

My Friend is a Palestinian Bedouin: XV. Work Attitudes

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There is a large difference between Bedouin culture on one side, and North America and Western Europe on the other side, when it comes to work attitudes. I will share my thoughts on three aspects: the issue of combining intercultural friendship with business, differences in attitudes toward work and leisure, and the topic of child labor.

Stories of Friendship: At the Garage

Anata, a Palestinian village just outside Jerusalem, January 2011. While Bashar and I were in the garage office, Fawaz, one of the mechanics, came in with his small boy (about 2 yrs). He was angry. He wanted his salary. Bashar explained to Fawaz that he already received more money than he earned. Bashar showed him from the notes he wrote in his diary how much he brought in (quite little). The discussion took at least a quarter of an hour. Bashar then got angry at Fawaz and raised his voice.

Not having understood much from the discussion, I asked Bashar what had happened. He then informed me that two days before police came to the garage with the intention to arrest Fawaz and Bashar paid NIS 4000 (about \$1000) to get him free. The conversation continued as follows:

Daniel: [frowning] Did you take the money from the garage?

Bashar: Did you think from my family? You really are a European! You would not have paid?!?

Daniel: You could have told me about this; I am your partner in the garage.

Bashar: Do you not see how busy I am? If I tell you about everything that happens, it will take me an hour every day.

Daniel: So tell me in five minutes.

Bashar: [angry] Perhaps go home!

Daniel: [insulted and upset] I intended to, but before, you told me to stay.

Bashar: [changing to a soothing tone of voice] Do not take everything so exactly. Stay!

Things calmed down between us and ten minutes later I saw Bashar and Fawaz talk in a friendly way, as if nothing had happened.

Mixing Friendship with Business

In Bedouin community, much business is done with friends. Thus, Bashar and I started Jahalin Tours, a small project to make people aware of Bedouin life (Weishut, n.d. a). Although our perspectives and work attitudes were dissimilar, we managed to organize a series of tours. I did the organizing; he provided the content. Later, I became involved in Bashar's garage, financially, organizationally, and emotionally. When starting the garage, I had known him for many years, and was well aware of many of the dissimilarities in how we deal with life. I also had a background in Business Administration. I invested many weeks in planning, preparing excel sheets and trying to teach one of the workers how to fill them.

I was acquainted with a Euro-American way of doing business, emphasizing efficiency and planning. I also was accustomed to the notion that time is money. Furthermore, in Dutch culture decisions are typically made by consensus, which is based on values like individual autonomy

and cooperation (De Bony, 2005). I had expected a similar way of decision-making from Bashar, but he preferred to manage things otherwise. He once clarified that “relationships are more important than money” and that “the program of the garage is to take care of relationships”. For him, the workers are like family and the clients like friends. The garage thus functioned as a family business, with Bashar as the authoritative head of the family taking care of the workers’ needs. He could spend hours in conversations with workers, suppliers or clients; something he perceived as part of his job. People would come in and come to consult on all kinds of issues, not merely related to their car. He was very committed to his work and would invest enormous efforts to fix cars, even if it would cost more than he would earn. The question of who owes what was often more related to the type of relationship than to the exact costs or to what was agreed. His way of dealing with things took much more time than I considered appropriate. On hindsight, I realize that it should have been obvious that running a business with an emphasis on people takes more time than running it with an emphasis on money.

Within several months it became evident that the differences between us were too large to bridge and that we would not be able to manage the business effectively together. Although I could appreciate his investment in people, I found it hard to accept working without a budget, written plans, set opening times, and safety measures, to name a few. The garage was in constant flux and it was too much uncertainty for me. Bashar would make major decisions, like hiring and firing people or major expenses, without consulting with me or even informing me (or anyone else). I experienced these surprises as disturbing. Since then I stopped my active involvement, but continue to visit regularly. I did not withdraw my financial investment, but only my expectation to make money out of it. One more thing that remained some time from the period in

which I was actively involved was the registration of the cars and the income; on a paper notebook, despite the fact that they have a fully equipped computer.

Work and Leisure

Cultures have different perspectives vis-à-vis the work/leisure division (Manrai & Manrai, 1995). In the West, for most men waking hours are divided in a rather rigid way between work - or studies - and leisure time. (One may consider time for volunteering – which I do quite often - as a separate category, or include it in either category.) In the Netherlands, most people work according to fixed working hours and finish their job at a fixed time. The notion is that at work one works, and during leisure time one does not work. At least in my upbringing this division was strict. For instance, I recall my father's reaction when I called him once from my office in order to get from him some information. He said: "Are you not at work?", implying that it is inappropriate to call him when I am supposed to work. Israelis tend to be more flexible in this respect. Many Israelis will make private phone calls or errands during working hours. In the Arab world there is no clear differentiation between work and leisure time (Samovar et al., 2009).

