



Merging management ideals in Swedish IT offshoring

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ABSTRACT

This article explores management ideals in transnational business relations by drawing on interviews with 18 Swedish managers involved in managing IT offshoring from Sweden to India. Drawing on a critical discourse framework the analysis highlights how the managers interviewed discursively constructed the meaning of ideal management and tried to merge their familiar Swedish management style with the transnational business context, using different discursive practices. The Swedish management ideal was understood as highly context sensitive and the subject position constructed within the discourse was not unproblematic to assume outside of the Swedish business context. Instead, according to the managers interviewed, their management practices were inefficient in the transnational business context in which they were now operating. The article advances the discussion of contemporary management by examining how managers negotiate management ideals when faced with the challenges of effective management of offshore IT sourcing relationships. The managers argued for flexible management strategies that merged the Swedish management style together with the Indian business setting. Even if this entailed abandoning key aspects of the Swedish management ideal it was understood as necessary for securing and maximizing business efficiency.

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1. Introduction

Management ideals describe the qualifications, skills, competence and conduct that characterize successful organizational management (Peterson, 2007). They express what counts as “good management” (Gherardi & Murgia, 2014: 691), provide guidelines for action and prescribe what issues in the workplace that a manager is supposed to deal with—what problems they are required to solve and how they are expected to solve them (Varje, Anttila, & Väänänen, 2013). Organizational ideals label actions, behaviour and practices as “right” or “wrong” and therefore have a legitimizing function (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994). As a result, management ideals exercise disciplinary power because they influence, shape and constrain management performances (Jørgensen, Jordan, & Mitterhofer, 2012). Moreover, managers’ understandings of what they should be like and how they are expected to perform so as to be identified as professional and successful managers determine how they describe management work (Gertsen & Söderberg, 2010). Representations of management ideals thus appear in managers’ self-reports of working conditions, challenges, strategies and practices (Smith, Andersen, Ekelund, Graversen, & Ropo, 2003).

Management ideals do not evolve “naturally” in organizations. They are created, maintained and reproduced in social processes characterized by ideologies, power relations, ideas and values (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994). The ideas of what constitutes ideal management reflect contemporary images of management and can shift depending on the arrival of new management theories (Katila & Eriksson, 2013). The charismatic leader, the transformational manager and the participative leadership approach are examples of models that make a case for different management ideals (Madsen & Albrechtsen, 2008). Management ideals also vary due to “the conceptual foundation of the organization” (Allan, Gordon, & Iverson, 2006: 43) referring to how work is arranged, power exerted and decisions made (Holvino, 2010). Bureaucratic organizations for example promote a management ideal fundamentally different from the ideal dominating in team-based organizations (Peterson, 2005). To sum up, while management ideals concern personal authority, status and identity they also legitimize relations of inequality and privilege in the workplace (Collinson & Hearn, 1994).

This article explores management ideals in transnational business relations by drawing on interviews with 18 Swedish managers involved in managing IT offshoring from Sweden to India. The topic of outsourcing and offshoring has started to attract academic interest (Lacity, Khan, & Willcocks, 2009) although the research literature on the organization and management of

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offshore outsourcing of IT services is still limited (Gannon, Wilson, & Powell, 2014). This article advances the discussion of contemporary management by examining how managers negotiate management ideals when faced with the challenges of effective management of offshore IT sourcing relationships. Drawing on a critical discourse framework the analysis highlights how the managers interviewed discursively constructed the meaning of ideal management and tried to merge their familiar Swedish management style with the new transnational business context, using different discursive practices.

The article is structured as follows. The next section describes the theoretical framework and previous research. After that the methodology and the empirical data is described. The subsequent section presents the findings and analyses. The article concludes with a concise discussion of the main findings.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Culture-specific management ideals

Varje et al. (2013: 248) emphasize the importance of national case studies that focus on organizational-level representations of management ideals because different countries have “unique historical characteristics that need to be taken into consideration”. Management ideals and leadership ideologies are usually perceived as culture-specific and intertwined with more general aspects of national culture (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2006). Nation/state and “national cultural traits” are categorising principles that often appear in management theory as well as in organizational practices (Vaara & Tienari, 2011). Previous research has for example described a “global variation in management styles” with some of the most evident differences appearing between North American, European and Pacific Asian styles (Smith et al., 2003: 492).

The Nordic nations have also been discerned as constituting a region characterized by unique management styles with Nordic managers relying more on subordinates and less on formal rules than in other regions (Smith et al., 2003). Even a specific “Swedish management style” has been identified and depicted as typically “soft”, referring to the lack of open supervision and control, absence of explicit orders and the importance of trust in that the employees take responsibility for getting the task done (Gustavsson, 1995; Styhre, Börjesson, & Wickenberg, 2006). Holmberg and Åkerblom (2006: 308) conclude in their study: “the notion of a Swedish leadership style is still meaningful and valid as a device for a better understanding of leadership efforts and cross-cultural interaction”. They highlight several elements in preferred leadership style that are perceived as Swedish and as expressions of the Swedish national culture, such as; participative decision-making; collaborative team orientation; conflict aversion; strong focus on interrelations and change orientation; integrity; inspirational; and visionary (Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2006). This is a management ideal that has developed within an organizational culture characterized by equality, consensus-orientation, co-operative working methods, conflict avoidance and teamwork (Styhre et al., 2006) and a national context where “Swedishness” refers to cultural values such as equality and democracy (Kalonaitye, 2010).

