

# An analysis on cirque du soleil from a management perspective

[Business](#), [Management](#)



From a reading of “Cirque du Soleil” written by Professor Thomas J. DeLong and Research Associate Vineeta Vijayaraghavan, the Cirque was characterized as an organization beyond the normal context of what it should be. There are different factors related to organizations that the author wishes to address in this paper in relation to Cirque du Soleil. These include behaviors of the employees in the workplace, cultural diversity of the workforce, compensation, organizational culture, psychological contract, and organizational commitment. Each topic will be explained as one goes through the paper.

### **The Circus Backdrop: An Organizational Overview**

The Cirque du Soleil was founded on June 1984 by street performers from “Le Club des Talons Hauts” which means “The High-Heels Club” in English (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). The Cirque du Soleil is an organization whose main goal is to enhance the creative skills of their artists, bring entertainment and make a change in the lives of its audience, and make a profitable business out of every performance.

When it started in 1984, the Cirque initially had seventy-three (73) people working for the organization (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). Constantly, new artists and performers for the shows are recruited from different countries all over the world. Local artists with great potential and capabilities are being recruited to join their tours. As the company grew, its number also grew to around two thousand one hundred (2,100) employees and five hundred (500) artists in 2001.

From 1984 to 1998, it was equally owned by Guy Laliberté and Daniel Gautier. During those years, Laliberté had jurisdiction over the creative production and Gautier handled the business side of the organization with regard to partnerships and financing (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). After 1998, Laliberté bought the share of Gautier and was the sole owner of the Cirque from then on. He refused the urge of “going corporate” and maintained that he will “never go public” (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). This stems from his fear that he would be accountable and responsible towards investors and would be restrained from managing his employees as he please (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002).

Since it has been around for quite some time, a very large number of audience estimated to be almost reaching thirty (30) million were already able to witness its shows from 1984 (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). From 1984 to 2005, there were already fourteen (14) shows crafted by the organization to entertain the world. The Cirque had set foot on places like Quebec, Toronto, and Vancouver for their “Le Cirque du Soleil”; Canada for the “La Magie Continue”; North America, London, and Paris for the “We Reinvent the Circus”; Switzerland for the “Tour with Cirque Kine”; North America and Las Vegas (The Mirage Hotel) for the “Nouvelle Expérience”; Japan for the “Fascination”; North America, Japan, Europe, Ottawa, and Asia-Pacific for the “Saltimbanco”; Las Vegas (Treasure Island Hotel) for the “Mystère”; North America, Hong Kong, Japan, Europe, Biloxi (Beau Rivage Resort), and Asia-Pacific for the “Alegria”; North America and Europe for the “Quidam”; Las Vegas (Bellagio Theater) for the “O”; Orlando (Walt Disney World) for the “La Nouba”; North America for the “Dralion”; and North

America for the “ Verakal” (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). Read also under what circumstances should a company's management team give serious consideration

All of these factors enumerated above have their certain roles to play in this show of Cirque. They contribute to both the success and the downs of the organization as their environment has changes over the years.

The People working in the Cirque: Factors affecting their Behavior

### **Compensation**

Inevitably, the people working in the Cirque are there for a certain purpose only the people in there can tell. Performing artists had different reasons for joining the Cirque. Mostly, it was not for the compensation for their starting pay was too low. From the words of a conductor named Oberacker in Cirque:

“ I almost jumped from a 10-story building when they told me my starting salary two and a half years ago, it was so low. But they told me, build the blocks, put in your time, the rewards will be there. We do 10 shows a week, which is two more than any Broadway house, and it's sometimes a strain. We are paid per show, not per week, so we are unemployed for a fourth of the year” (quoted in DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002).

In this statement, it can be considered that another purpose is driving people to join the organization aside from the compensation. Indeed, their starting salary is too low but the promise of career development and fulfillment is made clear to the people as they are welcomed aboard. The chance to have career growth is important for performing artists especially since the people at the Cirque have already considered their work as a part of their life, if not

life itself. This compensates for the low salary given to the workers. However, the chance of going up the ranks is also a promise of getting better salaries, but is not the main goal of artists in the organization. Read also SWOT Analysis Cirque Du Soleil

Compensation, in the case of the Cirque, is not mainly on the money each one receives. This holds true for both the performing artists and the support staff. Compensation for them consists of the previously mentioned financial rewards, responsibility and leeway in the conduct of work, career growth and personal development, self-fulfillment. This way, management of people with compensations for work such as these mentioned above would be based on the Theory Y of Douglas McGregor where they do not need constant monitoring and one does not need to breathe down on the necks of every employee every minute to keep them working (Microsoft Encarta, 2006).

### **Organizational Culture: One with the Stage**

According to Deal and Kennedy, as quoted in Muchinsky, organizational culture is “the way we do things around here” (2003). More specifically, organizational culture is the “languages, values, attitudes, beliefs, and customs of an organization” and these mixed together gives the organization its “distinct flavor” (Muchinsky, 2003). Indeed, from the readings of Cirque du Soleil, the organization poses a great sense of “distinct flavor” as compared to a very formal organization with a corporate taste such as Microsoft Company, Sony Corporation, or even the government. Both its nature and its culture drive to shape the organization into what it is today. Moreover, the culture in the organization is somewhat contagious such that

people share this with new employees who join the organization and they bring this along. This shared culture becomes more intense especially in their tours where they could not separate their work from their private life. All of them share this passion for entertainment as if they breathe and live its very sense.

