

## **Biculturalism and Personnel Administration** **La gestion du personnel et le biculturalisme**

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Article abstract

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# Biculturalism and Personnel Administration

Fernand G. Malo

*The author explains the historical reasons for the distribution of Canadians in industry along cultural-linguistic lines, describes the present evolution toward a better equilibrium, the problems thus posed and the prerequisites — both individual and institutional — for their proper solution on the basis of increased efficiency through respect for cultural differences and rational use of people of both languages.*

## Introduction

Only a few years ago we were at the stage when French Canada filed its grievances about its status in the country. First it was met with astonishment and with a benevolent sympathy. It was felt to be just another wage of nationalism that would disappear through catharsism. Reinforced by the world-wide movement toward self-determination that has produced so many new independent countries, the movement was more serious this time.

Then French Canada, mostly through its extremists, kept the pressure on and threatened to walk out. The reaction was a general stiffening of English Canada. Today, the dialogue is going strong and tangible measures are volunteered from both sides to arrive at a « modus vivendi ». The general evolution of the conflict, however, is not clear-cut and the pendulum sometimes swings back to extreme positions but, nevertheless, it is moving in the right direction.

This evolution is quite similar to a labour-management situation. A conflict of interests sometimes will be solved only after going through a stage of hardening when both sides finally decide to get down to specific solutions. It is similar to a labour conflict also because it is composed of emotional and economic considerations. In both cases, the answer will be one of compromise because the two sides are inter-dependent.

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## The Overall Problem

Some of the more important grievances of French Canada have economic implications. Industry has been accused of ignoring the French « fact ». It has been pointed out that very few French-speaking Canadians have senior positions in companies and that business is conducted only in English, even here in Quebec. We have to admit that this was, and still is to some extent, quite true but, as in every situation of conflict, the blame does not rest with one party alone. Indeed, a case could be made for both sides.

Historically, French-speaking Canadians have done their very best to stay away from business and, naturally, the English-speaking group moved in and made industry their stronghold. The now famous expression « Two Solitudes » depicts a status quo accepted tacitly by both groups. The French-speaking elite stuck to liberal professions and ignored business disciplines entirely. Only the uneducated French-speaking Canadians entered industry through ranks and files. If it had not been for business, it is likely that formal introductions would still be in order.

When business brought people out of their solitudes it gave rise to a problem. Because of traditional investment actions and occupational interests, both groups met on different levels. Most significant commercial activities were controlled and managed by English-speaking Canadians in the Province of Quebec. As it is natural in such a case, the English language became the language of business. When French-speaking Canadians went to business through the factory door, we had all the elements of a potential explosive situation, the class gap compounding the racial difference. This abnormal relationship accompanied by two brands of rigid nationalisms gave birth to myths and clichés about each other that are still very much alive.

They are the expression of deep beliefs about French-speaking Canadians being unsuited or untrained for managerial positions and, on the other hand, that English-speaking Canadians who are in command are discriminating and imposing their language, culture and customs even in a Province overwhelmingly French.

Today, with the resurgence of French Canadian identity and the forceful impetus given to education and to its economic role, conditions tolerated before are no longer acceptable. The desire for self-determination and full involvement in social, political and economic fields is not an isolated phenomenon. It is a reflection of a worldwide movement. Assuming that Canada is worth preserving as a country and that its fragmentation is an economic nonsense, each one of us has the duty to reconcile conflicting interests and keep our country together. The racial strife we have at the moment is a luxury we cannot afford,

but the fact that it exists gives it a subjective importance that we cannot minimize.

### **The Role of Business**

Because businessmen are usually sound in their judgement and because industry must have unity of purpose to compete effectively on world markets, it can serve most effectively as a catalyst. Business has forced ethnic groups out of their ghetto into common ventures, and this forcible action could help make this country or widen the gap, according to management sensitivity or indifference to the problem. To try and pin down responsibilities at this stage is completely sterile as they would end up evenly distributed between the groups. We can reproach the English-speaking people of Quebec an abnormal lack of tact and sensitivity but we also have to throw a few stones on the French-speaking people who have done an outstanding job of avoiding exposure to business life.

Both groups have to leave their traditional entrenchments and arrive at a settlement which will respect, as much as possible, the intellectual and historical values of each other.

