

Managers about Their Employees

The Case of Poland

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Abstract

The degree in which the potential of employees in organization is used depends to the large extent on managers' opinion on their subordinates. The chances that employees will be given opportunity to produce and deliver high results are related to the managers' ability to recognize the value of employees and to trust in their competences and honest intentions. The stereotypes about Polish managers suggest that their attitudes may be an obstacle to face the above challenge.

Thus the purpose of the presented paper is to verify the said stereotypes. The survey conducted on 455 managers in Poland based on attitude and behavior scales of the Theory X-Y shows that Polish managers are closer to the Theory Y than X. Interestingly, there are no differences between males and females, MBA and non-MBA graduates, and the strongest differentiating factor is the age. The results suggest that several stereotypes and popular beliefs on Polish managers, male and female differences, and MBA programs should be reconsidered.

Introduction

Competitive advantage of companies is nowadays more and more related to their ability to use the intellectual and motivation potential of their entire staff. The above results from the development and growing importance of knowledge management and participative leadership, but also from the increasing complexity of work and tasks connected with the majority of jobs. This process is accompanied by a shift of responsibility for the important part of human resources management from human resources departments to managers [1]. Yet the managers' capability to fully use the potential of their employees mainly depends on whether they notice and appreciate this potential at all, and on actions they take to activate and develop it. If managers have no trust in the intentions or capacities of their employees, even the most advanced and modern management styles turn into meaningless clichés and *pro forma*-used methods. Though truly important and of significant practical value, this aspect of management and leadership has been so far covered by a relatively limited number of empirical studies [2]. In this paper, its authors are presenting the results of their studies carried out in order to fill the said gap.

One of the most intriguing issue is therefore that about the attitudes and declared behaviours of Polish managers towards their employees. Specifically interesting is the question to what extent their managerial style is rooted in the past and in naturally superficial stereotypes, and to what extent it is already a product of having absorbed and developed the experiences derived from the modern management. In short, the stereotypes attributed to Polish managers describe them as communicating mainly top-down, closed to other people's ideas (specifically those placed lower in the hierarchy), loving hierarchy, power and titles, and having low trust in subordinates' good will or commitment. The main objective of the presented study was to verify the above stereotypes.

Method

The study was based on a fundamental human resources management concept created by D. McGregor namely Theory X-Y [3]. According to this concept, managers can be classified into two basic groups depending on their (frequently concealed) attitudes to and opinions about employees. Managers following Theory X assume employees are inherently lazy, lacking initiative, and treating work as an unpleasant obligation completed just for the purpose of earning their living. Behaviour-wise (i.e. at the level of their management style), Theory X managers focus on controlling and disciplining their employees, which is accompanied by a low level of trust. Theory Y managers assume their employees want to develop at work, are capable of independent thinking, aim at reaching “higher goals” (not just material), and, if given the right conditions, have a lot to offer. The management style of Theory Y managers is based on delegating, participative leadership, enriching jobs, and management by objectives. The stereotypes about Polish managers place them clearly closer to the Theory X.

To carry out the study, we used two questionnaires (attitude scale and behavior scale) developed and verified by R. E. Kopelman *et al.* [2, 4]. The questionnaires aggregate 52 statements the respondents were asked to comment upon. The authors concluded that both the attitude and the behavior scales were a useful self-assessment tool for managers, however for practical purposes the managers’ declared behaviors seemed to be more important than just their attitudes and beliefs. In both questionnaires a 5-level Likert scale was applied, with 1 standing for “strongly disagree” and 5 standing for “strongly agree”. The questionnaire the respondents worked with contained behavior and attitude statements as well as Theory X and Y statements mixed.

We distributed surveys in November 2011 to Polish managers and received 455 useable responses. The table 1 below presents the information about the sample:

Table 1: The profile of surveyed respondents

Age [years]	%	Managerial level experience [years]	%	Company employment volume	%	Team size	%
Up to 34	13	Up to 5	11	Up to 49	23	Up to 24	49
35 - 44	57	6 - 10	28	50 – 249	29	25 – 99	27
Over 44	30	11 - 15	36	Over 249	48	Over 99	24
		Over 15	25				

Taking into account that the market economy in Poland has developed for around twenty years now, it is highly satisfactory to see that as for their age (87% being 35 years of age and older) and managerial level experience (61% with over 10 years of experience) the participants show a very desirable structure if considering the purpose of our study. Their managerial competences have evolved in parallel with the development of the young Polish economy. For that reason, the analysis in fact focuses on the first generation of local managers. It is their experiences and achievements that will be fundamental for the development of further generations of Polish managers.

