

Cultural Crash between the Merger of Daimler-Benz and Chrysler: Applying Hofstede Analysis

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Abstract

This article explore the issue of management on crisis within the arena of cross-cultural management. One of the biggest merger failures that happened in automobile history is the cooperation between Daimler-Benz with Chrysler. The failure of this iconic merger is due to the clash of cultures between the two. Both companies initially planned to collaborate to tackle the 90s recession together by pooling in their respective strengths. In 1998, a new company, DaimlerChrysler was born following the merger. However, after only nine years, they finally de-merged, when Daimler-Benz chose to sell off its share away in 2007. The expected synergy never existed and the dream of becoming the world automobile leader vanished. From this article, readers are able to understand in depth of cultural dimensions based on Hofstede model. Readers could contrast and compare the differences between countries on cultural dimensions. With the help of the case study, readers could develop critical thinking and analytical skills on how these dimensions influence the organisation.

Keywords: Cross-cultural management, decision-making, crisis management, organizational culture

1. Introduction

Cross-cultural management is the analysis of management in a cross-cultural context. The study includes the influence of social culture on leaders as well as their management practice. It also includes alternate study of cultural orientations of both leaders and own employees (Peterson and Soendergaard, 2008) [33]. It focuses on descriptions of organizational behaviour within different countries working within the same organization or work environment. Subsequently, domestic companies can enter the global market through several ways, for example partnership of any form, merging, joint venture or acquisitions is one of the most common ways. Companies usually choose to merge because they want to share the goal of becoming the leader in a specific industry. They can achieve this objective by sharing their different know-how, different work processes and organizational cultures. In this case, Daimler-Benz and Chrysler wanted to merge in order to be the leader of the world's car industry (Hollmann, Capers and Beuron, 2010) [17].

The merger of Daimler-Benz and Chrysler happened back in 1998. Daimler-Benz (now called Daimler AG) is a German automotive corporation headquartered in Stuttgart (Daimler.com, 2020) [8]. It was first formed in 1926 following the mergers of two pioneer German automobile companies, Daimler-Motoren-Gesellschaft and Benz & Cie Rheinische Gasmotorenfabrik (Daimler.com, 2020) [9]. Daimler-Benz is most famous for their luxury car line, Mercedes-Benz. At the time of merging, Daimler-Benz had a very strong presence in the European market. However, even with their well-established background in the European countries, they faced difficulty when entering the US market. Before they fused with Chrysler, they had merely less than 1% market share in the US market (Kumar, 2019) [25].

Chrysler on the other side, is an automobile manufacturer from the United States. Chrysler was founded in 1925 by Walter Chrysler (Kollewe, 2009) [23]. Before it was re-organized to be the Chrysler we know today, it used to be known as Maxwell Motor Company (Ward, 2010) [38]. This American company that is headquartered in Michigan is now operating under their parent company, Fiat Chrysler Automobiles N.V (abbreviated FCA), an American-Italian multinational automobile company (FCAGroup.com, 2020) [12]. Back in the day, at the time the merging of Daimler and Chrysler happened, Chrysler was known to have a very strong position in the American market.

The main reason for the merger was majorly based on the fact that the car industry was facing a crisis in the 1990s. Both Daimler-Benz and Chrysler planned to strengthen their positions by pooling in strengths and tackling the recession together (Kogut, 1999; Daimler.com, 2020) [22, 10]. Furthermore, they shared the same ambitious goal of becoming the third largest automobile manufacturer behind General Motor and Ford. Aside from that, the key reasons for Daimler-Benz to propose the merging idea to Chrysler was to prevent themselves going bankrupt during the recession, strengthen their position in the US market and to gain competitive advantages (Hollmann, Carpes and Beuron, 2010) [17].

The combination of the two organizational cultures between the German car manufacturer and the American carmaker failed due to a culture clash (Wearden, 2007; Alexander & Korine, 2008) [40, 3]. These two companies' cultures were totally different in order to be well integrated. Based on this case, the existing differences became obvious for both companies appeared in the daily work. As discussed for most of the part, the differences of both companies were within the

numerous differences in organizational cultures and leadership styles (Campbell, Whitehead & Finkelstein, 2009)^[7]. Management of Daimler-Benz and Chrysler did not focus on priority to succeed in bringing line of connection for both cultures and it failed in setting the foundation for a shared corporate culture that reflected aspects of both cultures.

