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TEACHING THE FRENCH MODEL OF MANAGEMENT THROUGH CASE STUDIES

A world of difference exists between the French *cadre* and the American manager. While students usually learn to be aware of the specific aspects of the French model of management through lectures, readings, videos, and speakers, such a theoretical approach is not always enough to understand subtle differences. Appropriate case studies can help students learn about the French model of management. Raising problems that occur in the daily lives of managers, and attempting to solve these problems, allow students to go beyond the classroom setting and to explore more closely the French corporate world.

Before considering the advantages of the case study method and examining how this method can help American students understand the French model of management, a brief description of the characteristics that define French managers is needed.

The French believe that management is a state of mind, not a set of techniques that can be learned in a classroom. Carol Pineau even considers that in France, one's station in life is often determined at birth ("Tradition" 22). Managers are believed born, not made, and there seems to be little chance for those without certain socio-economic advantages to escape their backgrounds. There are, of course, exceptions to the rule, but for the most part, management education is heavily biased toward the higher social classes and shows little sign of change. In addition, tradition plays an important role in corporate France. Americans tend to define themselves by what they do, while the French tend to define themselves by their origins: who they are and where they come from (Pineau, *Working* 83). This emphasis on origins may create problems for the middle-class American manager working in France or for the French executive outside France (see Appendix).

Global Business Languages (1996)

The elite, who hold many of the most prominent positions in the important areas of government and business, favor certain schools for the training of future managers. The entrance into one of the “Grandes Ecoles” seems to be the *voie royale* to a prestigious career. Some of the most prestigious schools include Ecole des Hautes Etudes Commerciales (HEC), Ecole Supérieure des Sciences Economiques et Commerciales (ESSEC), and Ecole Supérieure de Commerce de Paris (ESCP). These schools attract the brightest students from the preparatory schools (Ecoles Préparatoires) and breed the competitiveness and the intellectual brilliance that French society most reveres and upon which French management is founded.

The “Grandes Ecoles” have succeeded in creating a distinctive shared identity among French managers (Barsoux and Laurence, “Making” 58), and the corporate world has done nothing but reinforce the differentiation. As a result, there is no true English translation for the French *cadre*. Well-read, well-informed, articulate, and adept at quantitative thought, French *cadres* have nearly become their own social group. “Managers must be able to group complex issues, analyze problems, manipulate ideas, and evaluate solutions” (Barsoux and Laurence, “Making” 62). Intellect is emphasized, sometimes more than communication or action. In France, an executive is perceived as being all-knowing and does not usually ask the advice of subordinates. Teamwork is not considered to be as important as in the United States, and French managers abroad are often viewed as being more individualistic than their American counterparts. Openness is considered a sign of weakness, and cordial relations in the workplace are perceived as manipulative by employees.

Case studies, such as the one shown in the Appendix, provide language professors with concrete examples of the French model of management. Paul Lawrence defines a “good case” as “the vehicle by which a chunk of reality is brought into the classroom to be worked over by the class and the instructor” (Erskine 11). The case study method presents clear advantages. First, case studies allow students to analyze and solve actual business dilemmas, since they place themselves in the role of the decision maker. Using case studies in French shifts the setting to real French business situations that require managerial decisions. All aspects of business can therefore be addressed, including management. Cross-cultural communication can also be examined, allowing future executives to

overcome stereotypes before doing business in a foreign market. Charles Gragg explains that:

A case typically is a record of a business issue which actually has been faced by business executives, together with surrounding facts, opinions, and prejudices upon which executive decisions have to depend. These real and particularized cases are presented to students for considered analysis, open discussion, and final decision as to the type of action which should be taken. (Erskine 10)

Well-written cases involve the reader by creating a situation in which students make decisions as if they were the executive in question. By keeping the cases short and focused, one is able to capture and retain the students' interests, while still achieving the desired key objectives. The traditional method of instruction, currently used by most business French instructors, is based on lectures and pre-rehearsed dialogues involving hypothetical situations. The instructor expects specific responses from the students that correspond to questions asked on pre-determined vocabulary, grammar, and comprehension. This method limits creativity and primarily tests the students' abilities to memorize and repeat. In contrast, the case-study method encourages creativity and tests the true knowledge of the student. A discussion about actual business situations encourages students to analyze and solve problems and requires the demonstration of vocabulary and grammatical comprehension. Cases are presented in written form and are studied and discussed individually or in small groups, then debated with the entire class as directed by the professor. Preparation, including the case and any relevant background readings, is encouraged so all students may contribute to the class discussion. Textbooks of case studies¹ should incorporate extensive vocabulary and comprehension exercises based on each case, without focusing on grammatical reviews, which are assumed to be already learned.

