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**One Size does not fit all: The Learning
Organisation comes to Singapore**

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we question the cross-cultural validity of the key propositions of Learning Organization (LO) theory. Using two Singapore-based case studies, we argue that LO theory as promoted by Senge cannot be culturally neutral nor universally applicable. Rather, it includes a number of assumptions about both 'learning' and 'organization' that are specific to western cultural contexts. After describing the study and key findings, we present two differing commentaries: one from an 'insider', a Singaporean practitioner who is the fieldwork researcher, and one from an 'outsider' - a non-Singaporean (New Zealand) academic. Our research suggests that the key constructs of the LO are seen as attractive in some ways, but as going against the grain of what is seen as Singapore's national culture, and that the tensions between 'Learning Organization' and 'Singapore Culture' make a thorough-going adoption of Senge's LO principles in Singapore organizations to be impossible.

KEY WORDS

Learning Organisation, Singapore, National Culture, Organisational Learning

ONE SIZE DOES NOT FIT ALL: THE LEARNING ORGANISATION COMES TO SINGAPORE

INTRODUCTION

In this paper we present and comment on a Singaporean study of the 'Learning Organization' (LO). We describe the ways that LO principles are both embraced and resisted in two government organizations. Peter Senge popularised the concept of the Learning Organization *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990, and since then it has gained wide currency among practitioners around the world.

We argue that LO theory as promoted by Senge and his colleagues (Senge 1990; Senge et al., 1994; 1999), cannot be culturally neutral or universally applicable. Rather, it includes a number of assumptions about both 'learning' and 'organization' that are embedded in certain specific western cultural contexts. Even though the literature on LO is vast, there are no in-depth studies of LO and the ways that national cultures influence, impede or facilitate LO practices in organizations. Management concepts or tools that are successful in a particular national culture may be inappropriate in another, as different cultures and political contexts shape people's values and behaviours differently. This study calls for further empirical research on situating the LO concept within an understanding of the national cultural framework which organizations are embedded. After presenting the case and key findings, we then present our analysis in the form of two different commentaries: one from the point of view of an 'insider', a Singaporean practitioner (who is the researcher), and one from the point of view of an 'outsider' - a non-Singaporean (New Zealand) academic.

Within the learning organisation literature, several authors have acknowledged that there is a recognised need for more attention to cultural issues (Taylor and Easterby-Smith 1999); Popper and Lipshitz (2000); Lorbiecki (2001); Wang and Ahmed (2003); Rodrigues, Perez and del Val (2003)], as culture shapes the behaviour and attitudes of organisational members it can serve as an analytical device [O'Reilly (1996)] to make sense of the interactions and its influence in facilitating or impeding learning. Though most of these authors have focused on organisational culture, the awareness, of the broader societal culture that has great impact in the implementation of any new initiatives, is brought to attention of academics and practitioners of organisational learning. On this basis, the study is an attempt to relate and understand the practices of organisational learning in a specific national culture.

THE CASE STUDY RESEARCH

This case study research addresses a number of questions about the relationship between the concept of LO and issues of national culture. Is the LO concept independent of culture? Does it have cross-cultural validity? In particular, is it compatible with Singapore culture that is characterized as being hierarchical, authoritarian and disciplined? To answer these questions a qualitative case study was carried out in Singapore with two contrasting public sector organizations. In Singapore the government uses the public bureaucracy as the major vehicle for formulating and effecting social and developmental

changes. Thus, the implementation of new policies or management concepts can be best studied in public agencies that are bureaucratically instituted. In this case, public organisations were also well suited to the study due to the fact that LO was officially incorporated as national policy.

Method

The researcher is Singaporean and a practitioner in Singapore government organizations with many years' experience in organizational training and development. This study was based on the proposition that the cultural values of Singapore, as the researcher had previously experienced them as a Singapore practitioner, can be seen as antithetical to the LO concept. The study inquired into what public servants in the case organizations saw 'Singapore culture' as consisting of, and how it related to LO ideas. Ethnographic-style fieldwork was carried out in the two organizations, with a period of six weeks spent in each. The in-depth interviews were supplemented with participant observations and analysis of company documents. The aim of the analysis was to explore the meaning provided by the participants and retain, as much as possible, the wording used in their comments. The analysis of data in this inquiry was based on the process of category development [Constas (1992)]. Some preliminary findings of the study have also been presented to and validated by some Singapore government practitioners [Retna (2000)].

The study asked how participants made sense of the concept of 'Learning Organization', as well as exploring their perceptions of 'Singapore culture', and the relationships between the two. A particular focus was the extent to which prevailing conceptions and practices of traditional Singapore culture hinder, facilitate or amend the implementation of LO principles. The two case organizations involved in this research are a school and a large regulatory agency that are referred to respectively as New Millennium School (NMS) and Super Security Agency (SSA).

NMS is a new school that commenced with its first intake of students in the year 2000. The Principal is one of the pioneer participants in the Group on Organizational Learning Education (GOLE) that was initiated by the Ministry of Education in 1999. GOLE consists of selected schools that underwent training on organizational learning principles and tools. Prior to taking over the school the principal has also undergone extensive training in LO concepts and is known to be an advocate of LO disciplines. NMS began its journey to be an LO right from its inception.

SSA is a traditional and bureaucratic organization that has been entrenched with a line and staff structure and culture. In 1997, the Head of the Civil Service announced that the public service "must be a thinking, trying and learning public service" to cope with Singapore's fast paced complex environment [MITA (2003)]. As a result various government departments, including SSA, were involved in policymaking and in strategies to meet the challenges of human development in terms of learning, creativity and innovation. All the departments involved in this project were trained in LO approaches by consultants from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Being highly impressed and convinced with the LO concept and tools, SSA spearheaded the implementation of LO in Singapore.

