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# Revisiting Single Case Studies in International Business Research: The Case of Maersk Line

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## Abstract

The aim of this paper is to study the consequences of rolling out a global corporate culture on a multinational company in order to streamline modes of communication between headquarter and local offices across different host markets in an attempt to optimise the functionality of the organisation per se. Our key focus in this connection is to understand how employees in the Danish shipping company Maersk Line's headquarter in Copenhagen as well as in three local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur 'read' and respond towards such an optimisation process. We focus in particular on how employees, based on their 'reading' of this process, try to make sense of it in order to construct personal strategies as guidelines for how to navigating the organization to their own and the company's advantage. The key question to research in this context is *what elements enters into employees personal strategies when navigating a multinational organization?* To answer this question we employ a phenomenological approach as a way of exploring the relationship between organizational changes and employers' response towards them. We argue that single case studies provides us with the capability of providing deep insight into the inner workings of a multinational organisation. Furthermore, such kind of studies shows how various societal factors within a host market impact on the functionality of employees in local offices as well as on the relationship between the latter and headquarter.

**Key words:** *international business, headquarter-subsidary relations, subsidiary-host markets relations, employee, strategies, cross-cultural issues.*

## Introduction

The aim of this paper is to study the consequences of rolling out a global corporate culture on a multinational company in order to streamline modes of communication between headquarter and local offices across different host markets in an attempt to optimise the functionality of the organisation per se. Our main research focus is to understand how employees in the Danish shipping company Maersk Line's headquarter in Copenhagen as well as in three local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur respectively 'read' and respond towards such an optimisation process. We thus focus on how employees, based on their 'reading' of this process, try to make sense of it in order to construct personal strategies as guidelines for how to navigating the organization to their own and the company's mutual advantage.

The research for this article is framed as a single case study.<sup>1</sup> According to Yin, single case studies are case studies that only deals with one case thereby leaving out a comparative perspective.<sup>2</sup> Yin emphasizes that "how" and "why" questions tend to lead case study design because issues often need to be traced over time, something that statistical analysis cannot do. Likewise, if something negative or positive happen over time it will also have to be described as part of a case so that the reader can follow the developments within the case as they unfold (Yin 2014, Mariotto, Zanni and de Moraes 2014).

In whatever way researchers work with single case studies, the ultimate purpose of it is to generalize the findings. There are two main forms of generalizations. The first one is statistical generalization, which is used in quantitative methods to prove or disprove hypothesis, a dominating method in

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<sup>1</sup> A classical single case study is Allison's study of the Cuban Missile crisis (Allison 1971). The case showed that the United States and the Soviet Union acted as (a) rational actors (b) complex bureaucracies (c) politically motivated group of persons. Based on these factors Allison demonstrated and compared the ability of pertinent theories to explain the course of event in the crisis (Cited in Yin, 2014).

<sup>2</sup> Yin state that single case studies are appropriate when researching in what way local communities integrated immigrants, somewhat similar to the classical street corner case study done by Whyte that is still used at American universities despite the fact that the book was published in 1943 (Whyte 1943/1993). In other instances, exploratory studies about what can be learned from start-up businesses has be described in several other cases. (Yin, 2014)

IB studies. The other form is known as analytical generalization. In addition to be able to describe various kinds of processes, analytical generalization sheds empirical light on theoretical concepts. This is somewhat similar to grounded theory. This approach bases itself on an inductive methodology that allows the researcher to develop accounts of general features of a topic while simultaneously grounding the account in empirical observation or data (Martin and Turner 1986).<sup>3</sup>

Two other streams within organizational studies that are relevant for our study focus on the quality of life within business. The first one focuses on the degree of either well-being or the opposite, that is, degree of stress, mopping, etc. in organizational life. The other stream focuses on positive feeling within and perception of the work place (Legge 1995, Gold et al 2013). Both approaches studies how management teams aims to inspire their employees in a, for the company, desirable way. Contrary to these two streams and in accordance with the main principles case studies based on grounded theory, our research focus on how employees optimize their personal mode of how to make sense of the organization in order for them to navigate it in a strategic manner.

By doing so, we do not focus on stress or other forms of psychological inconsistencies between employees and their jobs or between the employees and the management teams, but rather on initiating a bottom-up approach in relation to employees by organizing them into different age groups and different levels of employment. This were done partly in the company headquarter in Copenhagen and partly in three local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur respectively. This represent a new research trend compared to general IB studies that tends, in a top-down mode, to describe various processes within organizations over time by either generating explanatory theoretical frameworks or explorative reinterpretations of existing studies. We argue that such studies are best done by employing a single case study approach (Yin 2011).

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<sup>3</sup> A classic example is The Street Corner Case (Yin, 2011). Another example is the study about “The epidemic that never was” – a swine flu vaccination program (Neustadt and Fineberg1983).

As mentioned, the purpose of analytical generalization is to go beyond existing concepts and theories so as to update and expand existing studies of how, in our case, employees navigate the organization in which they work. Grounded theory, due to its focus on inductive methodologies, uses reflecting analytical memory by employing a phenomenological approach to develop categories for theory generation (Miles et al 2014).

### *Some further methodological considerations*

A sub-research question in our article is *what elements enters into employees personal strategies when navigating a multinational organization?* To answer this question, we employ a phenomenological approach as a way of exploring the dialectical relationship between organizational changes and employers' response towards them thus following Miles et al. (2014).

