

ACTIVATING SYMBOLS WHEN CREATING CULTURE – THE DEVELOPMENT AND DISSEMINATION OF “ASUKA PRIDE” AND NYK CRUISES CO., LTD. IN JAPAN

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Abstract

The Cruise industry is a growing market which represents, 24.7 million global passengers in 2016, 25.8 million in 2017, and an estimated 27 million in 2018 (FCAA 2018, CLIA (Dec) 2018). In addition, this industry is providing over 1.1 million full time jobs, with \$45.6 billion accumulated wages and salaries (CLIA (Nov) 2018). Lieberman explains that Cruise companies encourage early booking, and target 95% occupancy rates. Customers are skewed towards the more affluent. For example, the world cruise fare on Crystal Cruises departing January 6 2020, ranges from \$30,447 to \$202,099 per person (Garay et al. 2019).

A wholly owned subsidiary of Nippon Yusen Kabushiki Kaisha (NYK), NYK Cruises offer cruises to the Japanese market aboard Asuka II, the company’s luxury cruise ship. NYK Cruises’ guest population is predominantly Japanese. This is with the exception of non-Japanese guests residing in Japan, Japanese speaking foreign visitors or foreign visitors travelling with Japanese friends or family.

In 2017, the NYK Group CEO (NYK 2017) stated that 30 years ago, the greater majority of their employees had been Japanese. Presently however, non-Japanese represent 85% of office workers and seafarers worldwide.

According to Radic (2017) English is the first language aboard ships and aboard NYK’s Asuka II, crew staff consisted of 86% non-Japanese employees, 38% of whom could not speak the language and did not interact with guests directly.

Of the NYK Cruises’ land talent, Japanese employees mainly communicated and delivered services to Japanese guests in their native language. This situation led to a cultural split caused mainly by the different use of language (Cohen et al. 2017), and also by the nature of business operations. In other words, the crew on board Asuka II could not see what happened on land, while the land communicators, organizational engineers, talent operators and corporate executives did have a direct appreciation of what happened at sea.

This paper uncovers how IBM Japan helped a group of corporate communicators, organizational engineers and talent operators at NYK to utilize modern technology. In addition, along with their social engineering practices, to enhance internal communications, stimulate

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internal collaboration, strengthen engagement and modernize talent practices to transform the cruise operator's corporate culture.

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I. Introduction

NYK's history parallels that of modern Japan - a maritime nation. Established in 1885, NYK is one of the oldest and largest shipping companies in the world (Katayama 1999). A full member of the Mitsubishi Group (*Mitsubishi keiretsu* 三菱系列) – a business conglomerate of autonomous Japanese multinational companies operating in a variety of industries. NYK is headquartered in Chiyoda-ku, Tokyo and manages a fleet of 792 ships, including container ships, bulkers and woodchip carriers, tankers, Liquefied Natural Gas (LNG) carriers, Multi-purpose carriers and cruise ships (NYK 2019).

In an effort to provide wealthy Japanese guests with a uniquely Japanese cruise experience, NYK established Crystal Cruise Japan KK in January 1989, and later changed the company name to NYK Cruises Co., Ltd. in September 1990. NYK Cruises started by acquiring a new Japanese manufactured cruise ship and hiring cruise operators from the market (Coggins 2019). NYK Cruises was principally focused on constantly exceeding guest expectations by developing and delivery high quality hospitality services. Aligned with market expectations and using cultural elements, they attempted to provide an authentically Japanese cruise experience. Brdar et al, (2015) suggest that creating authenticity can play an important factor in tourists' decision choices. Talent operators paid careful attention to the talent acquisition process as well as the development, engagement and retainment of highly performing crew.

In March 2003, NYK Cruises purchased the first *Asuka* cruise ship from the holding company, NYK, and welcomed Japanese guests on board in May the same year, offering a new cruise experience, further anchored in the Japanese culture. Guests on board *Asuka* experienced not only a wide variety of cuisine, starting with Japanese *teppanyaki* 鉄板焼き and continuing with modern French, Italian and Chinese options, but also a wide range of entertainment offered daily at the on-board theatre: Japanese performing arts, traditional *shamisen* 三味線 music, Japanese vaudeville *yose* 寄席, comic monologue stories *rakugo* 落語, and many other forms of performing arts.

