

MY FULBRIGHT EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

I was fortunate to receive a Fulbright Exchange Professional scholarship to the United States of America to study the influence of cultural values on management, particularly American values, and their impact on western managerial practices. As a former human resource development specialist in a US multinational organization, it was an excellent opportunity to visit a country which is often associated with democratic ideals, human rights, and big business.

During my 9-week stay and visit from May 14 – July 19, 1994, I became immersed in the American way of life through home stays, business meetings, workshop discussions, dining outs, picnics and conversations with a number of my valued professional colleagues and friends.

I attended numerous seminars, listened to a number of renowned scholars, academics and managers in the field of human resource and cross cultural management, and in return gave talks, conducted workshops and led discussions on a number of topics ranging from culture, corporate culture, training, women, and our Malaysian culture. The audience too was varied and consisted of academics, graduate students, women, and managers in many parts of the United States. My professional colleagues and contacts facilitated my learning and exposure to various aspects of American business and academic life and the special challenges faced by American managers as they worked on diversity and across cultures. I saw America through their “lenses”.

Indeed, being on the Fulbright program was a passport of honor – an experience which should be on the agenda on the CV of any training professional – a feeling which money cannot buy! People simply gave their time to you. I was able to meet and get access and entry to a number of places, universities and business organizations and even the United Nations which I would not have been able to do otherwise!

Key Observations on American Values

Most Malaysians I know tend to make sweeping generalizations about America and its people based on what they see through the print and electronic media. While there are many positive things to say about the American people, there are those who are critical of the American way of life and its influence on our youth especially its stand on individual freedom and liberal attitudes on dressing, love, free sex, and violence.

But in studying cultures, I believe we have to look at the behavior of a group of people by looking at their values, symbols, heroes, rituals, and underlying assumptions. I believe it is only through some form of participant observation, that is by staying or working with the people we are studying and thinking in their concepts that one gets a feel for the “pulse and tempo” of their culture.

So, what did I learn about America and her people?

As a Malaysian interculturalist, there are many admirable things about America and the American people. According to Orlando Peterson (1994) from Harvard University, the Americans can be categorized as falling into three groups:

- Firstly, the traditionalists who believe in the doctrine of being separate but truly equal.
- Secondly, the multiculturalists who represent different racial groups who went to live and make America their new home, and
- Thirdly the Ecumenicalists who are united by the Christian heritage – Protestants, Catholics and belief in a Christian God.

But the Americans I got to know are ones who value individual rights, freedom of expression, achievement, independence and a competitive spirit.

As a Malaysian of Malay origin, these values can be a little discomfoting because we have been “programmed” to value harmonious relationships, respect for elders, a “we” orientation, religion and a concern for face-saving. A Malaysian who is very “American” in his ways can often earn himself the label of being a self-opinionated, egoistic, task-oriented, and assertive individualist.

Nevertheless, with these differences considered, I still feel that there are many aspects of life which are exemplary and worth emulating. But there are also those which may not be suitable to our Malaysian way of life. Malays refer to this form of reflection as “*ambil ilham dan buat pengajaran*.” (Be inspired and used as example).

Based on my conversations with a wide spectrum of Americans from all walks of life I would like to share five key observations which are as follows:

1. Control over Nature

Most Americans believe that the forces of Nature must be harnessed through technical and scientific devices to meet the needs of Man. They have to separate themselves from nature and establish some form of mastery and control to manipulate it to human advantage. People are expected to modify and challenge their existing boundaries - both physical and non-physical - to enhance their quality of life and well-being. Hence Man should control Nature, rather than the other way around.

To Americans, words like “new”, “change”, “challenge”, “breakthrough”, “possibility”, and “opportunity” excite them as they are often strongly linked to development, improvement, progress, and growth. They are linear and efficiency-oriented – meaning, the shortest distance between two points is a straight line. So they are direct, systematic, action-oriented, great short term problem-solvers and solution seekers. They see a problem as not something to be accepted but something to be attacked and to be fixed as soon as possible.

This value on control is best illustrated in their “frontier mentality” which has made them explore the “Wild West”, go to the moon, and achieve several breakthroughs and inventions in their pursuit of new challenges. That is why, in spite of all its shortcomings, America is

still the most admired nation because of its extraordinary accomplishments in science, technology, business, higher education, research and development in practically all human endeavors. Adaptability, ingenuity, and raw physical energy made up the frontiersman's survival kit, and Americans like people who question conventional wisdom as their intellectual culture nurtures original thinking and pioneering research. No one can deny that it is this value of individual creativity that has become the cornerstone of a great many American ideas and breakthroughs.

2. Low context form of communication

Americans are more inclined to be low context in the way they speak and come across to others. What is said is what is meant "mean what you say, say what you mean." The verbal message containing facts and information itself means everything – hence the more explicit, detailed and specific the better. In this case, information is often conveyed in a direct manner as vagueness and ambiguity are often interpreted as devious and show that a person is trying to conceal something. The stress is on clarity, a straight and to the point communication style. As people can separate the behaviors from the person, they are not afraid to speak up when they have something to say which may not be pleasant to others.

Hence, the values of freedom of speech as embodied in the American Constitution allows them to have a point of view, some very strong ones too about their community, government, the President, gay liberation, etc, etc. So, with a group of Americans – one has to share one's views and opinions. Needless to say, they must be supported by facts and data to sound credible!