In addition, the strong failure cause that doomed the merger were the contrary and opposite organizational cultures that give out overwhelming obstacles. This can be seen that Daimler-Benz's dream of becoming the third largest car producer in the global burst when Daimler-Benz ended this corporation by selling all its shares of the Chrysler division after fusing with them for nine years (Mateja, 2007; Wearden, 2007)^[26, 40]. The introduction of two different organization models involved led to the 'clash of culture'. With the consideration of 'merge of equal', both companies were supposed to serve a shared goal and gaining competitive advantages but after merging it soon obvious can be seen is not the same from the first sight. This can be seen that a problem appeared when Robert Eaton, CEO of Chrysler corporation did not seem in agreement for the joining company where the idea of Chrysler was not obtained by Daimler-Benz and had the intention of no promise of guaranteed equal status to its German partner (Alexander & Korine, 2008)^[3]. It became evidence that this could no longer be considered a 'merger of equals'. After two years of merger with Daimler-Benz, Chrysler's share price dropped dramatically and obtained an estimated loss of \$500 million hence the sale of Chrysler's division in 2007 was unavoidable (Garvin & Roberto, 2001)^[13].

2. Two Cross-Cultural Issues

2.1. Decision Making

Soon after merging, both companies experienced various conflicts due to differences in corporate cultures, business practices, management and leadership styles and inefficient communication networks (Badrtalei and Bates, 2007)^[4]. Firstly, in the DaimlerChrysler situation, the issue on decision making is significant. There were times where dispute in decision-making is hindering the synergy of the two companies. The issue with DaimlerChrysler's decision-making is somehow related to ethnocentrism, which refers to the situation where one tends to judge other cultures by using their own culture as the standard of evaluation (Tripathy, 2019)^[37]. It goes beyond characteristics of humans who are reluctant to change (O'Sullivan, 2008)^[31]. One example is during the discussion about the production costs for Mercedes-Benz E-class' seat. American engineers suggested they use Chrysler's components for the seats to reduce the production cost significantly. However, German designers disagreed saying that Chrysler's components failed to meet the standards. Moreover, after more investigations, Daimler-Benz found out those components were expensive (Ostle, 1999)^[32]. After being told that, Chrysler's side defended themselves, saying there were no problems with their components and accused the Germans of having an attitude problem. Unlike the Americans, the Germans looked more into the details to ensure that all components fulfil the quality requirement to ensure there will not be any unwanted and unexpected issues in the future, which is related to their high uncertainty-avoidance nature. The German designers disagreed to include Chrysler's components based on the fact that the components did not meet the requirements and were costly. However, the Americans had unconscious ethnocentrism, where they failed to take the high-uncertainty

avoidance aspect of the Germans into consideration and perceived that the Germans were rejecting their components because they wanted control and stated that the Germans had attitude problems.

Next, according to Hofstede (1984)^[16], uncertainty-avoidance refers to tolerance and ambiguity of a society in a country. High level of uncertainty-avoidance results in more stability, structured rules and less comfort in taking risks (Hancioğlu, Doğan and Yıldırım, 2014)^[15]. Daimler-Benz originated from Germany, a country with a high level of UA (Al-Alawi and Alkhodari, 2016)^[2]. This caused Daimler-Benz to be more resistant to change and intolerance towards new ideas (Hofstede, 1984)^[16]. For instance, during decision-making processes, members of Daimler-Benz took longer time to discuss and pay more attention to details to avoid any mistakes that might expose them to uncertainties. On the other side, Chrysler was more used to low uncertainty-avoidance culture (Street and Matelski, 2019)^[36]. It can be seen that the major factor contributing to Chrysler's success before the merger was their willingness to take risks of incorporating new and fresh ideas in their car development process (Washington, 1999)^[39]. Following the merger, there were often disputes in the decision-making process because of the differences in uncertainty tolerance levels. When developing cars, Daimler-Benz demanded Chrysler to be more consistent in its engineering instead of trying to incorporate new innovations (Resetarits and Ankle, 2019)^[34]. Another example is the differences in the way the German and American employees reacted to problems. While German employees preferred following procedural methods and took longer discussion time before coming out with a solution, the Americans were more "hands-on", spontaneous and solved the problems on the spot (Badrtalei and Bates, 2007)^[4]. Furthermore, this issue was also connected to structured value orientation of the unified cultural framework. The dimension concerns individual relations with others based on their preferences about being part a group or standing individually. It focuses on decision making preferences within an organization and expresses how feedback is given and their impact. Through the Daimler-Chrysler merger, decision making in both German and American organizations was sometimes individual-based and sometimes group-based and it mostly depended on circumstances and importance of decisions. For example, Daimler-Chrysler's new car project is critical for both German and Americans to be involved. Where American is more into individualism with less distinction between in-groups (Johann, 2008)^[19]. They have strong individualism and rely to a smaller degree in the organization by discussing the project their own way. When Americans encounter a problem, they tend to discuss it with their own hired specialist to gain new aspects and conclude it (Ostle, 1999)^[32]. They were encouraged to be independent and did not discuss with their German partners. As a result, Daimler-Benz executives thought that the Americans had the tendency to not listen to the German's side opinions. On the other side, Germans were used to having formal meetings where they discuss among the members of organizations to come out with a final decision in a structured process. Once everyone agrees upon this, proper actions need to be performed accurately and rapidly (Caliskan, 2014)^[41]. The constant conflicts in the decision-making process made it impossible for the newly-found company DaimlerChrysler to be effective and efficient, hindering their performance compared to their competitors.