The atmosphere on board was reminiscent of that of a traditional Japanese inn known as a *ryokan* 旅館, with heavy emphasis on Japanese hospitality practices known as *omotenashi* おもてなし and legacy operations. Kostic et al, (2011) suggest that employees working in tourism need English language skills to provide effective hospitality to international travelers. Conversely, aboard the *Asuka*, where the guests were predominantly Japanese, the guests found comfort in the welcoming and familiar environment and enjoyed the convenience of services offered by Japanese hospitality professionals in their native language, especially aboard round-the-world cruise journeys.

In February 2006, the company sold the first *Asuka*, acquiring at the same time a new and larger ship named *Asuka II*. In an effort to provide the growing market of cruise lovers a revamped cruise experience, NYK Cruises focused on developing a new offering. This had more diverse entertainment on board with the touch and feel of an international cruise. Japanese speaking international talent was immediately acquired from the Philippines, Thailand, Eastern Europe and Latin America and positioned in various capacities, ranging from reception to restaurants, theatre to room service and mechanical functions.

By the end of 2017, NYK Cruises was employing 135 land operators and 36 permanent cruise staff, 86% of whom were non-Japanese employees, with a further 38% of the non-Japanese talent who could not speak the Japanese language and did not interact with guests directly. This led to a rapid growth of unseen communication barriers, caused not only by the variety of languages spoken by the crew on board, but also augmented by the physical distance from the land team.

II Research Objectives, Method and Objects

Objectives

The main objective of this research is to illustrate the benefits for businesses to constantly probe for communication silos, cultural gaps and talent bank disconnections and to seek the development of sustainable working cultures of inclusion, integration and co-creation. As a second objective, this research will provide a use case of successful collaboration with providers of professional consulting services in corporate culture development and international business management.

Research Objects

NYK Cruises land operators working in Corporate Communications, Talent and Organizational development practice, corporate executives and cruise crew.

Research Methodology

We conducted research based on an actual business case study. Additionally, the authors of this research engaged in first-hand participant observation¹ of this change management process. Therefore, we could observe various stages of cultural disconnection, miscommunication, corporate confusion, and various stages of decision making, along with the whole process of organizational and cultural integration, with the eyes of in-house full-time team members, from the start of the project until the implementation stage.

IBM define Design as the “intent behind an outcome” and Design Thinking as focusing on user-centered design, engaging multidisciplinary teams and continuous reinvention (IBM 2018). At the end of each Design Thinking session, we conducted qualitative research through focus group interviews with all participants in an effort to determine in-depth emotions, perceptions and affinity with key cultural symbols. Symbols are mechanisms organizations can use to signal their management philosophy to workers (Fuller 2011). Patton (2002) relates that focus group interviews aim to collect

¹ Yin, Robert (2003), *Case Study Research: Design and Methods*, SAGE Publications, Inc; Third ed.

high-quality data in social contexts which help encourage elaboration and maximize interaction within the group (Khan et al. 1992). Quantitative data was collected between December 1st 2017 and December 20th 2017, consisting of a self-completed questionnaire. The authors ensured that the respondents answered all questions in order to reduce the number of missing values.

III The Culture Development Process – From “THEM” to “US”.

The potential for communication problems such as misunderstanding and disagreement is high when cultural differences exist (Livia 2009). This is because culture implies shared beliefs and behaviors (Sussman 2000). In this case, the disconnect between Japanese and non-Japanese crew aboard *Asuka II*, along with the physical distance between land operators led to a breakdown in trust, coordination and communication.

In October 2017, NYK decided to utilize business consulting professionals to analyze the situation and to provide support with developing a culturally relevant, internal communications strategy. Its purpose was to install a culture of trust and collaboration.

