CULTURAL BARRIERS TO THE LEARNING ORGANIZATION IN CHINESE SOCIETY

An Ti Lee

National Chinyi Technical College in Taiwan, Lecturer

Abstract

Along with Senge's success in proposing the concept of a learning organization, Taiwan's society has jumped on the bandwagon regardless of a second thought on the notion. The central idea of Senge's learning organization requires five disciplines: system thinking, personal mastery, mental modes, shared visions, and team building. The primary purpose of the study is to explore the implication of Senge's learning organization concept in Chinese culture. Particular attentions are given to the following questions: Is the notion of the learning organization applicable to a different culture? What kind of challenges and barrier does the application face? The study examines some principal characteristics of Chinese society first. From the review of literature, the study realizes that the basic cultural elements rooted in Chinese society are contrary to the five disciplines of Senge's learning organization.

Keyword

Learning organization, organizational learning, Cross-culture study, Chinese culture

1

[1] An Ti Lee, 10 Chen Chan ST, Taichung Taiwan R.O.C.Tel: 8864-23924505#7714, Fax 8864-23929584. E-mail: andiey2k@yahoo.com

1. INTRODUCTION

Apparently, learning as the core value of a company is hard to disagree (Stata,1989 ; Senge,1990; Redding,1997; Tsang, 1997)Nevertheless, we may oversimplify the key elements of organization accomplishment and think learning as an omnipotent dose dealing every problem in an organization.

Although Seng's conceptual works provide ideal scenery for the management, putting concepts into action is not so easy. Senge believes that all companies should possess the characteristic of a learning organization in order to achieve continuous success. According to Senge, a learning organization can be achieved by practicing five disciplines: a shared vision, personal mastery, strong mental models, group learning, and system thinking(Senge, 1990; 1991). The assumption is quite rational and inexpugnable, but we can soon realize that there is a knowing-doing gap. The job of changing one's mental model and behavior is such big challenge, not even talking about changing the organization as a whole.

Another complication is the generalization of management theories proposed in Western culture to other cultures. The five disciplines working well in the West might lead to destruction in the East. For example, Chinese culture respects highly the patriarchal system. Anyone who disagrees with an authority is considered ingratitude. Transplanting different cultural values to another culture without any modification is questionable.

This article attempts to explore the application of the five disciplines works in Chinese culture. What challenges does it meet? Do we need to modify the learning tools in a different culture? To discuss the above issues, the article is divided to four sections. The first describes the definitions and concepts of learning organizations. Then the second section explores Chinese culture. Extending these discussions, the third section presents a critique of learning organizations based on Chinese values. Finally we derive a series of propositions from the review of the key Chinese values.

2. THE NOTION OF THE LEARNING ORGANIZATON

The paper cites Senge's definition of learning organizations since it has been the most favorable and agreeable definition in Taiwan (Senge, 1990):
  "*A learning organization is an organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behavior to reflect new knowledge and insights.*" According to Senge, the learning organization builds on some key premises. (Senge, 1990):
 1. Not only individuals learn, but so do Organizations learn.
 2. Human beings are born learners,
 3. Generative learning is essential to success.

  A true learning organization, in Senge's opinion, employs five disciplines(Senge, 1991):
 1.   System thinking
System thinking is a framework to see things as a whole. System thinking helps us to break the system boundaries and open up our vision.
 2.   Personal Mastery
Individuals can master their professions. Organizational learning is based on how well a person learns.
3. Mental Models

A frame of mind that influences our perspectives to the world and, in turn, affects our behavior. An organization can not change unless organizational members change their mental models.

4. Shared vision building

The team members of an organization share an organizational vision with the same mission. A shared vision motivates employees to do things voluntarily.

5. Team learning

The ability for individuals to learn together in order to enhance collective capacity and create organizational learning. Team learning is the base of organizational learning.

Senge believes that the learning organization can trigger human beings' intrinsic needs. He concludes that the learning organization to a company's competitive edge in the rapidly changing world.

