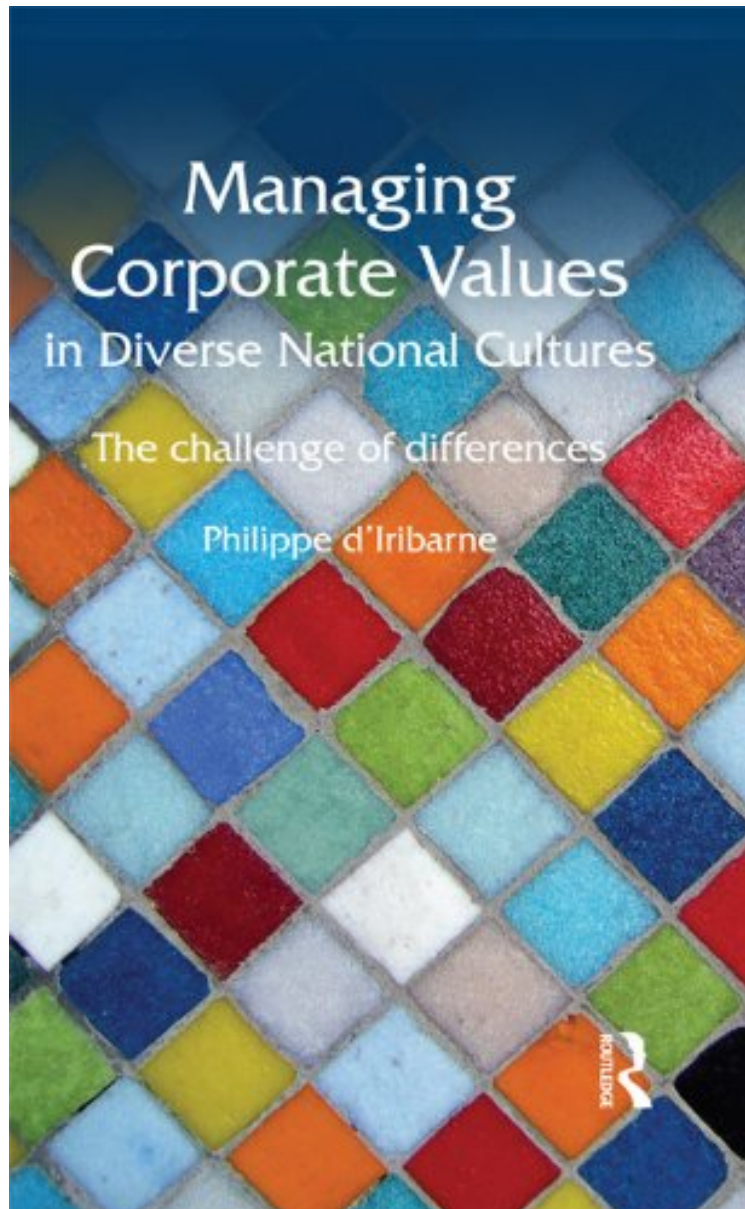


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## **Managing Corporate Values in Diverse National Cultures: The Challenge of Differences (Routledge Studies in Management, Organizations and Society)**

*Philippe d'Iribarne*

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not it would be worth my time, and all praised *Managing Corporate Values in Diverse National Cultures: The Challenge of Differences* (Routledge Studies in Management, Organizations and Society):

