

Global Business Cultural Analysis: Costa Rica

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Abstract

This research paper explores scholarly research that report on the global business culture and climate of Costa Rica as well as the implications that these findings have for the United States. The sources of research are varied in their definitions and applications to the understanding of culture in Costa Rica. By definition a business is an organization which develops strategies in order to create a projected or forecasted profit and sustain its employees, stakeholders and community. International business maintains the same goal as domestic business, which is to develop strategies necessary to create a profit while sustaining relationship with employees, stakeholders and the greater community. The research conducted on the nation of Costa Rica allowed for further investigation of the strategic development of a global community. This community is focused on leveraging natural and human resources in order to become a global leader in sustainability and attraction of transnational businesses and tourists.

Key words: global, international, business, Costa Rica, United States, economy

Major Elements and Dimensions of Culture in Costa Rica

According to *Cross Border Commerce*, culture is defined as “the set of shared attitudes, values, goals and practices that characterize a society, or in the business sense an organization” (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 38). In order to successfully manage an international business, it is first important to understand and critically analyze the culture of the business as it relates to employees, stakeholders, executive leaders and the greater community. Additionally, it is imperative to explore and comprehend the culture of the country in which business transactions will occur in order to have a positive impact on those native to the country as well as those migrating with the company and unfamiliar with traditional customs in the new territory (Lehoucq, 2006, pg. 1). The integration of the internal operations of a business with the external needs and demands of the environment is a winning formula to set the stage for long-term global success (Keller, 2013, pg. 85).

Communication

Communication is the most important aspect of building relationships and community. It is communication that can both create and overcome barriers to intercultural interactions (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 40). Successful communication involves both verbal and non-verbal components that can translate in forms such as language, technology and distribution of authority which all impact business communications. Another culture’s language can be hard to grasp as a result of translation needs, subtle differences in dialect amongst cultures and uses of gestures or nonverbal. Additionally, attitudes about accents and dialects can also create barriers in

international business settings because of the tendency for individuals to view their native country as superior. Throughout various stages of development, we develop a bias that informs us that our culture and language should be preferred and any additional information we absorb is secondary (Stephan, 1996, pg. 150).

Another area shaped in early development is our view on and understanding of authority. Cultural differences play a critical role in the understanding of roles, responsibility and hierarchy in the workplace. The way in which a message is received and delivered are relative to the status or rank of the receiver and/or transmitter. Plainly stated, interpretations of authority have a great impact on the shape that executive and international communications take. Nonverbal communication is increasingly important when discussing the issue of authority in an international context because how a message is perceived and its impact will be readily displayed through this channel (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 40). Knowledge of a culture as displayed through verbal communication only represents one aspect of communication. Nonverbal gestures of communication such as eye contact, attire, touch, body language and personal space communicate messages regardless of the culture these originate from. Additionally, environmental factors can play a big part in the progression and authenticity of cultures. Factors such as the availability of natural resources, population, climate and landscape contribute to both the present and past conditions of countries and geographic regions. Costa Rica specifically could be considered by some to be a harmonization culture due to the balance that is achieved between modern technology and the environment (Blake, 2009, pg. 76). This feat could be why

Costa Rica as a nation has achieved great success with sustainable development, eco-tourism and sourcing from renewable energies (Keller, 2013, pg. 90).

Religion

Religion influences behavior and belief regarding the interpretation of business and economic issues while helping to determine ethically sound outcomes for all involved (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 42). If not for the structure and order provided by religion, we may live in a world where everyone was focused on immediate gratification and focused on their own needs rather than practice being giving, kind and loving. The perspective of a culture without the influence of religion is that of the extreme individualism and success was measured in terms of success on the job, status and amounts of wealth. The diversity at the basic and cultural levels would not be properly appreciated and incubated. Ultimately, we would lose the opportunity to learn from others and to practice faith in our dealings with the world around us.