As a contrast to the Swedish organizational culture, the dominating Indian management ideology has been described as characterized by hierarchical structures, bureaucratic mentality and patriarchal management-employee relationships (Upadhy, 2009). Pelligrini, Scandura, Terri, and Jayaraman (2010) use the concept ‘paternalistic’, referring to managers who “take a personal interest in the workers’ off-the-job lives and attempt to promote workers’ personal welfare while offering career-related support”

(Pelligrini et al., 2010: 392). This is a management ideal that entails that managers assume the role of parents, with combined control and benevolence, and an expectation of loyalty and devotion from the employees in the role of grown up children (Salminen-Karlsson, 2015). There is thus a power inequality and distance between management and employees (Gertsen & Zølner, 2012). The paternalistic management ideal is described to agree with a collectivist culture, prominent in India, where belonging to a group shapes the individual’s life course by offering both protection and opportunities in exchange to loyalty and conformity (Pelligrini et al., 2010).

2.2. Critical perspective on culture

Although still a popular approach among organizational theorists, practitioners and actors, Hearn (2004) emphasizes the dangers of conducting research that reifies a notion of culture as a fixed, unified and homogeneous set of organizational values. Instead, a critical perspective can reveal the complexities of organizational culture and conceptualise it as diverse, differentiated and shifting (Hearn, 2004). Such a critical perspective can be used when investigating cross-cultural contexts in transnational enterprises where different organizational cultures meet and organizational actors from different cultures and nations collaborate and work together. A critical perspective on culture is particularly useful to understand offshoring conflicts that often have been explained with reference to lack of fit between different organizational cultures (Blomqvist, Peterson, & Dhar-Bhattacharjee, 2015; Brannen & Doz, 2010).

Previous research shows that in an organizational setting characterized by cross-cultural encounters, employee resistance can take the form of stereotypes, cross-national comparisons and promotion of national interest (Vaara & Tienari 2011). Van Marrewijk (2010) studied offshoring of IT services from the Netherlands to India in four multinational corporations, and examined how both Dutch front offices and Indian back offices used cultural differences as strategic resources in arguments when they competed to gain control over projects, client contacts and high-end jobs. The Dutch employees for example emphasized their Indian colleagues’ lack of planning capability, their failure to reach deadlines, and, more generally, their lack of high-quality organizational processes. Cohen and El-Sawad (2007) studied employees’ experiences of captive offshoring in a financial services company with offices in the UK and India and analysed how employees in both settings accounted for cultural differences to position themselves in relation to one another. Their study identified language issues, work ethics and notions of competence as central in these accounts. The UK employees infantilized their Indian colleagues as a way to regain a feeling of control in a situation characterized by insecurity and vulnerability caused by organizational change and a threat that they would lose their jobs to India (Cohen & El-Sawad 2007). Also managers use the construction of national differences as a strategic resource (Van Marrewijk, 2010). Tienari, Vaara, and Meriläinen (2010: 47) explain that managers in their study discursively constructed a national identity as protection “in the insecure contemporary business environment”.

Researchers have used several different analytical concepts to understand how individuals and groups deliberately and strategically negotiate, construct and interpret national-cultural differences to achieve particular objectives in business relationships characterized by asymmetrical power relations. One example of such a concept is ‘ethnicisation’, used by Van Marrewijk (2004) to refer to “the process of social construction of an organizational identity based upon a notion of shared national identity and shared cultural values” (Van Marrewijk, 2004: 304). Taking the view of local managers in Thailand, Mexico and Israel, Shimoni and

Bergmann (2006) use the post-colonial concept of 'hybridization' to highlight how these managers retained the local managerial culture rather than simply absorbing the standard Western practices promoted by the global corporations they worked for, with headquarters in Sweden and the US (Shimoni & Bergmann, 2006: 76). In a later article Shimoni (2008) shows how these local managers used different hybridization styles to integrate the corporations' management forms with their own management values and practices. Tienari et al. (2010) use Michael Billig's (1995) concept 'banal nationalism' to analyse how national identities have been constructed in multinational corporations. Banal nationalism refers to the all-pervading shared sense of national belonging amongst people, not least in the so-called established nations in 'the West' (Billig, 1995: 6). 'Banal' implies that nationalism not exclusively takes very visible and extreme expressions, but also concerns "how the construct of nation is often reproduced and accepted in everyday life, rendered possible by mundane habits of language, thought and symbolism" (Tienari et al., 2010: 40).

To sum up, a transnational business context brings questions about managerial ideals to the fore, as these ideals can become sources of power struggles and conflicts. While management ideals reflect organizational culture they also actively and strategically contribute to establishing cultural differences. The concepts 'ethnification', 'hybridization' and 'banal nationalism' facilitate a better understanding of transnational business relations and cross-cultural cooperation and project management. By drawing on this previous research the article analyses how constructions of management ideals intersect with notions of shared national identity and cultural values and how they are used strategically in order to re-instate a dominant position in a transnational business relationship.