3. Driven by guilt

A sense of guilt more than shame tends to drive the American's individual actions. Americans believe that everyone should be a self starter and internally driven. They are expected to get things done on their own volition without any form of external and social pressures and are not subjected to the "herd" mentality and to the views of others who may disagree with their stand. This orientation towards getting things done on their own makes them want to excel, to do it right and to be recognized for their efforts and individual accomplishments.

They are not concerned about what others will say about them if they commit a wrongful act. They believe in a strong sense of absolute right and wrong based on an internal locus of control (inner conscience). In keeping with this orientation, words like self-confidence, self-identity, self-control, self deception, self conscious, self improvement, and self reliance are the best indication of how seriously Americans take to doing things on their own. They believe that they have to take control of their own destiny and "dare to be different" from the rest.

4. Concept of monochronic time

Americans are conscious about time. They are monochronically-oriented and see time as a scarce and finite resource, linear, displaced, sequential and are more inclined to queue and take turns. To save, spend, waste, lose, gain, and reduce time, they have to routinely plan and execute their work within the specified time and scheduled deadlines. People do one thing at a time and are intolerant of those who are not punctual. This indicates that they are focused,

on target, and goal driven as time is effectively used, and not wasted. It is sinful to waste one's time and to sit around and appear to do nothing.

Hence communication between business persons is done with directness, speed, and specificity. As time is measured in terms of monetary value - just like other resources used to create wealth and prosperity. As a result, monochronic time-orientated people are more task-driven, would not like to be kept waiting, and tend to get down to business as soon as the small talk is over and done with. It is common for an American to fill up a day with some purposeful and fulfilling activities.

5. Spirit of individualism

Americans regard themselves as unique and independent individuals "I did it my way" and are concerned with their own behavior, needs, interests, and goals. Competition is fostered in the American home and the classroom even among the youngest age levels. Very young children for instance are encouraged to answer questions for which their classmates do not know the answers.

The spirit of individualism makes them want to stand alone, not needing others, not depending on the judgment of their significant elders and not submitting to their wishes. They are expected to express their opinions without being influenced by what others have to say.

The American way of life is also highly competitive as they believe that competition brings out the best in any individual. They assert that it challenges or forces each person to produce the very best that is humanly possible. These cultural values and their underlying assumptions must be clearly understood as they have made Americans what they are. The values of competition, individual achievement, independence, assertiveness, pursuit of material wealth, personal freedom, private space, autonomy, and self interest are internalized in them at an early age as they are regarded as the best impetus to advancement. Their sense of identity is very much that of a separated self and they do not depend on others to help them in life. Regardless of sex, gender, sexual orientation, and cultural identity each group is allowed to protect its own heritage, keep a safe boundary, and assert its rights. Americans are happiest when their achievements, accomplishments and successes can be documented, measured specifically through scoreboards, charts, heroes, bestsellers, TV ratings, statistics, numbers, figures and pay cheques.

Related to the focus on individualism is the pride they take in their "work hard achievement motive" which makes it possible for anyone to succeed if they really try hard enough and have the right backing. They get no credit whatsoever for having been born into a rich family although this gets them into better networks and sometimes better schools. To first of all fail, then try again with a lot of support and finally celebrate the "win" are the ingredients of success. To them achievement with minimum effort conveys arrogance or unfair superiority and will never bring the same accolades as when maximum effort is expended. A person who has achieved much in society but with low effort does not feel right or make sense to Americans. Indeed the American cultural archetype is one who starts as an underdog to become a "champ".

Most Americans I have met are warm hearted, kind, civic minded and are in general a very friendly group of people on the surface – yet they may not necessarily be your friends! Perhaps, this is due to their highly mobile society which makes it difficult to cultivate deep lasting friendships. Though they are individualists, there's always a support group willing and ready to help one another through voluntary work to pursue a worthy cause – and they start to do this while still in school. I was told that this spirit of volunteerism probably grew out of the Puritan and Christian ethics in the early pioneering days. As they have to face all manner of adversities in a rugged country where Man was pitched against the hazards of Nature, Americans have cultivated a sense of involvement and participation to help one another improve their surroundings.

To sum up, the American self-made man or woman is still very much the ideal autonomous, independent, and self-reliant individual who is proud to be on his own. For the 20th Century American - he believes that he is the best judge of what is good for him.

Some Comparisons and contrasts

The trip to US and the opportunity to be with my American friends made me realize the impact of one's cultural values and how we relate with others and view the world. Our socialization process and the internalization of values at a young age play a significant role in shaping our adult behavior. Indeed the opportunity to be a Fulbright has certainly enabled me to compare and contrast the values of my American friends with those of what I know about Malaysians especially Malays. These are as follows:

1. Live in harmony with people and nature

While Americans are likely to take charge and be in control, Malaysians are more inclined to be in harmony with others and co-exist with both nature and the non-physical aspects of the unseen world. This belief promotes a healthy co-existence with people around us and a willingness to accept things the way they are. It prescribes that one has to adapt and “take” whatever comes which induces an attitude of humility, non-confrontation, adaptability, and even submission that makes life in a community easy and smooth. As a result Malaysians tend to have an accommodating posture with their physical surroundings and make us less likely to challenge existing boundaries as it can cause disharmony within the established norms of a particular group of people.