Religion guides behavior of people, and therefore it can be used at every level of society, including organizations, to build positive relationship within it (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 42). The international business environment creates the unique challenge of integration and acknowledgement of various religious practices and beliefs in a shared setting. Due to this fact, religion can pose as a source of internal conflict amongst employees, executives and potentially stakeholders. Henceforth, the establishing an ethical relationship between religion and business is initiated by promoting a culture of tolerance and understanding of the different religions, so that a balance is achieved and productive, efficient work can take place. The major religion in

Costa Rica is Roman Catholicism (Williams, 1989, pg. 42), however, freedom of expression is accepted. Other religious designations include evangelical Protestants; Buddhism; Hindu, Muslim, Baha'I and non-affiliated (About costa rica, 2014, pg. 1).

Ethics

According to *Cross Border Commerce*, ethics is the “study of morality and standards of conduct” (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 48). The morals of a culture will vary from one to the next. It is important to note that this does not mean that one is correct and one is not. Yet, it is critical to have the knowledge of what is considered ethical so that decisions can be made not out of our own understanding but truly doing what is right based on our environment. This fact is not easily integrated into an international setting, however, once done right it will set the company and team up for long-term success in the global market (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 48).

Values and Attitudes

When we think of the word “community”, we understand it to mean any place where people interact with one another. This may include a classroom, neighborhood, family, friends, coworkers, frequented businesses and organizations amongst others. Most importantly, a community shares values, which provide a sense of shared understanding about goals, priorities, interactions and truths. If values are not shared openly within a community, the process of growth and development can be inhibited and overshadow satisfaction that could be achieved through building the community itself. In this sense, a community is an example of a team. When any team is competing against another and lack shared values or lack consistency between

what is said and what is done, it can often result in poor performance. Values allow the members of an organization to interact harmoniously (Marks, 2012, pg. 1).

Values affect their formation and development as individuals, and make it easier to reach goals that would not be possible to achieve separately. Further, the attitude of an individual can be felt by other teammates due to the close interaction of the group while attempting to reach the shared goal. The same is true for a community – whether domestic or international. A positive attitude and good etiquette greatly enhances one's ability to achieve and maintain a high level of performance and grow community (Seager, 2009, pg. 1). In a global market, etiquette assumes more importance as you develop business relationships with people from different cultures. The people with whom you interact can gauge the level of your professionalism by the lengths to which you go to exercise proper etiquette. When practicing proper business etiquette, others are put at ease because of the understanding that business commitments are to be taken seriously and treated with respect. People respond positively when engaged in community in positive way.

Customs

Trust is the cornerstone of all relationships and thus must be a priority when establishing a business in another country. Interaction with the international market requires knowledge of the customs, cultures and traditions applicable to that nation and will help to avoid embarrassment, offending someone or ruining a business deal (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 53). In international business, first impressions may provide the only opportunity to build trust and put a transnational business partner at ease. At times, international business may be conducted at

social events; business lunches and dinners; or online contact therefore it is highly imperative to understand how to conduct oneself and represent the business in a variety of settings in order to close the deal. Conducting business outside of the office coupled with knowledge of cultural customs concerning business attire, facial expressions, body language, eye contact, and shaking hands will ultimately result in success when networking and closing deals. As international business is often negotiated and discussed at social events, business lunches and dinners, and through online contact, global professionals need to know much more than handling interactions in a conference or other business setting.

Social Structures and Organizations

By 1562, the first successful colonial city was established by Juan Vasquez de Coronado and the area today is known as the province of Cartago (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011, pg. 1). When Mexico rebelled against Spain in 1821, Costa Rica used the opportunity to liberate itself from its founders and followed suit. After a successful rebellion against Spain, a portion of Costa Rica elected to come under Mexican rule which spurred a civil war in the middle of the nation (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). Pro-Mexico provinces Cartago and Heredia were defeated by anti-Mexico provinces San Jose and Alajuela which returned Costa Rica to sovereignty (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). During this phase of initial independence, Juan Mora Fernandez became the first head of state for Costa Rica and was later succeeded by the nation's first president (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). After two major civil wars and several attempts at guided leadership – by Spain and Mexico – Costa Rica explicitly expressed its independence with the

drafting of its Constitution on November 7, 1949 (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). The Constitution abolished the army; established presidential term limits banned the Communist party and nationalized banks, which all set the stage for the politically stable environment that Costa Ricans experience today (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1).

