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# Mayan Organisation and Management

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## Introduction

A large proportion of 'Latin-Americans' are not 'Latin', despite living with the heritage of the encounter between Spain and the Americas. Among other challenges, indigenous peoples in the continent face the need to manage their organisations in the context of a system built by cultures very different from their own. In Guatemala, Mayan organisations have adopted an increasingly relevant role in the national context, and have experienced some degree of institutionalisation, along with its implications. There is at least incipient evidence pointing to important differences between 'Western' and 'Mayan' management of indigenous peoples' organisations in Guatemala, where around half the population belongs to one of 22 different ethno-linguistic groups. Some evidence suggests that received knowledge of conventional management promoted by management schools, and the assumptions about the constitution of organisations in the Western world, do not necessarily offer the best solutions, and cannot be adopted uncritically by indigenous peoples bent on taking more control of their own development.

## Diversity as an Aspect of Management

Although the relevance of social and cultural diversity for both analysis and practice in management has been recognised since people started studying and prescribing management, interest in culture as a crucial dimension for organisation and performance increased when it was perceived as a critical factor in addressing a variety of differences between Japanese and US industrial organisations (Schein,1995). A first aspect of this interest, which we may term *diagnostic*, seeks to typify the cultural differences between organisations entering into contact with each other, or focuses on the way in which management is practiced in different cultural contexts. A second aspect, which we may call *instrumental*, seeks to find ways to manage agents from cultures different from the manager's. Additionally, the process of inter- and trans-national linkage called globalisation is increasingly recognised as cultural, social and political, rather than just economic (Reich, 1992; Appadurai, 1996; Reinicke, 1998).

## Empirical Features of Mayan Organisations

From one study we found a variety of dualities illustrating differences in perception or practice between Mayan organisations and the international cooperation agencies helping them<sup>1</sup> (Rodas, Alvarado and Chaclán, 1998). Among other things, Mayan subjects see actions and results in their organisations as part of a longer-term process than the project linking them to any specific cooperation agency. They had a marked preference for oral rather than written communications. Additionally, perceptions about the time ruling their transactions are cyclical, rather than linear, making it difficult for them to make sense of donors' expectations concerning discrete products that come from clearly differentiated short-term activities (Stewart, 1997).

Are these findings simply local peculiarities within the 'organisational cosmos', or are we facing phenomena that may teach us something about management, and at the same time help us derive learning that may benefit subjects in the Mayan population itself? Before attempting an answer – necessarily tentative – to these questions, it is useful to identify other features pointing towards differences and similarities between management in Mayan organisations and notions received from more conventional management.

Indigenous organisations have over the last decade and a half progressively

found spaces for political, ideological and strategic convergence in their efforts to vindicate themselves vis-à-vis a state representing non-indigenous interests. This has meant that above their ethnic and linguistic differences Mayan leaders have had to find a *lingua franca* – paradoxically Spanish – and at the same time use it to develop their own cultural initiatives. The challenge has been huge, and the effort has indeed been criticised as 'revisionist' (Bastos and Camús, 1995) among the indigenous community itself, as well as leaving little time for the organisations' own internal development. Besides the challenges posed by inter-cultural relations among indigenous communities, Mayan organisations have had to face the need to link to international cooperation agencies. In the study mentioned above, interviewees underscored the burden that trans-cultural communication places on Mayan organisations, which must deal not just with using Spanish for day-to-day transactions, but also having to adopt and adapt to the codes of cooperation agencies coming from cultures that are even more remote from theirs than the Hispanic (Rodas, Alvarado and Chaclán, 1998).

The difficulty of grasping the scope of this cultural complexity is repeatedly emphasised by external evaluations of government and cooperation agencies working with Mayan organisations, which point to the insufficient incorporation of a focus on ethnic diversity in programmes, making it impossible to address this requirement adequately (Alvarado and Barillas, 1998).

