



● **Family, respect and comfort stand for top Czech values**

By: *Cristina Muntean, 05. 05. 2008, Source: www.cbw.cz*

As working in a multinational environment became normal in the Czech Republic after the fall of communism, so did cultural clashes between numerous foreign management styles and local values. Specialists say that in order to improve, both international managers and local employees have to make more effort to understand what is behind the other's motivation, even if this means stepping out of the comfort zone and accepting change.

As many as 140,518 companies, or 37 percent of the total number of 379,153 private enterprises and corporations located in the Czech Republic at the end of 2006, were either owned by a foreign entity or ruled with foreign capital, according to the Czech Statistical Office (ČSU). From Germany, the largest foreign investor to this country, to Japan, the U.S., Korea or the Netherlands, every country brought a different management style that it more or less tried to implement to its local employees.

Trevor Smith, the managing director and lead trainer of consultancy Vision Training & Consulting, which focuses on delivering international learning solutions, says that one of the qualities of Czech people is their ability to quickly adapt to new management strategies. Yet, foreign managers should also make efforts to understand what is behind the so-called negative approach of their local employees or behind their silence when asked strategic questions. In the framework of a series of leadership seminars organized by recruitment and management consultancy Williams & Partner, Smith also emphasized that currently the Czech Republic is going through a gap of leadership.

While former President Václav Havel was a trusted leader whom people followed willingly, now Czechs lack a new political or business leader, Smith says. Yet, this could be overcome if people try to better understand their environment and stand up for what they believe in without fears of being "hammered in," he says.

Williams & Partner is a consultancy focusing on permanent recruitment, executive search training and development, compensation and salary systems and outplacement services. It covers industries from retail, finance and banking to purchase and logistics. Williams & Partner has offices in the Czech Republic, Slovakia, Croatia and Romania.

Q: What are the most important values held by Czechs?

A: From work to social values, Czech people are very good; they have all of the correct values. The problem comes when people, perhaps of other nationalities, are working with them. There are still gaps in understanding, mainly from expatriate managers coming over into higher positions. They just don't understand the way Czech people want to work and why they do things the way they are doing them. Yet, there are no problems with Czech people; they are very good and innovative workers. Problems come when there are differences among people working together.

Q: What should expatriate managers know in order to manage their team of Czech people better?

A: Expatriate managers have to understand themselves and the way they function very well, first of all. They have to have some of the differences pointed out that they might [be confronted with]. A standard one is the difference between being positive and negative, or optimistic and pessimistic. It is generally seen that Czech people have a tendency to be on the pessimistic side, while they think they are just realistic. It comes across in the way people make decisions or how they react when asked to do something. I often recall being told about how expatriate managers ask some of their people if they can do something, and often the answer is negative, as if people were looking for

reasons why that [thing] could go wrong before they have even tried it. This is seen as being negative—not wanting to do it. But it might not be this; it might be that what has been asked wasn't asked clearly enough, with a clear guideline on how to do it. It's more [like] 'this is what we need, go ahead and do it' as opposed to 'this is what we need, what I'd like you to do is in this way, using these tools and not in that way.' So, perhaps people are just looking for more guidance.

Q: Are there any other examples of this behavior?

A: Another aspect of this optimistic-pessimistic approach is—as with many other people, actually—the fear of making mistakes, which is quite high. Western managers know that things might go wrong, but they don't want them [just to be] pointed out; they want them solved. Their philosophy is more like 'don't come to me with the problems; come to me with the solutions.'

Q: What did you mean when you said that Czechs have correct values?

A: One of the main values I see here is family. This is one area where there have been culture clashes. Sometimes expatriate managers either don't place such a high value on family or have a different interpretation of that value. They would interpret a Czech worker who spends more time with the family and doesn't work as much as not being a good worker, but that's not true. People here visit families far more often than British people do. Family and loyalty to the families is important for Czech people.

Q: What is the main challenge of leading a team of Czech people?