3. Research design, methods and empirical context

This article draws on interviews with 18 Swedish managers engaged in the global industry of IT offshoring. They were leading business processes in two different IT firms employing professional IT workers with a higher education background in Sweden and India. The 18 interviews were made within the framework of a research project focusing the so-called "soft" issues in management of ICT offshoring from Sweden to India. One of the IT firms was a smaller start-up and one was a well-established large multinational corporation. Both had their headquarters outside India. They are given the pseudonyms Centech and Betacom for reasons of anonymity and the names of the interviewees are also left out for that reason. Centech is a small start-up with development offices in India and sales offices in Sweden and in two more European countries. They have around 70 employees and 30 of these are employed at their Indian office. Betacom is a subsidiary of a large multinational IT company headquartered in Europe and managed by the European CEO from distance and during frequent visits. They acquired a previously Swedish-owned company, and by this acquisition the Swedish employees and managers, over 3000 people, became part of a global arena, with collaborators in different countries and an order to offshore some development work to the company's offices in India. The number of employees in the company's Indian offices is about 5000 and they serve clients in different European countries and the USA. They do program development, IT support and some business process work.

There were thus considerable differences between the companies. Betacom, because of its size, had more structured policies and processes and the management in the Indian office was practically all Indian. The transnational collaborations that were studied took place between team members and team managers in the Swedish and Indian offices of the company, and only rarely directly with the customers, who mostly communicated with the company's

Swedish offices. Centech was more directly managed by European managers and project leaders and the developers in India communicated directly with customers. Most of the interviewed managers were stationed in Sweden, making more or less frequent visits, or longer stays, to their offices in Bangalore, Chennai and Kochi in India. Although for some, most contacts with India, sometimes on daily basis, took place using different web-based information and communication tools.

The analysis in this article draws on a total of 18 interviews with Swedish informants in management positions in the two companies: seven men and eight women in Betacom and three men in Centech. Each interview lasted between 45 min to an hour and a half and they were recorded. All interviews were transcribed in Swedish and the author has translated the quotations in this paper from Swedish into English. The interviews were semi-structured and an interview guide was used, focusing on how the initial cooperation between Sweden and India started; how the managers put together a team to manage and deliver the projects; initial phases of the project and challenges in setting up communication procedures; the cultural differences that affected everyday work; failures and successes in communication and delivery, and; differences in organizational cultures between Sweden and India.

3.1. Critical discourse perspective on management ideals

The analysis in this article is inspired by a critical discourse approach. Using a discourse analytical framework means focusing on how particular statements constitute specific social relations and produce different versions of reality (Bacchi, 2005). This is a methodological approach that does not focus management practices or "what is 'really' going on in the organization", but instead addresses managers' interpretations and identifications and "the very fact that the organization gives rise to these kinds of interpretations and identifications" (Tienari et al., 2010: 46). Here, discourse refers to a pattern of related statements that reflect and reproduce value systems, ideologies and beliefs, thereby producing specific perspectives, definitions, meanings and positions (Breit, 2014). A discourse privileges the dominant culture while marginalizing other organizational experiences and so becomes a medium through which organizational power relations are maintained and reproduced (Aaltio-Marjosola, 1994). However, critical discourse theory recognizes that organizations are sites of discursive struggles with multiple and fragmented discourses (Kemp, Keenan, & Gronow, 2010). As such, organizations provide actors with choices concerning the discourses on which they can draw and this produces resistance, change and instability (Alvesson & Kärreman, 2000). Critical discourse theory reveals how individuals engage in these discursive activities, use discourse as a resource and access different discourses to generate new meanings that help or hinder the enactment of particular strategies (Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000). Managers can appropriate different corporate management discourses about management qualities in order to legitimate power status quo and maintain their managerial dominance (Tienari et al., 2010). The discursive construction of organizational success can for example produce specific subject positions and portray the narrator in relation to other actors (Vaara, 2002).

Subject positions are idealized ways of being an employee or a manager constituted by discourses (Katila & Eriksson, 2013). The study of subject positions is important because these positions, if adopted, influence people's behaviour, practices and attitudes and involve judgments about non-desirable behaviours (Metcalfe & Linstead, 2003). If organizational actors accept subject positions they can produce authoritative narratives in support for the discourses, while if they resist the subject position and the discourse they can produce counter narratives and enact

alternative ones (Phillips, Sewell, & Jaynes, 2008). A third possibility is for organizational actors to merge new subject positions with already existing positions and produce narratives that modify the discourse and create new meaning (Peterson, 2005).

In order to analyse interviews with Swedish managers, this article adopts a modified version of a discursive model of strategic change developed by discourse scholars (Phillips et al., 2008). This model combines three levels of discourse analysis. The first level concerns the production of texts and the detailed study of patterns in language use (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). This initial phase of analysis focuses narratives as everyday practices of meaning making (Bacchi, 2005). The analytical process therefore started with a careful reading of the interview transcripts and a systematic examination of the narratives about managing in an IT offshoring context. The second level of analysis deals with internal organizational discourses that frame behaviour and actions in organizations (Phillips et al., 2008). This phase of the analysis involves identifying discourses that produce different subject positions (Vaara, 2002). The analytical process thus continued with investigating how the subject position “ideal manager” was discursively produced in the managers’ narratives (Breit, 2014). The third and last level of analysis situates narratives within the wider social context and identifies how discourses outside of the organization, so called ‘grand’ (or ‘mega’) discourses, are invoked in support of the production of knowledge and meaning inside of the organization (Hardy et al., 2000). Grand discourses provide a meaningful broader context for organizational discursive activities and are long-range, historically situated, standardized and more or less universal ways of referring to and constituting a certain phenomenon (Alvesson & Karreman, 2000). Examples of grand discourses, relevant for studies of management ideals, are for instance ideas about management in the Western world, business performance, career, managerialism, globalization but also corporate social responsibility and diversity (Kemp et al., 2010).

