

Aneta Jakonis

Spółeczna Wyższa Szkoła Przedsiębiorczości i Zarządzania

Organisational Culture in Multicultural Organisations – Mexico

*Truly, the journey of discovery lies not in seeking
new landscapes but in possession of new eyes.*

[Proust, in: Kostera 2003, p. 165]

1. National culture and organisational culture

There is a lot of different definitions of the “culture”, Kroeber and Kluckhohn pointed at over 150 of them [Zbiegień-Maciąg 2002, p. 13]. Trying to define the culture in the most total and general way, it can be described as human’s creations – material and immaterial [pl.wikipedia.org] such as artefacts, knowledge, beliefs, art, norms, values, language, etc. There are different grounds of cultural appearances:

- material, which is the material dimension of cultural phenomena,
- behavioural, such as external behaviours (creating) an internal ones (reliving),
- psychological, for example: evaluation, attitudes, motives,
- axionormative: norms and values [pl.wikipedia.org].

The bare bones, the contemporary science avoids valuation of the term “culture”. This term was previously equated with the civilization and progress and even now we can still meet sometimes the valuation of the term “culture” [Kłoskowska 2007]. My use of this term is neutral and descriptive in this article, because of the underlining variety and multitude of the cultural appearances.

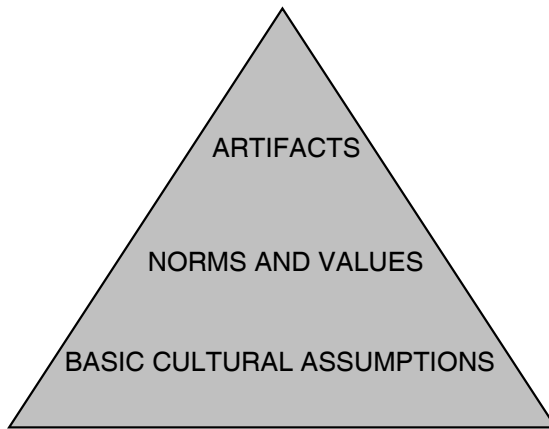
Assuming that “culture is the totality of objective products of human activity, tangible and intangible, values and practices capable of spreading socially and transmitted to the next generations” [www.eioba.pl], this is such a wide definition

that we can transfer it to the level of organizational culture and sciences of management. And we have a lot of definitions of organisational culture as well. So there is the viewpoint that organization is a culture, than the line that an organization has a culture and to the point that a culture is only a term which is made meaningful by people and it is not a thing one can explore [Zbiegień-Maciąg 2002].

The national culture influences the organisational culture very strongly. The cause of a such state can be the assumption that people create the organisational culture on the grounds of their attitude towards the environment, the sense of reality, the nature of humanity, activity and personal relations [Zbiegień-Maciąg 2002], which are the constituents of the national culture. That is one of the reasons why I was interested in the subject of my study – the international corporation with its headquarter in the USA. During the project of creating new subsidiary in Mexico, the corporation not only has enforced its worked out rules but has matched its way of acting to the local cultural environment as well. One of the conditions of the effectiveness was the knowledge of the local action's patterns and attitudes and their implementation into the main structures. It does not mean that the local culture has dominated the global organisation, but certainly we can not talk about the phenomenon as the global culture of this organisation. Generally the organisational practitioners agree that we can see global artefacts or norms, but when we step to the level of values and the basic assumptions – this is the national culture which determines what our organisational grassroots will be like.

In this article the E.H. Schein's definition of organisational culture is accepted. According to him, the organisational culture is the aggregate of "reasonable rules of conduct, discovered, established and developed by the group, used to wrestle with the problem of internal integration and external adaptation, which, thanks to good enough effect, define for the new members the way of thinking and feeling in the terms of above problems" [Zbiegień-Maciąg 2002, p. 16]. Therefore the organisational culture is perceived as existing in the human's minds and emotions, it is shared, it regulates the corporate life and it is procession in nature [compare: Schein 1986].

Figure 1. The structure of organisational culture according to E.H. Schein



Source: own work.

The artefacts are the external, explicit form of the culture and her surface reflection [www.eioba.pl]. They are visible and audible, they need to be interpreted, but at the same time they are easy to explain. Here we distinguish: linguistic artefacts (like language, stories, myths about the company's history), behavioural artefacts (like customs, ceremonies, rituals, patterns) and physical ones (like symbols, art, technology, organisation of the office, logo, design, exterior).