Industry, through its commercial and personnel policies, could go a long way, not only to ease up the tension, but also to promote a new concept of canadianism, recognizing diversity in order to better achieve unity. A sincere recognition of this diversity should be reflected in a more sensible approach to personnel management.

A national company, or a company located in Quebec, which refuses to accept the French language and culture is showing a very poor tactical judgement and, consequently, doing a great deal of harm to the nation. As stated before, the situation is not at all gloomy because we can see tangible progress being made on both sides. Large and important companies are taking steps to redress legitimate grievances. On the other side, more and more French-speaking students are turning to business disciplines and it is an encouraging sign. French-speaking universities are reporting a drastic shift toward sciences. For example, Montreal and Laval Universities are turning out over two hundred engineers each per year and the trend is going upward. Given time, and time is needed because deeprooted attitudes do not change overnight, the problem of living together will solve itself.

### **Bilingualism in Industry**

Bilingualism has been, and still is in many instances, a one-way requirement even here in Quebec. It has not been the result of sinister machinations or of an assimilation campaign. It happened because those in command and who were English-speaking just did not see the

necessity of giving French a place in business and most, presumably, were acting in good faith.

If we look at it from a pragmatic point of view, it made sense, especially in the business field which is so dependent on the rest of Canada and on the United States for markets and technology. Take the case of any company of some minor importance. Let us say it is exclusively French-speaking. It will not be very long before its management will have to use English to quite an extent. For someone who had no special feeling toward the French language, it did appear practical to evolve in this direction. However, there are two sides to every coin, and for a French-speaking Canadian wishing to progress in a company, it has been a painful experience. Think of the frustration and humiliation of somebody who takes pride in his intellectual ability and who realizes that he sounds like a stuttering child who still cannot express abstract concepts. I am sure that those who have gone through the process of acquiring the other language have felt deeply this sensation. This explains why someone learns a language only when his motivation becomes really strong.

This has been one of the reasons why French-speaking Canadians who could afford an education preferred the independence of liberal professions.

Today, with the rapid changes in our Quebec society, French-speaking Canadians want a say in industry, and industry needs them. We can see significant changes happening. Industry, at least many important companies, are making a serious effort to adapt themselves to a more considerate approach to bilingualism. Communications are more and more bilingual and English-speaking Canadians are for the first time making a real effort to master the French language. Many companies, and Domtar is one of them, are trying to remedy the shortcomings of our educational systems by instituting language training programmes. My personal assessment is that it is a worthwhile exercise, not only because it teaches the French language, but also because it gives an English-speaking employee a good idea of the pains the French-speaking employee goes through.

The educated French Canadians have responded by turning more and more to business. More and more, companies are now recruiting, communicating, negotiating and training in the language of the employees or prospective employees. It remains, however, that it would be foolish to go from one unilingualism to another. A French-speaking Canadian, to succeed, should learn English and do it well. He should aim at speaking correct and articulate English. With the new sensitivity of their English-speaking colleagues who are going through the reverse process, it should be much easier as it will be in an atmosphere of mutual sympathy and comprehension.

On the subject of bilingualism, I have been fortunate enough to witness how the Swiss, with their long experience in the matter, are coping with the situation effectively and without any fuss.

Long ago, they have realized that comprehension of a language comes more easily than expression. Consequently, a German-Swiss could understand French very well but may not speak it too well and vice-versa. In a meeting, a German-speaking supervisor would speak in German and the next Swiss, if French-speaking, would answer in French. I did not detect any problems — it seemed to be an accepted practice and nobody even bothered to translate. They grasped well what the other had to say but they could express themselves more precisely in their own language. I feel we can borrow from their long experience. At Domtar, we are trying this technique in some instances and it seems to work.