A key premise in phenomenological based research is that it assumes that phenomena are always phenomena for someone, and thus cannot be studied independently of how they appear to others. Arguably, the subject of phenomenology is the way in which phenomena manifest themselves to human beings. Furthermore, phenomenology is an attempt to eliminate the dualism between ontology and epistemology. Objects only become something (ontology) when there is someone who knows them (epistemology). The world does not exist as an independent entity and therefore cannot be separated from the context in which the subject experiences it (Egholm 2014).

Any observation is always historically, culturally, and contextually embedded. Due to this phenomenology states that science can never be value-free. It takes as its point of departure that an individual's intentions are always intentionality. A phenomenon is thus always something for someone, - it does not exist in and of itself.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> See also Duberley, Johnson and Cassell for a discussion of interpretivist constructs that arguably can be defined as a concretisation of phenomenological insights (2012: 20-22).

Arguably, a fluid understanding of social constellations is thus not a representation of an objective world outside humans, as there are no hidden underlying structure(s) that governs human interaction. Every action a human performs as well as every relation he or she engages in is always contextually embedded. This means that objective data does not exist, only patterns of perceptions and interactions. Compared to both positivism and structuralism, a phenomenological approach thus produces qualitatively different data sets on human interactions.

### *Phenomenology and data collection*

This discussion leads towards the question of how to collect data when employing a phenomenological approach. We argue for a combination of semi-structured interviews and narrative pictogram data collection methods as the most conducive approach for our research.

Despite having an ethnocentric or *etic* aspect to it, we employ the semi-structured data collection mode as it positions the informant in the context under study. The narrative pictogram data collection mode is based on a combination of narratives and images that the informant find important<sup>5</sup>, thus moving beyond the *etic* aspect and into an *emic* one (Pike 1967). When combining the two modes of interviewing, we are able to construct a data set that constitutes an empirical sounding board for the resulting theoretical extrapolations.

We argue that it is necessary to combine an *etic* and an *emic* approach to be able to excavate the driving forces behind what make employees thrive in multi-cultural organisations, and at the same time develop theories as a way of understanding how those employees navigate such organisations. By doing that we honour the ethnographic notion of ‘thick’ description thus heeding a call from Geertz (1973) that a description of a given context in all its complexity is a must, as it is the sum of the parts of such a context that makes us able to understand the role of the individual agents in that context. Such an approach constitutes

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<sup>5</sup> See Jakobsen, Worm and Xin Li (2017) for a detailed description of this data collection method.

the crux of the matter when studying how employees navigate a multi-cultural organisational (Lau, Dimitrova, Shaffer, Davidkov and Yordanova 2012).

Based on the above methodological discussion we suggest that localised or single case studies provides us with the capability of providing deep insight into the inner workings of a multinational organisation, both within headquarter and within the different local offices. Adding to these how various societal factors within a host market impact on the functionality of employees in the local offices as well as on the relationship between the latter and headquarter a full contextual account of the individual local office is thus provided.

Having outlined the key focus of this article and framing it as a single case study, we will in the following sections stress the methodological challenges in carrying out this kind of research by focusing on key issues concerning notions of organisational cultures as well as the globalisation of such entities. We then move on to identify four explorative assumptions that we apply on our case study, the Danish shipping company Maersk Line. This leads us to focus on how employees relate to a global corporate culture, evaluating it on the basis of sense making that is driven forward by either notions of empathy or notions of competitiveness. These notions constitute core elements when designing personal strategies that guide employees when navigating a corporate culture within an organisation. The final section sums up the findings and presents some suggestions for future research on organisations in the form of single case studies.

### **Studying Organizational Culture**

It was studies like those done by Deal and Kennedy (1982) and Peters and Waterman (1982) that generated an interest in studying corporate culture. The concept of organizational culture did not become popular until the 1980s although Chester Bernard had mentioned that individuals both had an organizational and individual personality. The book that especially brought organizational culture on everybody's' mind was the one written by Peters and

Waterman 1982. In their seminal work, they emphasized that as organizations become larger and more complex, inertia and lethargy begin to grow, something that we also have also observed in Maersk Line.

There are several theories of rational management that is only dwelling on various aspects of the bottom line thus forgetting concerns about motivation, quality, and the people within the organization. Peters & Waterman state that the companies which have shown excellent performance focus on a) the need for meaning, b) the need for control over one's own destiny, c) the need for positive reinforcement of one's self-image, d) the degree to which action and behavior shape attitude and belief rather than the opposite (Pierson, 1982). The influence of their book was immense and sold more than five million copies. It was nonetheless despite its achievements being criticized for advocacy rather than presenting scientific insights (Hitt & Ireland, 1987).

The modes for company excellence as discussed by Peters and Waterman has thus lost their impact on current company performance. Instead, current prices of container transport combined with additional services are becoming just as important signifiers as excellence in business performance. We have observed a similar trend on increasing emphasis of professionalism over business performance in our study of Maersk Line. For example, prior to the passing away of Maersk Mc-Kinney-Moeller in 2012, also known among employees as Mr. Moeller, the son of the founder of the company, A.P. Moeller, employees said they were employed by Mr. Moeller. Recently, after the demise of Mr. Moeller in 2012 the employees said that the company employs them. The current level of identification with the basic values of the company as manifested in the person of Mr. Moeller does thus not seem to carry the same imprint on the employees as previously.