Values and norms define the way of acting which is acceptable and desirable. There are guidelines for behaviour, ideologies, goals, procedures, requirements and prohibitions. They are partially visible and set up, but partially concealed and unaware.

The basic cultural assumptions [Zbiegień-Maciąg 2002, p. 22] are invisible and unconscious, very often too difficult to be aware of. Here we can have: attitude to the environment, nature of reality, time and space, human nature, the nature of activity and human relations [ibidem], and the perception of the truth, motivations, attitudes, emotions [compare Stoner, Wankel 1997]. This is the deepest, the most permanent and the most difficult level to get to know, even by the creators and the participants of the organisation.

If about the main functions of organisational culture we can feature [Sułkowski 2002, p. 56]:

- understanding of the mission, goal and strategy of the organisation,
- integrity and engagement of participants,
- standardization of ways to measure and criteria for evaluation of the effects,

- brightening the way of acting,
- having common language and the conceptual instruments,
- defining group's boundaries, criterions of acceptance and rejection,
- determination of power's rules, criterions of status, avoiding power's conflicts, negative emotions, aggressive acts,
- defining the way of obtaining the authority and the rules of criticising the executives and their proposals.

I have not used the culture as a core metaphor in this article. Nevertheless this metaphor is characteristic for the interpretative perspective in which this work has been done. I have adopted the modern perspective and the assumption that the company's culture is the internal variable, connected with the effectiveness of the organisation [Kostera 2003]. I don't mind the capacity that the organisation is the culture, but in this work I have adopted the phenomenon of culture as something which is produced within a organisation, produced by executives and by works being the result of the peculiar mix of the global values and local conditions. Coming back to the E. Schein's diagnosis of organisational levels "a culture is deep and complex set of factors which can be affected by one, if it is diagnosed accurately" [Kostera 2003, p. 31]. So if about my research perspective, I am coming further away from the cultural anthropology and although I am using qualitative methodology – the ethnography "from the human's level of the view" [Kostera 2003 p. 25] I am closer to the descriptive sociology and the practise of organisational management.

The national culture has been used in this work as one of the independent variables which determines the organisational culture characteristic for the international organisation which is built in different than the aboriginal country. I do not identify the national culture with the organisational one because I consider it too abbreviated. But what is proceed from my research is that the grassroots values of the national culture (grown from tradition, historical experience etc.) are the key determinant of the organisational culture which is built by the members of the nation. In the international, multicultural organisations one has to be ready for the compromise between local and global values. If we assume that organisations are an open systems, that there is the phenomenon between the culture of organisation and the national culture called cultural diffusion and value's transmission. "In the long term we can observe the evolution of the organisational culture in the direction of the values compatible with the cultural context of the society" [Sułkowski 2002 p. 8].

2. National culture of Mexico

The United Mexican States, commonly known as Mexico covers almost 2 mln km, and it has an estimated population of over 100 million people. Mexico is the federation of 31 states and Federal District with the capital – the Mexico city –

one of the most populated city in the world [pl.wikipedia.org]. From the 90-ties of the XX century Mexico has started its dynamic economical development and from around 2000 – democratization of the political life as well. In 1821 Mexico gained independence from the Spanish hegemony and in 1823 the republic was raised. In the next few decades Mexico was involved in the wars like with USA or France and in the internal conflicts. In XX century there was one ruling party – the Institutional Revolutionary Party, which has lost the presidency in 2000 [pl.wikipedia.org].

The majority of Mexicans are Mestizos – 60 % (those of mixed European and Amerindian ancestry), 30 % are Amerindians (native American Indians) and Europeans and others. The majority of the population is concentrated in the middle of the country because of the climate (dry north and tropical south) and because of the possibility of earning. The 2/3 of the population is concentrated within the cities of Mexico, Monterrey, Guadalajara and others [pl.wikipedia.org]. Nevertheless the majority of population is poor and is living at the edge of poverty, mainly Indians and Mestizos [Onstott 2003]. A small percentage of rich Mexicans is constituted by businessmen, the owners of big farms and persons implicated in criminal activity. The crime and lack of the respect of human's rights are one of the main contemporary problems of this country. Drug trafficking, corruption in government administration and police, brutal criminal structures in the country have been the common and visible phenomena during the everyday life in this country.

Mexico has a lot of natural resources (silver, oil, coal) but not a lot of plow. The main sources of national income are the tourism and oil's export [www.naukowy.pl]. There is another important issue for the Mexican economy which are the problems of overpopulation and earning – legal and illegal immigration labour, mainly to the USA [pl.wikipedia.org].