This need to maintain harmonious relationships have made us use mutually satisfactory and face-saving outcomes rather than aim for the best way to attain a goal. Malaysians placed harmony above openness and "saying it as it is". If there is a risk that saying what we really think will embarrass or offend another person or cause disharmony in the group, Malaysians will choose to avoid expressing our true and honest opinions.

As a result, Malaysians are more likely to support policy decisions made to preserve peace and stability. Any form of uncertainty, anxiety, conflict, and counter viewpoints are minimized to promote the only one popular way that is agreed by all. Members who persist on having their own ways and are unwilling to compromise would be considered as troublesome individuals.

Malaysians also tend to compromise and avoid open public criticisms and outspokenness in order to preserve long-term relationships. Being patient, humble and having a caring posture

of concern and support for others will ensure that the feelings of family members, friends, work colleagues and the community at large is taken into consideration. The much valued frankness in communication among Westerners is often seen as rudeness by Malaysians.

For example, Malaysians demonstrate their sensitivity in preserving harmonious relationships with others both at work and non-work settings by using the following circuitous phrases and statements in their daily interpersonal encounters:

Apologetic	"forgive me for asking and interfering"
Harmony	"we need to help each other"
Family	"this office is like a family and you're a member of this family"

Malaysians also think highly of those who are loyal, moderate in their ways, disciplined and obedient. Regardless of ethnicity, Malaysians believe that harmonious relationships will be maintained if children show these values when they do not challenge their parents, students do not argue with their teachers, and subordinates obey their superiors. The relationship between husband and wife is seen as complementary with the man taking the leading role and the wife following him in order to preserve harmony. It is important to create cohesiveness and harmony within the group, not to be too tough or be personally exposed to public failure or ridicule - all for the sake of harmony.

For example, the Malays are likely to hold social ceremonies of *doa selamat* - prayers seeking blessings to ensure smooth tidings before venturing into a new project. Through such gatherings they believe that the communal prayer will give them the spiritual strength to see them through difficult times.

For the Chinese, seeking harmony with the environment is shown in the way they practice *feng shui*, the science of selecting a living environment where the elements and the energies are in harmonious balance, thereby bringing good life to those who reside within that environment. They believe that people and their fortunes are affected by the layout and orientation of their workplaces and homes. As Earth forces have an influence on a person's physical health and personal disposition the Chinese would arrange their immediate living and work space to strengthen this vital balance. The goal is to promote good *feng shui* and make the person be in harmony with nature and the environment. This belief will encourage a flow of good fortune, improve luck, ensure peace, happiness, and success, and avoid failure at work or at play.

Similarly, the Indians consult their temple priests and gurus when planning major events in their lives such as weddings, births, and naming their children and pray to the appropriate deities for their blessings.

However, carried to the extreme this orientation can also deter us from breaking away from our existing mindsets to test new uncharted paths which will enhance our confidence and mastery in developing ideas and new areas of human behavior. In addition, most Malaysians too have the tendency to look at the West for inspiration. Perhaps the legacy of colonialism has made us look at anything that comes from the UK and USA as more superior, more advanced and hence must be emulated. Malaysians are known for copying foreign symbols without understanding their true meaning as evident in some of our local-based TV formats and productions.

So, to progress, we need to need to create our own unique symbols and build on our own traditional strengths and indigenous expressions with a modern and contemporary appeal. We have to be aware that we need to be globally connected but yet embedded in our local culture. And, to do this Malaysians must undertake to do their own cultural surgery on the values and practices which are counterproductive and those that can promote speed and self initiative. We have to identify local values which can be used to support best practices and downplay those which can impede efficiency and effectiveness. In adopting foreign concepts we have to be mindful that human behavior is experienced within a context. So, what we now have to do is to be able to locate management practices that are anchored in our own local culture but with a global appeal.

2. Focus on high context form of communication *rasa* or feelings

The American value of being able to speak up made me realize the indirectness of the Malays in their communication style especially when we want to convey something which maybe negatively received by others. We are less likely to be too open when articulating opinions, especially if they touch on the “minefield of multicultural sensitivities”. Malaysians grow up with a built in antennae to sense or *rasa* what other people are thinking without saying them in many words. What is not spoken may be just as important as the spoken word in building and maintaining relationships.

Indeed our communication patterns are high context - never direct - as meaningful information also resides in the physical context or internalized in the person to whom information is directed. We tend to be relatively formal as we rely on hierarchies, less verbal communication and more implicit understanding through shared experiences of history. Often there are rules, norms and guidelines for various types of social encounters such as introductions, meetings and other ritualistic acts and protocol which members are expected to know and demonstrate accordingly.

In fact both the meaning of the spoken and the unspoken words have to be deciphered or interpreted accurately - at the conscious and unconscious levels of understanding. To simply gauge a situation at the explicit and conscious level can cause some grave misunderstanding, as what is said is not what is meant unless they consider the body language, gestures, innuendos, facial expressions, tonal qualities, modes of non-verbal channels, family status, age differences, social setting and the use of imprecise and ambiguous language to say more or to say less. People who merely translate literally a verbal message (like subtitles in a movie) often tend to overlook the hidden subtleties, which are vital for a deeper understanding of what is being transmitted.