3. CHINESE CULTURE CHARATERISTICS

Culture is defined as shared values, social norms, group learning and beliefs (Hofstede, 1993; Schein, 1985; Wang, 1994) Culture is a significant force that influences people's behavior, attitude, and mental models. Accordingly, culture plays an important role in organizations. (Schein, 1985). Cultural factors (the assumptions, perceptions, feelings) can influence implicitly the way organizational members behave (Wang & Satow, 1994; Kaye & Taylor, 1997). Scholars began to question the universal applicability of management theories developed from one culture to other cultures (Hofstede, 1993; Schein, 1996; Tsang, 1997). Hence we need to examine Chinese cultural characteristics and their influence to management functions. So we can be aware of the cultural constraints of the learning organization theory:

3.1 The emphasis on harmony

Confucianism has dominated Chinese culture and demonstrated significant influence on Chinese values for thousands of years. Its core value is the pursuit of harmony. Harmonious relationships are considered to be critical to management and personal success (Satow & Wang, 1994). To achieve a harmonious state, there are certain rules that one must follow. For example, people shall follow a tight social framework and acknowledge their social positions without breaking the boundaries. "The king must act as a king; the subordinates must act as subordinates; A father as a father; a son as a son. Any confusion and break of the social levels will lead to social destruction," said Confucius. Obedience serves the crucial means to maintain the social hierarchy. The old saying "Parents are never wrong" explains best the situation. On the contrary, behaviors such as argument, defensive reasoning and conflicts to one's seniority are considered a threat to Chinese social framework. Such behavior and attitude will certainly not be approved.

3.2 The consideration with "face"

Chinese are very concerned with face (Tsang, 1997). They have to complement others especially the superiors and avoid criticizing people in public. Giving one face means a big favor to him and shall be paid back. An adult is expected to deal with the sensitive issue of face in Chinese society. In addition, one can not be too assertive even when he is right since such behavior will be considered as an insult to others. To save face, the art of equivocation and circumlocution is quite important in Chinese communication pattern. These strategies are suggested for generations in order to keep one from losing face. For

example, never reject one's request in front of him, even you know the request is impossible. When protecting individual's "face" is the top priority in Chinese culture, a more sentimental management style is preferred. Apparently, the pursuit of truth and professionalism will not be taken seriously when it violates the principal value in Chinese society. Therefore, too many political factors have to be considered when making a decision in Chinese society.

3.3 Utilitarianism in learning

Another value seldom revealed to the West is the philosophy of utilitarianism in learning. In Tan dynasty, an official personnel selection system was invented to recruit more competent officials. Anyone who outranked in the national exam could work in the government. The strict social hierarchy was thus loosened up. An individual had the chance to change the social status of himself and that of his family first time in Chinese history. This was considered to be a great social revolution in China. Learning became a means that could bring honor to one's family and clan. To honor one's family and change one's social status, the whole family did everything to support their male family members to study. "Ten years' hard study in return of honor" is the belief rooted in Chinese society. Therefore learning is considered not a personal business but the whole family's business. Students were taught to tolerate any inhumane lessons and to put every effort in learning in order to achieve highly in the national exam. Even now Chinese high school students study almost ten hours a day, including holidays to prepare for the national exam. Learning in Chinese society is not generative learning but a vehicle to break the social constraints. Since learning is to fulfill a family's expectation regardless of personal interests and attitudes, not many persons enjoy learning. Once an individual passes the national exam, he will not be so eager to learn. Influenced by the traditional values and learning attitudes, the management tends to use extrinsic incentives to promote learning and do not believe in generative learning.

3.4 The valuation of good relationships

Along with the traditional values on harmony and "face", it comes the valuation of good relationships. The adverb "personal network is more essential than competency" illustrates the situation. This virtue helps Chinese to team up and creates many more opportunities. Therefore, a task-oriented person is doomed to become a loser because he fails to value the importance of good relationships and in turn, is supposed to have fewer opportunities for success. To maintain a good relationship, a person is advised not to be open-minded and talk less. Any incautious wording might lead to the fatality of one's career.

In addition, it is necessary to work at maintaining rapport rather than confronting differences (Estienne, 1997). The idea of confronting differences is a cultural pattern familiar to most Westerners compare to that of Chinese society. In the West, people tend to "get on with it" when problems have occurred. This resolution to face up a problem is encouraged in the West, but is considered a lethal weapon to rapport in Chinese society. Chinese are expected to be obedient to the superiors even the superiors are unreasonable. The best problem solution is time. Chinese believe that as time goes by, the problem will fade. Hence, they do not encourage a person to take action on confronts.

4 THE FIVE DISCIPLINES AND CHINESE CULTURE

The fundamental ideas existed in the five disciplines are system thinking,

personal mastery, mental modes, shared visions and team learning. The section of this article intends to examine the notions behind the five disciplines under the perspectives of Chinese cultural values:

4.1 System thinking

System thinking is a framework to see things as interrelated. It expects us to break the system boundaries and open up our vision. On this perspective, Chinese also has the tendency to think every aspect of a problem before making any decision. Yet the aspects of a problem that Chinese focus is usually concerned with personal relationship. Chinese have to be very careful if the solution will hinder anyone's benefit. This kind of thinking pattern emphasizes on harmonious interpersonal relationship. Compared to Senge's system thinking, Chinese put relationship as the top concern.