### **Prerequisites for Improvements**

There are a few conditions which are needed to improve bilingualism :

1. Our schools should revise their methods of language teaching. Canada should be a forerunner in new learning processes because of the country's bi-ethnic character. Sadly enough, French and English have been taught here as dead languages with the results that we know. After five or six years of that kind of teaching our people are completely unable to carry on with the simplest conversation. Now that new techniques have shown spectacular results, our educators would be well advised to take a close look at them. If French-speaking Canadians are speaking English, it is certainly not because they have been taught any better, it is because of the exposure and the necessity.
2. French-speaking Canadians should help those who are attempting to speak French instead of switching back to English. By so doing they sometimes discourage genuine efforts from a fellow Canadian. Even though it slows down the conversation, to listen, help and answer slowly and clearly is a good service to render.
3. Bilingualism should be considered as an asset opening a door to new cultural values and not as something that will impoverish the mind. I cannot agree with the theory saying that acquisition of a language interferes with your own language. When it does, it is because the individual has a poor grounding in his own mother tongue. Granted that it is difficult to have perfect fluency in both languages, but it is not asking too much for a person to master his own language and learn the other well enough to communicate effectively.

## Biculturalism

Language is not the only cause of division in Canada and a new term has been coined, « biculturalism » to describe anything else that separates French and English-speaking Canadians.

A culture is defined as being « the concepts, habits, skills, institutions, etc. of a given people in a given period ». It is a heritage of traditions and beliefs, a hierarchy of values which influence the attitudes of people.

It is reasonable to find misunderstandings in a society where two different cultures are conditioning people to different concepts about life in general and business in particular.

The advertising people have recognized for quite a while now that the adaptation of a programme to a French Canadian public goes much further than translation.

## Studies in Personnel Development

In personnel management we feel that we have some work to do along the same lines. Already some research work has been started to try and isolate factors which are inhibiting the performance of an employee of French culture in his work.

Although it is too early to draw definite conclusions there are indications that some of the difficulties experienced by a French Canadian could be due to uneasiness in a milieu strongly influenced by another culture. I might add that this other culture having such a strong influence in industry is the American, but as the English Canadian culture is closer to the American one, the adaptation is not as difficult for an English-speaking Canadian.

Before going any further, let's emphasize that we are not passing any overall judgement on one or the other culture, we are merely trying to explain how different cultures could lead to conflicts.

The basic organization concept is to work with people and through people toward company objectives. Studies in group dynamics on separated and mixed groups seemed to show entirely different behaviours from one group to the other. The English-speaking groups, as a trend, would arrive more easily at a common decision than the French-speaking group who would have a more difficult time. The participants seemed to lose sight of the objective in favour of their own personal opinions. Their personal involvement became greater than their task orientation.

What is also of significance is the heated atmosphere of the discussion with tempers flaring quite frequently. Only after a rigid procedure could the groups proceed with the object of the meetings.

We could conclude to the blanket explanation of traditional individualism. More adequately it seems that these compared experiments show a conflict between the differences in concepts about *authority* and personal *competition*.

This could explain why some French-speaking Canadians have difficulty fitting in management. Why should we change? Some staunch nationalists may object to the adaptation of some of our ways of thinking to an American mold. I will not argue about the relative values of civilizations but, as far as business is concerned, we have to be impressed with the American leadership in industry. We may reject some of their concepts but we are paying the price for being distinct in our way of doing business.

Industry could help tremendously by reviewing their personnel techniques to cope with cultural differences, especially in training and development activities. A great deal of work remains to be done but already we think some special programmes could be developed to provide our French-speaking employees with opportunities to adjust some of their concepts to industrial life.

Very little has been done about it and it will necessitate a great deal more research and experimentation. Anything we can do to fill the gap between languages and cultures is worth a serious effort.

## Conclusion

A major breakthrough to the present national impasse will be made when industry has succeeded in bringing in and developing a large group of French-speaking managers. This group will fill a vacuum and help bring together the various points of view and aspirations of all Canadians.

Again, they will have to feel welcome and get fully involved. French-speaking Canadians are not interested in a free ride.

They have enough pride to resent symbolic promotions and hollow titles. They want to make their contribution to the national life, but they also want the respect of their right of self-expression in something as important as their work.

When this diversity is accepted gracefully and, more important, recognized tangibly, it will be possible to work on unity and tackle as grown-ups the man-sized problems our country is facing on other fronts.



## LA GESTION DU PERSONNEL ET LE BICULTURALISME

Les griefs des Canadiens français sont de plus en plus écoutés. Teintée au début d'une certaine sympathie, l'attitude des Anglais face au problème a changé d'une façon telle que les deux cultures en présence sont prêtes à faire des concessions. Le problème est loin d'être réglé et souvent on se retrouve aux positions extrémistes originales.