Mexico is a culturally diverse country: there are small local communities of Indian farmers – legacy from great civilizations of Mayas and Aztecs, there are colonial Spanish towns (Spanish is a dominative language in public life). The history of powerful old civilizations is mixed in here with Spanish culture and the great power of the Roman Catholic Church. Not without the reason one can find in the Mexican museums, common symbols of the power within this country – the statues of Indian peasant, Spanish king and the bishop.

Most Mexicans perceive themselves as a religious people [pl.wikipedia.org] and one can see a common participation in the religious practices and wide use of religious artefacts in everyday life (at the work's station, as a jewellery). As well as religion, the other important value is the family and tradition. The family is the patriarchal cell, man is providing the income, woman is taking care of children and the household and very often she is working as well, especially in the poor families.

Mexico is the country of contrasts [Gołębiewski, Draga 2007], both in terms of climate conditions, touristic regions and deeply hidden Indian cottages, as well as social and economical contrast. The foreigners can see only a small part of the reality – comfortable hotels, tasty food, cheap currency, stunning wildlife are mostly the tourist attraction. Working and living in Mexico for about a half a year one can see the second face of this place – poor slums considered homes for the majority of the population, dirty streets, food shops and corners which have nothing in common with the basic European hygienic requirements, work for minimal wage, hardship of getting higher in the social structure, criminality and hidden disbelief to foreigners. These two extremes of the country define both its potential and its difficulty in taking advantage of it.

2. The profile of the organisational culture of the Mexican subsidiary of international company

I spent half a year (2009/2010) in Monterrey's suburbs in Mexico, about 200 km from the USA border. I participated in the process of setting up a new subsidiary of an international company dealing with packaging service for international customers. The company was founded in 1899 in South Carolina, USA, it has been in Europe since 1923. It is presented in following market segments: consumer business, paper tubes and cores, packaging services and other [KJ, 2010]. It treats the production based packaging as a service [Warnecke 1999]. This is a multinational enterprise [Winkler 2008], multicultural organisation, in which there are interactions between different cultural foundations (pluralism), individuals are socialized to different cultural contents (acculturation) and they are treated equally regardless their cultural origin (integration) [Winkler 2008 p. 27].

In 2009 a new project was started – to create a new subsidiary localised in the suburbs of Monterrey and responsible for the packaging of products for an international client, whose intended market was North America. After the planning phase, which was ongoing from August till October 2009, there has started realizing the hiring and adjusting of the production and office building, cooperation with international suppliers and other subsidiaries from USA, UK, Poland and Mexico. The production of packaging was to start in January 2010. By March 2010 the subsidiary achieved favourable financial results and its activity has been stabilized and prepared to the further development.

During this project I made the research by the case study method – the subject of the research was the Mexican subsidiary. I used such techniques as free interview, participatory hidden observation and the secondary materials such as procedures, documentations, marketing materials, etc. I was involved in every aspect of setting up this Mexican subsidiary, from contacts with suppliers, recruiting and selection to work on the production line [compare Doktor 1961].

The parent company has its worked out procedures, regulations, artefacts which are spreading in all factories around the world. The main rule is safety –

safety of the workers, visitors, clients etc on the shop floor. The safety equipment is required – safety glasses, shoes, highly visible jackets, prohibition of wearing jewellery on the shop floor. There are procedures and instructions about safety using of equipment, conservations, behaviour in emergency situations etc., but they are not standardized, enforced, expected and not normalised. The Quality Management System based on the norm PN EN ISO 9001:2009 is the desired but not obligatory element as well and it can be adjusted to the local conditions in different environments. And if about other areas of activity, the standardization is not far-reaching feature. The well-tried rules are used, but the new procedures according to the local requirements are set, so as the company can be defined as a highly flexible one.

Multiculturalism in researched organisation can be characterized as different practices and traditions existing next to each other in one organisation and locally differential [Winkler 2008 p. 18]. “Due to the fact that every organisation has not only exact for itself organisational climate, but also its own organisational culture which is autonomic both in terms of the culture of the country in which the organisation acts and the cultures of the countries which the participants come from – we will have to deal with the phenomenon of organisational multiculturalism when the organisation is founded as a result of the connection of two or more organisations or if the organisation has considerably autonomic subsidiaries with their own culture [Winkler 2000, p. 19].