Proposition 1: In the Chinese society , the management prioritize personal relationship in system thinking rather than professional judgement.

4.2 Personal mastery

Personal mastery is another discipline that Senge strongly recommended in the learning organization. Personal mastery means the continuous pursuit of proficiency. The discipline requires lifelong energy and commitment to learning. To most Chinese, learning serves only a means to achieve personal success. The family and the education system never really foster a learning environment. For example, any learning which is not related to the national exam is discouraged and most of time forbidden. If a student shows interests in some other "useless" activities or subjects, parents will try to guide him back on the right track. Physical punishment is frequently practiced on the belief of reinforcing learning and improving grades. In the end, learning becomes a torture and punishment to most people. Most Chinese are passive learners. Generative learning is never really valued in Chinese society.

Proposition 2: In the Chinese culture oriented organizations, learning serves as a means not an end. The learning motivation usually concerns with collective expectation, not self-fulfillment. Therefore, learning has to satisfy collective expectation first before consider individual expectation.

4.3   Mental Model

Organizations are the product of its members' thinking. To enhance organizational adaptability, the mental model of organizations shall have the ability to accept new values and perception. This idea of challenging old assumption is rooted in the disciplines, mental model. In Chinese society, seniority plays a dominant role in shaping social norms and values. The past has a significant meaning to the seniority. Changing cultures means a break from the past. Disagreement and questioning to the old values also mean challenges to the seniority. Since respect to seniority is the cornerstone to social order, a person who doubts the old values is disapproved and considered as the origin of chaos.

On the other hand, the valuation of good relationship also blocks Chinese from confronting with the superiors. The superiors usually have more personal connections. In Chinese society, personal network is the key to promotion, to enter a company, and to do everything else, everything indeed including not paying for the parking ticket. Mutual benefit is the keystone to personal success. Moreover, disagreement to the seniority may eventually lead to a hostile situation and closure to one's personal connection.

Provision 3: In the Chinese oriented organizations, the organizational members tend to question new idea and skeptical to new working methods. Their learning method tends to be experience-based and follow the old working way. The new way of doing things has to be introduced by the seniority gradually. Otherwise, the impact of new learning will be negative.

4.4 Shared visions

To Senge, a shared vision is an essential means that guides and binds the organizational members. To create mutual visions, it needs team members to express their ideas to one another frankly without fear. However, the practice of two-way communication, probably a common practice familiar to the West, is a very difficult process in Chinese culture. Chinese are advised to listen to the seniority from their childhood. Keeping silence is a virtue to most Chinese because they believe that listening can learn more. Besides, talking too much might accidentally confront the superiors, breaking a harmonious relation. Therefore, the communication pattern is usually an one-way and top-down process. The vision builders are doubtlessly the superiors.

On the other hand, Senge suggested a learning tool; that is, dialogue. Dialogue is a form of deliberate talking and thinking. Through a process of continuos confronting critical issues, the communication block such as defensive reasoning is overcome. To Senge, defensiveness can be overcome through the practice of dialogue and argument. Yet he underestimated the sensitive issue of "face" in Chinese culture. Defensive reasoning is a tool to protect one's face in Chinese society. Chinese do not like to make things clear because it not only humiliate the person who uses defensive reasoning to save face, but also violates Chinese communication principle. Chinese prefer things to be vague. They believe in that way, it will leave rooms for things to change.

Provision 4a: A shared vision in Chinese-oriented organization usually follows the superior's idea .

Provision 4b: The art of equivocation and circumlocution is the major communication pattern in Chinese organizations for effective communication. An open-mind dialogue to the seniority should be done in private and practiced with delicacy.

4.5 Team learning

Chinese culture can be characterized as collectivist based on Hofstede(1980)'s individualism-collectivism dimension. The social structure of Chinese society, which values rapport and harmony highly, fosters a friendly environment for team working. In a recent study on organization decision-making, managers felt much confidant when making decisions as a group (Satow & Wang, 1994). The working ethic encourages Chinese to work as a team. Unfortunately, the emphasis on team working does not mean encouragement on team learning.

