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“NATIONAL FROZEN FISH DISTRIBUTOR”: PARADIGMATIC CASE STUDY OF AN AFRICAN COMPANY FOR OPERATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY IMPROVEMENT

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Abstract. *This paper develops a case study regarding the intervention requested by the leader of the Mozambican company "DNPC" (to consolidate the leadership and management of the company, in the context of the transition to the situation of a large company).*

In terms of diagnosis, there are four aspects that emerge as the most salient of this business initiative: (i) the differentiation of the company in relation to the commercial orientation of the company in order to respond to the most basic needs of the poor population (provide the supply of frozen fish); (ii) the traditional African culture centred on "affections", with the perverse effect of inducing a very high absenteeism of drivers, which would, in turn, make the flow of supply from popular markets unfeasible; (iii) the response to the initial chaos by the development of a business culture in an entrepreneurial network, both internally (drivers) and externally (sales companies and security elements of the financial flows generated); (iv) promotion of an organization of work based on a meaning based on autonomy and liberation from the hierarchical submission of the worker, and designed not to force him to exclusion from society and to move away from traditional African values.

Keywords: *orientation to the base of the social pyramid; traditional culture; network integration; work with meaning.*

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Introduction

Regarding the emblematic phrase from Popper's work, which we mentioned above, it is necessary to recognize that conceiving and developing, in a concrete economic fabric, a frozen fish distribution company, does not seem, and at first sight, to imply a process that is too complex. There are hundreds or even thousands of similar cases in every country in the world. In Africa, however, the rule is the difficulty of creating successful business formulas (as recognized, in September 1991, in the World Bank Bulletin - WB), and it is therefore imperative to analyse the foundations of this extraordinary case in which a African company, presents itself as, simultaneously, modern and from a cultural point of view, fully inserted into the local culture: working with and for the base of the pyramid – “the (starting) point of view when referring to the recommendation of this type of studies, by Popper. During the reflection, some (few) problems of a theoretical nature are selected, which allow contextualizing and deepening the most relevant questions that the case raises, and thus situating the Popperian exception in relation to the concerns of the World Bank, which will speak below in the text.

Forming a company of this type, oriented towards the inclusion of the poor in this food market, with a low-priced product, would, however, imply a distributive flow based on flawless assiduity on the part of drivers. JDC was able to understand that the drivers considered themselves “chickens” when, in fact, they were eagles – maintaining the dream and the desire to grow, releasing the eagle that exists in every man, despite the limitations that imprison him and that we must continue to take in consideration (Boff, 1997).

Now, achieving this goal, within a “culture of affections”, would be equivalent to a gigantic paradox: drivers are, as can be seen, the key to the distributive flow and they do not guarantee the necessary attendance. The first obstacle of attendance was successfully resolved, as will be seen. Once this is resolved, a second and greater obstacle arises, from the moment the company goes from medium to large. Leadership needs are felt, the company leader seemed to be a little confused, specifically, with the limits of the effectiveness of his style, something composite, of leadership and management, simultaneously, autocratic and protective, according to Gomes, 2008) and requests help, and we proposed an intervention-reflection (A/R) model that should allow for doctoral research. Considering that management and leadership were provided by the same person, it will then be possible for the leader to be in a position to leave management (by delegating to a professional) and dedicate himself, full-time, to redefining the business project. Betting on reinforced leadership? Or does the other corporate party “wish” to take over management and prevent the leader from continuing to “play” the main role?

Let us first consider the theoretical issues underlying the before mentioned design. In this regard, we considered that, in the case of a retake of the notes written in a “research notebook”, the theories that could help to elucidate the facts would be more easily understandable if they were presented in accordance with the description of the same facts.

Secondly, let's start by situating the design of the structure of the business model developed and the respective level of success, following the same conceptual scheme, to situate the different episodes, as they appear.