As compared to work attitudes common in the dominant North-Western European and American cultures, with the Bedouins the pace of work seems slower and is interrupted with frequent breaks for a variety of reasons. Bashar explained: "Work should not be too stressful". As a Bedouin one may take a break, sit with a visitor, do private errands or sleep, at any hour of the day, also during work. This flexibility of work and leisure time had direct impact on a friendship. I would enjoy the flexibility of coming to visit him at work – like many other friends of his. By

contrast, he had difficulties with the notion that my working hours – which are mostly seeing clients – are inflexible and that I cannot leave my work in the middle, as he sometimes would do. Infrequently, I would wake him in the middle of the morning, and he would wake me late at night, because we did not expect the other to be asleep.

I found working days among the Palestinians to be much longer than common in the West. The garage functions seven days a week and Bashar remains most of his spare time - including nights and weekends - at the garage with the workers. He will leave a social event or get out of bed in the middle of the night in order to accommodate to people's work-related expectations.

Differently said, any social activity can be interrupted for work related issues. Therefore, on many occasions my encounters with Bashar – private visits, outside barbecue, or otherwise – ended abruptly, long before what I had expected, because work had to be done. He is never completely free. Bashar considers himself in this respect as extreme more than other Bedouins are; he believes that other Bedouins would take more time off than he does. Still, my impression was that in general the Bedouins stay more hours at their work than would be common in either Israel or the Netherlands.

Child Labor

Child labor was not directly a problem for the friendship, but it did conflict with my Western value system according to which children are not supposed to work. In the dominant culture of the Netherlands, there is an unambiguous division between what children are supposed to do and what is done by adults. Children are excluded from many social and work-related activities. To put it – perhaps overly – simply: they learn at school and afterwards are free to play. Children

may be asked to set the table, throw out the garbage, or - when they are older - look after younger children when parents are an evening out, but generally, requests from children to contribute to family life are limited. In Israel, the distinction between the lives of children and adults seems to be comparable to the Netherlands in most situations, but less strict when it comes to social events. It seems that in Israel children can participate in many social activities – like social visits or dinner parties - from which they would be excluded in the Netherlands.

By contrast, with children in Western Europe and North America, Bedouin children are socialized in playing a part in family and community life as much as they are able. Bedouin children are present in adult activities. Bashar would occasionally take along on errands and to his work one of his children, mostly Nimmer (the oldest), from the age of two. At the garage too the mechanics would now and then bring their small boys. The children observe and later imitate the adults. Bashar said: “This creates a feeling of togetherness of the family. They are not requested to behave like that. They do it voluntarily, because they enjoy it. Furthermore, we want our boys to become men, and this is how they learn it. It gives honor to the family to see your son behave like a man”. Small girls and boys are expected to help in the house. They may look after their younger siblings, take part in the daily care taking of the house, and serve the men. At a later age, girls will remain at home to assist their mothers, while boys will go out to work at a young age. A few examples: Bashar took care of the goats from age five. His son, Nimmer, does not work, but he would bring on request things from another room at age two, and started to show signs of looking after his baby brother at age three, the same age at which Bashar began taking him along to his place of work. I was there one night when Bashar’s wife, Um Nimmer, got upset with Nimmer, since she had sent him to the shop – in the center of the village – to buy

a light bulb and he had come back without. Nimmer then was a little over four years old. His cousin, Amir, works from age eight at his father's gas station, the one I mentioned before, filling gas and taking care of payments. At age ten, Amir learned to drive a car.

It seems that Bedouin children have many more responsibilities than would be common in the West and are gradually socialized into the workforce. In contrast, I could not imagine my Dutch nephews – who are at a similar age – or other Dutch or Israeli children taking so much responsibility. I had associated child labor with child abuse and children working for long hours in terrible conditions. This may be true in some societies, but I never encountered Bedouin children forced into work. My observations indicated that most Bedouins are fond and rather protective of their children. At the same time, child labor – after school hours - is common and accepted, and as far as I could see, the children seem happy to participate in the lives of the grownups.

My Experience of “Work Attitudes”

The challenge here was mainly cognitive. The idea that relations between people are more important than money was hard to grasp. Furthermore, at first I found it difficult to accommodate to the flexibility of work and leisure time, but after a while I habituated. I could see the advantages of this style of living. Though it was annoying to see how all my work in the garage was lost, this was a learning experience. The most striking thing for me was that many issues that I had considered as self-evident and not worthy discussing – like a consultative way of decision-making, payment to workers as a function of their work and not as a function of what

they need, registration of income and expenses - were considered by Bashar as either problematic or unacceptable.

I experienced issues like child labor initially as strange and confusing. The human rights organization in which I am active for many years, Amnesty International, subscribes to the International Labour Organization Conventions of Child Labour (United Nations, 1973) and the Rights of the Child (United Nations, 1989), which put strict limits on the economic exploitation of children. My encounter with seemingly happy Bedouin children at work did not coincide with what I had believed. Child labor is an example of how the intercultural encounter, “threatened” my value system, and made me feel less secure about what is “right” and what is “wrong”. It also made me more aware that even (my) basic assumptions about society are no truths, but can be challenged.