During the 1990s, the nature of corporate culture changed due to waves of mergers and acquisitions as well as focus on the bottom line became the main reference. Deal and Kennedy argues that rebuilding the social context of work is essential if people are to be motivated to perform to the best of their knowledge. In most literature about corporate culture, 'motivation' is a key word. Motivation

might come from fear of being laid off. It can also come from affinity to the corporate history as mentioned above. With the weakening of corporate history due acquisitions or the opposite such as downsizing or further globalizing the company, the challenge is to find a new method that can motivate employees. Deal and Kennedy stressed that respect towards the employees constituted the most crucial aspect when motivating them. Other suggestions for how to motivate employees are by challenge them, having fun, engage them in adventures as well as creating a social rewarding environment. They see globalization as a considerable challenge because during the 1990s, the increasing borderless world was a new phenomenon that created “confusing cross-cultural dealings” (Deal and Kennedy 1998, p. 277).

Since then discussions about how globalization affects the workplace has increased immensely.<sup>6</sup> For example, Schein talked about group culture as, ‘...a pattern of shared basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think and feel in relation to such problems’. (Schein 1992, p.12).

According to Schein, the main cultural thrust in the early growth of a new organization comes from the founder of the organization. If the organization succeeds, the founding father’s values can be viewed as the “glue” that holds the organization together as well as differentiate it from other competitive organizations (Schein 1992). The corporate values as well as the corporate narratives created by the founder also plays a crucial role in this context. As an example of such narratives, it is was said in the early days of container transportation that one could set one’s clock after when ships from Maersk Line entered a harbor. Precision and high quality service was thus a main characteristic of the company during this period (Jensen 2014).

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<sup>6</sup> For a more detailed reference, see Holden, Michailova and Tietze (2015).

## **On the Globalization of Organizations**

Before discussing the impact of globalization on organizations as well as its impact on employees within organizations, it is necessary to introduce two definitions that are essential for a deeper understanding of the relationship between globalization and organizations. Furthermore, it is equally important to integrate the impact of the national institutional environment on both headquarter and host market into the analysis, as that too have an impact on how employees as well as the organization 'read' and react towards the impact from both institutional setups as well as that from of especially economic globalization. The first definition we will touch on is the difference between organizational culture and societal culture. The other definition deals with the difference between a corporate culture and a global corporate culture.

### *On the difference between organizational and societal culture*

It is imperative to distinguish between notions of culture per se and notions of organizational culture. Culture per se refers to a societal aggregation of specific local norms and values that socialize individuals in such a way that they are equipped with a specific type of identity that makes them capable of navigating that particular local culture thus reproducing it over time during the process. An organizational culture, on the other hand, refers to a specific set of norms and values that generally originate from a company's basic assumptions, sometimes referred to as the company's DNA, assumptions that are generally defined by the founder of the company (Schein 1997). The two types of cultures serve different purposes. A societal culture provides an individual with a normative compass that makes him or her capable of navigating a specific social landscape where the past, present, and future merges into a familiar societal narrative. An organizational culture is a more pointed mode of creating a collected "we" the main aim of which is to increase the coherence, functionality and profitability of the company. The key aim of the basic assumptions is thus to make the organization survive over time to the benefit of the owners, employees, and other stakeholders in general.

Such a distinction between the two types of ‘culture’ should be recognized, as studies of corporate culture in major companies generally focuses on how such a culture is perceived in local offices that are located in markets where the institutional setup is different from the that in the home country in which the headquarter is located. The main assumption here is that headquarter and local offices are influenced by different sets of norms and values that are defined by the respective national institutional setup, especially those emanating from within the informal institutions (North 1992)<sup>7</sup>. This has an impact of how employees interpret as well as internalize corporate values.

This differentiated mode of defining culture in a societal cum corporate contexts has served as a key point of departure for us when analyzing our interviews with Maersk Line employees at the headquarter in Copenhagen or in the local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo, and Kuala Lumpur. One of our main observations in this connection is that employees experience the interplay between Maersk Line’s (global) corporate culture and the societal cultures in Copenhagen, Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur respectively in different ways. Consequently, the employees at headquarter and at the local offices relate rather differently to the (global) corporate culture thus interpreting its impact in a variety of ways that are difficult if not impossible to streamline seen from a top-management perspective.

*On the difference between a corporate culture and a global corporate culture*

It is furthermore important to distinguish between a corporate culture and a global corporate culture. A corporate culture generally refers to the organizational glue that makes employees relate to the organization’s basic assumptions, whereas a global corporate culture, besides the general features of a corporate culture, further recognizes the need to accommodate the multi-cultural composition of staff as well as the multinational structure of the company as a response to the globalization of the company.

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<sup>7</sup> See also Scott 2014, especially the relationship between the normative and cultural-cognitive elements and how that impact the functionality of the regulative element.

Another key distinction between the two conceptions of a corporate culture is the way in which top-management perceive the global economy. A top-management in a company featuring a more localized corporate culture focuses mostly on optimizing the functionality and thus competitiveness of the company within a given domestic industry. The top-management in a global company featuring a global corporate culture, however, focuses more on the assumption that the world is “flat” in the sense that doing business globally is gradually becoming more and more standardized throughout the relevant global business community thus making the implementation of an all-inclusive unilineal global corporate culture feasible (Friedman (2005), Florida (2005)). The latter assumption constitutes the Achilles heel as the global economy is far from being “flat” or standardized because both the national and local business environments are made up of contextual institutional specificities as well as of local modes of doing business that challenge notions of a perceived increasingly standardizing global economy.