2.2. Organizational Structure

Second, issues in organizational structure were also a major barrier for the continuation of Daimler-Benz and Chrysler merger. The merge failure was mainly caused by the sudden mesh of remarkably inadequate organizational cultures of the two companies. Based on cultural value orientation (unified framework), power value orientation is featured in Daimler-Chrysler's management style. Daimler-Benz's management was based on pronounced hierarchies, while Chrysler was known for their flat hierarchy structure. This dimension will be utilized for analysing hierarchy versus equality in organizational structure among different cultures (Kawar, 2012) [21]. After the combination of Chrysler and Daimler-Benz into one integrated unit, the level of authority and power are strictly following the hierarchical style (Nyambegera, Sparrow & Daniels, 2000) [30]. In another way, the workers do their task according to the command of their director. Chrysler's employees were used to working in freedom, but after the merge, the new organisational structure is tightly controlled where responsibility and authority are centralised (Niranjan *et al.*, 2013) [29]. This can be seen where German is dominating Daimler-Chrysler and harms the American's company morale. CEO of Daimler-Benz, Schrempp manipulated by populating the top hierarchy with Germans people. Daimler took advantage and imposed its culture on Chrysler and acted as a dominant counterpart. This causes a reduced employee satisfaction at Chrysler. Right after this change, the press was overflowed with the news of resignations of former Chrysler executives and employees (Washington, 1999) [39].

In addition, cultural clashes of Daimler-Chrysler can be interpreted using Hofstede's theory (Badrtalei & Bates, 2007) [4]. The problem started when an American who formerly worked for Daimler-Benz, Steve Rossi got the position to be the vice president of communication in Daimler-Chrysler instead of former Chrysler's employee, Harris (Washington, 1999) [39]. According to Hofstede (1984) [16], German has a high power distance culture, which displays autocratic leadership and degrees of centralization of authority (Karolyi, 2003) [3]. However, power distance was ranked significantly lower in the US. This demonstrates America's belief in individual opportunity and equality. Less powerful people of the network will choose to accept and expect that distribution of power unequally (Schermerhorn & Bond, 1997) [35]. Chrysler's public relations staff is unhappy that Harris did not get the top job. They had no choice but to accept the new management, their positions in hierarchy and fulfil their roles within it. Besides, a great degree in power distance of a culture preferable a strong tendency towards hierarchy by placing the top director as the most important role (Gill, 2012) [14]. Former Chrysler executives were enraged because they felt like they did not have a say in the changes of positions. In terms of American's management style, Chrysler had a reputation for having a more relaxed culture. Employees expected to be treated accordingly and enjoy their own equal right (Neubauer, Steger & Rädler, 2000) [28]. Additionally, Rossi's leadership style and ways of communication were heavily influenced by the German style. As such, the German do not provide workers with many rights for shaping the company's responsibilities and goals. Therefore, Chrysler's American employees found it difficult to cooperate with him and decided not to listen.

Cultural Orientations Framework (COF) is another model to map divergent cultural backgrounds (Maznevski *et al.*, 2002) [27]. In this merging process, one of the dimension uses of

space has been discovered. There were raising concerns on how to merge American employees to fit into German's hierarchical organizational style. The cultural difference was the spatial orientation of German and American employees at DaimlerChrysler. While Americans tend to be more public oriented and less distance between hierarchies whereas Germans are more private oriented (Estienne, 1997) [11]. The characteristics of both cultures had an essential influence on spatial behaviour. Therefore, the changing of the new manager role brought up different behaviours on communication style with employees. Most of the Chrysler employees who trust in egalitarian found it hard that they had to report everything to their superiors and enforced it in spatial distance. This prompted more cultural mistakes as Americans thought being controlled by the Germans and their voice being restrained (Kuchinke, 1999) [24]. A huge mistake committed by Daimler-Chrysler's managerial board when it came to communications within the company. This caused American employees to feel pressured as they were not used to this style of communication. For instance, the Public Relations staff in Chrysler who needed to work closely with Daimler's staff since the beginning of the merger claimed that they had traumatic experiences. Thus far, Chrysler's PR department tendered the most top-level resignations following the merger (Washington, 1999) [39].