China started a genius personnel selection system, providing the lower class persons an opportunity to alter his social class by the year 587AD(Wang, 1991) So long as a person passed the national exam, he could improve his social level. The exam was divided into different levels based on strict competition. Appropriate official positions were offered according to different levels of exams. The national exam not only preserved social justice in a feudal society but also

enhanced the organizational effectiveness in Tang Dynasty. The national exam system has a great impact on Chinese social system for a long time. Until now Taiwan and Mainland China still practice a similar national exam system.

Education is thus considered to be the only and major vehicle that can change one's social status. Learning is not for self-fulfillment but for the honor of the whole family. Learning based on one's own interest is taken as being selfish. Learning is thought meaningless unless it can benefit the family. To secure one's learning effort, he has to outrank his peers. Therefore, parents and teachers seldom encourage team learning.

Provision 6 In Chinese-oriented organizations, the learning is adaptive and competitive. If the result of team learning hurt individual learning benefit, the willingness of team learning would be reduced.

CONCLUSION

Based on the previous discussion, the study obtains the following suggestions:

1. Thinking in Chinese way is important before applying the Western managerial theory.

Chinese prefer incremental change for the purpose of preserving social order. They think that hasty or dramatic change is inappropriate and destructive. Chinese are just not used to challenging the traditional metal frames in a rushed way.

2. Fostering a learning culture in a paternalistic society requires system and senior management support.

Building a learning organization requires a total commitment from every level of a company. Learning is difficult especially in Chinese culture when the senior management does not appreciate its value and takes it as only a means to make an easy way out of the company's problem. Companies need to cultivate their learning attitude and commitments first. Then the company should support and encourage creative ideas. Only the system and senior management free up their employees from performance pressure and support the free flow of idea exchanges, can the employees feel conductive to learning.

5. To cultivate favorable learning attitude requires an incentive system and training tailored to individual needs.

To stimulate Chinese employees' learning, the employees must feel the benefits exceeding the costs. The training programs have to integrate the disciplines to their work; otherwise they will be reluctant to learn.

Although there are abundant of research on Senge's learning organization, little work addresses organizational learning in cultural perspectives. The paper combines insights from Senge's learning organization and Chinese cultural values to derive a series of propositions. Cross-cultural study can help the management to modify learning tools before they jump on the bandwagon. In addition, understanding cultural impact can reduce bias and adapt learning to Chinese culture.

REFERENCE

Appelbaum, S. H. & Reichart, W.(1997). " How to Measure An Organization's
Learning Ability: A Learning Orientation: Part 1", *Journal of Workplace*

Learning, 9(7), 229-239.

Argyris, C.(1991)."Teaching Smart People How to Learn", *Harvard Business Review* (May-June), 99-109.

Argyris, C.(1994)."Good Communication That Blocks Learning", *Harvard Business Review* (July-August), 77-85.

Estienne, M.(1997). "The Art of Cross-Cultural Management: An Alternative Approach to Training and Development", Journal of European Industrial Training, 21(1),14-18.

Garvin, D. A.(1993). "Building a Learning Organization", *Harvard Business Review* (July-August),78-91.

Glasmeier, A. K.; Fuellhart, K.; Feller, I.; Mark, M. M.(1998). "The Relevance of Firm-Learning Theories to the Design and Evaluation of Manufacturing Modernization Programs", *Economic Development Quarterly,* 12(2)(May),107-124.

Hansen,M. T., Nohria, N., and Tierney, T.(1999)."What's Your Strategy for Managing Knowledge?"*Harvard Business Review,* (March/April).

Henderson, S.(1997)."Black Swans Don't Fly Double Loops: the Limits of the Learning Organization?", *The Learning Organiz ation*, 4(3), 99-105.

Hemmington, N.(1999). "Themes and Issues in continuing Professional Development, *Continuing Professional Development*, 2,47-51.

Ho, Samuel K.M.(1999)."Total Learning Organization", *The Learning Organization* ,6(3),116-120.

Hofstede, G.(1980)." Culture's consequence: International Differences in Work-Related Values, Sage, Beverly Hills, CA.

Hong, J.(1999)."Structuring for Organization Learning", *The Learning Organization,6(9),* 173-186.

Huber, G.(1991)."Organizational Learning" , Organizational Science, 2, 88-115.

Iles, P.(1994),"Developing Learning Environments: Challenges for Theory, Research and Practice", *Journal of European Industrial Training*, 18(3),3-9.

Kaye, M. & Taylor, W. G.K.(1997)."Expatriate Culture Shock in China: A Study in the Beijing hotel Industry", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*,12(8),496-510.