1. Business model

The business model idealized by JDC appeared as something complete, perfect. He appeared as a man of ideals, who intends to negotiate with the base of the social pyramid (to feed needy populations), seeking, at the same time, to generate wealth for the community through entrepreneurship. This idealism seems to be translated into an alternative approach to that of Franz Fanon (who, in “Les Damnés de la Terre”, invites Africans to learn to kill the white man within them), proposing to his African workers, instead, a dialogue (which we consider indispensable in any organizational culture) between the traditional man who inhabits them and the entrepreneur who will make them climb the social ladder.

The problem, however, relates to the Human Resources Management (HRM) strategy, to serve the leader's vision regarding the company's ultimate purposes. Pay attention to the difficulties

of a similar business project (Collins and Porras, 1998) and the innovative way in which the leader embodies the vision. The authors say that it is essential to find the values (perpetuity of a central ideology) that constitute the essence of the business and that can guide it towards the future (construction of a mobilizing vision).

Two refrigerated warehouses (very modern and highly performing) are created for handling frozen fish, which can supply the entire country, from the ports of Maputo/Matola and Nacala. Technical support staff for warehouses and support staff for the company's headquarters are selected. A vast group of drivers is recruited (with the mission of integrating “production” and “consumption”), who will make the journeys from the warehouse to the markets, distributing fish to local sellers (an example of “flow technology”) and make a cash return. Local sellers are selected to ensure the distribution of the fish on market stalls.

The workforce at the headquarters was city-based and did not present, from the outset, any major difficulties for efficient integration in the context of working conditions. The same can be said of the saleswomen, who, being of suburban culture, are destined to work in the areas where they live, making it not difficult to make business culture compatible with traditional culture. The problem of identity (with the company) was related to drivers of popular suburban culture, posing an extremely relevant question, given the stability of the surrounding culture and the permanent need to promote values of modern business, to adapt to the constantly changing social environment:

How would the leader manage the employment contract and the performance of all these drivers who cannot miss work, in a cultural context that is strongly “affective” and induces strong absenteeism, due to the frequency of ceremonies associated with mourning to be held in their regions (often rural) of origin?

The company quickly enters into a situation of labour chaos: absenteeism due to several days of traditional mourning, on the one hand, due to road accidents given the deplorable state of the communication routes, on the other, or, even, due to frequent drunk driving (due to the need to ensure the support of companions who help the driver out of trouble, in “exchange for a few drinks”).

2. The meaning of work

The origin of countless problems facing society seems to lie in the rupture, caused by modernity, between capitalist and industrial business culture, on the one hand, and traditional society, with its system of values.

Throughout the 19th century, an organizational world deprived of access to the collective creation of opportunities for the production of meaning was created, which is at the origin of resilience in the face of anomalous situations, to which Weick (1995) refers. The world that would eventually emerge was above all dependent and, above all else, without autonomy). The traditional world (which would be essentially collectivist) has been accused as a factor that blocks industrial development, which would inevitably lead these traditional societies into a spiral of generalized impoverishment.

Modernity would inevitably involve individualism with regard to the code of values, the remission of a kind of “original sin” permitted by work (the success of which would be the true sign of the same remission). These would be the conditions for success of advanced industrial society, in the sense that seems to underlie the fundamental reflections on management that M. Weber calls “bureaucratic”. This would be characterized by the dominance of eight attributes, the most determining being the one that imposes a radical separation between the management of “property” and the management of the technical dimensions of the business.

Following this text, we seek, among other aspects, to call into question the individualistic vision of so-called industrial modernity.

3. Drivers' performance and the resolution of cognitive dissonance situations

Drivers, as the heart of the business, are caught, as if inevitably, between two tensions, two opposing behaviours (making them impossible to make compatible):

- Do not miss, fulfilling the turnover and ensuring continuous supply to the market.

- Do not fail to respect the imperative precept of celebrating the memory of the deceased, without considering the consequences in terms of employment rules.

The installed “cognitive dissonance” (Festinger, 1957) prevents traditional GERH, imposing a reinvention of performance that can resolve the incompatibility, by managing the desire (which the driver will be forced to defer to) to be an entrepreneur, without running the risk of failing to meet either of the two injunctions.

