

Corporate Culture and Management Style of a French Multinational Petroleum Company: an Empirical Analysis on the Influence of Cultural Standards and Dimensions

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Abstract

This paper explores the influence of French cultural standards and dimensions on the corporate culture, the management style and the international development of the French petroleum company Total by using empirical methods. Due to its important degree of internationalisation, Total projects a considerably internationalised outward appearance, in which French national cultural influences are hardly recognisable. On the other hand, the internal processes and structures of the company are significantly more influenced by French cultural characteristics and standards.

Qualitative individual interviews of employees from the middle management of Total provide the basis for the empirical examination. The results of these interviews confirm the findings of analytical studies, complement them with broader views and provide clear indications for the influence of national culture on the type of communication, hierarchical structure, as well as work organisation and decision making processes within the company.

Keywords

Management style, Corporate culture, French, Cultural standards, Cultural dimensions, Petroleum company

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1. Introduction

The petroleum industry is one of the most internationalised business sectors. This is due to the fact that crude oil resources are often located in geographic regions that are far from the large consumer markets of mineral oil products. The big petroleum companies, or majors, are hence a prime example of internationally acting organisations.

They correspond fully to the criteria for “born global companies” which are founded according to Andersson’s definition, by active entrepreneurs during the growth phase of an industry and enter early into the phase of internationalisation (Andersson, 2004). As examples, Marcus Samuel as one of the founders of the Shell Transport and Trading Company, John D. Rockefeller as founder of Standard Oil, or Joseph Cullinan as founder of Texaco can be cited (Yergin, 1991).

Halbouty also describes the petroleum industry as a business that intended to act globally already from the beginning (Halbouty, 2000). However, he sees mostly external factors and requirements at work, resulting from the necessity to assure the crude oil supply during the First World War at a time when oil had already become irreplaceable for the world economy.

Due to the major strategical and political significance of the oil, nations also play an important role in the creation and development of the mineral oil economy. A motivation for the influential control of the states is the desire to assure the supply of mineral oil products, either in the form of national exploration and production enterprises who become active in their own country or abroad, or in the form of national refinery companies who produce the required products. State policies and laws also intervene, sometimes harshly, in the developments of the companies. For example the decision of the Supreme Court of the United States in May 1911 led to the decartelisation of the Standard Oil Trust after a complaint against the group had been filed two years before because of forbidden arrangements to restrict the free trade (Yergin, 1991).

On the other side, the crude oil producing countries themselves are trying to expand their economic influence. Since the 1970s, they have started to nationalise the crude oil production to a greater extent and have taken large parts of the industry into their own hands, as for example Libya in 1970 or Kuwait and Venezuela in 1976 (Yergin, 1991).

But even if the mineral oil industry is one of the most globalised, the number of enterprises that are clearly above average internationally, regarding the extent to which they carry out extensive activities and productions abroad, is relatively small. Concerning this point Fourçans remarks: “... the multinational mammoth enterprises remain, if one wants to express it like this, limited mainly to their own territory. The really global ones are rather rare. Two thirds

of the production and the jobs of a typical multinational enterprise are located in its country of origin” (Fourçans, 2008, p. 35).

The origins of the French petroleum company Total S.A. are based on the efforts of the French government to establish a nationally controlled petroleum supply. Therefore, in 1924, the Compagnie Française des Pétroles, later Total, originated and in 1941 the Société nationale de Pétroles d'Aquitaine (SNPA) was founded, which later became Elf Aquitaine S.A.. These two companies developed separately until the year 2000 when they merged to become today's Total, after having incorporated the Belgian PetroFina S.A. in 1999.

Today, the Total S.A. is a French publicly-traded corporation, which forms together with its branches and connected societies, the worldwide fifth largest non-governmental mineral oil and gas company when ranked by revenues (Fortune, 2010). With branches in more than 130 countries, Total is involved in all areas of the petroleum industry from the exploration and production of oil, gas and liquid petroleum gas (LPG) to the refinement and distribution, up to the trading and shipment of crude oil and mineral oil products.

Due to its worldwide activities, and measured by various indices, such as the Transnationality Index (TNI), the amount of foreign employment or the Herfindahl indicator, Total shows a similar degree of internationalisation as comparable multinational petroleum companies (Benaroya, 2003; UNCTAD, 2009). Having the influence of a global business culture, characterised by global capital markets, international shareholders and worldwide competition in a largely homogenised industry, the company projects a largely international appearance. This image is also reflected in the company's mission statement and in the code of conduct which has already been closely adapted to international forms (Total Conduct, 2010).

On the other hand, the company has maintained a significantly centralised organisational structure. Even if the local establishments can operate quite independently in the daily business, the enterprise headquarters in Paris has a significant strategical power of decision. Apart from acquisitions of smaller companies, Total has never merged with a larger company from a very different cultural background, if one accepts that the fusion with the Belgian PetroFina put together two companies with a relatively similar culture. So, at its core, Total might still be called a “French” company, despite its multinational character.

Therefore, the purpose of this paper is to analyse whether a multinational group such as Total still bears the traits of a French company or if it has already completely adopted the nature and characteristics of a global enterprise. These global or transnational characteristics might be described by managerial independence of foreign branches, the degree of internationalisation of the employees and the executives, the type of management culture and the degree of

involvement of foreign managers in decision processes. It shall be evaluated if the patterns typical for the French national culture left their traces in the image, specifically in the corporate culture and the management style, of a multinational enterprise.

A possibility for exploring this subject is to interview people who know the company as such very well, but do not belong to the French national culture. By evaluating their personal experiences and impressions as those from outside the culture, but from inside the company and by analysing the results from these interviews and comparing them to recognised descriptions and models of cultural characteristics, interesting results concerning the cultural foundations and their influence on the corporate culture and management style of this French multinational enterprise should be achieved.