Since ancient civilization, societies have been establishing rules and laws in order to create a sense of order and consistent expectations for citizens. An excerpt from a chapter on culture and international business provides additional insight into this critical development:

In order to achieve survival of a culture, groups must establish and sustain methods of preserving social order and necessary rules. If no rules or guidelines are established, then people will violate others' rights – knowingly or unknowingly – and potentially cause social chaos. Each culture will have a different social structure and set of rules in order for this sense of harmony to commence. Every society has a system for coercing people to obey the social rules, and these are called social control systems. Again, knowing the constraints that culturally different people rely upon for maintaining social order is important for managers of international workforces (Pearson Education, 2014, pg. 19).

Education

In order to ensure that the basic needs of citizens are met, a society must see to it that children and adults have access to learn the way of life and create new opportunities for themselves. Having an organized cultural heritage that can get passed on from one generation to the next begins with the spark of discovery and continues with the nurturing of the community.

This universal societal need for cultural transmission gives rise to some form of educational system in every society. In spite of the synergy with curriculums at the university level, specifics to learning goals and outcomes will vary from one culture to another. Depending on the community in which the learning is taking place, students may be exposed to either a broad “liberal arts” education or a narrow, vocationally-focused track. There are also other macro-social factors to consider in regards to education as environmental factors will impact the ability of the student to absorb and process information. This acknowledgement may include the simple task of confirming that physical and emotional needs are being met at home or providing a full supplementation resource for outstanding needs. International businesses from domestic markets must consider the approach and policies affecting education in the community they are seeking to do business, especially because those receiving education are their future employees, executives, stakeholders and/or supporters.

Integration of Elements and Dimensions of Culture in Costa Rica

Communication

The process of communication in the international business environment is processed by undertaking a variety of factors, each with its own implications that could be further defined on based on shared or different cultural perceptions. Critical factors to successful communication include language, environment, technology, understanding of authority and nonverbal communication. Due to the fact that business is not conducted identically from one culture to the next, it is important for a company seeking international transaction to be mindful of the various

forms of communication and how they impact both the deliverer and receiver of the message. If this practice is put into place, business relations will be enhanced when employees from entry to executive level are trained to proactively identify communication barriers and conflict across cultures. Another important strategy for communication is to highlight areas of similarity rather than focus on differences. Costa Rica is a unique country which offers a wealth of natural resources as well as international companies that are helping the nation to invest in developing on both sustainable and technological playing fields. While communication by telephone will not be difficult, one may need to consider learning the Spanish dialect.

Religion

International business managers should be mindful that religion is not openly discussed but privately practiced and respected by a majority of the Costa Rican citizens.

Ethics

International businesses must be aware of the ethics of the region and apply as necessary.

Values and Attitudes

Businesses should have a positive attitude and be willing to accept changes as needed in order to adapt to the high-risk taking, strategic environment.

Customs

Ultimately, business is enhanced when people from different backgrounds and cultures find new approaches to old problems, explore creative solutions and remain willing to see issues

from the perspective of the other party or culture. Businesses should seem to learn local customs and adapt accordingly on days and times of most significance.

Social Structures and Organizations

The Costa Rican culture is one of liberal democracy, egalitarianism and equality. Businesses should adapt or create policies as necessary in order to offer employees a workplace conducive to the local leadership expectations.

Education

International businesses should place education as a high priority for their employees and create a reward system for returning to school or seeking additional opportunities to learn new skills.