### LE PROBLÈME

Parmi les griefs des Québécois, il en est, des plus importants, qui ont des implications économiques. Mais nous devons nous rappeler qu'il n'y a pas qu'une partie en cause qui ait tort.

Historiquement, nous devons nous rappeler que les Canadiens français se sont bien gardés de « se lancer en affaire » et préférèrent de beaucoup les professions libérales.

Vu que les Canadiens de langue anglaise contrôlaient l'activité commerciale au Québec, naturellement l'anglais devint la langue du travail. On retrouve alors une situation explosive en puissance.

Si nous faisons l'hypothèse qu'il vaille la peine que le Canada soit un pays et que sa fragmentation soit une absurdité économique, chacun d'entre nous doit se faire un devoir de reconcilier les intérêts en conflit et de préserver l'unité canadienne.

### LE RÔLE DE L'INDUSTRIE

L'industrie a forcé les groupes ethniques à sortir de leur ghetto et ceci peut contribuer à refaire l'unité de ce pays ou à accentuer l'écart existant, dépendant de l'intérêt des cadres face à ce problème.

Il serait stérile présentement de tenter de trouver les responsables de la situation. Les torts sont également distribués.

L'industrie, par ses politiques touchant le personnel et le commerce pourraient contribuer non seulement à atténuer les tensions mais encore à promouvoir un nouveau concept du canadianisme en reconnaissant les différences afin d'atteindre une meilleure unité.

L'augmentation du nombre des jeunes Québécois intéressés par le domaine scientifique et leur intérêt au monde des affaires nous amène à croire qu'avec le temps le problème de vivre les uns avec les autres va se régler de lui-même.

### LE BILINGUISME DANS L'INDUSTRIE

Le bilinguisme, dans l'industrie, pour les Canadiens français, est dû au fait que les postes de commande appartenaient aux Canadiens de langue anglaise qui eux ne voyaient pas la nécessité de donner au français une place dans le monde des affaires.

Du point de vue pragmatique, cela a du bon sens. Mais pour le Canadien français le progrès à l'intérieur d'une compagnie était limité.

Aujourd'hui les Québécois ont leur mot à dire dans l'industrie et cette dernière a besoin d'eux et essaie de s'adapter au bilinguisme. De plus en plus les compagnies recrutent, communiquent, négocient et établissent des programmes de formation dans la langue de leurs employés. Il reste qu'il serait insensé d'aller d'un unilinguisme à un autre. L'expérience de la Suisse pour ce qui a trait au bilinguisme est à considérer très sérieusement.

### LES PRÉREQUIS AUX AMÉLIORATIONS

Il y a quelques conditions nécessaires à la promotion du bilinguisme ?

- 1.—de meilleures méthodes d'enseignement des langues dans nos écoles ;
- 2.—les Canadiens français devraient encourager ceux qui essaient de parler français plutôt que de leur répondre en anglais ;
- 3.—le bilinguisme devrait être considéré comme un actif offrant de nouvelles valeurs culturelles et non comme quelque chose qui appauvrit l'esprit.

### LE BICULTURALISME

La langue n'est pas la seule cause de division au Canada. Le biculturalisme exprime toutes les autres choses qui séparent les Québécois des Canadiens anglais.

### LA GESTION DU PERSONNEL

Il semble, d'après quelques recherches, que quelques-unes des difficultés rencontrées par le Canadien français peuvent être dues au fait qu'ils ne se sentent pas à l'aise dans un milieu grandement influencé par une autre culture.

Vu le travail d'équipe nécessaire dans toute organisation, il serait peut être adéquat de souligner que des études en dynamique des groupes semblent démontrer des différences extrêmes dans le comportement de chacun des groupes.

L'industrie pourrait grandement aider à pallier aux différences culturelles en revisant leurs politiques de personnel et en mettant l'accent sur la formation et le développement.

### CONCLUSION

Il y aura un grand pas de fait quant à l'impasse dans laquelle nous nous trouvons lorsque l'industrie aura réussi à recruter et à développer un grand nombre de cadres de langue française. Cependant, les Canadiens français ne veulent pas de charité. Ils veulent contribuer à la vie nationale, mais ils désirent également le respect de leur droit d'épanouissement personnel au travail.