There are three important things proposed by Furnham and Gunter as features of organizational culture (Muchinsky, 2003). First, the culture that an organization holds can be traced to its founders (Muchinsky, 2003). It could be remembered that the Cirque was founded on 1984 by a group of street performs who belong to The High-Heels Club. The passion, the attitude, beliefs, language of art, and the customs and standards of these people can be the fountain for the culture that is being acquired today by the present employees. Indeed, culture can be learned from one generation of employees to the next (Bodley, 2005). Second, culture can be developed out of the interactions of the organization towards its external environment (Muchinsky, 2003). With every applause, every appreciation, every overwhelming tear falling from an audience's face, and every feedback they receive from the people they perform for keeps their culture of excellence and places the quality of magic back into every show they put on stage. From Douglas B. Lee in his article entitled " Montreal: Spirited Heart of French Canada", he says something like this:

If I were growing up in Montreal, I would want to run away with the Cirque du Soleil, the Circus of the Sun. Montrealers knew what they liked when some canny circus and street performers reinvented the wheel, or more correctly

the ring, with Cirque du Soleil. Eschewing animal acts and two of a grand circus's rings. Cirque du Soleil relies on intimacy with the audience, on character and fantasy, and above all on the artistry and acrobatics of the human body. The success of this concoction has become pride of the city. This year it dispatched the circus on an eight-city North American tour" (1991).

The audience, who are included in their environment, serves as a pushing factor for the maintenance of culture that the people at Cirque adopt. Moreover, the perceptions and standards set by their external environment on them help develop the culture they have.

Third, culture develops from the need to maintain a harmonious and good working relationship between the employees of the organization (Muchinsky, 2003). This is easier for performers of the Cirque since most of them gets along during the shows. They share a common passion for the art and they have to get along with each other and this means adopting and respecting each other's values and beliefs. There are certain lines where things are accepted and where things are not. This guides how people would act for them to maintain a harmonious relationship among their co-workers.

As needed, organizational culture can be changes to adapt to the ever-changing environment upon which it operates and live by (Muchinsky, 2003). Certain aspects of its culture may be modified or dropped altogether as a result of the three factors mentioned above.

**Cultural Diversity: Unity amidst Differences**

According to DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, there are over forty (40) nationalities belonging to people in the organization. Considering that the Cirque is really a very mobile organization, having to tour to different continents of the world to perform and recruit local artists, there is really a big chance that their workforce will become culturally diverse. This poses a difficulty at times especially in long tours involving artists of different cultures. Alison Crawford, the artistic director for Dralion, there was a bit difficulty because the core acrobat team came from China (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). The members of the Chinese acrobat team did not speak English and there are also big cultural differences (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). Since they are on tour, the cast of performers have to learn how to adjust and live with one another, something that Crawford has to manage with and admittedly has taken some time for them to adjust (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002). Cultural diversity affects the behavior of the people in the team. To an advantageous extent, it helps keep them bonded together because of the adaption period each one has to go through. It also teaches them the way to become tolerant of other cultures and learn to respect and accept them in a good way. The management of the Cirque also creates an enabling atmosphere that will make them more accepting of other cultures. The measures include language trainings onsite in six languages to enable them to understand employees from the different parts of the world (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002).



**Organizational Behavior: The Performance**

The employees of the Cirque, which includes artists and support staff, are quite independent on their jobs. This does not mean that they entirely do not need any intervention but it is because they already know what they are to do every time. When Marc Gagnon, chief operating officer of Cirque, worked on a project with Disney, he does not have any handbook to send back to Disney regarding their employee conduct. In his own words:

“ What handbook? If we told our employees what to say or how to say it or whether they can get tattoos, we would be finished” (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002).

Gagnon can not simply place a code of behavior for their employees to follow because their employees mostly desire the will to have their own unique way of doing things. They are given the nurture and independence to perform their masterpiece but are still under the supervision of their corresponding directors and managers. As Crafword said, “ Most of our artists have too much adrenalin. I have to be strong enough to defend the decisions I make because the artists will often question me. I have to be a mother, policeman, and friend. It requires being open-minded, patient, handling stress well, and loving people” (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002).

In the book of Muchinsky, there is the concept of organizational citizenship behavior (2003). Organizational citizenship behavior refers to the act of people who “ give extra discretionary contributions that are neither required nor expected” (Muchinsky, 2003). This term are sometimes referred to as prosocial organizational behavior and extra-role behavior. Apparently, most

of the people at the Cirque possess this because of the very nature of their work. They could work for twelve (12) hours of rehearsal without remuneration, something not allowed at the Broadway theater, just because of their ambition and fervor for their craft. To demonstrate the organizational citizenship behavior further, Gaeten, an employee working for the props of the show, would have to go beyond the normal and would have to make sure that every detail of the props are at its best. They are willing to take the extra mile to make everything beyond what is expected of them. Moreover, artists does not have to be pushed in order to go on with their jobs. This is their craft and from the personality of an artist, they do not have to be taught how to shed a tear or how to say the line to put more conviction in it. They just shed a pearl of tear and they blurt out the lines from their hearts.