Comparison of Elements and Dimensions of the United States

Comparison of Costa Rica & the United States

Although Costa Rica and the United States both share the initiation of civilization being driven by the African slave labor force, both nations took very different routes in order to establish a culture best suited for its citizens and ultimate growth. Costa Rica is one of the oldest democracies in the Americas and has a heritage and tradition of peace, democracy and social development. To date, Costa Rica is home to the Inter-American Court of Human Rights; University for Peace of the United Nations; and the Earth Council (About costa rica, 2014, pg. 1). In addition to a sustained atmosphere of peace and democracy, the 4.4 million residents of Costa Rica are truly that of egalitarian tradition – which has been a direct result of the

development of an autonomous and individualistic agrarian society (About costa rica, 2014, pg. 1). The equality and individualism found in Costa Rica may be also be attributed to the nearly even distribution of gender - 49.86% of population is male and 50.14% of population is female (About costa rica, 2014, pg. 1). In spite of widening class divides created by the cultivation of the two major crops in Costa Rica – coffee and bananas – the nation has maintained the overall individualistic society first formulated during the earlier days of Spanish colonization because of the small landowners' relative poverty; lack of large indigenous labor force; isolation from the Spanish colonial centers; and the population's ethnic and linguistic homogeneity (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). Contrastingly, the United States is a traditionally patriarchal society that favors the masculine energy which fuels free trade, competition and entrepreneurship that have been interwoven into the “American dream” and quest for individual success (Costa rica USA chamber of commerce, 2014, pg. 1).

Hofstede's Analysis

In 1967, Geert Hofstede began a study that would make a huge impact on the study of culture and personality (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 56). During a time when much of society was concentrated on traditional protocol and psychoanalysis, Hofstede embarked on a study of the employees of multinational companies in order to draw more defined conclusions of cultural dimensions. Hofstede's comprehensive study applied the subset of cultural dimensions to business management and isolated certain components to develop a deeper understanding on each area, rather than a generalized hypothesis (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 56). For a period of six

years, Hofstede studied a large pool of IBM employees. As a result of his work, the Cultural Dimensions were developed which included individualism, power distance, masculinity and uncertainty avoidance (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 56). Using the parameters and definitions set forth by the Hofstede's research, findings on Costa Rica are able to be extracted for implications on the culture that other multinational companies have or will create in this country.

On the dimension of individualism, Costa Rica would be considered a "High Individualism" ranking which provides the insight that it is a nation which treasures individuality and loose relationships rather than a collective sense of responsibility that is shared amongst the family or community (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 56). In spite of this focus on the individual, Costa Rica has emerged as a "blue zone" which designates the country as a global hot spot for centenarians – individuals who have lived to the age of 100 years or older (Buettner, 2007, pg.1). Dan Buettner, international author and explorer, discovers that underlying truths and patterns for those that have extended lifetimes involve feeding the spirit and the true sense of self by honoring our connection to other people - having a strong network of support; self - through our purpose; God - through the practice of faith; and the Earth - by maintaining a plant-based diet (UNDP, 2012, pg. 1). This provides critical evidence that although a society may be labeled as "High Individualism" that it does not indicate a negative definition of detachment and selfishness (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 56).

On the dimension of power distance, Costa Rica has a "Low Power Distance" which implies that the established culture places more emphasis on an equal distribution of power and

wealth rather than creating broad distinctions between the two (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 56). Costa Rica is a great example of a nation that seeks to provide equal opportunity for all (Harvey, 2012, pg. 1). Upon abolishing military forces in 1949, Costa Rican leadership invested the dollars instead into health and public education (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). In spite of having no armed forces, Costa Rica is ranked first within Latin America for its political stability. Healthcare today remains a primary focus and an astonishing 90% of residents utilize some form of the public, universal health system (Casselman, 2008, pg. 1). For public education, the focus was to invest in the educational vessels in which most of the constituency would have access which included primary schools, secondary schools, the university system as well as institutions providing technical and vocational training. Today, the literacy rate in Costa Rica is 96% (Central Intelligence Agency, 2011, pg. 1).

In regards to the dimension of masculinity, Costa Rica would be considered a nation with “Low Masculinity” ranking which indicates that the country has little to no tolerance for or distinction between the genders and that both male and female are treated equally in all aspects of society (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 57). In 1870, General Tomas Guardia seized control of Costa Rica and facilitated the education, military and tax reform that continue to shape policy today (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). The second major civil war in Costa Rica took place in 1948 when Dr. Rafael Angel Calderon and the United Social Christian Party refused to turn over their power. In just a period of thirty days, Jose Maria (Don Pepe) Figueres Ferrer defeated Calderon and became one of Costa Rica’s most influential leaders (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). Figueres

Ferrer led the Founding Junta Second Republic of Costa Rica and was instrumental in policy and civil rights reforms (Lehoucq, 2006, pg. 1). It was under the leadership of Figueres Ferrer that Costa Rica permitted women and blacks to vote; banned the Communist party; nationalized banks and established presidential term limits (Lehoucq, 2006, pg. 1). The presidential era of Figueres Ferrer was one that cemented the political legacy of Costa Rica's liberal democratic values (Lehoucq, 2006, pg. 1).