The Talent & Engagement team of IBM Japan (Global Business Services) joined the NYK Cruises team in November 2017 in an effort to support the process of defining culture and installing an agile internal communications process needed in order to re-align expectations, mindsets and behavior between the Japanese land operators and the international crew. IBM proceeded with an immediate assessment module, aiming to identify communication blockers, psychological silos and key elements of disengagement. The assessment indicated a combination of issues, ranging from operational fragmentation to lack of trust and organizational confidence on both land and sea.

Land operators indicated a high level of anxiety regarding the efficiency of their communications, as well as lack of project ownership, caused by random executive communications and irregular decision making. The crew indicated lack of understanding of corporate culture, business purpose, values and direction, most internal communications taking place one way: from land operators to the crew.

Both parties frequently indicated that they lacked confidence the other party rarely understood or appreciated their efforts, referring to the others in disengaging terms, such as “them” or “they”. Even when the IBM team probed both parties separately about their culture, trying to determine common threads of emotional and cultural connection, both parties continued to talk about “them” and “they”, rather than anything that the land operators and the crew might have had in common.

The IBM team decided to address the cultural alignment as an immediate imperative, and subsequently resolve strategy and operational efficiency. According to Blanchard et al (2017), an awareness of cultural variations in interpersonal communication is essential due to rising globalization and human mobility. In addition, ontologies define main concepts and relationships in work environments. The IBM ontological approach sought to determine possible cultural and emotional elements that the land operators, and seafarers had in common.

As an initiative in determining common cultural threads, the IBM team invited both parties separately in a design thinking exercise, discussing typical employee and

guest personas, exploring frequent pains and gains and utilizing empathy maps in order to have a deeper understanding of how typical employees and guests feel, think and behave at various stages of engagement. Shareholder mapping was used to determine “who can do what, when, and how”, but the results indicated a total lack of project ownership, both land operators and cruise members voicing out concern about time being wasted in planning initiative escalations as long as the decision making process belonged in exclusivity to senior management and corporate executives.

The design thinking exercise helped to further illustrate the lack of organizational alignment and the immediate necessity of shifting mindsets from the distant “them” to a more inclusive “us”.

A later “pulse” survey conducted both on land and at sea further indicated a thorough lack of trust in organizational initiatives and a lack of shared vision of how the situation could ever be improved, 89% of the population interviewed indicating that they do not understand the corporate strategy, mission and vision, and an even more concerning 96% of the population indicating that they do not believe in a shared culture of collaboration, co-creation and inclusion, as most decision making and internal communications were taking place one way: top down and land to sea.

IV. Discussions and Actions

The IBM consultants discussed with the NYK Cruises executives the necessity of orchestrating internal communications and involving both land operators and members of the crew in the development of a shared culture that would be relevant to both parties in an equal manner.

NYK Cruises executives expressed concern about involving crew members in the culture development process, worrying that this would interfere with business operations and would create inconvenience for guests and crew members alike. A feasibility test, though, indicated that 96% or the crew members were happy to participate in culture development efforts and were ready to commit to extra work in order to contribute to the creation, prototyping and implementation of cultural initiatives and intelligent communication tools.

In December 2017, the IBM team split into two with half of the consultants joining the NYK Cruises land operators in daily business engagements, while the other half joined the Asuka crew at sea, working alongside crew members at various functions on board and delivering hospitality services to guests, while observing crew interactions with the guests and testing new initiatives.

At the end of the first week, both teams reassembled to share findings and to plan cultural integration initiatives. One of the early findings was the necessity to create a shared monthly engagement plan for the following year and to orchestrate internal communications at all levels. Another finding was the business imperative to determine cultural symbols that would be mutually understood, appreciated and embraced by land operators and crew members alike. Both parties expressed concern about the adoption of rigid corporate wording, which did not mean anything to anyone, leading to further disengagement and emotional split.

In the second week of December 2017, the IBM shared re-occurring key words, such as “pride”, “hospitality”, “love”, “inspiration”, “dedication” and “commitment” with both land operators and crew members, inviting both parties in another design thinking exercise, aiming to determine a common “way” of conducting business, addressing concerns and putting proposals forth. Furthermore, the teams were invited into graphically facilitated workshops to create road maps for behavioral change and cultural transformation efforts. As a result of this engagement, both teams indicated interest in adopting a shared culture of service, which would speak to both logic and emotion alike, in plain, unsophisticated language, that would be easy to remember even by non-native speakers of that language and would be culturally relevant to everyone involved.

