



THE COMMUNIST FOOTPRINT

by Brad Buie

Although the Soviet Union's domination of Eastern Europe ended decades ago with the fall of the Berlin Wall, the institutional legacies of communism are still a reality for the generation of workers who began careers in that era.

"According to imprinting theory," says Dr. Wade Danis, "adults who were trained in the communist era were not 'blank slates' after communism's collapse. They transitioned into the new market reality with a repertoire of communist-acquired experiences that their non-communist-socialized colleagues did not inherit."

Danis, an associate professor at Gustavson, recently contributed to a paper analyzing how exposure to communism influenced workplace behaviour. Titled "Communist Footprint and Subordinate Influence Behaviour in Post-Communist Transition Economies," the paper specifically looked at how willing individual workers were to prioritize the good of the organization over personal gain. As part of an effort to better contextualize workplace behaviours within individual countries, Danis and his research colleagues are keen to grasp these patterns of behaviour—or what they term communism's "footprint." Danis, who focuses on transitional economies in countries like Hungary and the



Wade Danis

This is because under communism, they often saw their superiors as corrupt, unaccountable and indifferent to their own plight. "The idea of employee of the month recognition such as we have here in the West would be viewed with distrust," says Danis. "Ambitions to achieve such recognition would be perceived as complicit and sucking up."

On the other hand, Danis explains that those similarly low in the hierarchy but with shorter exposure to a communist regime are less likely to harbour ill will towards their organization. Particularly if they encountered market liberalization at a younger age, they will be more convinced that helping the organization to succeed will result in reward.

Interestingly, for those in a higher position in an organization, the correlation between length of time and organizationally destructive behaviour is not as strong. A possible explanation for this, Danis says, is that they now have the opportunity to shape their organization's strategy, whereas they recall how

Dr. Wade Danis explores workplace behaviour in post-communist countries

Czech Republic, also refers to these after-effects by the more colourful term "hangover from communism."

So what does this particular kind of hangover mean for workplace behaviour?

"In this study," says Danis, "we measured whether the employee showed organizationally constructive or destructive behaviour. In other words, did they prioritize the interests of the organization? Or did they consistently disregard what would benefit the organization, and put their own interests first?"

Which route an individual chooses to go depends upon a couple of factors: the length of time exposed to communism and where in the hierarchy of an organization he or she was employed at the time of the study. To test this framework, Danis and his colleagues collected survey data on professionals working in organizations in Bulgaria, Croatia, the Czech Republic, Hungary, Lithuania, Russia and Slovenia. According to their study, an individual in a lower-level position who spent more time working under a communist government is less likely to be well-disposed towards the organization. For example, one would probably not work overtime in order to get a project finished. "They take a 'beat the system' attitude," says Danis, "even if their behaviour hurts the company."

subordinates were required to obediently follow orders under the communist system. A shift in mindset occurs. Rather than act authoritarian, they act both in the interests of the organization and for the interests of their subordinates, whom they are more likely to respect. In fact, the longer the exposure to communism in this case, the less the individual tolerates or exhibits behaviours that tarnish the organization.

Although the impact of communism continually recedes from the former Eastern Bloc with the passing of time, Danis views the transition of these countries' economies as a "natural experiment" worthy of further examination. The knowledge gained is useful for managers working with individuals socialized in the communist era, as it may guide them in how they communicate, motivate and collaborate with them as employees, as well as for those working in these transition companies themselves. However, even as echoes of communism in this region fade, and the number of impacted individuals in the workforce grows smaller, new applications for this research are on the horizon.

"While this particular paper focused on common behavioural legacies in several post-communist countries," says Danis, "the reality is that there are many different 'flavours' of communism and authoritarian rule, each of which might influence behaviours in different ways. It would be useful to explore these differences and also to determine whether our findings can be extended to existing communist countries, such as China, Cuba and Vietnam." ■