### Reproducing Values

Where do the differences between Mayan and Western organisations come from, and what do they tell us about the context in which these organisations arise? A valuable pointer on this subject is offered by studying educational systems. An analysis of the educational

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<sup>1</sup> In this study, among other things, a set of managers from NGOs self-defined as 'Mayan' and the officers serving them in international cooperation agencies were interviewed to identify issues arising from their relationship. A series of issues were identified in which important differences existed among the two groups (e.g. decision-making, criteria for recruitment, oral versus written commitment and so on).

situation of the indigenous peoples in Guatemala identified educational practices currently maintained within Mayan communities (Zapeta et al., 1997). Three of a variety of elements for a practical model of Mayan education are used here. First, there is an emphasis on those who occupy positions of authority as teachers: they are the 'elders' – either literally or figuratively – who teach the right way of doing things. Second, the preferred medium for teaching is oral: advice, explanations and corrections in practice sustain the learning process. Finally, education, rather than the theoretical transfer of knowledge, is a process of *learning in practice, for work* and in the *context of daily* life. At the same time, the school as a state organisation is seen by the subjects of that study as the place where exogenous education takes place, and through which the state assails and dilutes their culture.

### ***The Role of the Mayan Manager: Success and Acceptance***

An important area to be studied concerns the actual practices engaged in by managers in Mayan organisations. The municipality as the key agent of local government in Guatemala demonstrates the relationship between mayor, citizens and indigenous organisations (Gálvez and Camposeco, 1997; Gálvez, Hoffman and Mack (1998) contrast authoritarian and participative styles of government in several indigenous communities, underlining the importance of historical and cultural aspects of the local dynamics and their relationship with the national state in understanding these differences. This points to the importance of resisting the temptation to stereotype Mayan organisations and their management, by assuming that belonging to a culture that favours participation and consensus necessarily leads to a more democratic form of organisation and decision-making

(Rodas, Alvarado and Chaclán, 1998). It also sends a methodological warning about the importance of treating these as any other organisation, on the basis of the empirical features they present, rather than based on assumed generic features.

Another study illustrates the challenges involved in Mayan management as a 'no man's land'. Thus, a mayor in a ch'orti' community faced difficulties because, as a member of a generation that was not taught the ancestral language, he had difficulty communicating with older members in his own community. At the same time, urban non-indigenous inhabitants rejected him for being indigenous and a farmer (Arévalo et al., 1997: 28–31).

### ***Practical Implications: Evaluation and Commitment***

The practice of management as understood in the West generally implies showing results. A comparison in this area with Mayan organisations would reveal important differences, which play an important role in communication efforts between these organisations and their donors. Repeated reports in Rodas, Alvarado and Chaclán (1998) mention that Mayan organisations see means of evaluation (such as the logframe) as rigid, focused on the short term and leaving little space for process results. Whilst Mayan managers tend to appreciate the incidence of their actions, and those of their organisations, upon a broad and unspecific agenda for cultural, social and political development, most donors prefer to see products corresponding directly to the amounts of money contributed, with previously specified objectives in one to three-year cycles, at the most. Again, this underscores a notable difference between Mayan and non-Mayan organisations concerning preferred communication technologies. Mayan organisations tend to prefer oral over

written means, not just as a way to *communicate*, but also as a way to *commit*; in other words, verbal agreements are considered more credible than those requiring written formalisation (Rodas, Alvarado and Chaclán, 1998).

### **Structure and Legality**

In their interaction with the state and with the rest of society, Mayan organisations see the need to adjust to the existing legal and institutional structure. They have had to accommodate themselves to the legal framework for non-government organisations (NGOs). In this context, although Mayan organisations are characterised as NGOs, some important restrictions and contradictions exist concerning the assumptions of that legal classification. For example, the privilege and dignity awarded to elders within a predominantly oral culture, and the limited circulation of people within closed communities is relatively inconsistent with a legal structure predicated on periodic and frequent (one to three years) exchange of members sitting on an elected board of directors. In one study, the majority of organisations self-defined as Mayan fit more with a community-based organisation structure than with a service organisation structure (Alvarado and Carrera, 1996). Finally as mentioned before, Mayan organisations unlike their non-indigenous counterparts, tend to be *participative* rather than *representative* organisations. Thus, while non-Mayan NGOs mostly *promote* specific interests and intents, Mayan organisations tend to seek the solution to *social topics* or *issues*, and to arrive at decisions through broad consensus.

### **The Next Step: Building a Research Agenda**

Both empirical evidence and what has been said by multiple authors about managing cultural diversity leave little

doubt about the importance of a study on management in Mayan organisations. However, what are the questions we should ask and how will we use them?