As a result it can be difficult for a person to assess a behavior of another as separate from his family of orientation. Malaysians in general do not find it easy to describe an individual from the environment in which he or she functions as they tend to attach meaning to many of the stimuli and circumstances surrounding an explicit message and how meaningful is the stimulus. The implicit meaning of a nonverbal message is also important as “what you see is not what you get; there is more than meets the eye”. The phrase “the medium is the message” means that the message is often made up in terms of who is the sender, how did he say it, when did he say it, who else were there, etc.

As mentioned earlier, the desire to want to preserve harmonious relationships within the group has often made it difficult for Malaysians to be assertive especially with those who are more confrontative and use a direct style of communication. Malaysians in general, believe that those who are too open, frank, forthright and direct in speaking up are not sensitive to the feelings of others (*timbang rasa dan jaga hati orang lain*). Relationships could be affected, leading to a breakdown in interpersonal communication among relatives and friends. One could therefore argue that communicating with Malaysians demands a lot of patience and acute sensitivity on the part of the sender to sense how the message will be received.

As effective communication is the act of the receiver, failure to acknowledge the hidden subtleties will reflect the sender's naivety, lack of refinement and even ignorance in understanding local norms and practices. While Malaysians regard those who demonstrate this acute sensitivity as a strength and very much needed in a highly multicultural and multi religious society, it can also deter us from speaking up our minds when there are things that have to be highlighted especially at the workplace. This is where Malaysians must be able to welcome feedback because we can only grow when we know our blind spots. Perhaps what we have to do is to find an appropriate way to speak up through a formal channel when we are unhappy with what we have and be brave enough to state our opinions which may be contrary to what others want to hear. This is where Malaysians must have the courage to be decisive and to articulate boldly –but yet temper our views with an acute sense of consideration for the feelings and sensibilities of others who are important to us.

3. Are conditioned with shame – shame driven

Malaysians especially Malays tend to focus on the concept of *malu* or shame as a form of control and motivation based on an external locus of control more so than a sense of guilt which is often internally driven. For most Malaysians, *malu* is an ingredient of social conditioning that teaches us to be externally driven or influenced by *apa orang kata nanti* (What will others say). It serves as a tool to deter us from committing an act that is considered as socially unbecoming by others.

So, our behaviors are often judged and assessed by our peers and elders who are important in our circle of network. They expect to be consulted when we want to make a major decision or solve a conflict and will determine if what we did meets with their approval. While this orientation views the group as a form of social control or even moral policing, it can also make an individual deviate from the norm in their absence! The case of abandoned babies by unmarried teenagers is an illustration of the vulnerability of our Malay girls, especially those from the village, who have been programmed with “shame” are now finding that the social controls from their extended relatives (who used to act as parent figures) are no longer in place when they live in the urban jungle.

Also in shame-driven cultures, members are expected to demonstrate an acute sense of social sensitivity towards others in the group. They are discouraged from committing any wrongdoing for fear of bringing about adverse social consequences to members in their group. To a certain extent, they are driven by an external locus of control (outer conscience) and to rely on external sanctions - like parents, extended relatives, government and the authority to get things done.

To be openly ridiculed and punished will bring shame to the person and members of his immediate family. For Malaysians, learning to feel shame is the first step towards being

mature as parents can be held responsible if their children display bad manners. It is often the loss of face *jatuh air muka* of our family relatives, revered elders and company that will push us to do something for the common good.

In general, Malaysians want to feel proud of their family members, possessions, achievements, and standing in the society. They will take every effort to show to the world that they are honorable and good citizens. If others make some comment that touches their feelings and make them look awkward or uneasy, then they will perceive that they have lost face. This may explain why some families do not like to talk about their family problems to others as it may cause them to lose face and be looked down upon by friends and neighbors. On the other hand, if one of their children has achieved honors in studies or career, this will give them "face" and they will be very proud to show off to their relatives and friends.

4. Are flexible with managing time – flexible time management

Malaysians generally are flexible in managing the use of their time, more likely to be multi-track; circuitous, non-sequential, non-linear and would carry on multiple tasks, priorities, and conversations simultaneously. They regard time as more fluid than Americans without any fixed points as it is not a concrete commodity. Punctuality and deadlines are not absolute and things are less hurried, and people are accommodating to time and changing targets. They are likely to tolerate constant interruptions and failures to work and deadlines can be negotiated and adjusted. Malaysians are more likely than their foreign counterparts to take their own sweet time in getting things done. They are more likely than foreigners from the West to be late in attending meetings, keeping appointments, or meeting deadlines. The commonly heard concept of "rubber time" means that datelines are not strictly adhered to and that there are "rolling deadlines" which makes planning rather difficult.

Malays, in particular do not like to rush in getting things done as it can be seen as bad manners *tak sopan* and contrary to their modest disposition. People simply will not hurry to attend to tasks as they are more likely to complete human interactions and offer excuses reflecting their tolerance for people and a tendency to be influenced by factors beyond their control. It is common for Malays to arrive late for appointments and business is preceded by hours of social rapport. Looking at the watch and cutting a conversation short can be considered as impolite behavior and can be often taken personally. It is open-ended as completing the face to face communication is more important than adhering to a schedule. Generally, time is more diffused and activities occur without regard for the clock, especially in the rural areas.

However, the importance of time is stressed when it is an auspicious time to perform some important ceremony or event like the exact moment to begin an important ceremony where there is a senior elder or the moment to perform a wedding ceremony.