The cross-cultural case study placed in the Appendix relates the story of Philippe Martin, a young *cadre* who works for a French computer firm

¹Case Studies for Business French and *Cas Pratiques pour le Français des Affaires* have been developed with these models in mind. The two publications (containing 12 and 24 cases) use a variety of perspectives and highlight essential business concepts, including marketing, advertising, management, cross-cultural communication, export-import, and finance.

and finds himself promoted to the head of the American subsidiary's software division. Having read about Philippe and reflected upon his particular problem, students in class will act as professional consultants. The professor may prompt debate by posing an open-ended question such as: "What can be done to resolve this particular conflict between Philippe Martin and his American employees?" Students should formulate an opinion and defend their decisions by presenting a thorough proposal. They must also try to resolve a dispute that can affect the company, taking into account all elements of corporate decision making. The exercise is a rehearsal of real life, and students, especially those who want a career in a multinational corporation, are aware that they may be confronted with similar problems in the future.

During the discussion, the professor should assume the role of a mediator and should intervene only to control (not dominate) the direction of the conversation, encouraging shy students to participate by soliciting their opinions, and moderating to keep the more outspoken students from monopolizing the debate. Students should always be encouraged to share their knowledge of France. The instructor may clarify certain cultural traits, but should avoid lecturing to the class. Some debate topics are:

- What is the importance of education in the career of a French manager?
- What is the role of social classes in French corporate culture?
- Can American managers survive in France?
- What could be some of the problems encountered by French managers in the USA?
- Is the "Grandes Ecoles" system adapted to global competition?
- What are some of the social skills that are important to French managers?
- Compare teamwork in France and in the United States.
- What cultural elements could influence business negotiations in France?
- What is the role of women in the French managerial world?

In the Appendix case, some *sujets de discussion* appear after the vocabulary exercises so that students may prepare for class discussion. Instructors may adopt one of the prepared issues or present discussion topics that are appropriate for their own classes.

Students can also be asked to play the role of a character (manager, employee, banker, CEO, consultant, etc.). The instructor then divides the class into small groups allowing him/her to move from one group to another. He/she can also designate two students to engage in an impromptu exchange in front of their classmates. In the role play exercise, students must develop possible dialogues and communicate directly with another person. Communication skills such as tone of voice or gestures are as important as the use of vocabulary. It should not be surprising that students usually find this class debate easier than the role play.

Acting as a French manager in an American firm (and not as an American manager in a French company) adds to the complexity. Only after a thorough understanding of French corporate culture can students truly act as a French *cadre* and not just stereotype the foreigner. By portraying a French manager, students are better able to understand the reasoning behind corporate decisions through a different cultural perspective. Students are usually extremely satisfied with the role play exercise. Some of these *jeux de rôle* are listed at the end of the Appendix case. Other role play topics emphasizing the French model of management are:

- Two classmates discuss their family backgrounds.
- Two *cadres* discuss their education.
- Two *cadres* discuss the modest social background of a third colleague.
- An argument between a well-to-do *cadre* and a middle-class American manager.
- An American manager working in France calls a former colleague in the USA.
- A French *cadre* working in the US calls a former colleague in France.
- A business lunch between a French and an American manager.
- A contract negotiation between a French and an American executive.

These are just a few topics. Individual instructors can provide topics best-suited for their own class discussions.

Students seem to enjoy the case-study method as a means of learning business French. Instead of passively listening to a lecture, they are involved in an interactive class discussion. Furthermore, as case studies are

very flexible, professors can adapt them to the level of their students. The same case may be used in an introduction to Business French or in an advanced business class taught in the language. Case studies are most effective to teach to American students the subtleties of French management.

