

Afghanistan: Managing Conflict and Employee Relations between Americans and Afghans

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Based on interviews and the use of the “Conflict Management Modes” exercise, it was discovered that Afghan managers are more directive, less empowering and delegating, more relationship-oriented, have long-term visions, are less confrontational and mostly avoid conflicts, whereas American expatriate managers seemed to be more collaborating, more empowering and delegating, more task-oriented, more short-term in their thinking, and collaborative in handling conflicts. It is recommended that Americans working in Afghanistan need to pay more attention to the need to build human capital, pay exclusive attention to cultural values, and foster more relationship-oriented attitudes, particularly when working in this kind of environment. Afghans need to be prepared to be more confrontational, more collaborating, and empower others in order to develop future leaders. In certain areas, such as teamwork, expertise, and the relationship between management and leadership, both Afghan and American managers seem to agree to a great extent but with different attitudes.

ORGANIZATIONAL BACKGROUND

Working as a Senior Finance/Administrative Officer for a number of organizations including private, public and non-governmental organizations, the author has observed different styles of operating practiced by different employees at the workplace, especially due to being from different nationalities, backgrounds, leadership styles, social relationships etc. For instance, in his recent job with the Civil Service Commission of the Afghan government, the author contracted consultancy services with a consultancy company called Adam Smith International (ASI). Based on the contract, ASI had to hire some consultants from abroad to provide consultancy services to the author's organization. These consultants, mostly from UK and US, were usually given a contract ranging from two-six months – new consultants would arrive every few months. Every time there were new consultants, the Afghan people and their organization had to adapt to a new set of working styles, attitudes and behaviors. This was really challenging to the managers and employees involved in working with these consultants. These consultants and the Afghan managers and employees mostly overlooked the impact of national cultures on ways of working and operating in the organization.

The study of different working styles, attitudes and behaviors in the workplace has become very demanding in Afghanistan because of the latest developments in this country particularly after September 11, 2001. The international community (almost 40 countries) has an active presence in Afghanistan, which has increased in the decade since then. The number of foreign companies is increasing in an incredible way. Right now, working in Afghanistan requires the need to deal with so many diverse nationalities, cultures and management styles.

SETTING THE STAGE

Managing conflict and handling employee relations is particularly challenging in such a multicultural environment. Afghan managers seem to operate and interact with their colleagues and staff in quite a different way than Americans do, based on the researcher's experiences with Afghan and American managers. So why do they have such different attitudes, behaviors and ways of operating? Why do they see themselves differently from American managers? How do these differences in ways of managing themselves and others show themselves? Can we see examples of Afghan managers and consultants and compare them with expatriate American managers and consultants working in Afghanistan?

To understand the case we need some insights into the religion being practiced in Afghanistan. Islam dominates in all aspects of the country, which means the major-

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