Malaysians also demonstrate their relaxed attitude in the way they walk. While Americans who are late for meetings would "walk fast and look worried", drink and eat at the same time, a Malay will consider "eating on the run" as most unbecoming of a manager. They would rather be late than to drink while walking. To be seen to be rushing, running, and hurrying on foot is considered as lacking in grace. It is also ill-mannered to arrive early, especially for a Chinese wedding dinner.

Even at social functions, the Malaysian habit of being late is legendary and is a frequent source of irritation to foreigners from America, Europe, and Japan who are always punctual for any appointments.

5. Are group oriented

Most Malaysians are often affiliated to a particular group from birth based on some common grounds such as ethnicity, religion, language, community, and organization. Their membership and affiliation in these groups will continue throughout their lives as such groups provide emotional support in exchange for unquestioning loyalty.

While growing up in a collectivistic society gives its members a social sensitivity to care for others and listen to what they say, it may not always build and promote the concept of the independent “self” at an early age. Often, it is not easy for Malaysians to internalize the concept as they tend to see the group as its end and improvement to individual capacities a means to that end.

Because of their affiliation to a particular group they are expected to place their personal interests behind those of others who matter to them as illustrated in the saying “I did it for my group”. They tend to be concerned about the impact of their behavior on others and will only give their opinions on a specific issue after knowing what others have to say.

As a result, Malays in particular are more likely to speak up and be assertive when they are in groups. They are not as courageous if they are on their own. In fact, most Malaysians are known to be involved in an activity only if their friends are in it too. They derive benefits from their existing and complex web of relationships. They are expected to promote the values of collaboration, cooperation, communal responsibility, social usefulness (*manusia yang berguna*), and acceptance of authority as these are vital for functioning in a group oriented society.

On the other hand, while the values of individualism, achievement, and self autonomy are found among Malaysians who have been exposed to western values and education, their elders would still find them insensitive to local norms. However, as Malaysia modernize these values are important because they serve as the building blocks of a highly competitive and robust society.

Still, what Malaysians must remember is that they do not become corrosive elements in our collectivistic oriented society especially the spirit of individualism which can “leave one suspended in glorious but terrifying isolation.” (Robert Bellah, *Habits of the Heart*, 1985:146). Carried to the extreme, Malaysians know it can be an obsession and may have a devastating effect on the individual.

Perhaps what Malaysians have to do is to assimilate the three related values and express them through creative expressions both at the individual and group levels. At the same time, Malaysians too have to learn to be precise and use quantitative data like numbers, seconds,

minutes, figures to analyze ratings of events so that they become part of the Malaysian daily vocabulary – hence replacing our *lebih kurang* - more or less mentality.

On the other hand, I also believe that our primary group (family and extended network) can be a source of strength and immediate support. In our efforts to promote a *Bangsa Malaysia* we also have to learn to extend our caring posture and develop a high degree of empathy for those who are less fortunate. This means getting involved in many voluntary associations and community based projects which may cut across ethnic and religious lines so that values of nurturing and caring become embedded in the Malaysian psyche.

Another related lesson learned is that the Malaysian inclination to derive satisfaction by being together *lepak* rather than engaging oneself in some purposeful activity has to be discarded. The days of waiting to be told what to do are over – as Malaysians now have to learn to develop their own agenda – a specific mission and purpose in mind and go for it. We can no longer wait for the Government, for our Prime Minister and superiors to tell us what to do – we simply must generate our own “internal motor” and learn to look at time as a valuable resource, to be displaced and harnessed through some productive habits and outcomes. At the same time we need to take pride in being part of a collectivity and this means the institution of the family and its extended network must be nurtured and repeatedly strengthened because it can be the key to our personal well-being and socio-emotional support in the years ahead.

Some Personal Reflections

All in all, the trip was a great learning experience which provided me with the opportunity to reflect and review some of my own ideas and thoughts on human resource development, culture, managerial practices, and how I saw my role at a US multinational workplace.

Apart from the lessons gained, my exposure to the American way of life has also deepened my understanding of what it means to be a Malaysian. As an interculturalist at home and a cross culturalist abroad, I find that to be effective and to be able to relate comfortably with people across cultures we need to know our own “cultural baggage”. In a world where borders are becoming porous, we have to feel good about ourselves and be proud of our own heritage. We have to honor our past and value our symbols in order to build an identity which is uniquely Malaysian and yet realize that we have to be globally connected. This richness in age-old traditions and heritage can provide a strong foundation and guide future actions as we work across cultures and deal with diversity. In fact managing diversity is America’s new challenge in meeting the needs of a culturally diverse workforce, sensitizing workers, and managers to differences associated with gender, race, age, sexual orientation, and nationality in an attempt to maximize the potential productivity of all employees.

When I compare it with our own Malaysian multiculturalism, it is obvious that the concept of American diversity is more encompassing but the common thread is how to enhance the appreciation and understanding of ethnic and cultural differences and give legitimacy to local ways and customs of doing things in a collaborative manner. By exploring these differences, there may be room for synergy.

