

Mind The Gap

It's not my fault—"Nie moja wina"—how many times have you heard that phrase? In Polish culture when something goes wrong, the natural response is to pass the blame. But Western business values expect people to take responsibility for their actions, and if a mistake is made—fix it.

One man who spotted the difference and turned it into a successful business is Leszek Greń (pictured), the president of Greń Communications. Greń is recognized as one of the leading management training consultancies in Poland; helping multinational companies to bridge the "mentality" gap, and operate successfully on the Polish market.

"Foreign managers and local employees think and act quite differently," said Greń. "It must be so given the history of Poland but there still is a common ground."

To illustrate this point, Greń cites "honesty," a respected value in Western business culture. He walks over to a chart standing in the corner of the room and writes down two figures, 20 and 150. He explains that 20 years ago (and more) people in Poland were forced to work in communist state-owned companies and factories. To be less than honest with your manager was not perceived as doing anything wrong, it was normal. Go back 150 years you will see a country "owned" by other nations: Germans, Russians, Austrians. Once again, it was considered normal to lie to your masters.

Of course, the situation is different in Polish private life, Greń continues. "If you give your word to a friend, this is very important. So, there you have the common ground, both foreign managers and Polish employees value honesty but in different situations. Private life is important for Polish employees, therefore we use the private lives of Poles to help them to understand and accept this basic core value in their business life."

The practical side to Greń Communications' work is a proprietary system—dubbed the "Duo-plan"—developed in-house and now recognized by the *Harvard Business Review*. An integral part of the Duo-plan is case studies that Greń prepares, specific to a client company. These case studies are intended to test the response of employees,



asking them to create solutions where there are unlimited possibilities.

Based on their response and the answers they give to questions posed by Greń consultants, a picture begins to emerge. For example, do the employees of a company buy into its corporate vision and its values, or do they work against it.

One company to benefit from the Greń treatment is the U.S. corporation HJ Heinz. The company operates by a set of values identified as "PREMIER," each letter representing a different value—passion, risk, excellence, motivation, innovation, empowerment and respect.

"We expect our employees to uphold these values", says Heinz general manager, Adam Dyszyński, "but how can we be sure that our vision is shared by our employees? Greń came in and carried out a program in three stages to help us achieve the goals we set ourselves as a company."

In phase one, Greń gathered information by conducting interviews with employees and soliciting feedback from questions it prepared that were relevant to the company. The objective was to see whether the organization's values were understood and whether employees bought into these values. In phase two, Greń took senior and middle managers through their findings. In phase three, the same senior and middle managers were coached on how to teach and share the values of the company with people throughout the company at all levels of responsibility.

In addition to reconciling Western business values with Polish behavior, Greń is dedicated to bringing in the next generation of home-grown business managers. Through a program of self-enhancement identified by leadership training, Greń believes the next generation of Polish managers will fit in very well with multinational companies.

Having gone through life believing leaders are born and not created, I question Greń as to whether it is possible to learn leadership skills. "Of course," he says, "but we are teaching people who already have business experience." He goes on to explain that individuals might develop leadership skills at different speeds and achieve different levels of leadership but it is certainly possible to be trained to lead. Perhaps the only quality that is not easily taught, he concedes, is the motivation to become a leader.

The process of teaching leadership is part of the total Greń process, who believes managers must do more than manage—they must lead by example and train. Whether or not they accept this role, managers are trainers. If they are to be successful in their job, they must train people and know how to get the best out of them.

Greń must be doing something right, they have attracted seven grants from the EU that amount to over zł.8 million. These funds are applied to training programs and make up for the shortfall in the budgets of client companies that come to Greń.

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