The final of the original Cultural Dimensions is that of uncertainty avoidance which is central to the understanding and acceptance of loosely defined parameters and situations. The findings on Costa Rica's uncertainty avoidance still remain somewhat unclear. Traditionally, a nation that would be considered to have a "High Uncertainty Avoidance" are those that operate under rigorous rules, laws, ordinances and controls in order to achieve desired outcomes (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 57). For Costa Rica, there have been strategies related to the abolishment of the armed forces; investment in public health and education; as well as sustainability and renewable energy source development that have required strategic planning and implementation. However, it could also be argued that Costa Rica would have a "Low Uncertainty Avoidance" because of its low concern for ambiguity and the readiness to accept change and risk involved with the very same strategic developments.

An additional dimension added after the original four was that of "Long-Term Orientation". This dimension is focused on the degree to which society can accept long-term commitment to traditional values (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 57). This is again a dimension that may

be found in various regions or sub-populations of Costa Rica. In spite of initial unpopularity due to the few valuables or easily exploited resources, settlers began establishing a presence in Costa Rica in 1522 (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). For those that settled here, agriculture seemed to be the best means of survival and establishing rapport with other traders. The indigenous tribes that had previously called Costa Rica home – Caribs, Borucas, Chibchas and Diquis – did not last long after Spanish colonialism. Those that did not flee contracted smallpox and could not survive the weakened immune system with no vaccination or treatment. Spanish settlers adopted a growing practice and chose to bring African slaves over as a labor force in order to help establish civilization and tend to the farms (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1).

Although Costa Rica is not a country that was founded upon promises of wealth - like the silver and gold excavated in Mexico and Peru – it quickly earned and sustained its naming as a “rich coast” by Spaniard Gil Gonzalez (Geographia, 2006, pg. 1). Costa Rica was discovered on September 18, 1502 by Gonzalez and others during Christopher Columbus’ fourth and final voyage to the New World (About costa rica, 2014, pg. 1). Once home to the native tribes of Caribs, Borucas, Chibchas and Diquis, Costa Rica has evolved over time in order to become a global leader in race relations, peace, democracy, sustainability and ecotourism as it stands today (Keller, 2013, pg. 81). The history and leadership of the government as well as the engagement of stakeholders has created a high quality of life for the local community and a unique experience for international tourists (Costa rica USA chamber of commerce, 2014, pg. 1).

Implications for United States' Businesses Wishing to Conduct Business in Costa Rica

Economic Impact of Eco-Tourism

Although cash crops and high-tech companies continue to provide stability for Costa Rica, the top contributor to the economy is now eco-tourism. As the “birthplace” of eco-tourism and a nation with a reputation for peace, democracy and individualism, Costa Rica has become a highly sought after destination for tourists and businesses native to the United States (Koens, 2009, pg. 1226). Eco-tourism accounts for 88% of all purposes of travel to Costa Rica (Koens, 2009, pg. 1227). The United States was the top country of origin in 2012 with 864,340 visitors and \$2.4 billion generated in revenues (UNWTO, 2012, pg. 10). While visiting, tourists have many sites and experiences to collect prior to departure. Costa Rica has a unique tropical and sub-tropical climate that is home to twelve different life zones; twenty national parks; twenty-six protected areas; nine forest reserves; eight bio reserves; and seven wildlife sanctuaries (About costa rica, 2014, pg. 1).