Most of us take our own culture for granted and it is when we interact with people who are not like us that we gain some personal insights about who we are and how we get connected, and relate with others. To function effectively across cultures and promote cross cultural

communication, we therefore need an insight into one another's assumptions about life so that we approach any cross cultural encounter with an open and receptive mind. The more we can empathize cognitively and emotionally with people from another culture, the greater are the chances for effective communication, and in the process we can derive some powerful lessons about our own culture.

There are many ways of studying people from another culture: visits, surveys, readings, questionnaires and face to face discussions. Interculturalists call this "inquiry from the outside – but more importantly we have to go beyond a culture's symbols and rituals and look at the underlying assumptions of values and beliefs. To appreciate and understand the Americans, we need to look at their historical background and cultural assumptions of how the values of individualism, achievement, and freedom of expression have shaped their hearts and minds. This is called "inquiry from the inside" and we do this by occupying their frame reference – meaning living and working with them.

As a Malaysian, at first I was appalled by the fact that two gay people in some states in the US can now marry – but if I were to look at the underlying assumptions of individual rights, freedom of expression, openness – that's pretty understandable and perhaps the logical step between two consenting adults.

Implications for management studies

The study tour has therefore reinforced my answer that techniques and concepts, if they are to be exported overseas to another culture have to be "screened" by those responsible for implementing them for their relevance and applications. My exposure to Western management practices both prior to departure and after my study tour has convinced me that management strategies and decisions are very much a reflection of the values of managers who themselves represent a particular mode of mental programming unique to their culture of orientation. While organizations may have the same work structures and business goals, managers across cultures tend to interact and implement managerial practices differently.

American processes, thinking patterns and systems have evolved over the years based on a set of values derived from the "frontier mentality" and are therefore not always appropriate across cultures. While we admire their systems approach and breakthroughs in technology, we cannot afford to take their concept and theories *lock stock and barrel*, especially when they relate to human behavior. It simply goes against our second challenge in Vision 2020 of being a psychologically liberated nation. As young Malaysians go overseas to study in Western universities, I certainly believe that they need to learn about their own culture so that they are not easily influenced by what they see and hear while abroad. By so doing they are better equipped to select and identify those which are contextually appropriate for Malaysia.

With the current emphasis on diversity management, particularly in global project teams, there is now a realization that while the functions of management are almost accepted as universal, the way in which the human element performs and integrates these processes varies enormously from society to society, from economy to economy and within one society and from sector to sector. For those of us who are involved in management studies, this would mean that theories and concepts that are sensitive to the different power differentials of many diverse groups in the various global scenarios have to be explored and developed.

Managers in Malaysia have yet to evolve a work culture that is strongly anchored in local

values to drive managerial practices which are globally responsive. Currently, it is common to find our Malaysian managers who have been trained in western management concepts to look to our counterparts in the West to provide answers and recipes that seemingly have all the magic potion. My hunch is that we have a long way to go to remove the residual effects of colonialism, which resides in many disguises and forms.

The value orientations of managerial thinking and behaviour will now have to be identified and located within the context of the culture where development is to take place. After all, a human phenomenon can only be accurately interpreted when there is an attempt to look for the hidden and deeper patterns of thinking, feeling and acting in which people do not readily recognize.

One of the consequences of this line of thinking is to examine our Malaysian approach in management studies and human resource development and then ask ourselves the following questions:

- o How do we describe our Malaysian management?
- o What are the unique and distinctive features of managing in Malaysia?
- o Can we talk about a recipe for success in leading coaching and motivating?
- o Is there a particular branding of managerial style that is typically Malaysian?
- o What makes the Malaysian multicultural workplace unique?
- o What do we need to make our organizations world class? Who do we benchmark with?
- o How different are our Malaysian managers from their foreign (read Anglo-Saxon and Japanese) counterparts?
- o What are the values of managers at the Malaysian workplace?
- o How are we responding to the forces of globalization?
- o Can Malaysian trainers and educators take pride and describe to others the Malaysian way of managing people? If so, what would be the essential ingredients? o Or do we still refer to ideas and theories in managing people based on foreign constructs to strengthen our efforts at organizational transformation, managing change, resolving conflict and delivering even customer service?

So what should we do?

Firstly, there is a need for local academia and management practitioners to decode the Malaysian epistemology in the context of organizations in the local setting. To substantiate any form of quantitative research, they may have to also use an “emic” (locally developed) tool of participant observation to study how individual managers articulate their roles, make decisions, solve problems and relate with others. An attempt to locate what is the Malaysian brand has to be included in their teaching and or training agenda.

Secondly, Malaysian managers could benefit from their own interpretation of the culture of social organizations, in light of the advances made in information technology. In striving for greater homogeneity of basic human values, tastes and behaviors, what is much needed is a model of local organization that has to be reconceptualized and aligned with global values of speed, flexibility, integration, innovation, customer focus, and productivity. In fact there has to be a clarification of the universal values like efficiency, humanity, and integrity, which are valid in all cultural settings but articulated in many different ways.

Finally, Malaysian managers may find it necessary to do their own “cultural surgery” by discarding behaviors that are an extreme interpretation of their values if perceived to be dysfunctional. The over-emphasis on relationship, shame *malu*, practice of not wanting to give and receive feedback for fear of causing disharmony, too much emphasis on hierarchical relationships, and a tendency to wait to be told by superiors, have to be downplayed. Perhaps the challenge for all of us is to harness the values of group orientation, shame driven, hierarchical approach, and a religious outlook to enhance high performance teamwork, effective task completion, a competitive mindset, and a highly ethical conduct.

