary HR issues in the organization?

Expert: An HR guy should work with all honesty. It is often believed HR persons are very diplomatic and tactical. Surprisingly, you will find 80 percent of the HR people are in that category. I believe HR deals with human resources so they need to be human and treat like human. We should not believe in fads. We need to be a role model. You need to be open, empathetic, understanding and be a part of others.

Prof. Abhijit & Prof. Abhipsa : Thank you Sir for sharing your experience and insights!

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