After spending six months of working and observing this Mexican subsidiary, collecting data and analyse it, I have detailed a few categories which has been dominated in the collected data. They were highly repeatable both in the production and in the service area. I have grouped these categories into the following groups: informal communication (body language and informal relations), relations between sexes, core values/institutions (family and religion), attitude to work, price, *maniana* and contrasts.

Informal communication is very important both on the formal and informal levels and it evinces in the body language and in making informal networks. Convincing glances, smiles, handshake, shoulder slapping, jokes and lack of sketches in discussion are the base of the networking. The reliance, although restricted, is used to make the business contacts more informal. Even if about the Mexican attitude to the English speaking foreigners, which is very careful, they prefer to make the contacts more personalized and though if it is the façade, they like to have this semi informal sensation of relationship. Informal contacts and elations are important when for example there is the possibility for employment. Than people’s reaction is quick and pressurized on recommendation for their families and friends [materials from the meeting 27/10/2009, recruiting 09/11/2009]. For that matter people in the work environment integrate quickly and easily, cooperate in informality and free-floating but respectful atmosphere [observations from 13/12/2009].

Relations between sexes depict the basic cultural assumption of Latin America: patriarchal society and social inequalities. This relationship is visible in the interactions with the representative of other cultures as well. It has been depicted by my observations and interpretations made afoot: “women show far-reaching solidarity with me as a female – smile, handshake, informal nonverbal communications comments such as “you must feel funnily in here, guys themselves and you alone...?” If about men, especially older, they show the distance. In relation to coeval and the prominent men they show the coquetry, dally, act passively and subordinated, on the business ground of course. Men treat me as a daughter or the sexual object, not directly of course. They show caring attitudes and they can deliver what I am asking for, but it can be felt that they do not treat me as a partner, not as much to reckon with my opinions, they show rather courtesy in their behaviour. They carry out my instructions if behind schedule and they are not happy when I point out to them or force them to finish their work. Men on the whole behave as a partners to the other men, If they get to know each other better – they begin to act in more informal, social and open way. They show to each other the far-reaching solidarity” [02.11.2009].

The basic Mexican values and institutions, which they cultivate, which they are talking about and which artefacts are visible in their every day lives are – the family and the religion. During the talks and interviews they frequently chat about families, children, parents, sibling etc. Their families are very important for them, it is the element which can define you. The catholic religion is the second inevitable element of their everyday. Images of the saints next to the computer, crosses worn as a necklaces, the altar with the God’s Mother at the entrance to the factory or situated in the touristic attractions are the common artefacts. I have seen Mexicans as very religious and familial people. They represent it through artefacts and symbols. One could be tempted to transfer their attitude to these values for the company ground, into the organisation. We could think about something as religious metaphor – organisation seen as a church in a sense of community [compare to: Morgan 1997]. Dedication to an employer, which can be caused by high unemployment as well as by the need of fixture, loyalty and the pride of being the part of company as well as the part of the nation, are the declared values. The further research can be done if the real values tie in with the declared ones.

Attitude to work is a category which spans both the attitudes to the employee, organisation as the work and employer’s duties. It was researched by recruitment interviews with the standardised list of searched information and by participant hidden observation. Mexicans care for work and its is professionally very attractive to work for big foreign company. Especially if we notice the high level of unemployment and the young ambitious people speaking some English and searching for a opportunities. If it’s about declarative attitudes, Mexicans are presenting themselves as a hard-working, ambitious, honest and dedicated to the

employee, responsible, success orientated: “I will wear the shirt with your logo with pride” [recruiting and selection: 13/11/2009]. When they apply for a job, they are not presented themselves as a partner, rather as a subordinated, they try to show themselves from the best aspects. Although the language barrier makes the effective communication harder very often. Potential employers, especially applying for the managerial positions, are very well educated. They have good technical knowledge and longer or shorter managerial practise and they have the understanding of such tools as: 5S, “kaizen, kanban”, lean production etc. which is not very common for example on Polish ground.

But if we are coming to the work environment, the effectiveness of the tasks is getting to be the matter of opinion. Despite the cooperation and the high level of integration (“the team has private laptops which has been provided by one of the workers from his private resources, they are working late hours” [04.01.2010]), the teams’ effectiveness is very low. The tasks are completed with delays, there is no self-initiative, if there is failure nobody wants to take the responsibility. Nobody feels guilty as if the failure would not be anything noticeable or anything you really want to notice.