Cultural models

During the last decades, a number of cultural models and theories were developed in order to describe the cultural characteristics in different nations and countries to make them comparable. Kluckhohn and Strodtbeck (Kluckhohn, 1961), Hofstede (Hofstede, 1980, 2001), Hall (Hall, 1990), Schwartz (Schwartz, 1992, 1994), Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (Trompenaars, 1993, 1998) used the term “cultural dimensions” to define cultural characteristics and distinctive features of various countries. The GLOBE study, one of the most recent and extensive analyses of culture and cultural influences on organisational and leadership effectiveness, also uses the concept of cultural dimensions to establish a measuring system for comparing different societies (House, 2004). Some of the cultural dimensions are relatively coherent between the different authors, for example, the time orientation or the attitude towards power and hierarchy within a specific culture. Others are particular to one or two authors, such as the specific versus diffuse kind of relationship to other people, as described by Trompenaars, or Hall’s dimension of space orientation. Thomas takes a slightly different approach by defining cultural standards, which are defined as “all kinds of the percipience, thinking, assessments and doings which are perceived by the majority of the members of a certain culture as normal, natural, typical and obligatory for themselves and for others“, and which help to judge and to adjust their own behaviour and that of others (Thomas, 1996, p. 112).

The specification or definition of a pure national culture sometimes only gives a rather coarse and simplified description of the particular cultural characteristics of a country or nation. And even within a country itself, the expression of regional cultures might sometimes be very different, which for their part might be more similar to those of the neighbouring country. Hence in literature, the limitation of societies’ culture is occasionally not fixed to the respective

borders of nations, but is enlarged to greater cultural regions. Thus, Galtung makes a distinction between Saxonic, Teutonic, Gallic and Nipponic intellectual styles (Galtung, 1985). In his overview, Nadoulek groups Anglo-Saxon, Latin, Asian (with a differentiation between Japanese and Chinese partial regions), Moslemic, Slavic, Indian and African civilisations together (Nadoulek, 1998). The GLOBE study differentiates between ten different sociocultural clusters, namely an Anglo, a Nordic European, an Eastern European, a Latin European, a Germanic European, a Latin American, a Sub Saharan African, a Middle Eastern, a Southern Asian and a Confucian Asian (House, 2004).

National culture and corporate culture

While globalisation of business and economy has increased and many products and services became common to world markets, this did not necessarily result in the appearance of universal cultures. Thus, it is of great importance to identify and to understand the influence of cultural differences in the operations mode and the strategies of international firms (Laurent, 1983; Trompenaars, 1993; Hitt, 2006; Meier, 2006). According to Porter (1989), the circumstances predominant in a country determine the way in which enterprises are built up, organised and managed. Here, cultural characteristics play a determining role. Aspects like management structures, working morale and the relation of companies among each other differs from one country to the next. Other influences come from properties and controlling structures. Porter sees here the determining causes for the strategy, structure and rivalry of firms.

House et al. perceive a direct influence of the societal culture on the culture of an organisation by creating a shared meaning resulting from the dominant cultural values, religious principles, assumptions, and implicit motives amongst the members of the company, which lays the foundation for a shared context from which recognised leadership theories and implicit organisation theories are developed. Furthermore, the societal culture influences the executives in their activities and actions as founders, who codefine the culture of an organisation right from the beginning, or who, as superiors, influence the behaviour of their employees (House, 2002).

The fundamental assumption that a close connection exists between a national culture and a corporate culture is also shared by other authors. Thus Pfohl, Bock and Dubbert stress the similarity between both types of cultures concerning their historical basis, structure and consequences (Pfohl, 1991). Hofstede sees a connection between culture and enterprise strategy, too. The strategies of an organisation, which have been outlined by the top management to fulfil the objectives of the company, are carried out by the existing structural and controlling system, and the result is influenced by the culture of the organisation. Hence culture, structure, strategy,

and control are closely linked (Hofstede, 2001). Laurent even states that nationally bound collective mental maps about organisations seem to resist convergence effects from increased professionalization of management and intensity of international business (Laurent, 1983). Some researchers assume that also the political system affects the corporate culture, on the one hand by influencing the tendencies of decision-makers in the enterprises (Armagan, 2005), on the other hand, by contributing as an environmental factor to the strategical decisions and regulations of the company (Marshall, 1998).

On the other side, the intensity of the economic, technological and social changes leads to a breakdown of traditional structures, at least in those companies that are severely exposed to these transformations (Meier, 2006). Other authors share this estimation, supposing that global market integration and internationalisation (Americanisation) of management literature, and hence management methods, leads to a reduction of national differences of organisational cultures (Van Oudenhoven, 2001). This levelling of organisational culture should likewise be true for a segment as internationalised as the petroleum industry.

Characteristics of the French national culture

The distinct features and characteristics of the French culture and its impact on the corporate culture have been analysed in several studies. In his book “The Logic of Honour: National Traditions and Corporate Management”, d’Iribarne compared the specific cultural influences in the French, Dutch, and American branch of a metal industries company (d’Iribarne, 1989). In the case of the French corporate culture, he identifies a certain code or logic of honour, where a distinctive separation exists between the management and the lower levels of employees, each with its particular rights and duties.

This is reflected in the investigations of Hofstede who found for the French national culture relatively high index values for the dimension of Uncertainty Avoidance (UAI) as well as for the Power Distance Index (PDI) (Hofstede, 2001). Hofstede argues that both these dimensions often correlate. He ascribes this in the case of the high values of both of these indexes in France, as a Latin country, to the inheritance of the centralised, structured Roman Empire. And with respect to d’Iribarne, he notes that in the French society power is limited by traditional and fixed patterns of thought.