Drivers were also able to adjust the three aspects of an ultra-ambitious project – professional, business and personal life.

A franchise network with salespeople and a network culture with drivers.

Two opposing views of the same trend (intercooperation - network - and disconnection, in relation to territory): that of Reich (1991) and that of Veltz (1996).

Both seem to us to make very positive contributions; but which of these visions would be the most inspiring?

The innovative and sustainable company based on the knowledge economy?

The chosen activity, to be competitive in the future and escape the “assumptions” of R. Reich (Prof at the University of Berkeley and former governor of the USA), needed to remain, permanently, strongly creative at all levels of the organization, in an approximation to the VRIO model, by Barney et al. (2001), (as well as the idea of agility and flexibility). It is important to bear in mind that the company's resource-based view (RBV) is perhaps the most influential model for understanding the strategic management of people and achieving positive results.

How can I achieve this strategy?

Reich (1991) segments jobs in the globalization era into four broad categories:

25% of protected jobs (agriculture, extractive industries and public service);

30% of assets provide personalized services, relatively precarious, but less threatened by relocation.

25% will be subjected to fierce competition from emerging countries (routine work, ensuring current production services), with this category being the big losers.

Ultimately, 20% of the assets, the symbol manipulators, will be the big winners (among these, business lawyers, engineers, creatives, advertisers).

4. A company designed in the image of Japanese intuition

We discuss, at this point, the importance, but also the relativity, of Hofstede's approach – the lesson from Japan and its application to Mozambique (in accordance with the idea of the need to study exceptions, by K. Popper).

An article in the World Bank Bulletin, from September 1991, specifically referred to the lack of a concept of Human Resources Management (HRM), an alternative to the so-called Western one and adapted to the culture of African countries. To obtain this knowledge, it was necessary to deepen the studies of the culture of the main countries of that continent and their respective key ideas. It was necessary to find an anchor idea that could guide managers on the path of the necessary adaptation of advanced people management, without falling into processes copied from more developed countries, as was customary to do, concluded the same text.

Our personal interest in this issue and the exposure (in a master's degree in Mozambique) of what we understood to be HRM inspired by the eight attributes/principles of Weberian “bureaucracy” that we were exploring in the classroom.

Reaction from a student (M^a do C. - oriented towards the HRM activity of the company in question): “my boss practices everything that the Prof says” and continued saying that he was paying for his Master's registration because he wanted, she learned as much as possible about the strategic management of people, in the context of Africa!

5. The need to study the exception that the fairness of the leader's action in the management of African culture (Popper) represents

As we have been suggesting, the case presents itself as an exception in the context of the dominant culture of affection in Africa. See how, for the leader, people are the company's strategic

asset and how the most important capital is the intangible asset, starting with the value of a brand (DNPC), which evokes, precisely, a culture of affection, so specifically African.

The eight principles of the human equation, that is, considering people as the company's main assets (in the terms referred to by J. Pfeffer and collaborators), seem to have been reformulated, in the local context, by management action, which we would call “adaptive”, by JDC. The company leader “dared” to effectively trust simple people, close to the tradition of humble people, “knowing/trusting” that they would acquire the necessary skills, that they would train themselves, in practice, and assume themselves as people with a high ethical sense, as well as evolving in terms of social status.

He bet on (humble) people, before they could “demonstrate” that they deserved trust. In particular, he allowed them to be fully integrated into the organization (and therefore, society), without disruptions; rather starting from their family insertion, as required by the values of tradition, and from the values of Christianity that Western modernity has made us forget (Moulinet, 2017).

In this approach from the leader in question, there is a lot of work on the idea of recognition. “Recognition” is, therefore, more important than high remuneration, especially because it is prior to the expected income from economic activity.

The company “DNPC” created, in fact, a system of work, field training and innovation, orienting itself towards, and with, a very poor social Pyramid Base, placing it, thanks to an “integrative” strategy. (as Prahalad and Yunus say), that is, in conditions of rapid economic and social ascension. It should be noted that both authors propose to develop a type of “social business” (social business), or a solidarity company, seeking to act through a reconciliation between three dimensions: using the driving force of capitalism, achieving the eradication of poverty and consolidate social relations by reducing inequalities.