Kim. D. H.(1993)."The Link between Individual and Organizational Learning", *Sloan Management Review*, 35(1),37-50.

Kock, N.F., McQueen, R.J. & Corner, J.L.(1997)."The Nature of Data, Information, and Knowledge Exchanges in Business Processes: Implications for Process Improvement and Organizational Learning", *The Learning Organization*, 4(2), 70-80.

Kofman, F. & Senge, P. M. (1993)."Communities of Commitment: The Heart of

Learning Organization", in Chawla & Renesxh'(ed.) *Learning Organizations: Developing Cultures for Tomorrow's Workplace*, Portland, Oregon: Productivity Press, 1995,14-43.

Liedtka J.M., Haskins, M.E., Rosenblum, J.W., &Weber, J.(1997), "The Generative Cycle: Linking Knowledge and Relationship", *Sloan Management Review*(Fall),39(1).

Lynn,G.S.(1998)."New Product Team Learning: Developing and Profiting from Your Knowledge Capital," *California Management Review*,40 (4)(Summer),74-92.

Marsick, V. J. & Watkins, K. B.(1999)."Looking Again at Learning in the Learning Organization: A Tool That Can Turn Into A Weapon", The Learning Organiztion,6(5),207-211.

Martin, R.(1993)."Changing the Mind of the Corporation", Harvard Business Review(November-December), 81-94.

Morey, D., & Frangioso, T.(1998)"Aligning an Organization for Learning: the Six Principles of Effective Learning", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, 1(4),308-314.

Powell, G.N.(1998)."Reinforcing and Extending Toady's Organization: The Simultaneous Pursuit of Person-Organization Fit and Diversity," *Organizational Dynamics,*(Winter),50-61.

Prewitt, E.(1997)."What Managers Should Know About How Adults Learn", *Harvard Management Update*
(Jan.).

Redding, J,(1997)."Hardwiring the Learning Organization, "*Training and Development*,(August),61-67.

Rogers, C.R. & Roethlisberger, F.J.(1991)."Barriers and Gateways to Communication", *Harvard Business Review*(November-December),105-111.

Satow T. & Wang, Z.M."Cultural and Organizational Factors in Human Resource Management in China and Japan", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 9(4), 1994, 3-11.

Schein, E.H.(1985)"Defining Organizational Culture"in Shafritz , J.M.& Ott, J.S.(Ed.), *Classics of Organization Theory : Orlando, Florida, Harcourt Brace College* Publishers,1996,430-441.

Schein, E.H.(1996)."Three Cultures of Management: The Key to Organization Learning", *Sloan Management Review*, 38(Fall)(1),9-20.

Senge, P.M.(1990)."The Leader's New Work: Building Learning Organization," *Sloan Management Review*, (Fall),7-23.

Senge, P. M.(1991)."The Learning Organization Made Plain,"*Training & Development*,(Oct.),37-44.

Slater,S.F., and Narver, J. C.(1995),"Market Orientation and the Learning Organization," *Journal of Marketing*,59(July)53-74.

Tsang,E. W.K., (1997)"Organizational Learning and the Learning Organization: A Dichotomy Between Descriptive and Prescriptive Research," *Human Relations*(50(1)),73-87.

Walker R., &Massey C.(1999) Aiming for Organizational Learning: Consultants as Agents of Change, "*The Learning Organization*, 6(1),38-44.

Wang, Z.M.(1990). "Human Resource Management in China", in Pieper, R.(ed.), *Human Resource Management: An International Comparison*, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, 1990, 195-210..

Wang, Z.M. (1991). "Recent Development in Industrial and Organizational Psychology in PRC", in Cooper, C. and Robertson, R.T. (Eds), International Review of Industrial and Organizational Psychology, 6, Wiley, New York , NY, 1-15.

Wang, Z.M. & Satow T. (1994)."Leadership Styles and Organizational Effectiveness in Chinese-Japanese Joint Ventures", *Journal of Managerial Psychology*, 9(4), 31-36.

Williams, M.J.(1997)."Agility in Learning: An Essential for Evolving Organizations—and People", Harvard Management Update(May).

Wright, P.C. & Belcourt, M.(1995),"Down in the Trenches: Learning in a Learning Organization", *The Learning Organization*, 2(1),34-38.

Zuber-Skerritt, O.(1995)."Developing a Learning Organization Through Management Education by Action Learning, *The Learning Organization*, 2(2),36-46.