As we move forward, I believe any form of social intervention can be made more meaningful when there is an attempt to examine our own particular “software programming and operating system”. It is only when we learn to recognize the roots from which we’ve grown that we can anchor our new behaviors to what we most revere. While our roots cannot be removed or changed, we can modify the soil, change the fertilizer or climate, and even prune its branches to evolve our own unique cultural capital in management development. In assimilating the positive aspects of globalization to enrich our way of life, we also have to preserve some of our revered values of our Malaysian culture from being erased by the homogenizing forces of global capitalism.

It's time we surface those particular, indigenous and culture specific management practices that are equally effective and efficient in both local and global settings. In the spirit of *Malaysia Boleh*, (Malaysian Can) we have to generate our own unique, distinctive, and innovative responses to the new global work scenarios by capitalizing on our inherent strengths, demonstrating a willingness to learn, reflecting from our own experience, and accepting the fact that tension and conflict are inevitable in a context of globalization. If Malaysians want to take center stage in the global arena, we cannot afford to be a member of the audience – we now have to learn to speak up and articulate our views and opinions clearly and boldly in a language that others can understand. This also means being able to describe ourselves to others in terms of what we value without being apologetic or even arrogant and ethnocentric – but humble enough to accept the fact that we need to learn from the rest of the world. Otherwise we may not be seen to be equal contributors in this global workplace. In addition we also have to articulate our Vision 2020 and its accompanying values, (See Chart 1) and recognize that our path towards progress and development is one which wants us to interpret modernization in own mould of modernism – without sacrificing our core values and beliefs.

As a Malaysian, our Vision 2020 made me realized the importance of self-determination to go beyond what initially is seemingly impossible to achieve, by enrolling others in the process. This means that we have to continuously seek new challenges and directions so that our achievement drive is constantly primed for our own fulfillment as well as for the betterment of the community we live in. Indeed the way ahead to achieve the 9 challenges of Vision 2020 will take us along a path which requires us to be clear as to what we want – both for ourselves and our children.

9 CHALLENGES OF VISION 2020

- 1 Establish a united Malaysian nation with a sense of common and shared destiny
- 2 Create a psychologically liberated secure and developed Malaysian society with faith and confidence in itself, justifiably proud of what it is, of what it has accomplished and robust enough to face all manner of adversity.
- 3 Foster and develop a mature democratic society practising a form of mutual consensual community oriented Malaysian democracy that can be a model for many developing countries
- 4 Establish a fully moral and ethical society, whose citizens are strong in religious and spiritual values and imbued with the highest ethical standards
- 5 Establish a matured liberal and tolerant society in which Malaysians of all colors and creeds are free to practice and profess their customs, cultures and religions beliefs and yet feel that they belong to one nation.
- 6 Establish a scientific and progressive society, a society that is innovative and forward looking, one that is not only a consumer of technology but also a contributor to the scientific and technological civilization of the future
- 7 Establish a fully caring society and a caring culture, a social system in which the society will come before self, in which the welfare of the people will revolve not around the state or the individual but around a strong and resilient family system.
- 8 Ensure an economically just society in which there is fair and equitable distribution of the wealth of the nation in which there is full partnership in economic progress.
- 9 Establish a prosperous society with an economy that is fully competitive, dynamic, robust and resilient.

So, the next time you visit any country, look at it from both lenses – yours as well as the foreign country so that you have a simultaneous screening process of learning – accepting what is exemplary and critically evaluating and strongly rejecting what you consider to be not in line with the value and aspirations of our Malaysian multicultural society. To appreciate cultures and have a global mindset, we need an insight into one another's assumptions about life so that we become comfortable with others who are not like us. Only then can we function effectively across cultures and promote cross cultural communication.

Conclusion

Certainly, Malaysians have a lot to learn from our American brethren and we can start to nurture our young in schools, the spirit of individual creativity and invention without sacrificing the revered values of our group “we” orientation. This I find, can be a daunting task because the questions which my American friends are grappling with now tend to focus on spirituality, the value of wholism, interconnectedness, love, and dignity. Perhaps this is a reaction of years of a Newtonian form of thinking, very mechanistic, simply linear, and fragmented that there is now a need to see work in a new way.

All in all, my Fulbright program was a splendid “sabbatical” and time for a recharge and an opportunity to learn more about the American culture as well as to reflect on my own (Malay, Muslim, western educated, cross cultural marriage to a British and the experience of working in a multinational American company). Work, I believe has to have meaning, a sense of purpose, almost a mission and we will give our best to organizations that will honor and make use of our latent potential. The experience of living in another culture can serve as a tool to look at our own local roots for insights that may give us some answers to the future.

Although the feelings of loneliness confronted me on many a times as I made the journey alone, it was a silent battle that was made possible by the number of contacts and friends that I have cultivated over the last 10 years or so. But thanks to my shortwave radio for news around the world and the American Telephone and Telegraph (ATT), I had access to all my friends and dear ones back home and was able to catch up with them from wherever I was! So, thank you to all my friends.

Also ribuan *terima kasih* to MACEE for giving me the opportunity to be a Fulbrighter!

12 years after my Fulbright experience....

