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Recommended Citation

Available at: [https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol33/iss1/15](https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol33/iss1/15)
Would You Like Fries With Your Borscht?

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Introduction

In April 2012, Depaul International hired me to conduct a 20-month consultancy project with Depaul Ukraine—still a very new organization—to evaluate operations and make recommendations for growth. I was to point out efficiencies and suggest how to grow the organization, a typical American approach to consulting. A subsidiary of Depaul International, Depaul Ukraine exemplifies its parent’s values of innovation, action, and responsibility, catering to local culture. The story of Depaul Ukraine shows how it is possible to leverage cultural attributes and build an organization that answers the call of the homeless in the post-Soviet cities of Odessa and Kharkiv.

As homeless people and homelessness practitioners are from the same culture, different aspects of the culture may be positively or negatively influenced by practitioners’ abilities to effectively deal with homelessness. As the old saying goes, “the doctor doesn’t have to be ill to cure the patient”; but what if he is? And conversely, how can managers recognize the aspects of culture with the highest potential of positively shaping issues influencing homelessness?

The Context of Hospitality Found in the Face of Others in Need

My previous work in the region (two years in Moldova and a brief stint in Romania) had warned me that organizational change would occur only at the rate that host-country nationals would change. I knew I would need to learn more about post-Soviet culture if ever I was to effect change there, both with my colleagues and with the homeless. These two groups seemed to overlap sometimes, adding another layer of complexity.

My immediate task was to build upon the trail-blazing work of Vitaliy Novak, C.M., Catholic priest and chairman of Depaul Ukraine. Novak was fearless. In 2006, he had charged into the unknown, oftentimes challenging cultural norms in his own country, to serve the poor and start up Depaul Ukraine in Kharkiv. In a redeveloping nation such as Ukraine, where needs are as high as obstacles, until someone would give him money for a building in Odessa, a big bus would have to do. Still in the bureaucratic process of officially registering the bus as a project of the seven-year-old Depaul Ukraine, Novak decided it was more important to address the urgent need, risking legal troubles, than to wait. Thus, in 2011, he began by dispensing borscht—the local, traditional beetroot soup—from a bus, amounting to 30,000 bowls a year.

Novak, who spent his childhood in Ukraine, seven kilometers from the then Czechoslovakian border and was educated in Bratislava, developed a creative approach to designing an NGO for the homeless in Ukraine. But questions began to arise regarding how to build upon this approach and give it some stable, sustainable, organizational shape. In my approach, I was greatly helped by the thinking of Geert Hofstede, a Dutch social psychologist and author of Culture’s Consequences. In this book, Hofstede explains several of his “Dimensions of National Culture.” Hofstede developed a system of metrics,
analyzing and assigning numerical values to countries including the United States and Russia, and demonstrating large divergences in the two countries’ cultural norms. Three attributes rang out clearly:

1. Power Distance, measuring the distribution of power across society;
2. Individualism versus Collectivism, demonstrating a society’s affinity for social framework; and
3. Uncertainty Avoidance, measuring comfort with ambiguity and the future.¹

Application of these particular dimensions improved my understanding of me, my fellow Americans, my Ukrainian counterparts, and those we served. Applied to homelessness and to the staff of Depaul Ukraine, these dimensions help us to understand how to work more effectively with homeless individuals, to prevent homelessness, and to provide long-term support to those in need.

Culture and Hospitality

Ukrainians, like Russians, diverge widely from Americans in their attitudes toward uncertainty, individuality, and power. As a “Generation X” American, I never question my right to express individuality, to walk into the boss’s office and make a suggestion, or my right to dream the future of my choice. As an expatriate in Ukraine, however, the local culture required me to use the proper forms of speech for elders and superiors; to focus attention squarely on the present; and to dress stoically and act like a proper Ukrainian lady. Yet I soon realized that this was no way to cultivate creativity, take advantage of the talent and skills of staff, or move the organization forward.