To sum up, the article presents the results from a critical discourse analysis of managers’ narratives about “ways of being an ideal manager”. The discursive approach allows for an exploration of how these narratives draws on discourses both inside and outside of the organizational contexts to create managerial subjects positions.

4. Results and analysis

4.1. Swedish management ideal

When asked about their management ideology, the managers interviewed drew on a discourse about a specific and distinct Swedish management style. Their definition of ideal management was infused by what previous research has described as typical Swedish management practices and business values (cf. Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2006). In line with this, participative decision-making was emphasized by several of the managers as an important part of their management practices: “Most often we make collective decisions” (Centech, manager 3). One of the managers described that she used a Swedish management style, which she defined in terms of “management by means” and a way of “managing bottom up” (Betacom, manager 9). She further explained that no Swedish managers “commands and says: ‘Do this!’ On the contrary” (Betacom, manager 9). This informal, non-hierarchical and “soft” management style necessarily includes a communicative approach: “Swedish managers listen to everybody before we make a decision” (Betacom, manager 15). In order to facilitate this kind of decision-making, absent of explicit orders, the creation of a collaborative team-orientation was also an important managerial tool:

We have team meetings where we include the whole team, not only the managers, and communicate directly with the employees. It makes the employees feel that we see them and appreciate them. (Betacom, manager 12)

This means that the Swedish management style includes practices that “make room for everybody and give responsibilities to them” (Betacom, manager 9). According to one of the managers this communicative and participative management ideal facilitates an open dialogue and an informal relationship between the managers and the employees:

In Sweden, the manager is just like one of the colleagues. You don’t have that great respect for the boss. If you think that the boss is wrong you speak your mind immediately. (Betacom, manager 3)

The management ideal that the informants described as typical for the Swedish business setting encourages, but also requires, a certain behaviour and mind-set from the employees. It is a management ideal that assumes that the employees are autonomous and self-sufficient, independent, ambitious and self-assertive, efficient and business-minded: “Our employees are used to doing things from start to finish and be involved in the whole process” (Betacom, manager 7). An ideal manager thus delegates responsibilities and promotes self-management and self-sufficient employees: “Swedes [Swedish employees] handle freedom with responsibility exceptionally well” (Centech, manager 3). One of the informants explained how this mind-set could manifest itself in the employees’ behaviour: “If my manager tells me to do something, and I’m a Swede, then I will do it. Because it’s the culture” (Betacom, manager 6). This should not be interpreted as if Swedish employees always follow orders but rather that they are understood to work independently after the manager provides them with some initial guidelines. Another Betacom manager described in a similar manner how the mind-set of the Swedish employees impacted on managerial behaviour, eliminating the need for them to “micro-manage” the employees: “It’s enough [for us managers] to give a vague instruction [to the employees]” (Betacom, manager 15).

This way of managing also presupposes that trust exists in the relationship between managers and employees (cf. Gustavsson, 1995; Styhre et al., 2006): “They [the employees] can interrupt and suggest things. And I think it’s all about trust and that they feel that we listen to their viewpoints” (Betacom, manager 14). The managers thus trust their employees to an extent that minimizes the need for managerial supervision and guidance of the employees. Moreover, the employees trust their managers to treat them in an unbiased and fair way: “It’s all about respecting principles of equality. No matter what rank or position you have in the company, we treat everybody the same” (Betacom, manager 12). The managers also established trust by keeping the employees informed about business policies and strategies: “We have a Swedish management style, which means that they [the employees] trust what we say, because that’s how we run our company” (Centech, manager 2).

Applying a critical discourse framework to the analysis of the narratives about the Swedish management ideal reveals how these narratives constituted a shared sense of belonging, a feeling of togetherness and management identities that were infused by banal nationalism (Billig, 1995). The subject positions created through the narratives about the management ideals situated them geographically and socially not only within their specific organization but also within a perceived Swedish national culture. That the managers identified with this Swedish management ideal and assumed the subject position produced within this discourse is

reflected in how they continuously used the pronouns “I”, “me”, “our” and “we” in their narratives:

Some things we take for granted in Sweden. Our company culture is based on that if I give you an assignment, then you'll do it and you let me know if you run into problems. [. . .] If we don't hear from you, then you will deliver 100%. Otherwise you will let us know that you need help. (Betacom, manager 1)

The critical discourse analysis also reveals that this ideal both reproduces and draws on the Grand Discourse of Business (cf. Phillips et al., 2008). This discourse is a system of shared meaning about capitalist organizational logics that produce business and administrative tools used to guide effective decisions that accomplish organizational goals and financial success (cf. Hardy et al., 2000). At the core of the Swedish management ideal is thus an organizational ideology about achieving business rationality, economic efficiency and corporate profit through employee performance, entrepreneurialism, individualism, independence and competitiveness (cf. Tukiainen, 2014).