It is now 2006 – almost 12 years after my trip. Upon my return in 1994, the tour was a stimulus for me to return to school to obtain my doctorate in culture and management. I now teach, conduct workshops, and give seminars for both Malaysian and foreign managers on living and working abroad. Through my research and publications, I have been able to supervise graduate scholars, both Malaysians and foreigners, on their research theses in managing across cultures. I also served for 10 years on the Board of MACEE and am an active Committee member in the Fulbright Alumni Association of Malaysia and Malaysian Association of American Studies.

Currently, I am now playing host to another American Fulbright scholar, Ms Sonita Wachtel from Athens, Ohio who is conducting research on cross cultural management and diversity. As we interact and exchange ideas, views and experiences it is obvious that there is no better substitute to learning about culture other than face to face dialogue and exchange. I see my Fulbright experience as my way of contributing towards building bridges of cross cultural understanding that can never be achieved through visits, travels, and readings.

Places and Activities in chronological order

Los Angeles

I started the trip by attending the American Society for Training and Development Conference (ASTD) at the Anaheim Conference center out of **Los Angeles** from May 15-19, 1994. This is an annual event – almost like an annual pilgrimage for trainers from all over the world to network and update themselves on the latest state of the art in HRD. I participated in a number of interesting sessions and learned that the latest breakthrough in performance management is the introduction of “360 degrees” feedback.

Colorado Springs

My friend Dr Elayne Gallagher, a former Fulbright scholar to Malaysia, and her husband John (a former judge) invited me to **Colorado Springs**, and because of our common interest in cross cultural management, it was an excellent visit. Elayne and I had a lot to share in terms of our work and experiences that we are now writing an article together.

I gave two talks on the influence of Culture on Management to MBA graduate students at University of Colorado and then to the academic staff at the Center for Creative Leadership. I also visited a Junior Achievement Program and brought back materials which may be of interest to entrepreneurial clubs in schools.

Charleston, South Carolina

Dr George Renwick, my mentor and a cross cultural consultant invited me to co-facilitate a two-day workshop with him in **Charleston, South Carolina** for both American and Malaysian supervisors at AMOCO Chemical plant in Cooper River pant (they are setting up a plant in Kuantan). It was an excellent opportunity to learn and work with a “guru” as we team teach.

Austin, Texas

I also visited my friends in **Austin, Texas** – Frank Curran (who used to be with Esso and had been in KL on a working assignment) and his wife, Rae Ellen. Gerald Cox (my former Chairman of Esso group of companies in KL from 1980-1985) and his wife Dolores and my old school friend Tengku Meriam now residing in **Atlanta, Georgia**.

Schaumburg, Illinois

In **Schaumburg, Illinois** visited the Motorola Museum, Motorola University and met with a Malaysian expatriate KL Cheah who shared his experiences about Working in Corporate America, I also met with the staff of Bennets Associates, a cross cultural training consulting company in Chicago.

Athens, Ohio

Next on my itinerary was to visit Associate Prof. Dr Valerie Perotti at the Center for International Education and Development of College of Business Administration at Ohio University (OU) of **Athens**. While at OU, I attended the graduation ceremony of our Malaysian students on the ITM/MBA-OU program. I also conducted a workshop on Cross Cultural Management Program for American MBA students and delivered a talk on Working with Malaysians to the academic staff at the College of Business Administration.

Ottawa

From Athens, I took a break from the program and under the sponsorship of the Canadian Development Fund attended and presented a paper on the Corporate Culture of a Multinational Company at an intercultural conference **in Ottawa**. I then visited Montreal at the invitation of the Montreal trainers society to speak to them on Multiculturalism – from an Asian perspective.

New York

From Montreal, I went to **New York** to attend a meeting at the United Nations with Elayne Gallagher. It was a two day meeting on the Role of HRD in the Public Sector and I got a “feel” for this world entity through its very tight security system.

Ithaca.

My next stop was to visit Assoc. Prof. Vladimir Pucik, an internationally renowned academic and author in Global Management, at the Center for Advanced HR studies (CAHRS) at Cornell University in **Ithaca**. As Exxon is one of the Center's financial sponsors, I was able to have access to its excellent library facilities. Besides Associate Prof. Pucik also met and listened to a number of academics working in various areas related to human resource development, culture, and management in Cornell.

Carbondale

Through my friend Dr Meera Kommaraju, I was invited by the College of International Business to Southern Illinois University in **Carbondale**. I met and talked with a Women's Study group on Culture and Management, delivered a talk to the academic staff at the College of International Business and to small business managers at the Incubator, senior Malaysian students, and undergraduates on corporate culture.

New York

Back in Ithaca I followed a group of visitors from east Europe, as well as students and academic staff at CAHRS for a visit to PEPSICOLA in White Plains in **New York** and learned more about their Compensation and benefits program.

Durham and Boston

I also visited Harvard and MIT in Boston with my friend Assoc. Professor Dr Rita Weathersby at the University of New Hampshire in **Durham** who has done extensive work on cross cultural education. We had a great time exchanging notes and ideas on what to write on the subject.

Dominguez Hills, California

Before taking my MH 95 return flight from LA to KL, I visited another friend and Professor Linda Groff from California State University in **Dominguez Hills**. Linda took me to a book reading session on "Reawakening the Spirit in Work" the Power of Dharmic Management by Jack Healey at a bookstore and coffeehouse called "the Hungry Mind".