According to the law, the week of work has 48 hours in Mexico, so people work generally 6 days a week. Nevertheless administrative employees, office workers and especially managers work much later hours, about 20 (unscheduled) hours of overtime a week. When I asked them why they are staying late at work, even if there is no need for that, they are surprised by my question and not giving me any rational answers. It looks like overtime is the unwritten norm for the managers in these culture, the natural and expected evidence of engagement and appreciation. It shows that Mexicans think that they are evaluated due to their engagement and the amount of time they are giving to the employee, not due to effectiveness of their work.

A few people who I spoke to, told me that Mexican employees can claim a lot – HR people gave me the advice to control the staff strongly and be quite strict with people. As one of the Mexican directors said: “the more you are giving to them the more they think they should, they must be kept short” [15.12.2009].

Another interesting phenomenon is the low regulations about employment in the research company in Mexico, which one do not exist in the subsidiaries in Poland or America. The person who is to be employed on the permanent contract, has to go firstly through the specific medical examinations. If the potential employee is diagnosed with the medical condition, for example obesity or with high blood pressure, these are considered as the “obstacles regarding the fitness to do work” and as a consequence they are not hired. These rules are very strict and they exclude from the work environment even person who could be approved to be valid to work in USA or Europe without any doubt. On speaking with the HR department representative about the explanation of that

situation, I received the answer that the reason for such politics is to protect the company against financial problems due to potential financial claims towards the company by the people whose health conditions could be exacerbated (!).

The most irritating issue, from the European point of view, is the phenomenon I call *mañana*. This is defaulting if about the terms, delays and waiting for the finalising even simple tasks in the unspecified future. *Mañana* (read: maniana) means “tomorrow” [www.talktalk.co.uk], in Spanish “tomorrow, morning, morn” [www.geozeta.pl]. This word means as well the specific way of behaviour of Latin America’s habitants, understanding of time, specific relationships. It means that its main characteristic is subjectivity and relativity, lack of haste and very liberal attitude to the time. *Manana* means tomorrow but it is not exact tomorrow. This is tomorrow in the unspecified future, so it can happen in one or in a couple days or in just some future. The answer for the question: when our order will be delivered? When do you finish this job? etc is: *manana*. It means more or less – in the future, so for the European it is no answer at all. There is nothing like such statement in our restricted and precise understanding of the time. Now I can write about this issue with the sense of humour, but being in the centre of this experience – it was one of the best exercises of patience and calmness for me.

The realisation of plans to a timetable seems to be challenging within Mexico, converting decisions into effective orders and the realisation of the results seems to be problematic [27.10.2009]. The negotiations about the contract of renting the building last 3 months: “contract is still unsigned, Mexican side is impatient and retard work at the factory’s adjustment, do not invest all its power and funds, so we have delay about adjusting the office space. Tenant is waiting for the acceptance of signing the contract by the highest management who seems to not understand that delay in making this decisions causes disaffection of many people engaged in the project” [10.12.2009]. *Maniana* made us really frustrated: if some problem occurred, something stand in the way of acting, than everybody would wait for the solution which was to be made by itself. Nobody wanted to make any binding decisions and be responsible for the effect, nobody thought to react in any way. Everybody was waiting when the situation is going to be fixed by itself. One can tell that Mexican *maniana* is contradictory to Japanese “on time in full” [www.glossaryofmanufacturing.com].

The price is next interesting category, especially from the foreigner’s point of view. The price means that everything has its price or one can have everything what he/she wants but it will cost “properly”. Mexico is mostly expensive for the foreigners speaking English as a core language. As the director of the estate agency said: “there is nothing for free in this country” [05.11.2009]. Renting the production space for example, tenant receives empty wall, floor and the ceiling. And he has to take care of such additional as water, electricity, anti-firing system, security or cleaning by himself. An it raises the cost up twice or more, so

property in Mexico are not subjectively cheap any more. The argument of local entrepreneurs for that situation is the statement that the cost of the building could be relatively expensive but workforce is still relatively cheaper (!) what is disputable if about the final cost as well.