### **Identifying Key Explorative Assumptions in Organizational Studies**

How to assess the impact of contextual specificities and local modes of doing business on global economics? Employing quantitative research techniques does not seem to be able to provide answers, as these kinds of approaches provide less detail on personal motivations behind different kinds of behavior, attitudes and motivation. Quantitative research is of no use here as it is based on numerical descriptions rather than detailed narratives thus providing less elaborated accounts of human perceptions and agency. This means that neither a positivistic nor a structuralist philosophy of science approach can be employed here to generate answers to the above posed question.

We employ as previously mentioned a phenomenological inspired qualitative approach that makes us able to get closer to answering our sub-research question, namely *what elements enters into employees personal strategies*

*when navigating a multinational organization?* In order to initiate the research process we have developed four assumptions to guide our research. Behind each of the assumptions human agency is perceived as the main driver for a processual understand of the relationship between a specific context and individual developed strategies for navigating that context.

Assumption I: *Culture as process*. When discussing the impact of a societal culture on performance in multi-cultural and multi-lingual organizations, sophisticated stereotypical perceptions of local employees working in an MNC are generally employed as a way of understanding behavioral differences between employees representing different cultures (Osland and Bird 2000). This is mostly organized along an East-West axis or as specific combinations of dimensions characterizing a society and people in a given market or society as discussed in the works of Gesteland (2005), Hofstede (1991), and Nisbett, Peng, Choi, and Norenzayan (2001). To go beyond such superficial considerations, we have developed a methodological approach that we call a narrative pictogram data collection method. This is an emic approach in which an informant through narrations and related drawings explain how he or she 'reads' the organization as well as how to navigate it to the benefit of themselves and the organization.<sup>8</sup> As will be seen from our case later on, the employees 'reading' of the espoused corporate values and basic assumptions built into the global corporate culture have a major impact of the perception and thus functionality of the organization per se.

Assumption II: *A processual approach towards culture avoids separation between structure and agency*. This means that an organizational structure and the employees within it condition each other, that is, impact each other's mode of relating to each other. The theoretical approach taken here assumes an institutional logic as outlined by Thornton, Ocasio, and Lounsbury (2012) as well as by Scott (2014). This approach emphasizes and specifies organizational processes that enact, recompose and even create a new institutional logic by

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<sup>8</sup> For a detailed account of the narrative pictogram data collection method, see Jakobsen et al. (2017).

stressing the importance of individual initiated processes that reproduce and transform the organizational setup itself. As will be shown in our case, there is a critical dialogue between the organization per se and the employees that have the capability of transforming the former in the process. The key issue here is how the various narratives of the organization, the one(s) defined by top-management and the one(s) defined by the employees relate or do not relate to each other. To achieve an effective operational organization the two set of narratives have to complement each other like gears in a clockwork. Otherwise, the organization is in danger of falling apart or become dysfunctional due to the conflicting nature of the narratives.

Assumption III: *Agency is never purely individual as it always takes place in a context.* According to Simpson, "...as transactions are mediated by significant symbols, social agency can never be attributed to any singular actor. In other words, a gesture has no agency capacity unless it calls out some sort of response" (Simpson, 2009, p. 1336).

In a sense, this statement gives credit to a key proposition within phenomenology, namely that phenomena or experiences are always phenomena or experiences for someone and thus can never be studied independently of how they appear to other persons. This means that phenomenology encompasses everything in the interpretative process, including verbal and nonverbal forms of communication, as well as prior aspects that affect communication, such as presuppositions in relation to a given context (Gadamer, 2004). Employees 'readings' and thus understanding of the key corporate espoused values and basic assumptions within the global corporate culture constitute a case in point.

Assumption IV: *It is in practice that narratives are used, reused, and created while simultaneously have the capability to change the way we understand each other and ourselves as mutually and socially constituted beings.* This relates

closely to what Simpson (2009) writes about transactions in which we re-negotiate the content of the significant symbols that we hold in common.

This further resembles what Geertz referred to in his definition of culture: '*The concept of culture is essentially a semiotic one. Believing that man is an animal suspended in webs of significance he himself has spun, I take culture to be those webs, and the analysis of it to be therefore not an experimental science in search of a law but an interpretive one in search of meaning*' (Geertz, 1973, p. 5). Here, Geertz relegates the notion of culture to a peripheral existence, as it only reflects the processes that govern the relationship between meaning and agency. Translated into an organizational context, an understanding of a global corporate culture can thus be turned into a semiotic 'reading' of social interaction within an organization conceived of as different more or less related webs of significance that both top management and employees have spun.

Based on the above four assumptions we are now capable of constructing a theoretical frame for researching our data so as to be able to answer our sub-research question, '*what elements enters into employees personal strategies when navigating a multinational organization?*'. The key elements in this framework can thus be distilled like this:

1. *Culture as process*: notions of culture are generally framed in terms of sophisticated stereotypes. By looking at culture from a processual perspective, we will be able to delineate the element behind personal strategies.
2. *A processual approach towards culture avoids separation between structure and agency*: Here we stress that we are not talking about structure (s) but rather structuration(s), that is, structured situations provoked by human agency.
3. *Agency is never purely individual as it always takes place in a context*: Here we stress the applicability of a phenomenological approach as it provides us with tools for how to deal with context and agency.

