

Learning Organization Values Fit in a Global Context: Cross-Cultural Perceptions of the Fit of Learning Disciplines in Effective Work Outcomes

David A. L. Coldwell, *University of KwaZulu-Natal*
Mervywn Williamson, *University of KwaZulu-Natal*
Sheila Cameron, *The Open University*

Abstract

This paper explores the comparative importance of learning organization disciplines in generating effective work outcomes in HR employees in two different national cultural contexts. It is suggested that the importance of the learning disciplines in different countries may be influenced by prevailing cultural differences. A survey of human resource practitioners' perceptions of the importance of the five disciplines in generating effective work outcomes in a single UK and South African tertiary educational institution was conducted to explore these aspects empirically. A specific measuring instrument was devised to operationalise the five discipline model adapted from Senge's (1990) seminal work. Results reveal that although the ranking of the five disciplines is cross nationally similar, the influence of national culture appears to affect the emphasis put on specific aspects. Implications of these findings are discussed briefly.

Paper

Introduction

Research Background

Many researchers and management theorists argue that a wide range of behavioural and management theories and models may not be universal and that many have been developed in industrialized countries and based largely on cultural assumptions predominating in that specific national cultural context (Alavi and McCormick, 2003; Hofstede, 1980; Leung and Bond, 1989). Although the learning organization model has been accepted by management practitioners and academics in many countries, its underlying theory and principles are grounded in the west, more specifically the USA. Thus, perceptions of the fit between the values of the five core disciplines and effective work outcomes model in non-western countries may be influenced by cultural dimensions predominating in specific national contexts. The purpose of the current study is to investigate these aspects more fully in an exploratory empirical study of HR staff in two cross-national institutions of higher learning. Results indicate that although the ranking of the five discipline values is similar in their perceived efficacy in effective work outcomes, national cultural aspects may affect specific aspects.

Research Question

Based on the extant cross cultural and learning organization literature, the primary research question is: "Do cultural value dimensions in specific national contexts

influence employees' perceptions of the fit between specific learning organization discipline values and effective job outcomes?"

Overview of the Literature

Learning organizations

Senge (1990: 3) defines the learning organization as: "organizations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people continually learn how to learn together". Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1991: 1) define the learning organisation as: "an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic objectives". Garvin (1993: 80) defines a learning organization as "an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights". A learning organization subscribes to specific value configurations that are shared by individuals these include: personal mastery, mental models, team learning, shared vision and systems thinking.

Organization-values fit

Billsberry et al (2005) note that person-organization fit is defined by researchers differently but that there are underlying conceptual similarities. Against the backdrop of individual-organizational interface, two underlying dimensions are generally considered: the goodness of person-organization fit through mutual agreements (e.g. in terms of value similarities) or how the one fitted into the other (e.g. how effectively an organization fulfills the needs of the individual). Chatman (1991) emphasizes the importance of values in workplace fit research since values are known to influence individual behaviour, and are regarded as being 'fundamental and relatively enduring' (Chatman, 1991, p. 459).

The idea of cross-cultural differences in a globalized world

The idea that at person-organization values such a those propounded by Senge (1990) in his five disciplines thesis can be assumed to have been generally accepted through the ongoing process of globalization runs counter to the empirical work conducted by Hofstede (1980). Defining the term culture has proven problematic in cross-cultural studies. Besides having many definitions, some aspects of culture can take on different meanings with different people (Pheng and Yuquan, 2002). Consequently, researchers have argued for the adoption of a systems approach in order to help understand the complexities of culture. In this regard Hofstede (1980: 32) that: "cross-cultural studies presuppose a systems approach, by which I mean that any element of the total system called culture should be eligible for analysis, regardless of the discipline that usually deals with such elements. At all levels of (national) cultures, these are phenomena on all levels: individuals, groups, organisations, or society as a whole may be relevant". It has been noted that American management practices may not be appropriate or successful when implemented in societies with cultural values that differ from those held in the United States (Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Hofstede (Pheng and Yuquan, 2002) argues that people carry

“mental programs” that are developed and reinforced through their experience, and that these “mental programs” contain a component of national culture. Hofstede (1980) identified four value dimensions to depict characteristics of national cultures. These dimensions include: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Based on his extensive research, each country studied was characterized by a score on each of these dimensions. The current study draws on Hofstede’s findings to delineate the national cultural characteristics of the UK and South Africa

Method

Participants and Procedure

The UK and SA samples consisted of 38 and 22 respondents respectively. Respondents in each sample received a hard copy of exactly the same self-administered questionnaire. To ensure consistency, the same sample strategy was adopted to select the samples in the two different countries. The sample subjects were human resource practitioners employed at a single tertiary educational institution in the UK and in South Africa. It was deemed appropriate to select human resource practitioners as subjects as these subjects are often at the forefront of employee development, learning and knowledge management strategies in organizations.

