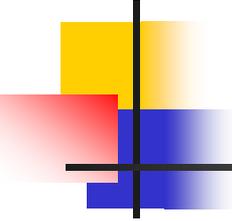


**How local re-interpretation of American
management techniques reveals the socio-
cultural context of enterprising:**

The Tunisian case of Poulina

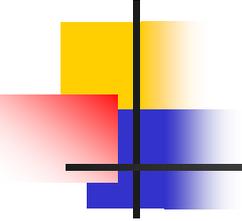
**Hèla YOUSFI
Associate Professor
University Paris Dauphine**

Syracuse, April, 2010



The Poulina Case

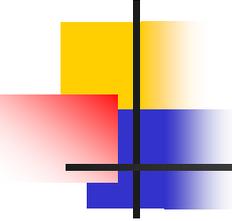
- Poulina: one of the most important private groups in North Africa created in 1967 by A. Ben Ayed.
- The implementation of modern management tools often qualified as “Americans” is said to have largely contributed to this success story.



How to adapt the American management model to the Tunisian context?

Method:

- An ethnographic approach
- 40 interviews conducted in 2005 at various hierarchical level using arabic and french

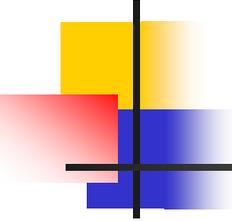


Universal management principles

Rigor

Transparency

Meritocracy

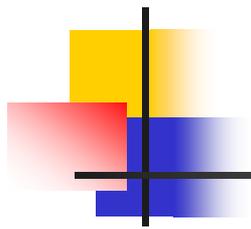


An innovative implementation

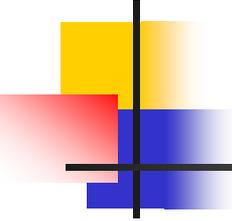
- “Systems” presented as “solutions” to identified dysfunctions:

“The strong point of Poulina is to have neutralized the dysfunctions of a family based model as it prevails in Tunisian companies. There is a memorandum prohibiting the recruitment of family members. The watchwords here are: rigour and discipline. Here, one manages the figures and not the feelings”.

“We learn from any experience we go through whether at the head office or at the subsidiaries, the management at Poulina is to put “gardes fous” **defense systems** that protect us from making the same mistakes, if we have a good experience somewhere, we try to replicate it in the other subsidiaries”



People Behind the Procedures



Double Hierarchy

- **Functional hierarchy : to manage the relationship**

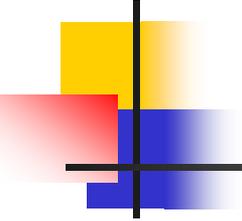
“The procedures come from the head office and our role is to find the suitable way to implement them”

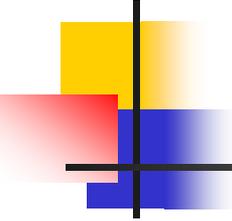
“A subsidy’s manager is asked to manage the social aspects and this is vital to the company. It is important to perfectly master the social side of our work”

- **Operational hierarchy: a distant control**

“The operational boss intervenes only to avoid mistakes, our work is to put pressure, we don’t sell, we don’t exploit, we just manage from a distance”

“When we want feed back or an account form a subsidy, we don’t do it directly, it is the audit who does it”

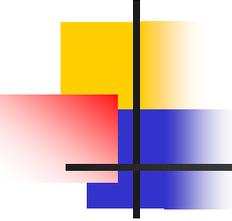
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- "There are two things in the procedure, explains an employee. A procedure is a law. First, there is the technical aspect of the law. A law must be respected but one should consider the procedure not only in its disciplining side. A procedure has also an educational aspect. We control with a procedure to help employees, to accompany them and to free them from the "arbitrary" power of management".