4. *It is in practice that narratives are used, reused, and created while simultaneously have the capability to change the way we understand each other and ourselves as mutually and socially constituted beings:* This gives us the final touch to our analytical approach which is thus based on the relationship between agency, context and practice.

Put together this analytical framework enables us to understand how employees manage both externally constructed personal mindsets as well as a corporate mindset when working in an organization.

Taking a point of departure in this, we suggest that instead of perceiving organizations as only consisting of organizational structures and divisions, a perhaps more productive way is to think of it as constituting a playing field for competing narratives that changes content in synch with the overarching context in which the organization finds itself. Such a constant reconfiguration of narratives takes place regardless of geographical context in which a HQ is positioned or where a local office is situated in a given host market. The key issue here is that this overarching context is very dynamic and rather unpredictable thus forcing an organization to critically 'read' this overarching context, as such a 'reading' constitutes the base line from where narratives formulated by both top management and employees are nurtured and constructed. It goes for both of them that these narratives constitute organizational markers that are essential when navigating a dynamic and complex global business environment.

### **Navigating Corporate Values from an Employee's Perspective**

As a way of illustrating the above discussed dynamic processes within an organization, the Danish shipping company Maersk Line has been selected to constitute a case in point. This company have developed and implemented a global corporate culture as it has subsidiaries throughout the world. Furthermore, both headquarter and local offices exhibit a multi-cultural staff thus

reflecting the complexities of the various types of markets that this global organization covers. Maersk Line's global corporate culture is based on five basic values, as defined by the founder A. P. Møller (1876-1965) and his son Mærsk Mc-Kinney Møller (1913-2012), namely: (1) constant care, (2) humbleness, (3) uprightness, (4) our employees, and (5) our name. These values are rather generic and have the ability to endure changes within the overall organizational setup of the MNC as it adjust to changing market conditions (Jephson and Morgen 2014).

These values are ideal for developing a global corporate culture due to their simplicity and straightforwardness that apparently transgress and nullify potential effects from local societal readings in the different kinds of host markets. Hence, it is tempting to perceive a global corporate culture that is based on such values as a kind of acculturation mechanism that works towards a cosmopolitan mindset when working in headquarter, but as a problematic construct in the local offices due to the imperative of adaptation to host market specificities. Thus, a key question in this connection is how to identify the outer boundaries for a standardizing global corporate culture in highly dynamic and culturally complex local market environments.

When interviewing Asian employees at the Copenhagen headquarter, we noticed a strong similarity across the different informants. They were all rather young, very competitive, pugnacious, motivated, professional, and very much part of the collective company "we." We then noticed that a specific notion of a societal culture was not at the forefront of their mind. Rather, they focused in particular on three of the five company values, constant care, humbleness, uprightness, as their main guidelines when navigating headquarter. When asking the informants about their cultural background, be it either Chinese, Hong Kong-nese, Japanese, Singaporean or Malaysian, and whether this affected the way in which they perceived themselves in a Maersk Line context, the general answer was that their home culture was nice to have as a personal reference point, but not needed when working at the Danish headquarter.

Instead, the company “we” and especially the three core values constituted the main guiding principle when dealing with their different assignments within the organization. As a kind of consequence of their internalization of the company core values, almost all of our informants from headquarter did not socialize with Danes outside the company, but exclusively with their colleagues within the company, who thus were also their friends regardless of their country of origin. According to them Danish norms and values were difficult to understand and Danes so reserved when trying to get to know them so why making it more difficult than necessary to socialize? Corporate colleagues/friends were easier to socialize with, as they already understood you as you shared the same core values. Only one of the informants from headquarter engaged the Danish society by actually marry a Dane.

When zooming in on the local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur, the picture becomes more complex. There was a general agreement among the informants that the global corporate culture constituted a benchmark for how to do business the Maersk way in all local offices. They also stated, however, that it was impossible to fully implement the global corporate culture in a local context due to a more omnipresent and complex external environment affecting operations in the local offices. The five values designed as guiding principles for doing business the Maersk way were largely upheld, but there were situations where the values had to be amended in such a way that they provided a better fit with the local work environment. The reason for this is that the five values are historically grounded in a Danish context and therefore reflect specific Danish cultural traits. Consequently, they are sometimes interpreted by individual employees in ways not anticipated by the top-management at headquarter.

Asian business communities are generally characterized by strong networks based on personal ties, which of course also have an influence on companies like Maersk Line. We are talking about networks based on business-to-business partners as well as business to government relations. They are necessary to

make business transactions work more smoothly due to more or less well functioning formal institutions that result in various kinds of institutional voids (Peng and Zhou 2005). This is not to say that such institutions, when working in an Asian context, are generally manipulated, nor are we necessarily talking about corrupt business practices. In emerging markets like the Chinese and Malaysian ones, the institutional set up is generally characterized by rather weak formal institutions where informal institutions, such as more or less politicized local norms and values, have a bearing on the functionality and implementation of the formal ones thus defining networks as alternative and necessary safety nets towards dubious business practices. (Peng and Meyer 2016).

