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presents

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT,
A UNIVERSAL PROBLEM AND AN OPPORTUNITY
PROVIDED BY HISTORY



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INTRODUCTION

It has often been asserted that the conservatism of middle management is one of the major obstacles in a process of change. This phenomenon is not confined to narrow segments of society, e.g. Information Technology, or well defined eras, e.g. modern time. It is therefore reasonable to search and investigate past occurrences of the same phenomenon with a view to identify opportunities for a beneficial removal of the obstacle.

Opportunities for the beneficial removal of the obstacle would mean accepting and embracing the process change in an organization or system. This paper holds that

a middle person in a moderate but unstable economic conditions is adverse to change,

and that a person in similar standing position in a stable economic condition, to a degree, promotes and supports change.

MIDDLE MANAGEMENT IN HISTORICAL SPAIN

The situation of some parts of the middle class in the 18th and 19th century Spain may serve as an example. The country was then a rural one, with prospering and with poor regions. The typical middle class representative was the farmer, as opposed to the aristocratic upper class, and the rural proletariat of labourers. The regions are characterised in the following statements [1].

About Castile: "It was on the marginal farms of Castile, without capital and without markets, that change proved so difficult of achievement." and "When philosopher-agronomists advocated new crops and new methods they were met with the excuse'We do as our fathers do.'. Sometimes this obstinacy was the refuge of the poor man who cannot afford change and to whom stagnation has become a habit of mind necessary for survival;.."

About the Basque society: "In Basque law the farm could be left to any child - even a daughter -while co-heirs were bought out...", "The agricultural system was stable but not stagnant....." and "... like many supposed pockets of peasant routine the Basque system could adapt itself to new demands."

About Asturias: "The smaller resident Landowners lived a simple life and were interested in the reform movement and supplied many of it's leaders." and "Like the Basque Provinces, Asturias exhibited a 'progressive' element side by side with a conservative, settled peasantry."

The diversity of the regions is summarised in a modern document, namely The Economic Development of Spain by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development: "The 'bizarre confusions' of the regions of Spain werethe despair of reformers in search of 'general legislation which can apply to all the provinces....'".

POSSIBLE REASONS FOR THE EVOLUTION OF DIFFERENT MIDDLE CLASSES

Let us deal with the last statement first. The implied message is that not every system of a given kind can be treated alike by uniform rules set for all systems. This should be kept in mind when rules are to be applied and is a strong reference to a generic, possibly constitutional solution.

To the main issue: From the above statements it can be inferred that middle class persons in moderate but unstable economic conditions is adverse to change, whereas person of similar standing in stable economic conditions to a degree promotes and supports change.

The average Basque farm was of comfortable size and outright owned by the farmer, because it was never split among heirs. The typical Asturian farmer was a tenant, but "enjoyed the best customary tenure outside Catalonia and the Basque Provinces; if rents were higher, the tenant could not be evicted; he was compensated for improvement and his rents settled by arbitration"[1]. Both groups of farmers were not living under the threat of losing their livelihood through actions by the powers that be. Consequently changes were often seen as opportunities to improve their fortune.

Taking the hypothesis further: Due to the limits of their trade and the structure of their capital (i.e. the farm), the Basque and Asturian farmers had to go outside their traditional range of economic activities if they wanted to increase their wealth. This they did: For example the Caracas Company, which developed Venezuela and the first Spanish Bank both originated in the Basque Provinces.

In contrast the Castilian farmer: "... harassed tenants and peasantry were driven by short, often verbal leases, high rents and bad years into the clutches of village usurers and corn merchants. Increasingly landlords sought to raise rents with prices and to avoid secure customary tenures". Clearly, such circumstances discourage experiments and change.

LEADING QUESTIONS / CONCLUSION

Can one draw the conclusion, that modern day middle management would be less resistant to change, were its economic situation a more stable or were there no threat inherent in a change? Would it be appropriate to educate and advise middle management, that their current position is limited, and that growth has to come from new fields of activity, i.e. fields outside the current (and traditional) realm of a given middle management position?

Resistance to change can then be lessened when:

- there is a perceived and felt economic stability within the organization or system
- there is no threat in one's ability to perform inherent in a change
- one is encouraged to grow by learning and accepting changes coming from the outside of one's comfort zone

REFERENCES

1 Spain 1808 -1975, Raymond Carr, Second Edition 1982, Oxford University Press.