Life in the eastern Ukraine city of Kharkiv, site of the organization’s first projects and main work, presented classic examples of the behaviors cited in Hofstede’s analysis. While Novak, raised in the western side of the country, was looking to the west and grasping for Euros, Eastern Ukraine was snuggling closer to Mother Russia and bearing down against uncertainty. The legacy of culture in this former Eastern Bloc country, in which half of the population controlled the other half, can be found in Hofstede’s three attributes. Individuals with power are a class apart, separate and distinct from workers. A fierce sense of loyalty binds individuals in a group. Individuals value information, details, context, procedure, and structure. Uncertainty is uncomfortable. We, as Americans, are on the other end of these spectrums: individuality is celebrated; management structures are trending flatter every day; and higher education degrees in planning, creativity, and leadership are readily available at any local university.

¹ Geert H. Hofstede, Culture’s Consequences: Comparing Values, Behaviors, Institutions and Organizations Across Nations (SAGE, 2001), 29. See: https://books.google.com/books/about/Culture_s_Consequences.html?id=w6z18LJ_1VsC
Getting Direction

With the aims of reviving the spirit in which Novak had built the organization, recruiting new talent, and improving the quality of services, three evocative questions arose:

1. What change can we help our service-users achieve if our own employees dread and avoid change and uncertainty?
2. How can we empower line staff and cultivate managerial skills and behaviors when they feel so far from power?
3. How can we recruit top talent when staff feels they can only trust known individuals or those connected to the adjoining Catholic Church?

When I arrived in Ukraine, all project staff and volunteers worked across all projects, rotating between them. There was no real ownership of particular projects, and the system worked like a machine with no one making any effort to find efficiencies or trying to offer the homeless more. After several months of observation and cultural assimilation I announced my first change: in a few months’ time, I would promote four staff members as project managers. Before assuming full responsibility they would become specialists in their newly assigned projects, practice managerial behaviors, and develop work-plans for each project. This was, on my part, a conscious move away from one end of the spectrum of Hofstede attributes, with a goal of enabling people to gain power, face uncertainty, and receive recognition for individual roles and contributions.

Starting to Shift Towards Practicing Hospitality Towards Others

A year later, people responded differently and it seemed to me that changes occurred along a spectrum commensurate with age and longevity within the organization. Younger,
newer staff adapted to the more open, flatter managerial relationships. Older employees of longer tenure struggled to develop creative problem-solving skills or a vision for the future. One, for example, insisted she wanted to be a manager, oversee and guide her projects, and respond to the job requirements. Despite intensive training and development, she failed to meet the organization’s expectations and follow through with her responsibilities. She willingly accepted power but resisted duties and ideas of non-managers. Furthermore, she did not “think outside the box.” I asked myself, “How could someone who rejects change bring about change in the lives of the individuals who come to us seeking it?”

By contrast, when it came to working with Ukrainians and the homeless, Sister Victoria, a nun and volunteer, said, “If people are here and talking, they want change, something different.” Our employees needed to recognize this mentality. In Ukraine, it is important to explain, offer examples, demonstrate, reassure, convince, teach, inspire, and light the way. Sister Victoria explained to me, “When people trust you, when they feel they are in community, they will try. Then it will be no problem if something doesn’t go right.” I could not do enough to live her wisdom.

Hofstede argues that by the age of ten, individuals already have nation-based, unconscious, unchangeable values linked with social anthropology. Social class and occupation come later in life. Business and organizational cultures are more malleable, learned post-puberty, in the 20s and beyond. Here was my angle: while changing the culture of individuals is impossible, establishing a strong organizational culture would be effective. As Hofstede said, “National cultures… can be understood, respected, and treated as assets.” As Sister Victoria pointed out, I could build trust and a safe place to try new ideas. Novak had been building this organizational culture, and he leveraged his assets, too. When hospitals refused homeless persons, Novak provided priest or nun escorts and facilitation payments to ensure treatment. When beat cops extorted bribes or favors from vagrant street youth, Novak appealed to police and city officials to suggest how Depaul Ukraine could get them off the street. When children escaped orphanages in deference to street life and Depaul Ukraine services, Novak set up programs in orphanages. My job was to revive and reinforce this culture.