It is in this context that business networks in the form of personal connections between business partners and business to government relations come into the picture, as they make up for the deficiencies of the formal institutions thereby making the market work in a slightly different mode than anticipated by HQ. This stresses the point of why especially emerging markets function in an imperfect way thus highlighting the importance of considering various societal factors when engaging in business transactions in these kinds of markets.

The informants furthermore pointed out that the five key values in the global corporate culture, and especially the three key ones, constant care, humbleness and uprightness, could carry different meanings in a local setting thus setting off potential clashes of value systems within the organisation due to different kinds of mindset among the employees and representatives from top-management. It is important to keep in mind that the five key values are all embedded in a Danish setting, but are nonetheless expected to be fully understood and implemented in all the local offices around the world.

If we take the first value, “constant care,” it means that one is expected to take care of the company and staff regardless of rank. From a top-management perspective, this is obvious, as “company and staff” cannot be disentangled, as

they are mutually interdependent and thus conditional to the success of the organisation. If we, for example, look closer at a Chinese company that is governed by classical Chinese (Confucian) virtues, such as respect for parents/elders/authority, this is sometimes translated into a hierarchical relationship between the company owner and the employees. This means that instead of a relatively “flat” company structure with less power distance like in Maersk Line and many other Western companies, a more hierarchical structure governs a typical Chinese company. If the Chinese or Confucian mindset is confronted with the Maersk value of “constant care” the question is, constant care for whom; the stakeholders, the company, the owner or the employees?

Two other alternative understandings of ‘constant care’ are forwarded by Lars Jensen, a former employee in Maersk Line. According to him ‘constant care’ implies planning with due care. One is thorough in the planning phase in order to ensure that you are not later met by surprises, which could have been foreseen and prevented. Constant Care is closely connected to another popular Maersk Line-phrase, ‘no detail too small, no effort too great’. This resulted in a sharp focus on details that almost derailed the implementation of the bigger picture. It was later reformulated ‘The appropriate level of detail at the appropriate level’.

Finally, ‘constant care’ is the interpretation of ‘to go the extra mile for the customer’. Problems arise, however, when one has more than 100.000 customers as such an approach becomes rather costly. In other words, as Maersk Line grew as a company this wording became impossible to take into consideration thus emphasizing business instead of service in order to stay competitive (Jensen 2014).

When looking at “humbleness,” we find a better fit between Danish and Asian values. Just as Maersk Line does not brag of its achievements neither do Asians. Bragging is regarded as counterproductive to both “humbleness” and “constant care.” According to Maersk, for employees “humbleness” means that one has to listen, learn, and share. This is the only way to grow a company in a proper and respectful way. In a sense, this value is considered a personal

feature that employees are expected to have and live by. To all of our Asian informants this was something they easily could relate to as it constitutes part of Asian values too.

According to Lars Jensen this value has a subtitle, 'listen, learn, share, and give space to others'. Humbleness is all about trusting and respecting each other, and giving each other room. It is about constant learning, and recognizing that at times, others can be smarter than one self, and hence there is always something to be learned. Humbleness also means 'we' before 'I'. Establishing the collective 'we' in the company are to a significant degree ascribed to the MISE program<sup>9</sup>. For the individual employee later on in his or her career this bond is extended to other colleagues within the company notably those who have shared similar experiences.

The notion of a collective 'we' is in danger of gradually disappearing, according to Lars Jensen, mainly due to two things. The first one is an increasing emphasis on quantifiable individual employee KPIs, which has led to a significant reduction in the willingness to take on added work, or risk, on behalf of others. The other reason is a change in the recruitment base. The company has gradually increased the number of specialists, who were not 'brought up' through the MISE programs and thus were not exposed to the same bond-building mechanisms as previously. This new category of employees began to appear around 2013. According to Jensen, Maersk Line people are currently divided in their views as to whether 'humbleness' is a value already ingrained in the company, or an aspiration for the future (Jensen 2014).

The third and final value that we will focus on is "uprightness." Jens Larsen mentions that the official subtitle to this value reads, 'Our word is our bond', which means that one's actions are aligned with one's word. This is, according

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<sup>9</sup> The Maersk International Shipping Education (MISE) program was initiated in 1993 with the purpose of providing the company with a pipeline of leadership talent thus ensuring that the A.P. Moeller group was able to provide their own leadership talent at all levels of the organisation. The program was closed in 2009. The International Graduate Programs in Damco and Maersk Line replaced it. Now, a new program, Go with Maersk, has been introduced to give graduates an overview of the entire global supply chain thus making them ready for entering a carrier at Maersk.

to Larsen, one of the most well integrated part of the company culture. According to employees, however, that value was also the one that was subsequently 'abused' the most for other purposes, especially in relation to the annual appraisal of employees done by their managers.

The appraisal was supposed to have a qualitative element focused on the employee's potential for improvement in addition to his ambitions, as well as a quantitative element in which a specific score was given in relation to each objective given. This was all summed up to an overall appraisal score. According to Jensen, the key problem here was one of some managers' preferences for giving average appraisal scores and a nice appraisal statement instead of giving employees a poor score and telling it to them straight if they were not up to the job. This demonstrates that on this particular issue, part of the company practices were at odds with the value definition at the time.