Results

Statistical manager

Taking into account the explicit attribution of each question to attitude scale and behavior scale as well as to X and Y styles, we calculated the average values of the said parameters for the entire study. As a result, the outcomes of all 455 questionnaires can be initially summarized in the form of just four figures, which offers a preliminary and fundamental view on Polish managers. Given the stereotypes presented earlier, the outcomes can be somehow surprising. As for attitude scale, the average Y value is 3.61, whereas the average X value of 2.63 is much lower, i.e. below the middle of the scale. The conclusion is clear, the attitudes and declared behavior of Polish managers towards employees are in contradiction with stereotypes and are similar to the attitudes of the majority of managers from other studies in other countries. What is more, this conclusion is further and really strongly enhanced by the behavior scale. The average Y value amounts to as much as 4.34, whereas the average X value to 2.79. The first generation of Polish managers should be highly appreciated. Having no earlier behavioral models and often no chance to comprehensively study the issue of human resources management during their university years, they have quickly met the international standards and are on a good way to turn from managers into leaders.

Shared areas and differences of opinion among Polish managers

For the purpose of higher clarity, we can practically narrow the response scale to three areas, i.e. "no – difficult to say – yes". This simplified scale contributes to an easy identification of issues the managers were most homogenous (if the responses showed one of the options was strongly preferred) or most heterogeneous (responses widely distributed) about.

As for attitude scale, the managers showed an overwhelming concert in two cases. The statement "Employees enjoy meaningful work" scored 95% of support with only 1% of negative responses. On the one hand, this result confirms the intuitive feeling we all have that in general we work more effectively and with better motivation if we can see a broader purpose of our effort. On a colloquial note, we can say that knowing the purpose of the ditch that we are digging, we are more committed and stronger motivated to work with a weaker sensation of tiredness. In addition, the awareness of the goal facilitates flexible reactions in the case of some disruption. On the other hand, even such a trivial question, as it may seem, offers some deeper message. Since managers so commonly agree with the issue, they are burdened with an extra and permanent duty, though they are not always aware of this fact, i.e. to provide the employees with relevant information substantiating the "meaningfulness" of the work expected from them on a daily basis. What is more, the best source of such information is the manager him/herself in direct contact, with technical solutions (e-mails, intranet, etc.) rather supporting this communication channel than replacing it.

The other issue most commonly agreed upon in the attitude scale reads as follows: "Employees' ideas often result in the development of useful suggestions" - 93% of support and 0% of objections. In general, the above statement well illustrates a fundamental change in human resources management that took place globally over recent decades. One can be really pleased that the awareness of the potential deposited at all levels of companies' organisational structures is so strong. Let us emphasise the word "awareness" since it is just the first step on the way to use this potential.

Largest differences of opinion are visible in the case of three statements from the attitude scale, namely:

1. Employees prefer opportunity to security (32% of positive and 35% of negative responses).
2. Most people will not use their own initiative or do things they have not been specifically assigned to do (33% of positive and 37% of negative responses).
3. Most people work to eat and pay their bills rather than because they need to solve problems and be creative (34% of positive and 35% of negative responses).

While examining the three statements presented above, it is clear they all refer to one basic issue, i.e. defining peoples' major motivation for work. The opinions of the managers surveyed split almost evenly. Around 1/3 of them believe in the inherent internal motivation of employees to make an effort. It means that the role of a manager is to skilfully support the employees in this task as well as to bring out their natural talents and align them with the company goals. The second 1/3 of the managers assume their employees are passive and in a permanent need of external stimuli – an attitude of instructing people rather than supporting them. This approach offers a completely different definition of the role of a manager in the organisation and the relevant management style.

Actually, right now we may be approaching one of the major conclusions drawn from the survey. On the one hand, Polish managers declare their strong belief (93%) in the potential of their employees and statistically rather represent type Y than X. On the other hand, they show that the belief in the internal motivation of employees to make an effort scores thirty-odd per cent. The disparity is clearly visible. In short, such an approach to employees is similar to an old statement frequently used by teachers at school, i.e. “a smart but lazy student”. In reality, while doing their everyday job the substantial number of managers focus on streamlining and controlling the “lazy” aspect rather than on developing the “smart” aspect of their employees. This in turn affects the entire system of mutual communication and, eventually, the company's results. In our judgement, such a limited belief in the internal motivation of employees has a much stronger impact on the daily and real managerial behaviours than the general declaration referring to the volume of the employees' potential.