By the end of the second week of December 2017, the teams had contributed with 2,649 words which would reflect emotions that they felt strongly about. The IBM team used AI empowered cognitive technology to analyze these words, define linguistic taxonomy, study generative relationships and interpret cultural implications. IBM further clustered key concepts into three main blocks, crafting simple sentences based on the taxonomic relationships of the key words collected from the NYK Cruises associates.

Don't rock the ship, rock the heart
Heighten your standard, inspire yourself
Pursue and offer “made-in-*Asuka*” services
These key sentences were collectively named “*Asuka Pride*”.

During the third week of December 2017, the IBM team spent time working with NYK Cruises executives, communicators and talent operators to develop a communication plan for the following year. Gupta et al (2001), state that organizations which have internal cultures supportive of strategies have an increased potential for success. Therefore, NYK Cruises aimed to create a platform for the development of visual communications, digital tools, and engagement initiatives, both for land operators and for the crew to share “*Asuka Pride*” episodes and communicate recommendations and successful initiatives.

Satisfied workers tend to lack self-incentive to improve their work condition. Lyubomirsky (2010), suggests that passion and happiness are not lasting. This concept of hedonic adaptation which occurs in both positive and negative experiences has been widely established. Therefore, organizations must devise new methods on employee motivation based on employee characteristics (Aziri 2019). Additionally, the Project Management Institute proposes that communication describes the processes of distributing project information in a timely manner (PMI 2000).

In an effort to prevent hedonic adaptation, the IBM team created agile communication tools, which would involve everyone working at NYK Cruises. These tools would provide an opportunity for sharing use cases and individual episodes internally in a timely manner.

The IBM team pointed to the necessity of focusing on visualized communications. Visual representations of concepts, situations and emotions have been known to penetrate human consciousness faster and remain in memory longer (Alvarez et al, 2008).

According to Peters (1978), success stories can be utilized to achieve organizational goals. IBM recommended the development and timely distribution of videos, photos, storyboards, and clearly visualized success stories to help everyone align their behavior to the core elements of *Asuka Pride*. All employees were encouraged to share personal stories about how *Asuka Pride* worked for them. These stories were video recorded and shared both internally and externally.

In order to support timely sharing of personal episodes and meaningful insights, the IBM team recommended the adoption of AI empowered collaborative technology, providing cognitive assistance to users through Learning Managements Systems (LMS), mobile applications and internal communications technology. Robotic Process Automation (RPA) was later introduced to further support the automation of internal communications and engagement processes.

At the end of 2017, both land operators and seafaring crew were getting ready to celebrate the end of the year in style. They exhibited a camaraderie of sharing new cultural values, new communication practices and tools, and a shared belief that together they can provide world class hospitality services deeply rooted in the Japanese culture, for both Japanese guests and international visitors alike.

V. Conclusion

Organizations frequently underestimate the importance of timely and meaningful internal communications when developing and sustaining a healthy culture of inclusion and innovation. By engaging talent at all organizational levels in the culture development and dissemination exercise, NYC Cruises managed to secure early buy-in and commitment to strengthening and perpetuating the *Asuka Pride*, both on land and at sea.

NYC Cruises employees adopted and continued sharing the *Asuka Pride* because:

1. It was a culture they had developed themselves
2. They saw themselves as the main actors of the culture
3. They were empowered to become ambassadors and supported by senior executives
4. They were enabled to share emotional stories and personal episodes in a timely manner by collaborative technology.
5. Cascaded corporate communications messaging initiatives were aligned with key *Asuka Pride* elements and reiterated the mindset and commitment to creative and delivering authentic and emotionally engaging hospitality services both at land and at sea.

The adoption and utilization of collaborative technology and visual communications further contributed to the enhancement of an agile organizational architecture to support the perpetuation and timely revision of the corporate culture.

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