Two other problems relates to 'Uprightness'. The first one is that one was expected to tell your honest opinion during discussions, and fully support the decision taken afterwards. Many employees, however, experienced that uprightness was used as an excuse to be rude and confrontational. When confronted with this the reply was that they were only being 'upright'.

The second problem with this value appeared in relation to the initiation of the StreamLINE program in 2008.<sup>10</sup> During the mass-lay-off uprightness also includes the personal courage to take the tough right decision. As this program demonstrated firing people was an acceptable practice, this was seen by many as an encouragement to lay off people who are not delivering thus trimming the staff. The notion of life-long employment was over after the introduction of the StreamLINE program (Larsen 2014).

Finally, there is a major difference in the way in which Danes and Asians understand the concept. This is reflected in the way employer and employees

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<sup>10</sup> StreamLINE was initiated in the early 2007 as a new strategy that was to optimising the Maersk organisation resulting in about 3000 lay-offs. The new key focus was on servicing own internal departments and less on servicing the customers (Jensen 2014).

behave towards each other especially in an Asian context. If, for example, a manager from an Asian local office gives an employee an order to handle a business situation in a certain way, then the employee will, even though he or she has a different perception of how to do this, do as instructed. He or she will not question it even though he or she might find it unproductive or even wrong. In other words, an employee would not speak up if he or she finds it wrong so as not to offend his or her superiors thereby making them lose face, which is a key concept in Asian values. As can be seen, the value of “uprightness” carries entirely different connotations in a Danish cum Asian context.

Two of the three core values can thus be interpreted in different ways, as they carry different connotations both within the organization and within the different local offices. Regardless of how the key values are interpreted, however, they do serve as signifiers that employees employ when navigating the organizational landscape. This goes for our informants at headquarter as well as those in the local offices.

### **Sense Making and the Development of Employee Strategies in a Corporate Context**

A key concept that employees more or less consciously employ when developing strategies for how to cope with corporate requirements is the notion of sense making. This concept implies that an employee is not only a representation of the collective company “we,” but also a representative of his or her personal understanding of what is right and wrong in a given context. This duality in terms of employee loyalty and personal integrity is important to understand as it governs the way in which an employee navigates an organizational landscape. These modes of navigating a given context are, according to Weber and Glynn, governed by how the employees perceive, interpret and react to changes that are taking place in the organization in which they work. The outcome of this has an impact on their personal strategic

positioning in the organization as well as towards their fellow employees in the organization (Weber & Glynn, 2006).

An informant from the talent management team in the Maersk headquarter told us that a global corporate culture was constructed in such a way that it could withstand major changes within the organization. Now, taking into account that Maersk as an organisation is currently undergoing major changes, and knowing that employees are considering these changes then it is likely that they will try to make sense of these changes and thus develop pertinent strategies as a response to the changes. If we again divide our informants into two main groups, those coming from headquarter and those operating out from the local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur, then a major difference in terms of sense making between the two groups can be identified.

The employees at headquarter generally relate rather strongly with the corporate “we” as defined by the global corporate culture, and are thus more empathetic towards changes in the organizational setup. The employees in the local offices, however, are split between being part of the collective “we” and influenced by a localized interpretation of the ramifications of organizational changes. The main question that both groups of informants seek to find answers to is “what is in it for me?” or “how can I turn potential negative organizational changes into personal advantages thus providing positive avenues for a future carrier either inside or outside the Maersk organization”? In other words, all informants are trying to make sense of the changing organizational landscape to identify their own potential advantages or disadvantages, but again from rather different perspectives.

One of the informants in a local office mentioned that the drivers behind sense making originate from the personal ambitions of the employees. Those ending up working in headquarter have internalized the global corporate values to such an extent that they have transformed them into important signifiers thus making them able to navigate the organization to optimize their carrier opportunities

within Maersk. This statement matched our own perception of the employees we interviewed in headquarter, that they were very ambitious young people with a clear understanding of the significance of working in headquarter compared to working in a local office.

The interesting thing about the employees that was working in headquarter is that they have a cosmopolitan orientation. When asked about their future carrier plans they did not necessary include Maersk. It was more the shipping business per se that they had in mind, and not necessarily job opportunities in their country of origin. Any country could do as long as it provided them with a challenge in terms of a good work-life balance. This mode of optimizing one's job opportunities has the consequence that time spend in a company, such as Maersk or any other MNC, is rather short, about 5-6 years.

Those employees, however, who was working in the local offices, questioned whether it was worthwhile internalizing the global corporate values to such an extent that they would jeopardize their personal identity that had been internalized during childhood in their local societal culture. They were generally satisfied with having a job in a well-known global company, which gave them prestige and status in the local business community. Several of those we interviewed had not been to headquarter or only attended very short upgrading courses there and then sent back to their local office. Consequently, this type of employees tended to stay longer in their jobs compared to those working in headquarter. To further stress this point, several of our local informants, who had been working in the local Maersk office for more than 10 years, were older compared to our informants working in headquarter.

### **Empathy versus Competitiveness as Personal Drivers behind Personal Strategies**

Taking these consequences of sense making among employees into account lead to a discussion of what are the drivers behind personal strategy

making among employees, both those working in headquarter and those working in the local offices. The three core values that we have discussed, constant care, humbleness and uprightness, cannot be ascribed to a certain type of person, as the values are partly rather general and thus open for interpretation and partly because the composition of the individual employee is so complex. Instead, we suggest focusing on how these values are internalize and subsequently operationalized in such a way that they partly fits personal strategies when navigating the organization, and partly conforms to the overarching strategy of the company. To this end, we divide again our informants into two categories, those coming from headquarter and those from the local offices. In this context, we focus on the notion of empathy and competitiveness, and how the two are played out among the employees in these two groups.