There are (five) 5 dimensions to organizational citizenship behavior as given by Organ, Van Dyne, Graham, and Dienesch in Muchinsky. These dimensions include altruism, conscientiousness, courtesy, sportsmanship, and civic virtue (Muchinsky, 2003).

### **Organizational Commitment: My Work is My Life**

The employees of the Cirque, especially those on tour, could not easily separate their life from their work. To a certain extent, it becomes disadvantageous for the organization when people at the Cirque can not separate their life from their jobs because it leads to the blurring of the lines between these two. An example of which was when the staff had a party using the pools for the aquatic show O. Gagnon was disappointed with this but can not do so much because their set has become their home.

However, the commitment placed by the employees towards the organization is mostly on the positive side. Organizational commitment is “the extent to which an employee feels a sense of allegiance to his or her employer” (Muchinsky, 2003). With the Cirque employees, they have this sense of allegiance for the stage they perform and for the life they build there. There are three components of organizational commitment according to Allen and Meyer as quoted in Muchinsky (2003). These three components are the affective component, the continuance component, and the normative component (Muchinsky, 2003). The affective component refers to the employee’s emotional attachment to and identification with the organization (Muchinsky, 2003). The continuance component “refers to the commitment based on the costs that the employee associates with leaving the organization” (Muchinsky, 2003). The last component, the normative component, is the feeling that an employee has to stay with the organization (Muchinsky, 2003). All of these components are at play when it comes to the employees of the organization. Some have already formed their emotional connections with the Cirque like Crawford who is very willing to go back to the Cirque with one call.

### **Psychological Contract**

Psychological contract is described by Rousseau as “the exchange relationship between the individual employee and the organization” (Muchinsky, 2003). Further, it is said that the psychological contract is not necessarily a formal written contract between the employer and the employee but it is rather an “implied relationship based on mutual contributions” (Muchinsky, 2003). Even without any formal agreement, as

could be concluded upon the absence of a handbook of employee conduct or code of behavior, employees at Cirque are concerned with their obligations towards the organization they belong to. Also, the Cirque has to understand their obligations to every employee in their p. They have concern for their employee's career and personal growth. Starting from their recruitment process, they have to take into consideration that there are certain non-artistic needs of the artists (DeLong and Vijayaraghavan, 2002).

### **Recommendations**

Inevitably, the behavior of the employees at Cirque stems from a set of interrelated factors. The problems faced by the organization today with regard to their shows and production can be properly addressed through a collaborative effort of the management and the artists. The artists can suggest for ideas of innovation which can be acceptable to all. Cooperation in decision-making should be solicited from the artists so that they would feel involved in other aspects of the organization aside from the shows. Moreover, there is a need for the organization to accept a little change with regards to their employee policy. There should be a department that would handle the human development affairs of the organization. This could be composed of a number of artists themselves. Moreover, goals and plans should be formally set through meetings of the management and the artists.

### **Conclusion**

The Cirque du Soleil is an organization which has a very different nature when compared to the other organizations. It has its own unique characteristics when it comes to behaviors of the employees in the

workplace, cultural diversity of the workforce, compensation, organizational culture, psychological contract, and organizational commitment. With this, there are also unique problems and needs that should be addressed by the management such as problems with cultural diversity. In particular, there are language and beliefs differences within the employees because of the touring and global nature of the Cirque.

Moreover, OCB or organizational citizenship behavior is exhibited by most of the employees in the organization. In relation to this, there is the deep commitment exhibited by the employees for the organization. Also, it can be said that they share a distinct culture and there is a psychological contract that exists between the Cirque and the employees.

There are indeed problems challenges faced by the organization which can be resolved with full cooperation from the people composing it. Just like a show, each one has their own role to play. Just like every event, there might be a need to change concepts or ideas. Change is a part of everyday living and the Cirque should not be afraid of such. Instead, they have to face it and adapt when it is needed after careful analysis.

The Cirque has become their way of life and the stage is their home. To every act of the employee is a piece of brick that forms the puzzle of their life. Sometimes it may be hard but being in this type of organization has become the life they breathe.

## References

Bodley, John H. " Culture." Microsoft® Encarta® 2006 [CD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2005.

DeLong, T. and Vijayaraghavan, V. 2002. Cirque du Soleil. HarvardBusiness School.

" Douglas McGregor." Microsoft® Encarta® 2006 [CD]. Redmond, WA: Microsoft Corporation, 2005

Lee, Douglas B. " Montreal: Spirited Heart of French Canada." National Geographic, March 1991.

Muchinsky, P. M. (2003). PsychologyApplied to Work (7th ed.). CA: Wadsworth.