The value of the Individualism Index (IDV) lies distinctly above the overall average, but near the European average and clearly behind that of the USA. The value of the French Masculinity Index (MAS) lies closely below the total average.

The GLOBE Study shows, in the case of the French national culture, particularly high index values for the cultural dimensions of Gender Egalitarianism and, as also found by Hofstede, Uncertainty Avoidance (House, 2004). The aspect of Power Distance also gets high index values. The dimension of Individualism (IDV), which was regarded by Hofstede as relatively important in France, finds its corresponding value in the GLOBE Study in relatively low index values for Institutional Collectivism and, in particular, in those for In-group Collectivism. It characterises the French national culture as moderate to strongly individualistic.

The index value of practiced (*as is*) Human Orientation reveals an interesting result. This value, which is one of the lowest in the group of participating countries, marks the French culture as being very self-centered and placing little emphasis on altruism. These cultural traits seem to be typical for societies that are economically developed, modern, and urbanised. In contrast, the desired (*should be*) Human Orientation index value of the French society is one of the highest. Only few countries, such as (West-) Germany, Spain, and Singapore, show a comparable discrepancy between desired and practiced societal values.

Based on the results of the GLOBE Study, Dorfman, Hanges and Brodbeck differentiate between several management or leadership dimensions and they assume that in certain cultures certain styles of leadership or methods are perceived as particularly effective or worthwhile (*culturally endorsed implicit leadership theory (CLT)*) (House, 2004).

The study counts France as belonging to the Latin-European cultural cluster. In this group, Charismatic/Value-Based and Team Oriented leadership dimensions are supposed to be the main contributions to outstanding leadership. Typical for these dimensions is the ability to inspire, motivate, and to expect high achievements from others on the basis of firmly held core values. Effective team building and the implementation of a common purpose or goal among the team members is emphasised. In particular, *Uncertainty Avoidance*, *In-Group Collectivism*, *Performance Orientation*, and *Gender Egalitarianism* were identified by the authors as cultural drivers for these management dimensions.

Participative and Humane-Oriented leadership dimensions are looked at as being positive although to a lesser extent than the first mentioned dimensions. Autonomous leadership is considered as being a slightly negatively afflicted management dimension, whereas Self-Protective leadership is perceived as being strongly negative.

The cultural factors defined by Hall are also often cited to describe the characteristics of the French culture in general and, consequently, also for the culture in French enterprises (Meier, 2006). In comparison to other societies, the French culture can be classified as a rather high context oriented culture in regard to communication, polychrone time orientation and narrow spatial orientation (Hall, 1990; Demorgon, 2006).

The cultural standards, according to Thomas, deliver comparable results: the communication style is strongly implicit, the rationality in mastering tasks is very oriented towards people, the problem solving strategy is oriented towards a creative and individual way of thinking, the time management is polychrone, power and influence structures are externalised and concentrated in the top of the hierarchy, and decision processes are strongly dissent oriented (Thomas, 2003). These qualities determine firstly the contact of the firms' employees amongst each other, but are also of importance for intercultural communication. Moreover, they influence internal procedures, paths of communication and activities within the company, which in France are described as less formal and schematised than, for example, in Anglo-American or German companies (Meier, 2006).

The significant influence of the government and the resulting tight connection between the state and the French enterprises are an ever returning characteristic feature of the French economic model (Uterwedde, 2006; Meier, 2006). In particular, Ammon stretches the strong implication of the government and the still perceptible centralism within the French economy in general and in the enterprises in particular (Ammon, 1994). Hofstede argues that this is also a result of the high Power Distance Index value in France (Hofstede, 2001). Though the influential control of the government has weakened during the last years, under the pressure of economic internationalisation and the creation of the European market (cf. Christadler, 1999), the struggles in the case of the newest company privatisations and mergers, however, show how laborious this way is. Just recently, questioned on how France's large industrial groups can play their role in meeting the challenges of energy security and climate change, the former minister of French foreign affairs, Hubert Védrine, answered: "...before they can do that, the government must determine a strategic direction to follow and decide on the key focus of research" (Total Energies, 2010).

Another aspect of the proximity between state and private firms is the fact that the origin of the majority of firm leaders is from one of the large state elite colleges, *École Polytechnique* and *École Nationale d'administration (ENA)*, and in particular from the large *corps* (Clark, 1983; Meier, 2006). The elite, educated by state institutes, occupies the corridors of power in politics, administration and the private sector, and the trend of a social stratum specific reproduction of the elite has even continued to increase during the last years (Ammon, 1994). Trompenaars remarks that the status of a person in France is more attributed to ascription instead of achievement, meaning that it depends more on birth, connections and educational record than on accomplishments and results. So it is more important *where* someone studied than *what* he studied (Trompenaars, 1993).

In the French corporate model, the management style is authoritarian and the position of the superior is clearly established. The organisational structure is shaped like a pyramid and marked by a large number of hierarchical levels. This system usually creates a strong hierarchical distance and a high level of control of uncertainty. It is further linked to the idea of the unity of leadership and command, which is looked at as a way to stabilise the organisation and to reduce the risk of divergence (Meier, 2006).

This corresponds to the description from d'Iribarne that French firms are structured according to a hierarchically organised social system in which the “*patron*” makes decisions independently and is solely responsible at a strategical level. The style of leadership is therefore strict, but also very personal. Status thinking and an authority hierarchy determine the relations of the employees amongst each other (d'Iribarne, 1989).