0 of 0 people found the following review helpful. Values set in human connections By George F. Simons This slight volume is in a sense a case study of the development and implementation of the values of the Lafarge group. Bruno Lafont, the current CEO, in fact introduces the book. It is about the critical dilemma that continues to surface, that between attempts to employ Western values abroad, which shows up as a form of cultural imperialism and a recognition of contradictory values which terrifies Westerners as absolute cultural relativism, setting our moral compass in a spin, particularly around what we have come to define as human rights and label as corruption. The setting for the study is Lafarge's Franco-American base and its involvement in China and Jordan whose cultures both differ from those of the parent company as well as from each other. Frequently as in the case studied here, the attempt to define and implement corporate values, mission and policies is where this discussion comes to a head. According to Iribarne, the challenge is not about imposing values, replacing one set with another, but of the human implementation or better, "materialization" of existing values set in human connections. It involves and the exercise of humanistic power that brings fulfillment and satisfaction to those involved in the enterprise by tapping into the potential found in the cultures themselves. With this in mind, Iribarne enters the discussion, comparing specific interpretations of Lafarge values. Chapter One explores the nature of "living together" and the diversity that exists at the heart of Lafarge where common values are defined but lived out variously in two Western cultural settings and in their commingling. Iribarne explores the differences of allegiance generated by the respective cultures. Value statements may be expressed in quite similar words in English and in French, but their societal understanding and the motivation that drives them as well as the decisions falling from them may be quite different. Both, for example, are customer oriented, but the US is from a mercantile customer service orientation where money and morality are connected, while the French assume a more directive role toward collaboration and customer service. The sense of how one belongs to community in either case results in how one interprets its obligations and rules. With Chapter Two, we jump into China. With both feet. Here the focal point is the exercise of power and relationships. The chapter is appropriately titled, "Between guanxi and celestial bureaucracy," and focuses on working with the absolute and unquestionable nature of authority vested in the leader. But this is not the whole story. The system can be managed and affected bottom up but by how the subordinate exercises his or her activity and indirect communication, effective in ways that Westerners may find difficult to perceive. The chapter looks at how good and bad power are defined in both Chinese and Western contexts. Thus the key for Lafarge, and indeed for Westerners lie in learning how to administer practices they already have, yet responding to the Chinese desire for a "strong, just and nurturing power," modeled in humane exercise, at the same time contributing to improvements in Chinese organizational practice. Chapter Three takes us to the Arab world, the country of Jordan, where surveying personnel yielded a challenging picture of gaps between levels of people in the various operations in terms of resources, privileges and a context where there exists an overwhelming need for recognition and a great resistance to criticism. Here, more than in the case of China, Lafarge is very much conducting a work in progress, exploring the discomforts and experimenting with interventions aimed and preserving the familial sense of belonging and equality. Tribalism and rivalry are mitigated in Arab settings by the domination of power bearing religious and moral legitimacy. Criticism is inevitably a matter of personal offense; hence well-exercised management power must model justice and benevolence in an understandable way. In Chapter Four, a qualitative exploration is used to penetrate the results of an employee satisfaction survey that are reviewed for their cultural implications. Results are reported on for two groups, the first, France/USA, where the company is anchored and then, China/Jordan/Malaysia, where it has been more recently established. The search is for how cultural factors are involved in the company's relationship to its employees and vice versa and this includes the local company culture as well as its national setting. Where does all this lead? To the assertion in the title of Chapter Five, "Values materialize in harmony with individual cultures." A key assertion here separates cultural identity from values in a way that is not generally recognized. Values are ideals, but we are concerned with how cultures reconcile everyday value conflicts when it comes to evoking satisfaction with management styles and the sense of belonging generated between employee and company. Attempts to convey values result in reactions that may differ from culture to culture. This requires attention to the reactions themselves and soliciting feedback from the organization's people in order to find a workable resonance between the values and the culturally driven behaviors of the local workforce. Values statements therefore are often composed with expansive words that are less precise and defined. This allows their vagueness to be informed by local meaning. Agreement on the words expressing values does not imply that the same kinds of behaviors will materialize from them. Corporate engagement with a specific culture is not a competition to see whose values and practices will gain the day, but involves engaging its own values with the cultural references that make life meaningful locally. This may result in an organizational workplace culture that succeeds, though it may differ somewhat or even radically from what one would describe as the dominant native cultural characteristics of the country or place where it is inserted. Quasi-universal values about mutual care and

collaboration can often be actualized with local aspirations that are similar but not identical and, consequently, with differing behavioral approaches. Ideals can materialize differently but require dialogue to do so. Iribarne takes advantage of these reflections on corporate experiences to broaden the discussion to how such things as democracy and human rights as conceived in and extrapolated from the Western Enlightenment can find a home elsewhere. He cites how divergences in understanding on these issues have led to differences in the translations of agreed upon pronouncements, e.g., the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. Differences in the definitions of freedom even between Western cultures suggests that the floor is open for real progress but not literal compliance on the part of more remote cultures with greater differences in their social patterns and in their sense of what makes for order and well being. In the Conclusion section, Iribarne highlights how current conceptions of culture, focused on values, behaviors and identities, stimulates rather than resolves imperialistic tendencies when diversity is encountered. The solution is not to imagine an a la carte identity for individuals or organizations, but rather lies in the efforts to work well together and create human satisfaction by trial and error as we seek harmonious cohabitation of the workspace and common good. There follows an Appendix: National cultures and management: an interpretative approach. This sums up, perhaps even better than the Conclusion, the implications of the experiences and surveys the author has described in this short work. I found the key phrase here to be: "meaning is not just received, but produced". Hence the focus needs to be not on cultural definition or identity or the sharing of explicit values formulations but on the actors in the play. One needs to observe the social interaction, the diversity at play beneath attempts to define culture by more general constructs of identity. It is about "the efforts made to arrange daily reality" in the face of anxiety over change and difference. Progress is made by attending to people's preoccupations, what they see as causes for concern, and then to how they express them. This is key to understanding the cultural frame in which one is working. It is detective work, interviewing suspects and witnesses, exploring conjectures to see where they may lead. These explorations may or may not lead to the larger cultural groupings in which these people are found. Read this Appendix at least twice!

How should a Western company manage cross-culturally corporate values in its foreign subsidiaries? Do these values make sense everywhere and can they be assumed to be universal or, on the contrary, are they culturally Western specific? Philippe Iribarne provides answers to these timely and urgent questions, based on research carried out in the subsidiaries of a leading global company, Lafarge, in the contrasting cultural environments of China, the United States, France and Jordan. It appears that, in a large part of the world, people's expectations are similar; they expect from a good employer clear and decisive leadership, and fair and compassionate treatment, helping them to live a good life. But treating these expectations as "sameness" could be misleading. Western companies with a humanistic orientation are well positioned to fulfil them, provided they are willing, in each and every geography, to take into account the local vision of the right way to achieve a good life. By following the example presented in this book, companies who care can deliver economic efficiency as well as progressive people management in the countries in which they operate.

"Reading this book, one is immersed in a thorough and original piece of work showing in different cultural working contexts, how relative the meaning of certain values can be: in this instance, corporate values." Eleonore Mandel  
Ecole de Management de Normandie  
About the Author Philippe Iribarne is Managing Director of Gestion et Societe (Management and Society), at CNRS (National Center for Scientific Research) in Paris, France