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APPENDIX²Management Interculturel
Boule USA

Issu d'un milieu favorisé—son père est général, son grand-père maternel a été ministre dans les années 1960—, Philippe Martin a suivi un parcours exemplaire afin de devenir cadre supérieur. Après avoir obtenu son diplôme d'ingénieur informaticien à "X" et avoir complété sa formation technique par un diplôme supérieur en gestion (HEC), obtenir un poste n'a guère été un problème pour Philippe. Sa préoccupation était plutôt de savoir vers quelle carrière se diriger. Il y a six ans, le secteur informatique semblait être prometteur, et c'est ainsi que Philippe a choisi de travailler pour Boule Informatique, l'une des plus importants fabricants d'ordinateurs en Europe.

Le jeune homme s'est fait remarquer par ses supérieurs par sa ponctualité, son acharnement à la tâche, et son respect de la hiérarchie. Philippe n'hésitait pas à passer toute la nuit au bureau afin de respecter les délais indiqués. Très vite, Philippe a été placé à la tête d'une équipe de 25 personnes chargée du développement des logiciels industriels. La gestion de ce service a, encore une fois, été exemplaire, ses subordonnés témoignant en outre à Philippe un respect particulier et plutôt rare si l'on considère son jeune âge.

La performance de Philippe a été à l'origine de sa promotion en tant que responsable de la division logiciel au sein de la filiale américaine de Boule. Philippe, qui n'avait jamais vécu dans un pays étranger, à part les trois mois passés chez son oncle en Belgique après son baccalauréat, allait devoir s'expatrier pour une durée minimum de trois ans. Cependant, son anglais était de niveau encourageant et pouvait lui permettre de communiquer facilement, au travail comme à l'extérieur de l'entreprise. De plus, Philippe était favorable à sa mutation et était même assez enthousiaste à l'idée de vivre aux Etats-Unis.

A son arrivée à Phoenix, Philippe a découvert un pays qui ne semblait pas être trop différent de la France. Le style de vie des Américains avait des caractéristiques qui lui était propres, mais n'était pas choquant. Philippe trouvait les personnes plus détendues et plus ouvertes qu'à Paris, les commerçants plus aimables, les femmes plus souriantes. Beaucoup

²From *Case Studies for Business French*, reproduced with permission.

d'Américains semblaient francophiles, et Philippe aimait leur parler de la France.

Cependant, dans ses nouvelles fonctions, beaucoup de choses mettaient Philippe mal à l'aise. Il remarqua notamment que ses subordonnés ne se référaient pas suffisamment à lui. Il s'aperçut en outre que ses collègues étaient moins capables et moins rigoureux dans leur travail que leurs confrères français. Les Américains faisaient leur tâche sans poser trop de questions, de manière tout juste satisfaisante, semblant plus préoccupés de quitter les locaux à dix-sept heures. Ce qui gênait encore plus Philippe, c'était de sentir qu'il n'avait pas suffisamment de contrôle sur son équipe, que cette dernière était trop indépendante. Il conclut donc que l'efficacité de son service pouvait être accrue si les lignes d'autorité étaient clarifiées. Il devait leur montrer qu'il était leur supérieur en obligeant ses subordonnés à faire des rapports réguliers sur leur activité et à le consulter avant de prendre une décision.

L'opinion réservée de Philippe sur la rigueur des Américains et leur "laissez faire" exagéré se confirma quand il constata que certains directeurs de Boule USA lui demandaient de résoudre des problèmes dont ils étaient sensés connaître les réponses. Philippe pensait que ses supérieurs n'étaient d'aucune utilité si lui devait s'occuper de tout.

Philippe envoya donc une note à la direction générale de Boule, à Paris, pour leur faire part des difficultés auxquelles il faisait face. Cinq semaines plus tard, il fut rappelé en France. Quelle ne fût sa surprise quand il réalisa qu'à cause de lui le rendement de ses employés avait diminué de 20%, et que de nombreuses plaintes avaient été reçues concernant la gestion de son service.