Sample subjects were selected by means of a convenience sampling technique. The researchers approached the human resource practitioners with a request to participate in the survey. All responses were anonymous. An examination of the characteristics of the two samples reveals some differences. Gender ratios between the two-country samples differed marginally. UK sample: males comprised 5% and females 95%. SA sample males comprised 18% and females 82%. The mean age 46 years and 41 years for the UK and SA samples respectively. Mean job tenures were, in turn, 10 years and 12 years for the UK and SA samples. Educational levels for both samples did not vary significantly, although two human resource practitioners in the UK possessed doctorates.

Measuring instruments

The instrument uses a 5-point, “strongly agree” to “strongly disagree” Likert-type scale ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. The combined scale consisting of 25 items for the two samples together (n=56) generated a Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient of 0.74.

To test for construct validity, the variables in the scale were subjected to a principle components factor analysis with a varimax rotation in order to obtain a simple structure.

The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin MSA=6.42 with Bartlett’s test of Sphericity= 0.000, suggesting that the data were middling material for factor analysis. Although nine components achieved eigen values >1, the first seven rotated components explained 65.4% of the variance. No clear interpretable pattern emerged from the analysis as there were multiple variable loadings under various components. However, it was possible to discern: a general component across all five disciplines and four distinct

components namely: systems thinking, personal mastery, team learning and shared vision. The factor analysis supported the original model although there appeared to be a powerful general learning discipline component emerging from the rotated data.

Findings

Hofstede's (1980) study revealed that the UK and SA vary in terms of their cultural contexts. The UK has higher scores on the cultural dimensions of individualism (89, 65) and masculinity (66, 63) than South Africa. South Africa, on the other hand, scores higher on power distance (49, 35) and uncertainty avoidance (49, 35) than the UK. Results of two- independent samples T- tests indicate that there are significant differences between the UK sample and South African sample on three measures: Personal mastery, mental models and shared vision. The South African sample reflects higher perceptions of personal mastery (mean 23.27, $t = -3.641$, $df = 58$, $p = 0.001$) than their UK counterparts. In the case of mental models, it is the UK sample (mean 20.13, $t = 2.571$, $df = 58$, $p = 0.013$) that has a higher perception than South Africa. Perceptions of shared vision appears higher in the South African sample (mean 17.27, $t = -3.756$, $df = 58$, $p = 0.000$) than the UK

Mean scores of the scales (measuring instruments are similarly ranked by respondents in each cross national sample of HR employees, with personal mastery reflecting the highest mean score, followed by team learning. In the case of mental models and systems thinking, the ranking order is reversed between samples. In both samples, the measure of shared vision reflects the lowest mean score.

Discussion

The ranking of the five disciplines by the Human Resource practitioners in the South African and United Kingdom samples was found to be similar suggesting that the relative importance of the disciplines in generating effective work outcomes was considered in much the same way cross-nationally. In other words, it seem that learning discipline values in generating the kind of person-organizational fit that are deemed important in effective work outcomes has generality cross cultures. However, significant differences in cross-national mean scores were found on specific disciplines suggesting the influence of cross-cultural factors. South African respondents scored significantly higher mean scores on personal mastery and shared vision dimensions and significantly lower mean scores on the mental models dimension compared with their UK colleagues pointing to different national cultural oriented influences. The findings tentatively suggest that although the person-organization fit of learning organization values are deemed to be salient cross nationally and are considered important in work effectiveness, there appear to be culturally specific prioritizations.

References

Alavi, S.B. and McCormick, J. 2003. Some structural considerations for applying the Learning organization model to Iranian organizations. Available, <http://www.members.tripod.com> (Accessed 23 July 2007).

Argyris, C. and Schon, D. 1996. Organizational learning II: Theory, method and practice. New York: Addison-Wesley.

Billsberry, J., Ambrosini, V., Moss-Jones, J. and Marsh, P. (2005) 'Some suggestions for mapping organizational members' sense of fit'. *Journal of Business and Psychology*, **19**, 555–70.

Garvin, D. 1993. Building learning organizations. *Harvard Business Review*, 10, 803 – 813.

Chatman, J. (1991). 'Matching people and organizations: Selection and socialization in public accounting firms'. *Administrative Science Quarterly*, **36**, 459–84.

Gersick, C.J.G. 1991. Revolutionary change theories: a multi level exploration of the punctuated equilibrium paradigm. *Academy of Management review*. (16)1 10-36.

Greenwald, J. 1996. Re-inventing Sears. *Time*, 23 December, 53-55.

Hofstede, G. 1980. Culture's consequences: International differences in work-related values. London: Sage Publishing.

Pedler, M., Burgoyne, J. and Boydell, T. 1991. The learning company: A strategy for sustainable development. New York: McGraw- Hill.

Pheng, L.S. and Yuquan, S. 2002. An exploratory study of Hofstede's cross-cultural dimensions in construction projects. *Management Decision*, 40(1), 7 – 16.

Senge, P.M. 1990. The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organization. New York: Random House.