Negotiations about the price are long and painful process. The contract of hiring the production space was negotiated 3 months. Tenant expected to have all the basic installations in the building and not higher height of the rent that in Europe. After cottoning on the cultural reality, he expected only the price to be "fair" and to get in it as much as he can. Negotiations were running from the position of strength for a long time, both sides politely but toughly did not want to make concessions. Stripped off plate technique – calm but inductile, continuous, monotonous repetition of the tenant's requirements has taken effect. Probably patience is not the strongest side of Mexican negotiators. Nobody wanted to talk openly about the financial issues as well: profit, what is the real mark-up, how much would they earn. It seems to be a taboo topic – Mexican businessman affirms that he is making a loss, even he owns thousands acres of land and driving new model of prestigious car. Informal contacts and reliance is rather deceptive and at the bottom there is business distrust and readiness to make as much profit as possible and leaving the other side happy with what it got.

Mexico is the country where at least for foreigners there is nothing for free. Even the basic service is not basic when the additional payment like "tip" is seen to be expected and inevitable element in all kinds of services. The same situation is into organisation, when the pace of work is too slow, additional payment activates people very efficiently. Money seems to be the basic motivational factor in the effort to work.

The tip is an unwritten requirement from the client. There is unwritten acceptable amount of the tip – not less than the lowest daily rate – about 50 pesos (4 \$). If the tip is given, one can count on not only the interest but on courtesy as well and the problems are solved immediately like fixing the TV in the hotel room. It looks like the tips are inevitable part of Mexican economic system, they are seem to be the part of basic, free income for the worker and huge saving for the employee, at least in the service sector.

Contrasts in Mexico seem to be its characteristic. On the one side there are three social sources of the power: state power, church and tradition, which are upholding promoted national values, on the other side – there is omnipresent corruption, police on the payroll of drug's mafia and criminality.

Contrasts in organisations are visible on the example of division of three social classes: lower, middle and higher which differ if about income, education, access to resources and the style of living. During the talk with the quality manager from international company who works in Mexico for a year I have been told that the social inequality in Mexico is huge, especially between workers and managers. They have significantly different motivations to work as well, as the

hired temporarily workers work for the basic money and cater to the basic needs of their families, as the managers work additionally for the prestige and adhesion to the higher social class [compare: Maslow 2006]. Differences about salaries are very high and dependent on the place of living. Monterrey is considered to be the best and the wealthiest work market in the country right now.

Internal contrasts are seen in the organisational life as well, for example in the procedure's field. If the safety requirements in the factory are not met, the Mexican government can even close the factory. But during the project phase many of Mexican subcontractor's employees did not obey basic safety rules. They did not use safety equipment during dangerous work, do not care for security of unsafe installations which can cause death etc.

3. Summary

Summarising this short characteristic of the organisational culture of organisation which has been built in Mexico, I would like to conceptualise it by some theoretical terms. This presented culture can be defined as:

- pragmatic: there are basic norms kept, as time of work, safety requirements but at the same time there is a lot of elasticity. Leaders promote professional knowledge, task orientated attitudes, individual experience and group wisdom (by such techniques as a brain storms) [compare: Zbiegień-Maciąg 2002],
- strong: with stable structure, unwritten rules about effectiveness, requirement of competency, and high level of involvement from the personnel, high quality of products and sharing the common sense of success [compare: Zbiegień-Maciąg 2002],
- moderately protransactional: the effectiveness of negotiations depends on references from the third command and on the informal relations. They are direct, long-lasting and the lawyers are engaged as well. The partnership is mixed here with the formalisation [compare: Gesteland 2000],
- collective: cooperation orientated, internally integrated, with a lot of national solidarity [compare: Humpden-Turner, Trompenaars 2003], but the collectivity here is more about internal interactions of the people than the team work,
- polychronic: people are more important than terms, punctuality or harmonograms, time is not so strictly watched [compare: Gesteland 2000].

Simultaneously I want to underline that there is not such phenomenon as a global culture in the researched organisation. Despite a few norms and rules which has been set up at the beginning, the internal life of the organisation constituted around the values characteristic for the national Mexican culture and the attitudes of people raised in this country. This can be the characteristic of the researched organisation, which one lets people grow up and sustain local values and different internal realities within the organisation around the word.

Abstract

The article presents the organisational culture of a Mexican subsidiary of international packaging company. The shown data was collected during a half year stay in Mexico and it was gathered by observation, interviews and secondary sources. The main subject of this study was the subsidiary of the American production company, the formation of its organisational culture and the influence of the national culture on the basic values of the Mexican workers. The article presents the conclusions in this range in regards to the most interesting characteristics.

In the beginning the definition of organisational culture has been presented, then the influence of the national culture has been described and the business behaviours of the Mexicans has been shown. At the end of the article the chosen typologies of cultures are summarised and their connection to this case study have been presented.

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