Gaining Momentum

We then went through a rough patch, with two unpleasant dismissals, followed by the resignation of a key leader. At the same time, however, the opportunity arose for hiring talent unaffected by the history of the organization’s change process. In Kharkiv, Ukraine’s second largest city and home to nearly thirty colleges and universities, economic and political conditions made for a rich talent pool. Depaul Ukraine’s values include

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recognizing potential, taking responsibility, and putting words into action. We set out looking for positive attitudes, strong interpersonal skills, and values that matched ours. Not only did we need fresh ideas and attitudes, but, at a more personal level, I wanted to vindicate myself after the personnel disruptions.

Following the turnover, staff needed an infusion of energy, hope, and solidarity. Three speakers delivered a mini-series of talks aimed at development and bringing the team together. Four new employees elevated the organization, imbued with excitement about working in the emerging charity in Eastern Ukraine. After all, no one was working with the homeless like Depaul Ukraine, they would say. Staff also anticipated the arrival of five people in our summer internship program for international students.

During the recruitment process, members of the community circulated job descriptions (rarely used in Ukraine) and worried about who would apply. Senior management tended to avoid resumes that included experience with tax authorities, law enforcement, or political offices. The applicant pool eventually revealed candidates with compassion for the vulnerable, befitting experience, and enthusiasm about the organization’s uncertain future. New employees were not Catholic, some were smokers, two were married, and one had grown children—all qualities that drew attention to them as individuals.

By setting a tone with open recruitment, a behavioral interview, and a trial volunteer period, employees started with new expectations. Our organizational culture was developing slowly. At first new staff piqued the interest of their colleagues, with positive attitudes and new ideas; others scrutinized their interactions with senior management. Gradually the team gelled, and the nuns on staff hosted an end-of-summer picnic. Nothing forges friendships like a Ukrainian barbeque.

Obstacles that arose during that year of change kept pointing back to people’s tendency to avoid uncertainty. When employees stagnated or resisted change, I thought of Sister Victoria. We reinforced the organization’s evolving and strengthening culture by providing training and building trust and power. As an American and a speaker of only passable Russian, my teaching style was simple: listen, give feedback, and get out of the way. We
learned to trust each other, complementing each other’s strengths and weaknesses. Where employees could maneuver the inner workings of social agencies, I could offer ideas on improving operations, developing programs and strategy, and managing finances. They learned confidence with their new power, speaking up when my language skills prevented me from doing so. Change emerged from necessity, exactly as Novak had designed it: a slow transfer of power under the guise of simply helping a person in difficulty.

**Fitting In and Finding Hospitality**

In the Ukraine, families are close-knit; several generations may live under one roof. People turn to friends and family during times of trouble, and not just at weddings, funerals, and birthday parties. In Ukraine, as opposed to in America, managers hire people solely on the basis of their relationship to a person of power inside. When I began work, despite being a non-religious and non-government organization, only one employee was unaffiliated with the church. While this comforted the in-crowd, the church’s talent pool was limited, and Catholics are a religious minority.

Most people know that being homeless during the era of the Soviet Union was illegal, punishable by incarceration. Decades later, the effects of being different are equally punishing: hospitals have rejection policies for the homeless, and businesses avoid hiring ex-offenders and those whose address is known to be a shelter. Someone without connections, a person who lost a job or a person with an addiction or broken relationships, is isolated. These are the homeless. These paths lead to homelessness. One of Depaul Ukraine’s first projects was providing first aid to the homeless. We developed an informal policy
of accompanying people to a medical facility. Similarly, because of rejection, we began meeting young men in prisons in order to prepare them for life outside. Depaul Ukraine breaks through bureaucratic barriers, repairs relationships, and, as they say among staff, “restores people back to society.”

For the homeless, the prevailing mentality in Ukraine means people who are a part of a “we” society may be afraid to break from tradition. They may be reticent to pursue and demand their rights as American counterparts would. This mindset is deeply engrained in older people. After 23 years of independence, and 70 years under Soviet rule one Ukrainian told me, “We don’t want to be individuals… we don’t want to be alone.” But this line of thought can also have its strengths, as I was about to learn. Several housing projects in the Kharkiv region use a shared-room model. Coming from American society where individualism is valued and encouraged, I resisted having Depaul Ukraine double the number of mothers and babies in rooms. Staff insisted and argued that the new mothers needed to help and support each other; they were no longer individuals but, rather, part of a family. The project manager said, “If they live separately, then when one girl messes up her borscht, the others laugh and say, ‘See? She can’t do it either!’” When two moms and two children shared a room, she said, “They open up to each other more, help each other, and become friends. This is the value we want to instill in their families.” This argument trumped my attempts to defend sleep, assure privacy, and quarantine germs.