3. Recommendations and Suggestion

First, DaimlerChrysler should incorporate the cultures of both companies, instead of using only one company's culture to be implemented in the merger. Just like Chrysler's former president Stallkamp said, "A successful merger would require the two companies to abandon their own business cultures and create a new distinct one" (Bloomberg.com, 1999) [5]. In DaimlerChrysler's situation, it can be seen that Daimler-Benz's German culture dominated the company, like how they administered the hierarchical organizational structure. During DaimlerChrysler's operations, Daimler-Benz's side treated Chrysler's side in German ways, which Chrysler's side were unfamiliar and uncomfortable with. This led to various problems, including the high resignation rate at the American side, conflicts during decision-making processes as well as the Americans employees feeling controlled. This is where other issues surfaced and caused the merge to finally fail. As a newly merged company between two companies from vastly different cultural backgrounds, DaimlerChrysler should have considered finding a common ground between the two companies and formulated fresh strategies to be employed, rather than just depending on the way-of-conduct of Daimler-Benz's side.

Second, a company should avoid cultural stereotyping with contextual differences. Whenever one has merged with a partner from diverse culture, it is essential to analyse and understand the distinction between two corporates' culture. High turnover on Chrysler's employees was also caused by the fact that they were stereotyped by Daimler-Benz's executives as not compliant towards their superiors. This situation did not inspire trust in Chrysler's employees and brought up multiple serious communication challenges. DaimlerChrysler's top management must acknowledge the presence of stereotypes in the organization, and overcome them. In order to prevent cultural stereotyping, management could gather feedback from employees about their perceptions of inclusion and provide suggestions for change. Additionally, both Daimler-Benz and Chrysler's workers also lapsed into ethnocentrism. Therefore, there were a lot of times where they

misinterpreted the actions of each other. For instance, directness in Germans was perceived as rudeness by the Americans (Resetarits and Ankel, 2019) [34]. In order to prevent these disputes, DaimlerChrysler's top management should try to be more culturally sensitive so that they can promote better relationships between the workers from Daimler-Benz and Chrysler.

The third recommendation is that DaimlerChrysler needs to take into consideration how to resolve working styles from different cultures. These differences in culture may result in how employees perform their daily work task. Before the merger of Daimler-Benz and Chrysler, both of the parties should implement an awareness of cross-cultural training within the organization as communication style in Chrysler was non-hierarchical compared to Daimler. Akanni and Ahammad (2015) [1] stated that, by educating the workforce about the culture of the partner and their way of conducting business, it provides cultural understanding to understand their colleagues' cultural values and preferences. Leaders should clearly understand the difference in different cultures. It is essential for them to premeditate these important aspects before the merger, especially countries who are having a high uncertainty avoidance which is positively associated with cultural differences in uncertainty. Moreover, in order to prevent the failed merger of Daimler and Chrysler, common goals need to be addressed as well as different cultural norms and regulations in the business aspect.

Lastly, before the merger, both Daimler-Benz and Chrysler should take into consideration their respective employees' opinions. They might want to conduct analysis on what those employees think about the merging and collect feedback. Those employees should be communicated beforehand to ensure that they are prepared for the foreseeable changes in the organization structure and way-of-conduct. Daimler-Benz's employees deserved to know the differences between Chrysler's employees' and their own cultures so they can have an idea of what they can expect from their soon-to-be American colleagues and vice versa. After all, these employees from both companies are the ones who will be impacted most dramatically following the merger. Additionally, by having clear knowledge of these discrepancies, they would have higher tolerance and conflicts might be prevented. Moreover, Daimler-Benz and Chrysler should not have disregarded their employees' concerns. Instead, they should help by addressing those concerns to ensure that they are comfortable with the upcoming merger. As such, high resignation rates may be prevented and activities of Daimler-Chrysler is able to be conducted swiftly.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, the merge between Daimler-Benz and Chrysler into DaimlerChrysler failed was mainly caused by their incapability of finding harmony between the two significantly different cultures. In this paper, two major cross-cultural issues were highlighted regarding DaimlerChrysler, namely issues in decision-making and organizational structure. After analyzing those issues with several cross-cultural frameworks and theories, vast differences between German's Daimler-Benz and US' Chryslers can be seen. Following Hofstede's framework, there were differences in the level of uncertainty avoidance and power distance. Next, based on the unified framework, there were also discrepancies in structure and power orientation values. According to COF, there were also distinctions in the spatial distance between the two companies. Furthermore, the fact that both the German and

American's sides had a certain degree of ethnocentrism towards each other had worsened the situation even more.

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