As both a leader in global sustainability a nation plagued by areas of intense poverty, Costa Rica offers much insight into how a country can use its resources to improve the quality of life of its citizens through strategic development (Keller, 2013, pg. 89). Largely due to the influx of visitation caused by eco-tourists, there have been major policy changes implemented by the Costa Rican government in order to improve the authentic experience of the culture while increasing spend of visitors. Although major crops that were previously native to Costa Rica such as coffee, bananas and pineapples are still a part of the economy, the \$2.4 billion generated

by visitors sustains local jobs and drive appeal for global companies wanting a more “green” experience (UNWTO, 2012, pg. 10). While striving to become the first carbon-neutral nation by 2021, Costa Rica has become home to one of few “blue zones”, which are geographical regions in which the life expectancy of it peoples tends to elongate into the 90s to 100 range (UNDP, 2012, pg. 1). This growing is evidenced by Costa Rica’s top ranking on the Human Development Index which provides great implication for the future of transnational business.

Sustainable Energy & Carbon Footprint

In 2007, the Costa Rican government unveiled its plans to become the world's first carbon-neutral nation by 2021, which is further evidenced by its accolade as first in the Americas in terms of ranking on the Environmental Performance Index in 2012 (Yale, 2012, pg. 1). Costa Rica was named as the greenest country in the world by the New Economics Foundation (Seager, 2009, pg. 1) in 2009. The year 2009 was the year that Costa Rica was ranked first on the list of an international ranking of countries in the New Economics Foundation's Happy Planet Index; this feat was accomplished again in 2012. Businesses related to technology or energy have a great opportunity to experience a direct impact and great return on investment from the Costa Rican government and export tax (Mirachandani, 2005, pg. 336). Service-related businesses able to integrate with the thriving tourism industry may find a plethora of opportunity to be successful and expand the vision for economic development in the nation.

SWOT Analysis

The SWOT Analysis is a comprehensive business tool that critically analyzes the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats of market entry (Dyson, 2004, pg. 632).

Although in its most traditional form the SWOT Analysis is used to evaluate product or service based businesses (Dyson, 2004, pg. 631), for the purposes of this research it has been used to capture understanding on international business in Costa Rica. The strengths that the Costa Rican business culture provides includes: high literacy rate (96%); high access to phone (92%); political stability; low inflation (8.3%); and an egalitarian tradition (About costa rica, 2014, pg. 1). The weaknesses include a relatively low population; limited accommodation options authentic to the Costa Rican culture; and diversity in ethnicity and religion. The opportunities to consider in the Costa Rican business climate are continued investment in sustainability, public education and healthcare; tax incentives for businesses investing in the country; and high growth for companies of rare industry or high demand (Arias, 2012, pg. 1). Potential threats for the Costa Rican business climate for the high exports – multiple competitors (Costa rica USA chamber of commerce, 2014, pg. 1).

Government Incentives & FDI Analysis

Foreign Direct Investment (FDI) is an activity that organizations may choose to participate in by purchasing land or other resources internationally as they become more immersed in the global community (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 119). FDI then involves the process of purchasing real estate and/or existing properties in order to establish assets in other countries and reap additional benefits from the government. Most nations adhere to a threshold policy which

outlines the standard percentage of ownership in the range of 10 to 25 percent (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 119). Ultimately, it is the long-term purpose of an FDI to help companies reach strategic goals related to establishing new markets; maintaining global competitiveness; filling out global product lines; and reducing productions and labor costs (Satterlee, 2009, pg. 120).

Most recently, Costa Rica has begun offering tax exemptions to businesses that invest in the country. Global corporations such as Intel, GlaxoSmithKline and Proctor & Gamble have since located operations in the country and contributed significantly to the surge in Costa Rican exports and GDP. Although some areas of the seven provinces – Alajuela; Cartago; Guanacaste; Heredia; Limon; Puntarenas; and San Jose – are considered to be poverty stricken, the high levels of education, access to public health and creation of jobs by foreign companies has helped to reduce poverty from 40% to less than 20% over the past twenty years (Costa Rica USA chamber of commerce, 2014, pg. 1). Foreign investors seem to be most attracted by the political stability and the high education levels of the residents, which has helped fuel Costa Rica's leadership in sustainable development and as a top exporter of high-tech products (Lehoucq, 2006, pg. 1).

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