2. Method

In order to compare the cultural situation at Total with the models and patterns described in literature, an empirical investigation was chosen. For this purpose, the personal experiences and appraisals of a well-chosen test group, concerning the French national culture and its influence on strategy and management style within the company Total, were collected by means of a problem-centered partially-structured interview.

2.1 Interviews

Data were elicited by means of an individual interview wherein the people questioned were asked to give a detailed description of their experiences and appraisals. An interview guide was set up beforehand which was used to carry out the questioning. The form of the interview was largely open, which means that the respondent could express their answers freely and, to a great extent, without a default answer scheme (cf. Mayring, 2002; Hussy et. al., 2010). Some examples of the questions are given further below. Only some questions, used to categorise the people questioned, were formulated more specifically, for example, the question concerning the duration of the stay in France. The advantage of this procedure of using open questions is that experiences and impressions could be described and evaluated, which would not be taken into account in the case of a more restricted interview technique, for example, by marking preformulated answers. Each individual interview took about 60 minutes. The answers were recorded by hand during the conversation and were indexed afterwards. Since the number of

people questioned was too low for a reliable statistical analysis, the evaluation was carried out with qualitative-interpretative methods in the form of a reductive contents analysis.

2.2 Selection of the target group interviewed

For the interviews, employees of Total were selected that were not descended from the French society, but who had been living in France for some time. Furthermore, it was attempted to capture a very wide spectrum of origin nationalities, so altogether 17 people from eight different countries could be questioned.

The candidates were recruited with the help of the company's human resources department among the impatriates working at Total's headquarter in Paris. The addressed employees were asked if they would like to take part in a study concerning the management culture and the type of internationalisation within Total; all candidates agreed willingly to participate. Some of them named further impatriate colleagues, which were also interviewed.

All interviewees belonged to the middle management of the company and a large part of them had already had experiences in another country, where they had spent on average about 1.5 years. In addition, seven of the interviewees had already lived in France before their current stay. Important for the selection was that the people questioned had already been working for several years with Total to guarantee that they were familiar with the culture of the company. The average time was about 11 years, with a range from 3.5 to 19 years.

2.3 Interview guide

The compiled list of questions served for structuring the interview in order to cover all relevant subjects during the questioning and to be better able to compare the answers during the evaluation. By doing so, a broadly structured interview guide was set up which, despite its size, still allowed for the possibility of altering the questions and subjects according to the interview situation.

The topic of the first part of the interview concerned the relationship between the French national culture and the corporate culture or management style at Total. Through these questions, the influence of the French national culture on the company should be revealed from the point of view of the interviewees. However, the questions were formulated in a way that the people did not become immediately aware that they were being questioned about French cultural aspects in the company, so that they could freely disclose their own appraisals and

experiences. This should prevent the topic of the research becoming too transparent in the questions and thereby influencing the statement of the person.

In the second part of the interview the people were questioned on how they would describe the French culture in general and which characteristic features they feel are particularly noteworthy. The questions were then expanded to interpersonal experiences in dealing with French inhabitants. The cultural understanding of the respondent, his experiences with the foreign culture in general and possible critical incidents should be evaluated through these questions. Furthermore, it should be found out whether the cultural standards and dimensions forecasted in literature were retrieved in the individual experiences of the interviewee.

3. Results and evaluation of the interviews

In order to facilitate the analysis and evaluation of the various cultural aspects and to conclude on their impact on the corporate culture, the answers regarding French culture in general, which were treated in the second part of the interviews, are analysed at first. Afterwards, the impressions of the interviewees, in regard to the corporate and management culture at Total, are examined.

The following table gives two examples of questions from the interview guide and the method of answer analysis. The number of mentions indicates how much participants gave the respective response.

Table 1 Examples of questions from the interview guide and evaluation of responses

Question:

Can you designate or describe typical rituals within the company, which you would identify as typical for Total?

Answers given individually and independently with number of mentions (multiple answers possible):

	<i>Number of mentions:</i>
few obligatory rituals / rules	9 *
few rituals – typical for France / Paris?	4
relatively pronounced separation of business and private life	6
~ specifically in the head quarter	3
rituals are barely organised	1
not so much socialising / sparse private contacts	5
a lot of leisure time facilities, but not so much socialising	1
more common activities in the affiliates	1
collective cup of coffee in the morning / collective coffee break	4
collective lunch	4
importance of meals / refreshments	2
joining of business and amusement	1
 <i>formalised events:</i>	
end-of-year events	1
‘galette des rois’ (typical French cake served in January)	1
leave-taking get-together	1
seminars / conferences in outstanding places, such as chateaux or luxurious hotels	2
annual team seminars	3
a lot of seminars, especially for the directing department	1
events are very formalised	1
no binge drinking	1
very individual events	2
rather accentuated neutrality; rituals are intentionally avoided	1
 fixed meetings	 1
meetings are used for profiling / self-manifestation	1
French language strongly emphasised	1

Question:

Which kind of experiences did you make concerning your contact with French people or colleagues?

Answers given individually and independently with number of mentions (multiple answers possible):

	<i>Number of mentions:</i>
colleagues are open minded, lenient and helpful	4
not complicated; easy approach; open	4
friendly, polite	4
love a good discussion	3
supportive	2
pleased, if you try to speak French	1
people are open minded , but only to a certain degree	4
affable, but formal; invitations are often just an acquittal	3
in everyday life less tolerant, especially concerning the French language	1
in everyday life less sociable	1
not so much invitations for the whole family	1
(in Paris) social contacts are difficult to establish	1
can't stand conflicts very well; batten down the hatches, if someone gets angry and loud	2
resentful; no 2 nd chance	1
people don't discuss problems openly	2

3.1 Evaluation of French national culture

On the general question of what they consider typically French or what they would call typical for the French culture, most of the interviewees answered in the first instance with examples of relatively apparent cultural signs, such as the French kitchen and food culture and the “*savoir-vivre*” of the French. Also a special aesthetic sensibility was mentioned several times. Furthermore, the creativity and the innovative spirit, the flexibility as well as the readiness to follow visions have been enumerated as positive characteristics of the French and its national culture. On the other hand, as several interviewees remarked, there is a certain degree of disorganisation and a tendency towards “*laissez faire*”.