A: What makes them do what they do, what their values are, why they make decisions [are issues that need to be understood] so that managers can change themselves more to fit in with the people. It is not just about, 'I'm here, I'm managing and you have to do it that way' but it's also about how I can change myself to get the best out of you and get people to want to do things, as opposed to making people do things. The challenge is not to make people do things, but to make them want to do things.

Q: What do foreign managers complain about most often?

A: They complain about the people and their mentality, this pessimism and possibly [people] not having such a hard-work ethic. If we look at statistics, the number of sick days that companies produce in production areas is far higher here than in Western countries. Perhaps it is, but there might be other reasons. One reason is that many people in production work eight hours a day and then they go home and work eight hours a day in their farm to produce the vegetables they need because they aren't paid enough to buy them from supermarkets.

Q: Is there any feature of the current Czech mentality deriving from the political system in place before 1989?

A: A major challenge on which Czech people should probably work more is that they need to give their opinion more, to push themselves more forward. I have experienced international meetings when people were asked what their opinion was, and Czechs gave no opinion. This is seen as negative. When asked [why they do that], people say, 'Well, I don't feel I can contribute, I don't know enough about that area, I don't want to say something wrong, I don't want to put myself forward.' Thus, putting themselves forward might be against their nature. But [in order] to get themselves accepted by Western managers, this is something they might have to do. There is an old saying about a nail that sticks out being hammered in. This comes from the [local] history. People don't want to stand out because [in the past] if you stood out, there were consequences for you. I still see that even in the mentality of the younger people. Czechs have to adapt themselves to fit the people they are communicating with. The challenge for the manager is to get the best out of people, to give them knowledge and trust that if they make mistakes and if they say something

that isn't right, there is no punishment. That's why people aren't comfortable doing it, because they are afraid that doing something wrong can have consequences.

Q: What are the cultural challenges that Czech managers might face when sent abroad?

A: It's not so difficult for Czech people when they are going abroad because one of the best features that Czechs have is that they are very adaptable. That comes from history as well. When they are given a set of circumstances, they find it easy to change. Some might say even they are easier to blow with the wind: when the governmental system is this way, we will be this way because it's in our interest. We might not agree with that, but we can adapt. Some might not like it, but they're just more adaptable. I see this adaptability as strength. That is why Czechs adapt probably far quicker than other cultures that are not so adaptable and want to do things their way.

Q: Can you give me some examples of such cultures?

A: Perhaps some international or German companies with international operations just like to push forward their way of doing things. But British or American companies do the same. If you look at management books, most of them are American and promote American management methods.

Q: What do Czech managers and employees want to change most often?

A: Probably, most Czech employees don't want to change things at all, unless they see something [will come] out of it. The concept of values and value-based leadership is very difficult for normal Czech workers to grasp. This is because, historically, values have been imposed on them. Change isn't such a strong area; people don't want to change and don't want to be pushed outside of the comfort zone—which is fine, if they are living the life they want to live. But if they want to compete on an international stage, which some of the companies are already doing very successfully, they will have to change the mentality side.

Q: What are the main values of Czech people?

A: Definitely family and trust—I see this as a problem, as they don't trust some of their political leaders. So, I'd say family, trust, respect and comfort.

Q: What are the things Czech people are running away from most often?

A: Fear of failure and rejection.

Q: Can you identify some leaders in the Czech Republic?

A: Currently, the most well-known leader is former President Václav Havel; he had a vision, willing followers and values that were in line with other people. I really don't feel that [is the case] with other politicians now; they aren't seen as good leaders. People don't feel they can trust the political leaders they currently have. From the business side, there aren't many. There are a few young entrepreneurs who are doing a good job, but not so many leaders.

Q: Whom are Czechs most willing to follow right now?

A: I think there is a leadership gap for the moment. I don't think young politicians are coming through. Talented people are going into business. The political leadership isn't there. I don't see any clear Czech leaders at the moment on the business and political side.