### **The Indigenous Peoples: Subjects of Exclusion and Inequity**

The indigenous population in Guatemala, as in a large part of Latin America, is subjected to a profound inequity. More than half the Guatemalan population may be considered indigenous, which includes three major ethno-linguistic groups and 22 distinct ethnic groups. Ethnicity is closely related to poverty, so that 92.6 per cent of the indigenous population lives in poverty and 81.3 per cent in extreme poverty, while in the case of the non-indigenous population these numbers are 65.8 per cent and 45.2 per cent, respectively (World Bank, 1995). This translates into worse social and economic indicators for the indigenous population. For example, the mortality rate among children 0 to 4 years old is directly related to the percentage of indigenous inhabitants in each of the country's departments, the coverage of health services is much lower among the indigenous population than otherwise (Barillas and Valladares, 1998) and education coverage and quality are lower among indigenous and rural populations than amongst the rest of the population (De la Cruz, Girón, Zapeta and Alvarado, 1998).

At the same time, many of the features of Mayan organisations that we see are a reflection of ways of interpreting the world and addressing problems that hark back to a long tradition, linked to the need to resist and survive over 500 years of domination, first colonial and then under a nation state that was organised to serve the interests of a different, hegemonic culture. With the return to a formally democratic regime in 1986, new spaces opened up in the

country for the legal organisation of the indigenous population. Amid an explosive expansion in the number of non-government organisations in the country<sup>2</sup>, new and expanded Mayan organisations also arose, both those dealing with the promotion and defence of the Mayan people's rights and those addressing the conceptualization of their cultural bases (Bastos and Camús, 1995). In the same way, the state began to accommodate in an expanded manner the needs for representation of the indigenous peoples. In 1996, the Accord for a Firm and Lasting Peace was signed between the government and the guerrillas, ending over thirty years of internal war. Among the accords covered were one specifically addressing the identity and rights of the indigenous peoples and another dealing with socio-economic and agrarian issues. The first accord covers aspects of cultural development of indigenous peoples and their equitable treatment by the state, while the second deals with the needs for socioeconomic development predominantly affecting the indigenous population in rural areas.

However, these are still only minor achievements, for there are extended and unacknowledged practices of racism and ethnic confrontation. In May 1999 a plebiscite was held to ratify a series of constitutional reforms required by the peace accords to achieve, among other issues, improved inclusion of cultural diversity in the Guatemalan political and institutional system. All reforms proposed were rejected, mainly due to the vote of the population in the metropolitan region and in the south and east of the country, in its majority non-indigenous.

### ***Transition in Mayan Organisations: From Indictment to Development***

In the context of the war and immediately after its resolution, Mayan organisations were especially visible as agents seeking political redress from the state and as entities dedicated to oversight on human rights of Mayan peoples (Alvarado, Carrera and Girón, 1998). These organisations evinced a high degree of political development, as they managed to link interests and strategies among a variety of organisations representing diverse Mayan interests in the preparation of the Accord on the Identity and Rights of the Indigenous Peoples signed in March 1995 (Bastos and Camús, 1995).

With the signing of the Peace in 1996, political functions, although still important, began to take second place on the scale of social priorities. It became increasingly necessary, besides overseeing the implementation of the Peace Accords, to enhance the capacity of Mayan organisations to manage development projects and to switch from a position of confrontation with the state to one of collaboration in initiatives for reconstruction and development. In this context, the organisations began to recognise the need to strengthen their management and administrative capacities, given that preparing and managing productive and social projects required efficiency and effectiveness that had been a secondary consideration in organisations dedicated to lobbying and oversight, with their focus on inter-institutional negotiation and fundraising among donors committed to a specific political agenda. In this their challenges equal, in purpose if not in content, those faced by their 'Western' peers.

Mayan organisations have proved increasingly sophisticated in facing this challenge. Their political performance

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<sup>2</sup> According to the Ministry of the Interior, at least 341 NGOs were founded in Guatemala just between 1986 and 1989 (Alvarado, Carrera and Girón, 1998).

has been considerable, as they have managed to place an increasing number of representatives in Congress and win a large number of municipal elections, including that of the city of Quetzaltenango, the second most important city after the capital. Additionally, there has been a gradual specialisation in areas considered a priority in indigenous development: such as linguistics (Avendaño, 1999); curricular development and preparation of school textbooks; distance education; agricultural training; and micro-business development (Zapeta et al., 1997).