Routines and innovation, based on a “rapid implementation mechanism that could associate both social mobility and change” (instead of the founding assumptions of H. Tajfel's theory, which oppose the two terms).

With this strategic model of the company “DNPC”, as we have seen, a repeatable formula of “social enterprise” would be born, that is, the case of a true African paradigm of managing business, as can be seen from the ideals of M. Yunus, in the wake of so many others and, above all, H. Mintzberg.

The difficulties and chaos of the first phase, generated by the culture of affection (social gatherings and inevitable drunkenness), which turned drivers into a source of organizational blockage, were also the basis for overcoming the same initial bottlenecks.

Achieving the feat of learning to effectively manage the desire for social advancement made the change and can be considered as a social experiment close to the basic ideas of positive psychology (M. Seligman).

Positive psychology is, in fact, the scientific study of positive experiences, positive individual traits, institutions that facilitate their development and programs that help to improve the quality of life of individuals, preventing or reducing the incidence of psychopathology.

The happiest people have a functional emotional system that allows them to react in a more appropriate way to stressful and anguish-generating work situations.

However, the Mozambican cultural context imposes the logic of its system of values organized around what we would call the culture of affections (Gomes, 2008), as will be seen below.

Continuous change and innovation seem to have involved, among other dimensions, the following:

- Product (frozen mackerel - mono product) of high social interest (animal protein, abundant, cheap, nutritious and easily digestible), presented from multiple recipes (such as cod);
- Logistics and transport process based on drivers, with the expectation that they would reconvert into road entrepreneurs (integration through the network mentioned by W. Williamson);
- Logistics process (cold storage) guaranteed by the association with a remote maintenance company (headquarters in Odivelas/Portugal).

- Market (microcredit-consignment to saleswomen - franchising), converted into micro-entrepreneurs and “bosses” (M. Yunus).
- Security of the financial cycle (gang, converted into a security company, escaping the dictatorship of state “security”).
- Flexible/agile growth process, accompanying and enhancing the country's electrification.
- Process formative in management, associated with micro-entrepreneurial activity (a company/school of social transformation).
- Conditions for continued growth in investment in intangible assets (training, brand, network culture and computerization).

The recent formation of these countries seems to have created the conditions for a naturalization of inequality (“sub-citizenship, because sub-people and non-people”), which Souza (2003) talks about.

At this point we will discuss social change and mobility; Will they constitute a possible compatibility process?

6. Social group and professional group: from confrontation to respect for the traditions of the people

Prahalad's theory (2004; 2006), (effectively put into action, practiced more than 10 years earlier by JDC), presents as a starting point the idea according to which the popular classes can be integrated, as consumers, in the business development strategy of private sector companies. The famous author rightly asks why this integrated development strategy has been ignored by businesspeople, identifying three main reasons: (i) the poor could not form the basis of a partnership commercial of companies because they would not have sufficient financial capacity; (ii) the orientation of companies towards the base of the pyramid would imply expensive changes in terms of product that would eventually “eat” the profitability margin; (iii) it would ultimately be the role of governments and Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) to satisfy the needs of this population.

There is, therefore, a market at the Base of the Pyramid (BDP), which reaches more than 80% of people, who only require “to be treated as consumers and not as poor”, as the author says, to: (i) awaken its potential; (ii) be able to scale socially and economically; (iii) and escape poverty. To develop this market of 80% of the world's population, traditional approaches that focus on the Top of the Pyramid are not useful. What is needed is a new approach oriented towards innovation and that recognizes the true needs of the world's poor classes.

This point of this text is supported by two works:

1. Culture of affections (PhD thesis by Ana Célia Calapez, under our supervision). Book edition – “The logic of affection: culture and management in Africa” – Clássica Editora.
2. We share, on the other hand, E. Schein's theoretical position, according to which the dimensions of culture require more observation and less measurement (Schein, 1996).