A similar disparity is visible while analyzing the distribution of votes cast in the behavior scale. Responses on some issues are clear and unambiguous. 97% of the managers agree with the statement “Mutual responsibility and shared objectives should be emphasized”. A similar approach is shown in the case of "Employees should be encouraged to participate in decision-making within their own departments" with 95% of positive responses, “Discussion at all levels should be encouraged in order to obtain cooperation” – 93%, “Company objectives and sub-objectives should be communicated to all employees” – 98%, “Employees should be encouraged to share their ideas and suggestions” - 98%, “Establishing a trusting relationship between manager and workers is a good way to motivate employees” – 96%, and, “Employees should participate in establishing individual performance goals” – 94%. If our conclusions were based on this part of the survey exclusively, a Polish manager would be presented as a person absolutely open to multidimensional communication and diversity of opinions. But, as in the earlier case, this image is subject to significant change if we analyze the issues Polish managers mostly differ about. Three of them are presented below:

1. You need to constantly check up on employees to ensure they are working as required (31% of positive and 39% of negative responses).
2. It is important to continually remind people to meet deadlines (33% of positive and 30% of negative responses).

- Employees should not be allowed to set standards of performance, or they will be set too low (30% of positive and 40% of negative responses).

Again, a deep disparity is seen. And again, our opinion is that the everyday behaviour of a Polish manager is much stronger affected by the attachment to controls, supervision and top-down regulation of objectives than by the declarations about the importance of communication in teams. As a result, a very positive impression made by the outcomes from the entire X/Y styles scale is strongly watered down by the fact that only around one third of the managers think the remuneration is not the main motivating factor for employees, and that only a bit more of them think that permanent controls are not the most important effective management method.

Mars, Venus or Earth?

One of the natural areas of interest is to compare the characteristics of women and men with managerial jobs. It is an important issue requiring some deeper examination indeed. An argument speaking in favour of undertaking this issue is an animated dispute about women's professional development held a number of years now. It is highly emotional, but frequently more ideological than pragmatic and usually based on personal beliefs of the disputing parties rather than on scarce studies held of the topic.

As for this aspect, the structure of those surveyed was consistent with market data (women constituted 19% of the managers surveyed). The outcomes received can come as a surprise to many. It turns out that Polish female managers practically do not differ from their male colleagues. Both for attitude and behavior scales, the differences are marginal, which is well presented in the table 2 below:

Table 2: Comparison of female and male managers

	Attitude scale		Behavior scale	
	Women	Men	Women	Men
Theory X	2.60	2.64	2.74	2.80
Theory Y	3.66	3.60	4.34	4.34

The business environment is strongly parameterised by a number of commonly applied quality indicators referring to company performance (turnover, profitability, market share, return on investment, etc.) and to managers/employees themselves. It turns out that in such an environment the manager's gender plays no significant role. All, whether they want it or not, act according to the same rules and apply the same sets of objective assessment tools. Considering the study outcomes presented, one could conclude that the hypothetical circles representing the supposed female and male management styles overlap to a large extent leaving only narrow sections along the edges that can be related to the gender-specific characteristics. These narrow sections contain the differences that are, by intuition, assigned a much exaggerated role by automatically transferring maternal or paternal attributes to managerial positions.

As an element supplementing the above conclusions, it is worthwhile noticing that certain questions evoked a deeper difference of opinion between men and women. Out of six questions that produced the biggest differences, three contained the word "control" and each time they were marked as more important by men. In addition, men stronger than women believe that people aim at reducing their effort at work, which well fits the higher need of control mentioned in the previous sentence. On the other hand, men put a stronger emphasis

on encouraging employees to use their creativity. At the same time, they have a weaker belief in the statement that limitations imposed by the supervision or job reduce the ability of showing one's creativity. In general however, it may be that in private life women are from Venus and men from Mars, but as for management we are all from the same Earth.

The older, the...

There are many statements and commonly shared opinions referring to the impact of age on our behaviour. As it is usually the case in such situations, simultaneously there are also many completely opposite statements. Due to that, practically any thesis may win some illustration. Having access to such an extensive group of respondents, we decided to test how the age of managers affects their opinions about employees. We selected age rather than the duration of managerial career for a good reason. Age entails the aggregate of professional and life experiences, whereas the duration of managerial carrier only refers to one of these aspects and is, by nature, narrower.

As for this parameter, an explicit tendency was traced in the study, i.e. the older the Polish managers, the stronger the type Y approach in their management style and the weaker the type X approach (table 3).