3.1.1 Social structures

Concerning social values and structures, it was first noticed that in France a rather distinctive family orientation and family attachment is significant. This statement was made especially by those interviewees who live together with their families in France and thereby have a relatively direct contact with French families. Furthermore, it was noted that the French society is more strongly marked by class differences than societies in other countries, in particular due to origin and education, which in turn leads to a stronger social spread accompanied by a bolder class thinking. Also the hierarchical thinking and the hierarchy consciousness were described as being clearly pronounced. This observation matches with the assessments of Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner concerning a distinct tendency towards defining social status by origin in France. In this context, the importance of the French education system with its elite colleges was also mentioned, where a successful university certificate provides employment for a lifetime and permits the professional and social rise in status. The pressure on the students to achieve is accordingly great. On the other hand, this leads to an educational level in France which is valued relatively high by the interviewees.

A large part of the interviewees described the French as being very attached to their homeland and proud of their native country. However, this also leads to a certain self-centered attitude - in France known under the term "*nombrilisme*" - which results in a person being less open-minded towards other countries and cultures. As a number of interviewees stated, this may lead to a certain sense of missionarism, as well as ignorance and the conviction that abroad everything works like in France. Only one of the respondents noticed a greater tolerance and multiculturalism compared to Germany.

The French were described as being rather proud and not very modest, with a significant tendency to selfrepresentation, and even a certain amount of conceit and arrogance. This attitude reflects the significance of individuality within the French national culture which is supported by different cultural models in which people must assert themselves as individuals and emerge amongst others to obtain repute. The French education system as well, which is laid out to select the best over many years, encourages such an attitude.

The relatively high index values for uncertainty avoidance in the French culture, as highlighted in the GLOBE study (House, 2004) as well as by the works of Hofstede (Hofstede, 2001), should find their roots in numerous social norms and regulations. This was confirmed by some of the interviewees; however, it was mentioned even more often that there is a frequent contest of rules and authorities, a contradiction between theory and practice and a general culture of protest in France. Here, Nadoulek's theory of the exception and the rule is confirmed,

whereupon rules and regulations have a high meaning in theory, but are seldom obeyed in practice (Nadoulek, 1998). The tendency towards uncertainty avoidance, however, influences the decision-making process, as described later.

3.1.2 Communication style

The interviewees generally appreciated the French as being very communicative. Language is considered to be very important and also serves as a means for social distancing. The French are proud of their language and are therefore quite sensitive concerning this topic. However, it was also noted, that communication in French society is less direct than elsewhere, meaning that there is a more contextual communication style. This aspect matters, in particular, concerning the critical incidents discussed further below and the experiences of the interviewees in the company.

3.1.3 Experiences in dealing with French people

Most respondents described their contact with the French as uncomplicated and open. They were openly received by the French colleagues, and found them to be helpful and lenient, although one of the interviewees remarked that the French could sometimes not comprehend the difficulties of foreigners. French people are generally said to be polite and friendly; however, some of the interviewees said that this kindness is often somewhat formal. Contacts often do not pass a certain degree and personal invitations are often seen as being a duty. However, one person remarked that this could just be specific to Paris where the contact with people is generally more formal and reserved than in rural regions. Furthermore, the family situation, which many of the interviewees experienced during their stay, was sometimes felt to be an obstacle for closer contacts, particularly because family contacts were preferred by the French over contacts with colleagues.

3.1.4 Critical incidents

Based on the survey, two kinds of problem situations concerning the difficulties or conflicts when dealing with French people or the French culture can be distinguished. This is, on the one hand, the way of communicating, which is, besides the pure linguistic problems, often encountered as indirect and imprecise, so that communication problems occur. It appears to some interviewees as if messages get lost because they cannot be deciphered in the context. This indirectness is not only limited to the mere linguistic area. Several respondents indicated that

they had the impression that problems, in particular those such as personal issues, were not directly addressed. Confrontations would be avoided so that ambiguities, which would have been cleared up faster in other cultures by direct debate, remained. Also, the dissent culture in France, the different kind of humour and, in particular, the low self distance were seen as causing problems. These examples demonstrate rather clearly the manifestation of a cultural standard of an implicit and indirect communication style in France, as it has been described by Demangeat and Molz (in: Thomas, 2003). Comparable results have been found by Jahn comparing French and German management styles, where differing communication styles often provokes critical incidents (Jahn, 2006).

The second group of problem situations concerns, by and large, organisational and administrative processes. In particular, the complicated nature of administrative procedures, for example, at banks and institutions, the high level of bureaucracy, long waiting periods and the inefficiency of various processes were mentioned as leading to feelings of frustration and helplessness. At the same time, the French patience and equanimity with which they endured these alleged drawbacks were admired. These aspects were noted, for the most part, by interviewees with German or Anglo-Saxon origin, who are accustomed to a more rigid and more 'efficient' structuring of organisational procedures. This can be understood as an indication for the more human-oriented rationality in task management in France, whereas more business-oriented cultures give preference to an objective and efficient processing of tasks. The aspect of a more polychrone time concept in France may play a role as well, which leads to the fact that a different significance is attributed to the urgency and importance of various actions than in Germany or England. One of the respondents explicitly designated the flexibility resulting from this type of time management as a positive feature of the French culture.