Balancing Power

While Americans enjoy collaboration across an equal playing field with direct access to the boss, Ukrainians, it seems, maintain distance from persons in power and are more skeptical of collaborative relationships with management. This means that, in a bureaucracy, the customer is already in a position of a lesser amount of power than the worker. The homeless have it even worse. They may be unshaven or un-showered; they may not be able to read for lack of eyeglasses; they may be ashamed to speak because of bad breath or rotten teeth; they may be without money or identification documents; they may struggle with chronic illness or disabilities. Serving tasty borscht is good, but it is not enough. Without basic dignity, people cannot access medical services, apply for a job, or enroll in government entitlement programs.

Depaul Ukraine found difficulty in providing more than soup and underpants from a bus constantly victimized by the harsh elements in the country. In Odessa 2013, we opened a day center where the homeless could clean up and sit down with social workers. The clever staff went one step further, making Depaul Ukraine identification cards for the homeless. The homeless henceforth belonged to something. However simple the illusion, it worked. They no longer felt like rejected individuals standing outside mainstream society looking in; those little IDs opened doors at hospitals and employers. Creative inspiration in the organization, born first with Novak then instilled in others, was catching on. Establishing within the organization the collective ideal of our culture was crucial: staff and homeless
were on the same team. Depaul Ukraine earned respect within the community. We had the opportunity to shine light on our people. They needed that, and we had to change ourselves to meet that need.

Once staff confronted uncertainty, change was fun and creative. Photoshopping a black eye off of a man’s ID picture was part of the service, for instance. Our tactics generated energy and momentum. Staff had the courage to speak to management. People working directly with those facing homelessness generated new ideas. Staff used their power to drive the organization.

Beyond the Borscht

Borscht from a bus—30,000 bowls. But what is it that Novak was really sharing with others? Inspiration, love, compassion, creativity, and joy. He transformed seemingly unchangeable cultural attributes into the organizational culture prescribed by the needs of the homeless. It was this that I had to build on, and build in.

All of the charities that form the Depaul International Group continue to work in the spirit of the seventeenth-century Frenchman, Vincent de Paul: in a practical and non-judgmental way, with a focus on responding to need through action, organization, and innovation. The spirit of Vincent de Paul has us tend to the unique needs of each person. Yet, sometimes a group of individuals in a community shares the same needs. Vincent teaches us to organize and meet those needs. In the 1980s, Depaul International (then the Depaul Foundation) answered the call of mischievous street youth who stole and crashed a car, founding a driving school in response. Depaul Ireland answered the call of street drinkers and founded a wet shelter with a self-harm reduction program. Depaul USA responded to unemployed, homeless men by founding a social enterprise called Immaculate Cleaning.
Service. Depaul Slovakia answered Bratislava’s call to prevent the homeless from freezing to death in winter by renovating an airplane hangar into a 175-bed shelter.

Vincent famously told a dying colleague, “Love is inventive to infinity.” Depaul Ukraine must continue to love and invent, and love to invent: cutting hair, shaving faces, securing jobs, comforting the sick, distributing adult diapers, buying bulk underpants, buying medicine, liaising with foreign consulates, obtaining identification documents, and meeting the needs of poor people in the community, wherever they are, through whatever culture.

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People wait in line for a meal from Depaul Ukraine outreach services.

A man receives medical assistance from Depaul Ukraine outreach services.

The faces of some of those who have been helped by Depaul Ukraine.

The central panel of the altarpiece in the Vincentian provincial house, Kiev, Ukraine.

The icon depicts Vincent, Louise de Marillac, and Vincentian saints and blesseds mourning the suffering Christ.

*Courtesy St. Vincent de Paul Image Archive Online*

http://stvincentimages.cdm.depaul.edu/