The informants working in headquarter have internalized the five key values to such an extent that they have become personal guidelines for how to become the professionals they are. The drivers behind this are not due to the content of the values per se, but rather what governs the ambitions of the individual employees. Having succeeded becoming part of the collective “we,” the premise for staying there is top performance within the organization. The driver behind this is not, according to informants, an empathic approach towards doing business, but rather a competitive edge that was encouraged by the company and only afterwards, notions of empathic feelings and relations came into play.

To give an example, when asking the informants in headquarter about how to approach vendors or how to engage partners in various Maersk initiatives, the answer was: *‘first we explained to them what we want, but in case we are not coming across with our messages and requests, we let them know that we represent Maersk, so they have comply if they want to stay “on board”*. As can be seen, notions of empathy are not at play here. It is a competitive and assertive drive that dictates the way in which business is done. Of course, the informants do have empathic feelings and understandings towards vendors and

partners, but if their performance is to be kept at a high level, the competitive factor has to be the main driver if one still wants to be part of the collective “we.”

This avenue towards maintaining or expanding one position in the collective “we,” is also acknowledged by the top-management in the organization so the road towards being part of the collective “we” is thus not only governed by the core values, but also through alternative strategies employed by the employees themselves. The key point here is that the top management more or less accepts the personal initiated avenues, as they fit into the overall corporate matrix.

Things are somewhat different when discussing the same issue with employees in the local offices. This is due to a more complex reality here, as different mindset and value systems are simultaneously at play thus leading towards more or less conscious conflicting demands. We are in particular talking about demands emanating from the global corporate culture and from local norms and values, including constrains and opportunities that govern the different market conditions found in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur respectively. Generally speaking, business activities in the local offices are carried out according the prescriptions from headquarter meaning that notions of competitiveness and performance drives business relations, but there is an extra dimension to it that is not found in headquarter. Since networking practices and personal contacts constitute an important part of business relationships in an Asian context, empathy, as an essential relationship enhancer, plays an important role in building trust between business partners.

This point was stressed by our informants who stated several times that it is of course important to abide by company rules and regulations so as to maximize business performance, but to read and understand a vendor or partner demands much more than sheer business acumen. Here they were referring to personal connections based on emphatic feelings between partners. This is

what makes business tick in a local office and what engages local vendors and partners in positive ways.

These differences between headquarter and the local offices seen from an employee perspective have a major impact on the functionality of the organization, that is, Maersk per se. A more disciplined and controllable employee behavior at headquarter makes the organization function more efficient and according to espoused value systems and basic assumption as discussed by Schein (1997). Things are, however, more complex in the local offices, as the espoused values and basic assumption are expected to link up to local mores as well as to local political and economic specificities. In other words, the level of interpretation of the espoused values and basic assumption at headquarter is more direct and unidirectional, whereas in the local offices it is more nuanced and multidirectional.

A key problem here is that in case the distance between the level of interpretation of the espoused values and basic assumption in headquarter and local offices respectively becomes too big, there is a danger of the organization per se might implode. This is because the relationship between the two levels moves from a functional towards a dysfunctional mode due to gradually moving out of sync. This is a situation that every organization wants to avoid, but how to do that given the increasing complexity of the global economy? Perhaps a greater insight into how various alternative and at times conflicting narratives within the organization is constructed is a way forward.

### **Concluding remarks**

This article takes a first step in this direction. Instead of exclusively focusing of how top-management in an organization design business strategies and corporate visions of how to govern the organization internally, we have included narratives as constructed by employees. Because we focus on an MNC we are dealing with a multi-cultural and multi-lingual organization that are embedded in two different institutional setup, - one in which headquarter is

located and one in which the local offices are located. This complexity results in a variety of narratives that are, not to merge, but to complement each other in order to prevent the organization from imploding.

Besides indicating that employing an institutional theoretical approach is imperative to understand why a societal embedded organization is functioning the way it does, this also enables us to assess the various degrees of impact this have on the functionality of parts of that organization, in this case the local offices and in particular the employees in these local offices in Shanghai, Tokyo and Kuala Lumpur. Arguably, such an approach is essential, as employees have to manage both externally constructed mindsets as well as corporate constructed mindsets when working in an organization. In order to be able to research the construction of such a complex combination of mindsets we have combined a phenomenological approach with our four analytical assumptions to be able to construct a tool for analyzing how employees navigate an organization. In this way, we go beyond a top-down approach when analyzing corporate codes of conducts in MNCs by employing bottom-up modes of deciphering such codes. The key issue here is to understand how individually designed strategies for how to navigate such corporations are created, - to the benefit of employees as well as to the benefit of the organization.

This kind of research design is mainly applicable to single case studies, as it requires an in-depth knowledge of a company, both in terms of horizontal (headquarter-local office-host market) and vertical studies (creation of employee strategies over time). In a sense, single case studies thus require a time and space dimension that not only takes the organization per se into account, but also the overarching environment in which the organization is embedded. This is what we have tried to illustrate in this article.

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