3.2 Evaluation in regard to the corporate and management culture at Total

3.2.1 Corporate culture

The first question gave the interviewees the opportunity to express themselves quite generally concerning the corporate culture at Total. Based on the open question, a wide range of different answers was given which, despite their variety, could be arranged in several categories.

The positioning and orientation of the company in general was seen as being rather divergent. While some considered the company as quite technically oriented, others judged the technical orientation as less significant and saw instead an emphasis on the rate of return and cost orientation. Compared to other petroleum companies, no strong innovation and leadership

position was attributed to Total. In fact, the company was estimated as being rather discreet and a follower in its industrial sector.

On the other hand, an emphasis on controlling and figures is very pronounced within the company, as stated by a couple of interviewees, corresponding with a certain bureaucratic mentality. This rather general appraisal on behalf of the interviewees gives no specific characterisation of the business orientation in respect to a typically French national culture. However, the cited figure orientation can be interpreted as an indication for the pronounced uncertainty avoidance in France, as pointed out by Hofstede and the GLOBE study. The imponderabilities and risks of economic situations should be minimised by a large number of analyses and calculations.

At Total, the employee orientation is very humane and almost caring, according to the quite unanimous opinion of the interviewees. A lot of things are done for the employees and they enjoy a good level of trust. The pressure on the employees is rather low, compared to other petroleum companies, and unfavourable personnel decisions were rare, particularly since Total, being the biggest French company, is in the limelight for the preservation of jobs. Therefore, employment with Total is often seen as a permanent position and hence the turnover of personnel is relatively low. The performance issue, as some of the interviewees stated, originates less from pressure from the hierarchy, than from the competition of the employees amongst each other; due to frequent job changes in-company, there is a constant incentive for self-assertion and self-representation, at least among the career climbing managers (*cadres*).

The protective attitude towards the employees is less a distinctive French cultural standard than a reflection of a traditional French characteristic concerning the respect between the company and its employees, which is marked by a rather paternal relationship. D'Iribarne explained this in his analysis by showing that the rights and duties, which are associated with each rank, demand a certain caring attitude from the superior towards his employees (d'Iribarne, 1989).

In the opinion of many respondents, the type of communication within the company is often indirect and not very transparent or explicit. The communication is often unstructured and follows informal channels. Only a few had the impression that communication is generally open and easy to grasp. Such a characterisation is in line with the cultural standard of an implicit and indirect communication style, as identified for the French culture by Hall (Hall, 1990), Demangeat and Molz (Thomas, 2003), and as looked at in the previous section under the heading critical incidents.

Concerning the organisational structure in general, there were again different points of view. Some of the interviewees stated that there was a rather individual or individualistic working culture in the company, while others mentioned there was quite a lot of teamwork. However, a whole series of interview partners said that this depended very strongly on the areas and branches within the company and that there were large differences between the affiliates or refineries and the company head office.

With regard to the organisational workflow, some of the interviewees noted that there were a certain number of rules; however, these would not necessarily be strictly obeyed. Moreover, there was a certain tendency to get reassurance, that is, to first get the hierarchy's approval on an operation before carrying it out.

This assessment allows for some conclusions on various aspects of French cultural principles. On the one hand, there is the aspect of the concentrated external authority within the framework of power and influence, which includes the fact that rules are considered as abstract and standing outside and, which are therefore, not necessarily to be respected. Here again, we find Nadoulek's thesis of the exception and the rule confirmed (see section 3.1.1).

The second aspect is that of the hierarchical distance which manifests itself, for example, in a low delegation of responsibility and which therefore necessitates that employees get continual reassurance from those at the top of the hierarchy.

3.2.2 Rituals in the company

No other question in the interview was answered as uniformly as that regarding typical rituals within Total. Most interviewees agreed that, in any case, at the head office of the company there were virtually no typical rituals. While there are quite different, often typical habits in the affiliates and smaller establishments, this hardly seems to be the case in Paris. Apart from the common coffee at the coffee machine or a lunch with one or several colleagues, there were almost no ritualised events. Though there are organised seminars, annual reception events from the president and going-away parties for a colleague leaving, these events are by far less frequent and lack a definite formality found in other countries. For this reason, they are hardly recognisable as a socialising ritual and were, therefore, not even mentioned by most of the interviewees. On the other hand, many stressed the clear separation between professional and private life, especially in the company's headquarters. In spite of the many leisure activities offered on the part of the company, there were few private contacts and 'socialising', not even among French colleagues. Some supposed this was more typical for the situation in Paris and the large number of employees at the headquarters which creates a certain anonymity.

The low level of joint activities and the distinct separation between work and private life at the company headquarters suggests a high degree of individualism, as predicted by the works of Hofstede, Trompenaars and Nadoulek, or of a low degree of institutional collectivism according to the GLOBE study. The specific situation at the company's headquarters with its reinforced anonymity, which strengthens this degree of individualism, has yet to be considered. According to Trompenaars, in regard to a division between specific and diffuse cultures, the French culture should be more closely associated with the diffuse Latin culture, where a less strict separation between private and professional life prevails. Hence, in this point, a clear allocation is not possible on the basis of the present material.

3.2.3 Hierarchical organisation

The hierarchical organisation was seen by many interviewees as strongly depending on the location of the branch. While rather flat hierarchical structures predominated in the (foreign) affiliates, they are clearly more vertical in France and, in particular, at the head office. Furthermore, they are often marked by the personality of the respective manager. A considerable distance to the top levels of the hierarchy was stressed several times. These top managers only keep in touch with their closest employees and thus ensure a certain unapproachableness. Also, the adherence to hierarchical processes was to be strictly respected.