However, it is worth noting that the Swedish management ideal was not only praised because it was viewed as superior in creating efficient work processes in the organization. It was also ascribed an ideological underpinning concerning creating an enjoyable work environment for the employees (cf. Alvesson & Empson, 2008):

We believe in, no matter culture, that if we give people responsibility and stimulate them, then they will enjoy going to work. We still believe in that. (Centech, manager 2)

The management ideal, understood as typically Swedish, was described as uncontested, unproblematic, successful and efficient in achieving business goals in the Swedish business setting that the managers were used to operate in because, as they explained, the Swedish employees had adapted their behaviour to the expectations on self-management and self-assurance. However, when these managers became responsible for managing offshoring of IT services from Sweden to India their business setting changed, which had consequences for their understanding of ideal management practices.

4.2. Managing an Indian workforce

Managing IT offshoring to India was described as a challenge that presented the managers interviewed with new managerial issues that they were required to deal with. One of the main issues mentioned concerned managing Indian employees, who were described as unfamiliar with Swedish management practices and strategies which resulted in some clashes: “They have had real problems with the Swedish [management] style” (Betacom, manager 15). As a result, it proved difficult for the Swedish managers to use customary managerial tools with the Indian employees, such as creating a collaborative team-orientation:

It was completely new to them [the Indian employees] to work together in self-organized teams and contribute with whatever needs to be done at the moment. They were used to working only inside their own little box. (Betacom, manager 7)

Moreover, the Indian software developers were portrayed as “not independent”, “not autonomous (Centech, manager 2), ‘very quiet’ (Betacom, manager 14), “not taking the initiative” (Centech, manager 1), and “lacking team spirit” (Betacom, manager 4), that is, in the very opposite terms used to refer to the Swedish workforce. Contrary to the self-assertiveness displayed by the Swedish employees, the Indian employees were depicted as “not comfortable to speak up and stand out from the group” (Betacom, manager 9). Previous research has explained Indian software developers’ “submissive” attitude, desire to please and their avoidance of confrontation, with reference to the Hindu virtues of contentment, absence of desire and stability

that permeate many Indian workplaces (Nicholson & Sahay, 2001). These are values in sharp contrast to the dynamic striving for success and the highly aggressive competitive style to reach unlimited productivity and profit that are celebrated in the capitalist system and promoted in the Grand Discourse of Business (cf. Phillips et al., 2008). The Indian employees’ behaviour proved to be problematic when considered in relation to this definition of economic efficiency, reproduced in the narratives about the Swedish management ideal:

We expect them to challenge us [the Swedish managers]. If we have some really stupid idea we don't want them to work on it for 3 months and then deliver some useless results. They need to let us know immediately if something isn't right! (Betacom, manager 3)

The managers, however, described how the Indian technical experts often failed to express valid concerns and refrained from objecting to suggestions from a higher-ranking manager, as they were not accustomed to be involved in decision-making: “In India the manager makes all decisions” (Centech, manager 2). Another Betacom manager shared his experiences of difficulties with managing meetings where Indian technical experts abstained from contributing their opinion. Based on this, he concluded that in the Indian work culture: “it is more important *who* says something than *what* is said” (Betacom, manager 7). Narratives about how Indian work organizations are dominated by this kind of hierarchical thinking permeated the interviews with the Swedish managers: “Hierarchy is extremely important [in Indian organizations]. You [as an employee] can never override the Indian team leader” (Betacom, manager 1). This was a hierarchical system where the employees learnt to be subordinates that accepted hierarchical power and provided what their superiors told them to provide:

They are given more instructions and the manager supervises more. The employees report much more than in Sweden. That's not how I work. The manager in India is more involved in the details and gives suggestions and advices more than in Sweden. (Betacom, manager 14)

A manager in Betacom explained what he saw as the most important cultural difference between the business setting in Sweden and India by referring to the so-called paternalistic management style (cf. Pelligrini et al., 2010). He described how Indian employees relied on authority by comparing the manager in the Indian work setting to a “strict father”:

The most important difference is that in India they have a great deal more respect for their boss and they expect the boss to be more of a daddy. That is, more taking care . . . more a strict father. That is what they expect from a manager. (Betacom, manager 3)

This hierarchical structure and culture was interpreted as impeding the development of participative decision-making and collaborative team-orientation, important for the Swedish managers: “It's very hierarchical. It's not possible for everybody to talk to everybody and gain support for their ideas” (Betacom, manager 8). The Swedish managers understood the Indian workforce's lack of autonomy and assertiveness as a consequence of the dominating hierarchical organizational structure and the Indian managers' authoritarian leadership style. The hierarchical organizational structure was seen as problematic because it prevented the employees from developing into self-sufficient and assertive employees. The Indian employees were instead encouraged to adopt an attitude about “abiding to whatever the manager tells you” (Betacom, manager 5).