We carried out many hours of observation and conversation with African managers, especially JDC. For this purpose, we used the anthropological method of the “researcher's notebook”.

We conclude that African culture is particularly permeable to informal aspects, which strongly condition, in this way, the circumstances necessary for coordination according to usual norms. A type of regulatory fluidity results, which replaces the formal processes usually underlying business activity, both in terms of rules and in terms of the relationship with the hierarchy (traditional leadership is recognized, not the one designated by the company's management). Such a characteristic would not be detectable by quantitative methods, confirming what Schein (1996) says.

7. Knowledge from life experience

We refer, at this point, to the tacit knowledge, in the terms of Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), of a former military officer with multiple experiences, described as extremely close to his men and, by extension, of a strongly intuitive manager such as the case of JDC.

From what we have been able to observe, and test from in-depth interviews, the five conditions required to provide the company with the conditions for an emergency and consolidation of tacit knowledge are verified. A purpose of this magnitude involves the process of managing the group of drivers as a “pivot” element that guarantees the flow of distribution and organizational cohesion:

7.1. Develop a true national organizational purpose within the company (i.e., a strategic vision on the type of relevant knowledge required and the creation of a management system that allows its implementation);

7.2. Develop a strong capacity among workers in terms of autonomy (namely, through strengthening the ability to propose new ideas and respective ways of disseminating them throughout the organization);

7.3. Provide the conditions that create an environment favorable to business identity and that allows strong moments of a so-called “creative chaos”, which is likely to generate a high level of commitment to the company.

7.4. Accept the conditions that generate clear processes to encourage the implementation of all types of redundancies (openness to information and proposals for innovative solutions, clearly outside functional boundaries and immediate professional requirements);

7.5. Promotion of a general climate of openness to all types of information that individuals believe they should report, with nothing being excluded (all news can, in fact, be of interest).

These five circumstances would be precisely those that Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) would also note as being specific to excellent leadership, based on the authors' field experiences. It is, in fact, a well-established idea in Strategic People Management, that the two authors of Japanese origin are interested, above all, in the process of creating relevant organizational knowledge, disseminating it and incorporating it into their products/services, on the one hand, and how the organization as a collective system appropriates individual knowledge through the collective attribution of meaning and aspiration for continuous innovation, on the other, involving all professional strata without exception.

8. Leadership and management

Is a growing company based on a process of radical separation between leadership and management? How would the leader capture the disruptive signals associated with growth?

The (deficient) confrontation between the tacit knowledge demonstrated, with the leader's explicit knowledge about the complexity of management in general: there was, as we could see, effectively no awareness that the key to success lay in the separation between management and leadership.

As such, sufficient care will not be taken to “draw up a social pact” corresponding to the company's social innovation.

JDC seemed to have played, during the first drivers' crisis, brilliantly, and simultaneously, the roles of transformational and transactional leader, in Bass's (1985) terms. As a transformational leader, he presents himself with strong charisma, intellectual stimulation, involving, in particular, a permanent fight against routines, as well as a very personal vision of the business, always attentive, as well as a sincere concern in considering each person, to those who would like to convey the same inspiring sense of business. As a transactional leader, he would have developed a remarkable sense of management of an entire complex system of rewards, always having as his concern the control of the objectives to be achieved by each subject.

The son of the other partner (who owns another 49% of the company and who, apparently, had never been “interested” in business life), Dr Eduardo Veloso, could not, under any circumstances, have been relegated to the situation of an informal “deputy”, of the company's top management. It would be a fatal mistake.

At the right time, although this circumstance is truly unpredictable, could the manager lose control of the company, and be removed from management (according to M. Crozier's theory of power games)?

JDC, from our point of view, could hardly manage to develop a strong “idiosyncratic credit” (Hollander, 1958) that would hold it in the event of an institutionally sustained “coup”. This credit is based on the awareness that leadership is a result of shared interpersonal perceptions. Becoming a leader with idiosyncratic credit within a given group would be the result of an interaction process developed through an assessment of the various contributions of group members, in which positive (negative) contributions lead to an increase (decrease) of the level of group leader status.