The Coordinators: informal intervention

- “Sometimes, one of the operational bosses could make a mistake or could have a conflict with a subsidiary, so I try to fix the problem... I have an arbitration role between the two (...). I should keep the power balance between the two hierarchies”
- “There were cases of favouritism or a clan against a person, comments a coordinator, one of my jobs, it is to take care that there is no favouritism, My role is not official, it is very informal, but when I go to a company, if I notice that there are people which gather against a person, I intervene”.
- “When the role of coordinator was instituted, explains a coordinator, there was a difference, I remember, between a coordinator and an operational boss. When you are a coordinator, you should be diplomatic, you intervene as an adviser and you are not forced to conform to 100% with the procedures”.

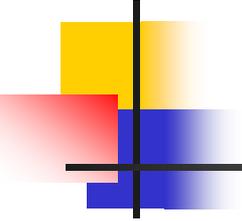
[1] The wises



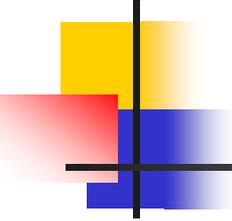
A leadership: a safeguard of the cohesion of the whole system

“Here, the discipline is above all. Mr. Ben Ayed clocked in like everybody, he gives the example”

“For example, the system of the third automatic reminder sent to Mr. Ben Ayed, is something very important in the system. The fact that he is the only guarantor, I mean he is the only one who can allow exemptions to the rules, it is important (...). The system in its operation, there is on one hand a very formalized aspect with the procedures and on the other hand there is a flexibility guaranteed by Mr. Ben Ayed”

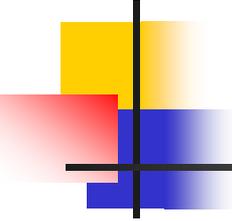


When management borrows the cultural metaphors



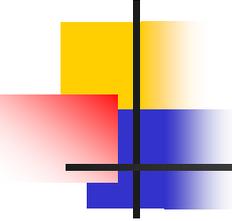
Poulina: A big family with written rules

- “Poulina is an organic group that could be compared to a big family with written rules” explains a director of a subsidiary company; “Poulina is our mother” comments an employee.
- “We do not sell our subsidiary companies if they lose money, we will do our best to save their lives, to help them to survive, with the help of the head office, We wouldn’t adopt the position of a financial expert who would say “we should close the non-profitable company”” (...). The vision of Poulina is not this. We would say “this company is important to us and we should absolutely put all our energy to save it”



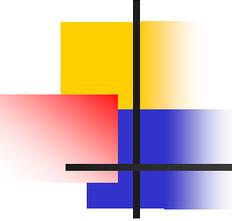
A craftsman is happier than a worker

“To work for others is considered degrading in Tunisia.^[1] As soon as a person starts to succeed in his work, he is pushed by his circle to work for his own account. The term ‘**zoufri**’, from the word ‘ouvrier’^[2] means thug in Tunisian dialect (...). That’s why I think the **craftsman** is happier than a worker.



A system that saves the Honour

“Procedures help people to save their honour. On one hand, they are committed, responsible, they don’t have a boss behind them who dictates to them what to do. On the other hand, they can lose the “face” if they do not achieve the written objectives. ... If somebody says “no, I don’t agree on something” We say to him “ok, go ahead, suggest something”, if he doesn’t succeed in proving he is right, he would end up submitting himself to the rule (...). The procedure makes the relationship between the superiors and the subordinates impersonal, you don’t have somebody behind you to tell you what you should do (...). The Muslims do not have an intermediary with God, there is no hierarchy, and they are not at ease with a boss who is behind them to control them. With a procedure, they self-check everything, they save their honour” notes the CEO



Conclusion

- The implementation of the procedures at Poulina succeeded because it echoed the way in which Tunisian employees interpreted social ties. One can find the same procedures everywhere, but the way people make sense of them may vary from one country to another, leading to different framings of their roles.
- Once culture is perceived as a producer of meaning, the temptation to attribute mechanical effects to it disappears. It is mostly by giving a specific meaning to management techniques that culture comes into play in the modernization process.