Adopting the concepts ‘ethnicisation’ (Van Marrewijk, 2004) and ‘banal nationalism’ (Billig, 1995; Tienari et al., 2010: 40) in the critical discourse analysis uncovers how the binary construction of

“Swedish” and “Indian” workforce was informed by asymmetric power relations and the idea of the Swedish/European/Western culture as superior in relation to inferior cultures in former colonial countries in the South/East (Ravishankar, Pan, & Myers, 2013). The Indian workforce was described more or less without exception using negative expressions and a critical language – the very reverse to the language used to describe the Swedish workforce. The informants thereby constructed a sharp distinction between Western/Swedish and Non-Western/Indian workforce in a binary way with the ‘other’ as exotic, primitive and inferior similar to the results in previous research showing how minority employees or natives are described as lazy, childish, irrational and in lack of discipline (cf. Frenkel & Shenhav, 2006). Within the discourse of the Swedish management ideal the hierarchical mind-set of the Indian employees was constructed as making them inefficient and focused on positions, hierarchy and power relations instead of strict business matters, productivity and profit. The work motivation of the Indian employees was thus interpreted as based on values in conflict with the Swedish work ideals (cf. Alvesson & Empson, 2008). As a result, a mismatch was produced between the Swedish management ideal and the Indian business setting. This setting was understood as problematic because their usually ideal management practices failed to produce the desired results. What followed was a discursive struggle shaped by the broader discourse of business efficiency. Next section will highlight how the managers engaged with this discursive struggle and tried to merge discourses to give new meaning to ideal management.

4.3. Merging the Swedish management style with the Indian setting

According to the managers, the management practices they were familiar with failed to be efficient due to the mind-set of the Indian workforce. In order to achieve business efficiency they instead had to use different strategies to merge their management practices with the new business setting. This meant that some familiar management practices had to be abandoned and replaced by new ones, adapted to this new setting. However, some of them insisted on expecting that the Indian employees were to become more like the Swedish employees in some certain aspects and argued for a change in employee behaviour and attitude:

They need to learn to take responsibility. Come up with ideas of their own. Be pro-active, push their issues. Let us know which problems they have or if they won't be able to keep a deadline. (Betacom, manager 9)

This way of merging the Swedish management style with the Indian business setting was sometimes characterized as necessary, self-evident and definite: “They have had to learn to ask questions to us managers during meetings” (Betacom, manager 15). Having the mind-set of Swedish employees was idealized and understood as equivalent to being professional, as defined within the grand discourse of business, and something that everybody, including the Indians, inevitably had to learn if they wanted to become successful:

Business is growing in India. And I find that the more senior people I meet in the organization the more professional they are. And the more they become like the Swedes. (Centech, manager 1)

One of the Betacom managers argued in a similar vein that, as a result of the offshoring, the Indian workforce had adopted a Swedish work model that was not just more “collectivistic” and “less authoritarian” but also more efficient and “modern” and had “transported them [the Indian workforce] 30 years into the future” (Betacom, manager 3). Although the change in attitude in this way was described as inevitable and as an almost deterministic

development, the Swedish managers also emphasized how they actively encouraged and supported the learning process. They described how they, when dealing with the Indian employees adopted new management practices and “tried to encourage them to take their own responsibility” and “pushed them to speak up a little more in front of the customers” (Betacom, manager 14). Notwithstanding, in spite of the encouragement from the managers, the change in behaviour was not always described as satisfying and the Indian employees were depicted as not embracing the new mind-set to the desired extent or to the desired pace. One of the managers expressed his desire to give the employees more responsibility but also explained the problem with this undertaking:

The problem is that it takes too much time. It's not possible to leave everything up to the individual employee and let them develop into self-organizing individuals. That would take 10 years. So we have to compromise and create processes where we evaluate and measure. (Centech, manager 2)

Expecting the Indian employees to change their behaviour was therefore not always understood to be the most successful and efficient management strategy. Instead the Swedish managers recognized that they themselves had to develop new management practices and learn new ways of managing Indian employees. Not only did they have to start to “evaluate and measure” (Centech, manager 2), they also had to change their ways of communication:

You [as a Swedish manager] have to change your management style and how you communicate. They are not used to the Swedish dialogues. They won't give you feedback unless you explicitly ask for it. (Betacom, manager 13)

Explicitly asking the employees to provide them with feedback during meetings was understood as one way the managers could create a dialogue with the employees. Developing new management practices for communicating with the employees also involved another approach to interpreting the information that the employees provided:

When we work with Swedes they are so used to that we give them an assignment and they let us know if they run into any problems. But in India we need to ask for constant reports and updates. It's not enough just to ask them how it's going because they will always tone down any problems. You [as a Swedish manager] have to learn how to communicate with them. (Betacom, manager 10)

The same type of trust that permeated the Swedish managers descriptions of their relationship with the Swedish employees thus appeared to be lacking from the discursive construction of their relationship with the Indian employees. Instead of trusting that the Indian employees would keep them informed and fully disclose any problems they encountered or correctly describe the progress they were making, the managers explained that they had to rely on managerial practices to form their own independent opinion about this. Giving detailed instructions and goals to the employees was one managerial practice that was depicted as important, in combination with increased close supervision of the employees' productivity and progress in relation to these instructions and goals:

As a leader you have to be very specific about the demands and what you expect them to do and when to do it, and what to do if they have questions, and continuously supervise them. Especially in the beginning. We can't do as Swedes and say: “now you have two weeks to do this” and then contact them on the night before deadline. You can't do that. You must supervise much, much more. (Betacom, manager 1)

The “compromise” that one of the managers talked about as necessary (Centech, manager 2) thus meant that the Swedish managers had to abandon some of the most important aspects of the Swedish management ideal, such as promoting self-efficient

employees, while adopting certain new features, for example supervising the employees, described in previous research as typical for the Indian management ideal (cf. Pelligrini et al., 2010).