A SELECTION OF VOCABULARY AND EXERCISES

VOCABULAIRE DU CAS

Noms:

acharnement (m): determination, unremitting effort

cadre supérieur (m): senior executive

confrère (m): colleague

Adjectifs:

choquant: shocking

détendu: relaxed

exemplaire: exemplary

Verbes:

accroître: to increase

s'apercevoir: to notice

communiquer: to communicate

Adverbes:

notamment: among others, notably

Expressions idiomatiques:

(être) à la tête de: to head, to lead

faire part de (quelque chose à quelqu'un): to let someone know (about something)

COMPRÉHENSION

Questions:

1. Comment peut-on expliquer la baisse de rendement dans le service de Philippe?
2. Quelles sont les erreurs commises par Philippe?
3. Comment éviter ce genre de problèmes?
4. Quelles aspects de l'éducation de Philippe l'on poussé à agir comme il l'a fait?

EXERCICES DE VOCABULAIRE

Vrai ou Faux? Si la réponse est 'faux,' donnez la bonne réponse:

- | | | |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Philippe Martin vient d'un milieu humble. | V | F |
| 2. Philippe Martin est allé à l'université. | V | F |
| 3. A la fin de ses études, Philippe avait l'embarras du choix en ce qui concerne sa carrière. | V | F |

Encerclez le nom qui complète le mieux la phrase donnée:

1. Le père de Philippe Martin était _____.
 A. ministre B. cadre supérieur C. général

2. Philippe a obtenu un diplôme _____.
A. d'ingénieur B. de technicien C. d'anglais
3. Philippe a choisi de travailler pour une compagnie _____.
A. de gestion B. informatique C. d'assurances

Associez le mot français à son équivalent anglais:

1. locaux ___ A. branch
2. équipe ___ B. buildings
3. filiale ___ C. team

Complétez avec les mots de vocabulaire du texte:

1. Philippe Martin était _____ d'un milieu favorisé.
2. Il avait reçu un diplôme d'ingénieur _____ à "X".
3. Il avait aussi obtenu un diplôme supérieur en _____ de HEC.

Encerclez l' (les) adjectif(s) qui complète(nt)

le mieux la phrase donnée:

1. Philippe Martin a suivi un parcours _____ pour devenir cadre supérieur.
A. difficile B. tortueux C. exemplaire
2. Boule Informatique est l'une des plus _____ compagnies informatiques en Europe.
A. importantes B. petites C. célèbres
3. Philippe était _____.
A. respectueux B. ponctuel C. travailleur

Associez le mot de la colonne de gauche avec son synonyme ou son équivalent de la colonne de droite:

1. X ___ A. trouver une solution
2. résoudre ___ B. homologue
3. confrère ___ C. école d'ingénieurs

Traduisez les phrases suivantes en anglais:

1. Après avoir obtenu son diplôme d'ingénieur informaticien à "X" et avoir complété sa formation technique par un diplôme supérieur en gestion, Philippe n'eut aucun problème à trouver un poste.

2. Très vite, Philippe fut placé à la tête d'une équipe de 25 personnes chargée du développement des logiciels industriels. La gestion de ce service a été exemplaire.

COMMUNICATION

Sujets de discussion ou de composition:

1. Comparez le système hiérarchique et la façon de travailler dans les entreprises américaines et françaises.
2. Dégagez les avantages et les inconvénients de la méthode française. Faites-en de même pour les Etats-Unis.
3. Comparez la formation et la carrière de Philippe à celle d'un cadre américain de même niveau.

Composition:

1. Rédigez la note que Philippe aurait pu envoyer à la direction générale de Paris.
2. Vous êtes un collègue américain de Philippe. Rédigez une plainte écrite concernant la manière dont le service est géré depuis l'arrivée de Philippe.

Jeux de rôle:

1. Imaginez un dialogue entre Philippe et son supérieur hiérarchique français lorsque ce dernier lui annonce sa mutation aux Etats-Unis.
2. Vous êtes un(e) ami(e) de Philippe qui travaille dans un autre service de l'unité de Phoenix. Vous êtes concerné(e) par les bruits qui vous sont parvenus concernant la mauvaise gestion de son service. Imaginez la discussion qui aurait lieu autour d'un repas.

Questions culturelles:

1. Comment s'appelle l'examen que passent les Français à la fin de leurs années de lycée?
2. Que sont "X" et "HEC"? Donnez d'autres exemples.