Table 3: Theory X-Y and the age of managers

	Attitude scale			Behavior scale		
	Up to 34 years of age	35-44 years of age	Over 44 years of age	Up to 34 years of age	35-44 years of age	Over 44 years of age
Theory X	2.85	2.66	2.49	2.99	2.77	2.74
Theory Y	3.38	3.62	3.70	4.19	4.35	4.40

As shown in the study, the older the manager, the stronger the belief in and dependence on the subordinates, the bigger the openness to the employees' creativity, and the broader the willingness to offer them more room for independent action or even expectation of such attitudes among the employees. Older managers also claim that the range of factors motivating their employees is much broader than just money. Young managers are more frequently characterised by giving detailed instructions and expecting their strict execution. As for motivating factors, young managers have a stronger focus on the remuneration as such and a simple reward-punishment system.

Age-related changes in responses were the strongest visible among all criteria used for the comparative analysis of individual manager groups. In practice, it was the only criterion that produced noticeable differences among managers from the perspective of the entire study and not only individual questions. This aspect is then crucial, even fundamental, in the self-improvement process. It shows that the flow of time refuses to be overridden in the manager's development. Irrespective of the training intensity, climbing further education levels or reading professional literature, what is needed is the consistent long-term work on oneself, strenuous attempts to win practical experience and its conscious development over time. At the same time, it is absolutely essential to gain experience outside the professional life – family and social life being the key areas in this respect. One could refer here to an extremely apt ancient statement attributed to Euclid, i.e. “there is no royal road to geometry” (while replying to King Ptolemy's request for a faster and easier way of learning the subject).

This part of the survey can be specifically well illustrated by some individual survey statements evoking the largest response differences between the first (up to 34 years of age) and the third (over 44 years of age) age groups. It is actually sufficient to quote them to clearly spot the overtone even without any further comments:

1. Most employees will not exercise self-control and self-motivation – managers must do this for them.
2. The amount of responsibility given to employees should be limited and controlled.
3. Most employees prefer to have someone else set their goals and objectives.
4. Most people do want responsibility.
5. For most people, work is as natural as play or recreation.

In each of the above statements, the first age group was always much more restrictive in their agree/disagree responses than the third age group.

The role of MBA

Nearly half of those surveyed were graduates of MBA programs completed as an additional element of their background. According to the study outcomes, the MBA graduates show practically no difference versus their colleagues without this education component. Only in the case of attitude scale are the MBA graduates slightly less X and slightly more Y type-characterised. As for behaviour scale, both groups are practically identical. The interpretation of such outcomes can lead to a conclusion that MBA programmes cover insufficient human resources management and managerial (or leadership) skills components. On the other hand, managers in large international corporations (and such corporations were the major source of our respondents) have a lot of soft skills training so the MBA program, with only a portion of classes referring to such competences, is not a strong differentiator in the Theory X/Y area. It needs to be stressed that the outcomes are strongly consistent with those about age, as already presented earlier. Definitely, an MBA degree is an important development-supporting factor, but time and the ability to settle and skilfully use the knowledge collected over years will always prevail.

Company and team size

It is interesting to see the correlation between the company size (measured by its employment volume) and the managers' opinions about employees. Throughout the entire questionnaire, differences between managers from companies up to 49 employees and those from organisations employing over 249 people were visible but not very significant. A statistical manager in a small company is more X and less Y than his/her colleague from a large company, with the first parameter being more differentiating. There is much likelihood in the assumption that in large corporations more funds are allocated to training, bigger attention is paid to management procedures, and internal contacts' intensity and diversity are stronger. Our study reveals that the above elements mainly contribute to the weakening of style X but have a significantly weaker impact on the strengthening of style Y. This piece of information can be of importance, taking into account the organisation of managerial trainings. The size of the team actually managed by a given manager shows no correlation with his/her X and Y attitudes or declared behaviors. The results were almost identical for various size teams.

Conclusions

The analyzed sample of Polish managers is located significantly above the middle of the Y scale and below the middle of the X scale, which marks its similarity with foreign colleagues. At the same time, managers in Poland show a relatively strong tendency to control people and to doubt any deeper, inherent motivation of subordinates. This area offers the largest potential for change on the way of transforming a manager into a leader. There are no substantial differences between men and women. The strongest differentiating parameter is the managers' age. A clear rule is visible in this respect, namely the longer the experience, the more the management model shifts towards Y, with model X being much more characteristic of young and less experienced managers. In addition, the larger the company, the more visible the weakening of style X with a slight increase in the intensity of style Y. The other parameters subject to analysis, e.g. an MBA degree and team size, do not significantly impact the differentiation of the X/Y attitudes or declared behaviors of Polish managers. The overall results of the study suggest that at least some stereotypes about Polish managers did not come true and should be treated with caution. Similar conclusions may be drawn about popular beliefs on differences between male and female managers and possible expectations towards an MBA degree.

References

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