We see, from what was described, according to our reading of the events (understood in light of the power games in the company), that JDC did not have the necessary conditions to resist the so-called “coup” at the head of management.

The most delicate issue is that I had lost (it is a fact) the opportunity to continue to be even a member of the management “team” with the mission of ensuring leadership.

For this purpose, it was enough for the societal rule to change, through the acquisition of 2% from a distant partner who, for years, had been “uninterested” or even unaware of the essentials of this remarkable business experimentation.

9. From powerful leader to “scapegoat”

Returning to culture: in Africa there is an explosive mix of affective collectivism and a tendency towards an attitude of restriction. According to studies by Hofstede (2011), carried out in the 1960s based on a sample of staff from the American multinational (IBM), implemented at that time in around 52 countries, national culture tends to vary within the scope of a continuum (between 0 and 100), in relation to a set (initially four and later expanded) of seven fundamental evaluative dimensions.

As we will see, we are interested, at this point, in reflecting on two main characteristics: individualism-collectivism and condescension-restriction.

On the ground, we had a leader of European origin, although a Mozambican citizen, that is, African. This situation raises, as can easily be seen, the relative ease with which a mechanism of “exclusion” of the leader could be triggered, converting him into a scapegoat (in R. Girard's terms). Quite easily, because (albeit in a completely unforeseen way, that is, in the manner of a “black swan”, in N. N. Taleb's terms), JDC would, it seems, be “discriminated against”, “stigmatized” and “excluded”, not only from leadership but also from company management. What was invoked, quietly, first and, openly, afterwards, certainly anticipating a negative reaction from the workers, and especially from the drivers, was simply the European origin. What was effectively at stake was mimetic rivalry: the son of the “other” partner wanted the place of power, of the leader, regardless of his ability to occupy the place!

10. Evolution phases in the life of a company

The evolution of companies is by no means linear: it goes through phases, essentially, of long stability, sometimes, and of sudden revolution. This is characterized by abrupt changes and quantitative leaps (we would call this idea enactment, as K. Weick calls it). Translating into less elaborate language, we would say that a selection of organizational solutions, or a retention of those that prove to be the most adapted to respond to evolving variables (such as size and age, but equally, and particularly, to the underlying strategies of individual power games, or of the power coalitions that are being formed).

The serious problem for the future of the company is that it no longer has a nodal “point” in which the so-called “organizational learning” (the LO) could be concentrated and, from this point of view, constitute the basis of “innovative, responsible and reflected” (Senge, 1991).

In fact, a company can never be considered safe or stabilized. She must learn in a continuum. To shed some light on this issue, we consider that a learning organization facilitates ethical and responsible behaviour, as it seeks to determine how it can increase productivity.

Conclusion

A leader who grasped, as completely as we think possible, the scope of traditional culture for company management and knew how to reinterpret it, just as the Japanese themselves had managed to do during contact with the great masters of the theory of “statistical quality control” in

the immediate post-war period, seems to have managed, very cheaply, as we saw, to transform the group of drivers. The event should be highlighted: people, with a previously miserable performance, achieve, through access to meaning and the management of expectations and the desire for social advancement, a performance of excellence.

Business institutionalization, however, implies a management capacity that goes beyond what is intuitive, leaving the company a prisoner of aspects that are easily resolvable, but which often lead to its loss, as is this case.

According to the bureaucratic management philosophy, of Weberian origin, or of the Germanic area in general, only a widely consensual and correctly led social pact can preserve a company in the face of what Girard calls emerging fratricidal rivalries. Effectively, the work of formalizing the pact, integrated into the “property attribute”, as M. Weber calls it (i.e., the definition of the mission, values, quality standards and superior governance processes), must be taken care of, in order to guarantee the stability, coherence and longevity of the company (thus exceeding the usual longevity, of a maximum, on average, of 12/13 years).

In the absence of this effort to institutionalize the business project, the risk of disintegration can even be very rapid, even in cases of strong economic and financial solidity.

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