In spite of clearly determining the hierarchical structures and drawing them up in promptly updated organigrams, the hierarchy was felt by most of the interviewees to be complicated, inexact, with low transparency and without a clear structure. Sometimes there were overlaps of hierarchical structures and series of intermediate levels. A lot of positions were held by '*chargés de mission*' – a French designation for collaborators without exactly defined areas of responsibility.

Furthermore, there is the importance of the personal networks which although they do not undermine the official hierarchical structure do insert an additional level of relationships in-company. The meaning of these personal contacts was stressed several times, concerning the informal hierarchical relations linked to it, as well as with regard to its importance for a successful career in the enterprise. According to the opinion of some interview partners, this induces the collaborators in the company headquarters to behave very politically and means that, for a successful career, the (academic) background and the origin are sometimes more important than technical skills. Many interviewees noticed that direct confrontation and addressing of problems were rather the exception, as already mentioned in the previous segment concerning critical incidents.

The statements made by the people interviewed prove the predictions about cultural standards regarding power and influence pathways within the French cultural area. The articulated manifestation of hierarchical systems, as confirmed in the interviews for France and especially for the company's headquarters in Paris, is visible in form of an external and concentrated authority, as it is typical for the French culture. Furthermore, it confirms France's high index value concerning the power distance from Hofstede's cultural dimensions or for the power index in the GLOBE study. Likewise, the statements reflect the personal orientation in task management because they reinforce the importance of personal networks and informal hierarchical relations.

3.2.4 Decision-making

According to many of the interviewees, decisions are made in France at a hierarchically higher level than in other, specifically more northern countries (Germany, Great Britain, the Netherlands). At the same time, less responsibility is delegated downwards, leaving a large part of decision-making power with the executives. Although the employees are sometimes involved in the decision-making processes, in the end, the superior often makes the final decision, and it may not necessarily be based on a consensus from the employees.

This approach makes the decision-making processes seem confusing, unclear, or not transparent enough to many of the interviewees. The number of informal processes and the low transparency of the information, sometimes used as an instrument of power, lead to the fact that the flow of information and the decision-making processes as such are sometimes very difficult to understand.

In addition, based on statements from several interlocutors, the whole decision-making process takes on a very political character because the responsible people do not want to commit themselves, pursue a strong risk avoidance strategy and try to reinsure themselves towards their hierarchy.

By doing so, many decisions take a long time to reach and must be accompanied by numerous and detailed analyses. In the meetings related to these decisions, no recognisable results are produced in spite of long, sometimes controversial discussions. Often, these meetings only provide a platform for the self-representation of the participants. In the end, the decisions are made after the meeting, sometimes in a small circle, if they were not already made beforehand.

On the other hand, quick and spontaneous decisions are perfectly possible, as several interviewees confirmed.

Interviewee statements also confirm the findings concerning the concentration of decision-making power at the top of the hierarchy. It proves, furthermore, the degree of the dissent orientation within the decision-making processes, as considered characteristic for the French national culture. The previously noted remarks concerning the typical manifestations of power and influence, as well as the implicit style of communication, are reflected here, too.

3.2.5 Internationalisation

Concerning Total's international development, most of the people questioned confirmed the particular historical situation of the company concerning its strong presence in Africa and in the former French colonies or generally along a francophone line. Today, in contrast, the choice of the regions in which the company wants to develop seems to be more objective, i. e. based on economic considerations, even if political motivations and other such factors always play a role for companies of this scale. In this respect, any other petroleum company would follow a comparable development policy.

In regards to a more exact determination of target regions for possible expansions, the statements were rather divergent. Several interlocutors saw a greater interest in developments in Asia, whereas the United States and English speaking countries in general seemed less attractive. Due to the very competitive conditions, it is often necessary to turn to less restricted markets or to regions where other major players have a reduced presence.

In its international activities, Total tries to take local cultural characteristics into consideration, according to the majority of the respondents. Sometimes tensions arise between the management of the foreign branches and the companies' head office in Paris on this point. Only if adapted solutions cannot be found, and this is often the case in regions with a foreign culture, ready-made solutions are applied. Several times it was also noted that the company aims to appoint French managers in the management of foreign branches and thereby fill positions with strategic functions with 'trustworthy' people.

An indication of specifically French cultural values was not easily derived from the statements about the internationalisation of the company. A strong state influence might be inferred indirectly from the strong presence of the company in the former French colonies, as cited by many interviewees. The company's significant efforts to economically and culturally support the host countries, as Total emphasises in its company guidelines, are also confirmed in the assessment of the respondents. In reference to Nadoulek, this might be understood as hinting at the humanistic tradition in France.

3.2.6 Cultural character of the company

Asked about the personal estimation of the cultural orientation of the company, the majority of the respondents described Total as a French company with international activities. The scale ranged from the characterisation of Total as a purely French company up to that of a European-French corporation. In general, the international activities were seen more as an appendix and, moreover, as being geographically very unevenly dispersed. Only about a third of the interviewees described Total as a primarily international or even globally driven company, and most of them reaffirmed there being French influence or tendencies in the corporate culture.

Most of the respondents said the French or Latin culture is still characteristic of the company. This is evident in the fact that a high percentage of executives are French nationals, that there is still an influence of the state and that the family origin, the (elite) university degree and personal network formed here are very important for a career within the company. The fact that the company head office is in Paris was considered by many as important with regard to a French stamping.