Another way of merging the Swedish management ideal with the Indian setting was based on a more explicit criticism against this ideal. Instead of claiming that the mind-set of the Indian employees made them inefficient, some of the Swedish managers turned the criticism about inefficiency towards their own management practices because these failed to be efficient when encountering the Indian business context. The Swedish managers suggested that it was necessary for example to give up the ideal of participative decision-making. Instead they had to learn to give explicit orders when dealing with the Indian workforce:

It's challenging for us Swedes to raise clear demands, in contrast to the British and Americans. They just say: "do this and keep quiet", whereas Swedes discuss and say: "that sounds good, can you fix something like that?" That opens up for misunderstandings. (Betacom, manager 1)

Although the informal participative decision-making was an intrinsic part of the Swedish management ideal, it was criticized because it failed to produce the desired effects if the Indian employees interpreted it as a lack of clarity concerning goals and expectations:

Swedes [Swedish managers] need to become better at raising demands. And be a little bit more bossy. Tell them about our business goals, what we are going to do and where we are heading. [...] Because otherwise it's really difficult for an Indian to know where you want him to go. (Centech, manager 3)

One of the managers explained that although it didn't "come natural for Swedes" to give orders, the Swedish managers had to learn to supervise employees and give clear orders when dealing with the Indian workforce, otherwise the employees would "say and do something completely different" than the managers intended (Betacom, manager 1). One of the Centech managers explained in a similar vein the problems with the Swedish management style as he compared it to a leadership style predominant in US corporations, perceived as more direct and authoritative:

Swedes are pretty bad at saying what we want and Indians are generally pretty bad at working if they don't get clear instructions. The result is that we just sit there and look at each other and nothing happens. That's pretty common. [...] We aren't a good match. I would say that Swedes and Indians are the worst match of all cultures. The Americans are much better because they bang their fist on the desk and that's good because then you understand each other. [...] The problem is that we aren't Americans that give orders. We are scared of conflicts. (Centech, manager 2)

This Centech manager criticized Sweden for being "really the worst country" for offshoring "because of our culture". The reason was the Swedish management style that gave priority to creating "nice workplaces" and "a nice working environment" instead of crude business results (Centech, manager 2).

Some of the Swedish managers also more explicitly described how they tried to adapt their management practices to the transnational business context. A Betacom manager gave an example of how he practised management in a more authoritative way and became "much meaner" when dealing with the Indian workforce in a way that would not be accepted by the Swedish employees. This "meanness" included to "communicate straightforwardly" instead of giving "blurry messages" or "expecting others to read between the lines" as that kind of management strategy would result in that "nothing would be accomplished" in India (Betacom, manager 7). Another manager described the advantages she had experienced with adopting a more hierarchical management style:

They are so much more hierarchical than us. And the manager is a manager. And sometimes that is a relief. It makes things easier. [...] Sometimes it makes things easier to feel that I can be more direct. It's not like if I yell at them in a negative way but it can be to tell them that tomorrow we will start to work at 7 am and that's it! (Betacom, manager 11)

Some of the managers interviewed even suggested that it was not enough for the Swedish managers to adopt new management practices but that they instead should rely on the local organizational culture and the local managers when dealing with certain issues (cf. Shimoni & Bergmann, 2006):

I've noticed that when Swedes try to tell the Indians how to work in a Swedish manner, the end result isn't that good. So, it's better to leave the responsibility for example for recruitment in India to the Indians. (Betacom, manager 15)

One of the informants suggested that the Swedish managers should learn to accept the Indian hierarchical organizational structure because this was understood as interwoven with the Indian caste system. According to him, the caste system was so central for the Indian mentality that it was pointless and inefficient for the Swedes to try to change it. Instead he recommended that the Swedish managers should leave the responsibility for this to the Indians. The Swedish way of for example appointing team leaders amongst the Indian employees, based on leadership skills, could become an infected issue leading to problems when the Swedish managers were unfamiliar with the informal hierarchy in the workplace, based on the traditional caste system. The manager continued to explain: "That's where you fail as a Swede – when you try to manage these things. It's better to leave the responsibility to them. [...] Trying to control this as a Swede is a bad idea" (Betacom, manager 5). The managers thus argued for flexible management strategies that merged the Swedish management style together with the Indian business setting. Even if this entailed abandoning key aspects of the Swedish management ideal it was understood as necessary for securing and maximizing business efficiency.