## Conclusions: Points for a Research Agenda

There are two levels on which to pursue ideas presented here. The first level deals with the differences between Western and Mayan organisations. Which of these are substantively relevant for practices and what do they imply for the development and progress of the Mayan peoples? If in fact the organisation and management of the Mayan world has a specific content and practical implications, where must we seek them? A second level addresses the lessons to be learned here for the study, design and implementation of management tools across cultural divides in general. Among the conclusions and other questions arising from addressing these issues I would emphasise the following:

- Considering the radically different history of the Guatemalan indigenous population from the societies in which descriptions and prescriptions of 'best management practices' arise, it is reasonable to expect an important divergence in values, codes and meanings in management practice. What are these differences and what do they mean for the development and progress of Mayan peoples? More generally, how far must we take into account diverse

cultural histories in understanding and prescribing management tools and practices across cultural interfaces? Monitoring, evaluation and reporting constitute a prime field for this discussion: should international cooperation agencies adjust to local cultural systems in requiring reports and implementing monitoring systems? Should local organisations accept these uncritically?

- What can studies of the strategies for relationship-building developed by indigenous mayors vis-à-vis non-indigenous communities, and between indigenous NGOs and cooperation agencies, for example, bring to the understanding of management in multicultural settings?

- How are the various indigenous leaders – each of whom belong to clearly differentiated ethno-linguistic groups – satisfying the needs for mutual communication, not just on political topics, but also on more pedestrian issues of resource administration and logistics? How can entities seeking impact on a larger scale, exceeding that of specific ethnic identities, reconcile global, regional and national agendas with inter-ethnic differences?

- What is the nature of conventional *received knowledge* applied by Mayan managers in their daily work? Within such knowledge and strategies what appears most useful? How were these acquired, and how is a Mayan manager trained? In what areas are more traditional practices maintained, and why is that so? More generally, how much of such traditional knowledge can be codified for the subject's benefit, and should cooperation agencies attempt to do so?

- Are the features of a successful and capable manager different in Mayan (or non-Western) and Western contexts, or

are they simply presented differently? Furthermore, how does a non-Western manager obtain and ensure success? In what measure does the rise of a generation of young, educated Mayans enjoying an environment of greater civic freedom affect the more traditional forms of delegation of authority?

- What role does sponsorship and linking to peer groups play in ensuring the survival of new Mayan or culture-specific managers in the organisational context? Is there a significant relationship here between indigenous managers and non-indigenous mentors as ‘bridges’ to the wider political, economic and institutional system, still predominantly non-indigenous?
- What are the practical implications of the features of Mayan/non-Mayan (or indigenous/ non-indigenous) difference concerning measurement and performance? How do we deal with the need to include long-term process measures that overcome the limitations of more conventional short-term productivity measures?
- Finally, what are the implications of these concerns for the training of managers that will lead indigenous organisations into the third millennium? On the one hand, we must better characterise such managers in those aspects that are ‘nature’ – as a part of a cultural heritage – and those that are ‘nurture’ – acquired in practice by resolving day-to-day issues in institutional management. On the other hand, we need to identify the formative elements that, while preserving ‘mayagement<sup>3</sup>’, may also broaden the manager’s role in leading organisations that contribute to building a more equitable society.

It is my hope that this note will awaken an interest in addressing systematically at least some of the issues outlined here. Some of the issues I have pointed to probably resonate with experiences in other contexts where indigenous and non-indigenous cultures are interfacing, while at the same time experimenting in development together. A general concern is to elicit responses about the similarities and differences between what I present here and other contexts. At the same time, more than simply satisfying intellectual curiosity this is an invitation to giving us all – indigenous and non-indigenous – the chance to negotiate and build a future that is potentially different from the situation of colonialism – external first, but later more insidiously internal – that still shapes the existence of a considerable part of humanity, not just in Latin America, but wherever indigenous populations meet the overriding means and interests of Western culture and society.

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<sup>3</sup> I thank R. Valladares for this ingenious neologism.



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