4. Discussion and conclusions

In answering the questionnaire about French culture, there is a certain risk that the responses from the interview partners merely consist of stereotypes. These stereotypes are simplified and schematised reductions of opinions or images, which often accompany prejudices or which are based on these. They are often a source for cultural conflicts, in particular, if they result in a firmly fixed and incomplete picture of other people based on generalisations and neglecting the individual traits of the person (cf. Meier, 2006). The description of the French as proud and arrogant or as disorganised, as it was given by some of the respondents, can already be classified as a possible stereotype; however, it can also be explained by a real experience of a respective person. There is also a risk that the interviewees only speak of qualities they have obtained themselves from indirect sources, for example, from pertinent descriptions of the French culture, and not through their own experiences. These descriptions can be internalised in such a way that the respondents are not aware of them anymore. However, due to the diversity of the given answers and the different cultural backgrounds of the people questioned, we can conclude that the assessments of the cultural situation in France are as authentic as possible.

Many characteristics concerning the French culture, as described in the context of different cultural models, can be found in the assessments and descriptions of the respondents. Hence, indications for the following cultural specifications emerged: a tendency towards defining status based on origin (Trompenaars; d'Iribarne), individualism as a fundamental orientation of the

individual (Hofstede; Trompenaars; GLOBE; Nadoulek), a strong insecurity avoidance (Hofstede; GLOBE), the characteristic feature of the rule and the exception (Nadoulek) and an indirect and contextual communication style (Hall; Thomas).

The interactive situations concerning difficulties in communication and problematic situations regarding administrative and organisational processes that the respondents describe as being critical, can be explained as an expression of several cultural standards. Firstly, the implied and indirect communication style in France may cause difficulties, in particular, for those employees who come from countries with a more explicit communication style such as Germany or the Netherlands and who are used to a clearer, more straightforward kind of communication. The fact that the French cultural standards include a strong people-oriented comprehension in the working environment and an explicit polychrone conception of time may serve as an explanation for the difficulties in administrative and organisational processes.

Beyond the official publications and statements of the company, the testimonials of the participants give a more sensitive indication of the felt or real influence of French culture within Total. The answers given to the questions about the cultural orientation of the company permit the following conclusion. The internal procedures and structures at Total are strongly marked by French cultural characteristics and standards. This concerns, in particular, the kind of communication, the hierarchical structures as well as the procedures for work organisation and decision-making. In particular nearly all of the typical French cultural standards as described by Demangeat and Molz could be identified: an implicit and indirect communication style, external and concentrated authority as a characteristic feature of power and influence paths, the human-oriented rationality in task management and the dissent orientation in decision-making processes. Only the aspects related to the problem solving strategy and the simultaneity in time concept appeared less clearly in the responses.

French cultural influences pertaining to the external orientation of the company, for example, in regard to today's international development, are much less identifiable. The distinctive number orientation and the controlling mentality within the company, which were stressed by a number of respondents, could be interpreted as an expression of the strong uncertainty avoidance in French culture, as noted by Hofstede and the GLOBE study. Whether this avoidance has an influence on the rather reserved external orientation of Total compared to other petroleum companies, as some interviewees believed, cannot be assessed on the basis of the present information.

The evaluation also showed that the cultural characteristics differ significantly between the foreign branches and the subsidiaries in France, with the cultural characteristics being most

easily identified at the company's head office in Paris. This is particularly true for the foreign branches that mainly have a local staff, especially with regard to its management. On the other hand, the percentage of foreign employees in France, standing at about 1%, is so low that they have practically no influence on the cultural characteristics within the company. The assessment results from the interviewees concerning the cultural character of the company, which was described as unambiguously French, is therefore obvious.

According to the model of Bartlett and Ghoshal (Bartlett, 2002), Total can be characterised as an international or global company in which the know-how and power of decision are concentrated to a great extent in the country of origin. This matches with the assessments from the interviewees that international activities are strongly centralised and steered from France. Such a company attempts to reach economic scale and cost advantages through technical standardisation. It is characteristic for the entire petroleum industry, and also for Total, that products and technologies are homogenised as much as possible. Specific adaptations of products to foreign markets are carried out when necessary, as with, for example, alimentary products, but occur to a much lesser degree.

Only a few (three) participants supposed that there is still an important influential control of the state, which is described in literature as to be characteristic of French economic style. This allows for the assumption that the relationship between the company and the state are clearly less present nowadays.

Many interviewees describe the attitude of the company towards the employees as paternal, caring and not highly performance oriented; this corresponds to d'Iribarne's theories. The cultural and economic support in host countries, as emphasised in the company mission statements (Total Environment, 2009), was basically also confirmed. However, a strong French trait is still present in the foreign activities, for example, in the practice of French employees making up the management in foreign subsidiaries.

Hence, in contrast to the external appearance, a significant influence of the French national culture could be detected in the internal structuring of the company. Such a situation can generally be found in multinational companies which have evolved over a long period as national companies without any serious mixing with foreign corporations. A widely homogeneous cultural orientation of a multinational company offers advantages and disadvantages. The lower internal tensions and frictions due to a less complicated, more homogeneous communication which does not have to struggle with cultural frictions can be beneficial. This might be one of the reasons explaining the fact that the merger of the former companies Total, Fina and Elf to today's Total Group was more successful than numerous failed

mergers of other large-scale enterprises (Roche, 2003). On the other hand, such a uniform cultural structure can be cumbersome in regard to open-mindedness towards other cultures. Due to the emphasis on personal networks, the auto-reproduction of elites and the suppression of culture-foreign elements, such a tight-knit system is difficult to change.

Acknowledges

The author likes to thank TOTAL for giving the permission to publish this article.

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