

Should Indians be Mere Copycats?

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I was recently taking some sessions in a training program on leadership meant for practicing executives. The objective of the program was to make the participants better leaders so that they could take their followers to places not even dreamt earlier. One of the participants was not an executive interested in enhancing his leadership capabilities, but a trainer who had come to the program to obtain materials for copying. He took down every word that was said, and even the examples that were cited, thereby taking significant steps towards the goal of becoming a perfect copycat. This was not the first time I had come across such people in my training sessions. If we learn what others before us have done, and modify the learning to suit our basic nature, that should probably be an effective means; but will being a mere copycat take us far?

Extending this line of thinking to management, can a mere imitation of Western management practices by Indian managers result in superior performance? Geert Hofstede in his article "Motivation, leadership, and organization: Do American theories apply abroad?" (*Organizational Dynamics*, Summer 1980) questioned the extent to which "theories developed in one country and reflecting the cultural boundaries of that country apply to other countries" (p. 50). He defined culture as the collective mental programming of people in an environment and claimed that it has become crystallized in the institutions these people have built together: their family structures, educational structures, religious organizations, associations, forms of government, work organizations, law, literature, settlement patterns, buildings, and even scientific theories. All of these reflect common beliefs that derive from the culture (p. 43). When some of the beliefs that are part of Indian culture are fundamentally different from those on which the Western management prescriptions are based, does it make any sense at all to simply imitate the practices of the Western world?

Take for example, the Western model of motivation. Almost all human resource practices in India including compensation and reward systems are based on that model. There is evidence to show that such a wholesale imitation is probably not conducive to improving corporate performance. The Western assumption that

individuals are solely driven by their individual rights and personal needs may not be very relevant for India. Indians consider discharging their duties to be more important than doing as they wish. Duty is conduct that maintains order and balance in an otherwise fluid universe. What is most important is meeting one's social obligations toward relevant others such as family members, relatives, friends, and even strangers. Hence, duty within an organization is interpreted as appropriate role behavior towards others, like respecting and obeying superiors, and loving and caring for juniors and dependents (J.B.P. Sinha, 2000, "*Patterns of Work Culture*," Sage, pp. 29-30). Human resource practices in India should therefore revolve around the various duties of employees and how best to help employees discharge those duties.

S.K. Chakraborty ("*Wisdom leadership*," 1999, Wheeler, pp. 158-160) claimed that emphasis on duty is perhaps the natural corollary of the Indian temper which has always seen the individual in the context of the whole—both societal and cosmic. Not just living off, but living for the whole, without contradicting individual perfection, has been the persistent Indian ideal. Duty-based modeling of social relationships has therefore, evolved as a practical scheme to fulfill this ideal. Egoistic individualism, on the contrary, can only result in pitting the individual as an adversary of society. Rights imply an exchange process whose direction is from others unto us. Duties, on the other hand, reverse the flow in terms of from us unto others. The concept of duty is one of the basic pillars of Indian culture. An Indian is born with several debts to others, and the purpose of human existence is to evolve into something higher by discharging one's obligations or duties toward those various beings. Human behavior in organizations could therefore be best managed by providing a conducive environment for such fulfillment of obligations.

Being a copycat can never enable us to bring out our best potential. Knowing what others do is different, and simply imitating them blindly is different. It might be useful to know the causes and effects of human behavior according to Western management models, but without understanding the moderating role of culture, such knowledge might be nearly useless. Corporate India cannot afford to ignore the basic assumptions of Indian culture like duty-orientation, if it is interested in achieving organizational excellence. It is time we gave more attention to empirically testing whether Western management prescriptions work in India, before embracing them without any modification. One person's food could even be another person's poison.