Applying the critical discourse framework on the analysis reveals how the strategies the managers endorsed for merging their management practices with the local culture at their Indian offices reflect a banal nationalism and their culture specific understanding of Indian business culture and of Indian workforce. The Swedish managers constructed the Indian business setting and Indian workforce as permeated by cultural issues, with little importance or relevance for efficiency and productivity. In contrast, the Swedish workforce was understood as being autonomous, objective and professional, meaning being "unmarked" by culture and cultural perceptions. The managers portrayed themselves as focused on efficiency, productivity and profits and with little to learn from the Indian colleagues. Besides developing an understanding for the Indian business culture and its peculiarities in order to adapt their managerial practices to them, they understood themselves as free from influence from the encounter with the Indian setting. Their own criticism towards the Swedish management style confirmed their position as rational decision-makers who could detach from their national and organizational culture if necessary to achieve business efficiency. They hence argued for abandoning several of the key aspects of the Swedish management ideal, such as participative decision-making, informal communication and trusting the employees' self-management skills. In the Indian setting these aspects became characteristics of "weak" managers that failed to give orders in a convincing and clear way. Instead they acknowledged the benefits of adopting authoritarian managerial strategies. Their managerial ideals thus seemed to at least partly become more multi-layered

and transnational, though without adopting a cross-cultural learning attitude (cf. Tukiainen, 2014).

5. Concluding discussion

Being one of the first studies focusing on management ideals in a transnational business setting this article makes a contribution to several different fields of research relevant for management studies.

First, it brings new insights to our understandings of “global variations in management styles” (Smith et al., 2003: 492) and of a “Swedish management style” (cf. Gustavsson, 1995; Holmberg & Åkerblom, 2006; Styhre et al., 2006) and how these different management styles are produced in an ideological language infused by banal nationalism. The analysis has limitations as it draws on a small number of interviews, but the aim is not to generalize the results to Swedish managers or to argue that a management ideology, characteristic for Swedish managers, exists. Instead, the article shows how the idea of a “Swedish management style” is reproduced in management talk and that it provides managers with a sense of identity and creates a sense of “us” in relation to the “others” and that these others are attributed both negative identities and positions (Indian employees and managers) and positive identities and positions (American managers). The article illustrates how 18 Swedish managers produced and reproduced the discourse of a distinct Swedish management style and identified with the subject position produced within this discourse. However, contrary to previous research on management ideals, the results also show how the ideal management practices and strategies promoted within this discourse were not uncontested.

Second, by highlighting how the discourse of a distinct Swedish management ideal was challenged and negotiated in work processes encompassing managers and employees involved in transnational business relationships, the article contributes to previous research on cross-cultural management and meaning making of cultural differences (cf. Shimoni, 2008) and how such cultural differences can be managed efficiently (cf. Tukiainen, 2014). The Swedish management ideal was understood as highly context sensitive and the subject position constructed within the discourse was not unproblematic to assume outside of the Swedish business context. Instead, according to the managers interviewed, their management practices were inefficient in the transnational business context in which they were now operating. As a result, many of the managers distanced themselves from this subject position by producing counter narratives criticizing the Swedish management ideal. The article thus contributes with important insights on how management ideals are intertwined not only with “the conceptual foundation of the organization” (Allan et al., 2006: 43) but also with expectations on the workforce and the work ideal in the organization.

Third, the analysis in this article contributes to the development of a critical discourse framework for the study of work organizations (cf. Hardy et al., 2000; Phillips et al., 2008). It highlights how senior organizational actors draw on different discourses to generate meanings that support their practices and strategies. The most important contribution concerns how discursive struggles are produced and negotiated within multiple and fragmented discourses in a transnational business setting (cf. Kemp et al., 2010). The analysis highlights how discursive struggles are produced when organizational and management ideals, previously established as normative, become contested in a transnational business setting and how the discursive struggle becomes a conflict over meaning-making around efficient management styles that reflects the dynamics of organizational change. It also shows how such discursive struggles are influenced and

guided by a broader discourse of business efficiency and business rationality and how this broader discourse enables and constrains managers' discursive activities. The results show how fruitful such a methodological approach is and how important it is to focus not only on what is really going on in the organization but also to address the managers' interpretations of challenges, strategies and practices (cf. Tienari et al., 2010).

Fourth, in addition to these three theoretical contributions, the results are of practical implications for corporations and organizational actors operating in transnational business contexts. The article contributes with important insights concerning perceived difficulties to exercise efficient management in a transnational business context and how to efficiently manage cross-cultural interaction (cf. Brannen & Doz, 2010; Vaara & Tienari 2011; Van Marrewijk, 2010). The results raise questions as to the transferability of management ideas and practices between transnational business settings. Instead, the article highlights the multiple ways management ideals and management subject positions can be negotiated and merged with a transnational business. The analysis provides examples of simultaneously existing multiple and fragmented organizational and management discourses and emphasizes the importance of awareness of the very different managerial strategies these promote. This is relevant and important to cross-cultural business relationships where business and administrative tools, used to guide effective decisions that accomplish organizational goals and financial success, are often employed in a business context where they were not developed. Organizations need awareness of the discursive negotiations, interpretations and meaning making that organizational change and especially transnational business relations give rise to and the consequences these have for management practices. The findings can be used to develop guidelines and recommendations concerning how management practices can be negotiated and merged with the local context and how managers can be supported to acquire the ability to develop cross-cultural collaborations that also benefit from the capabilities of the “other” and promote learning processes on both sides, without binary constructions and stereotypes.

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