'Learning Organization' and 'Singapore culture' were the two key constructs used in the research design, and they are described below.

‘Singapore Culture’

This study has been carried out from a Singaporean perspective, and the concept of ‘Singapore Culture’ was used both as a heuristic - in developing that the proposition that the cultural values of Singapore were antithetical to the LO concept - and as a subject for inquiry in the study itself. The secondary data on the culture of Singapore represents it as the epitome of the disciplined country. Its economic progress and achievements are seen as impressive, and credited to its government for its sound policies in managing and bringing Singapore to what it is today [Cunningham and Gerrard (2000)]. Singaporeans take pride in its authoritarianism and hierarchical structure, and attribute its success to the one-party strong political leadership that has been in power since independence [Quah (1996)]. Characteristics such as control, discipline, repression, compliance, inequality, competitiveness and capitalism are now internalised as ‘Singapore culture’. To a large extent this confluence of factors has been seen as responsible for its socioeconomic development [Cunha (2002)]. According to some commentators Singapore’s three decades of high economic growth is believed to have been to be achieved at a cost of exhorting people to behave in a particular way of working and thinking for national survival [Kong and Yeoh (2003)]. One of the key traits that is considered crucial for Singapore’s capitalist success is “discipline” [Offe (1984)].

Geert Hofstede has been influential in the field of cross-cultural management for his work on four dimensions of cultural variability in workplace contexts, and he has written about Singapore [Hofstede (1980, 1988, 2001)]. While his construct is contested by some [Dimmocks and Walker (2000); McSweeney (2002)] a couple of his dimensions such as power distance, individualism versus collectivism and Confucian dynamism were used for exploratory and analytical purposes without committing to Hofstede’s underlying theoretical assumptions. The three dimensions are briefly explained in relation to Singapore’s scores in the study of Hofstede’s national work related differences.

Power Distance. This refers to the extent to which a society accepts that power in institutions and organisations is distributed unequally. On this dimension, Singapore was classified as high.

Individualism/collectivism. The extent to which people are responsible for themselves and concerned with their own interests versus being members of groups that are responsible for the individual and where group interests are primary. Singapore scored high on collectivism.

Confucian Dynamism. It refers to the extent to which a culture emphasises values of Confucianism. Countries scoring high on this dimension are associated with values such as persistence, ordering relationships by status and observing this order and having a sense of shame. Hence, in Hofstede’s framework Singapore culture is characterised by an acceptance of unequal power, an emphasis on group interests, and a concern for status and order.

In meeting the new demands and challenges for competitiveness and realizing the importance of the new knowledge economy, Singapore government launched the “Thinking School, Learning Nation” (TSLN) vision in 1997 to enable Singapore “to

compete and stay ahead” [Gopinathan (2001)]. The new slogan heralds two major directions for schools and organizations: ‘Thinking Schools’, intended to ensure that schools meet future challenges, and ‘Learning Nation’, aimed at fostering a learning culture in and beyond the school environment [Gopinathan (2001)]. The TSLN vision requires educators and organizational leaders to develop a range of abilities that would facilitate a learning mindset and culture among people. The values seen as important in embracing the vision include motivating people to value and share their learning, facilitating open communication and encouraging a questioning attitude and experimentation. The call for a revolution in the way Singaporeans go about thinking and carrying out their daily practices is a significant reason for the popularity of the LO concept in Singapore.

One of the important features of the approach towards the practice of LO concept in Singapore is through the training of its top leaders and employees in the organisation. Senge and his associates were brought in by both of the case study organisations for consultation in 1999 and subsequently the training are provided by his associates in a big way to many government organisations. Researcher was informed about the involvement of Senge and his associates during the meetings held with the co-ordinators of both organisations.

The Learning Organization

The launch of the Senge’s flagship book, *The Fifth Discipline* in 1990, was regarded by many practitioners as a solution to the problems faced by organisations due to increased competition and changes in their environment [Pedler and Aspinwall (1998)]. Since then, the LO concept has attracted much attention among academics and organisational practitioners [(Garrat (2001); Marquardt (2002)]. Senge’s [1990] prescriptive treatment of the subject is a combined methodology of several ideas adapted from diverse fields of studies [Senge (1999); Jackson (2001)]. Thus, the concept is neither original nor novel [Jackson (2001); Coulson-Thomas (1996)] and Garatt [(1995)] argues that ‘all the necessary conditions to create both the intellectual and practical basis of a learning organisation were in place in 1947 [Garratt, (1995) p 25)].

Senge has synthesised the principles of organizational learning from a wide range of sources [Grieves (2000); Stewart (2001); Jackson (2001)] into ‘five disciplines’ that underpin the Learning Organisation: systems thinking, personal mastery, mental models, team learning and shared vision. While Senge’s discussion of the five disciplines is extensive [Senge (1990; 1994; 1999)] they are briefly explained here in order to later compare Senge’s formations with the versions articulated by the practitioners interviewed in the case studies.

Systems Thinking: It is at the heart of the LO as it is a framework for seeing interrelationships and patterns of change.

Personal Mastery: This discipline is the ability to achieve results that matter to the person. It goes beyond the mechanistic approach towards learning.

Mental Model: It refers to one’s image of reality; a conceptual structure that gives meaning to what one perceives the world and oneself.

Shared Vision: This discipline refers building a sense of commitment by developing shared images through servant leadership.

Team Learning: This refers to learning in which the group or team learns and it emphasises on both ‘dialogue’ and ‘discussion’.

Findings

Case study findings are categorised here in terms of key constructs of the Learning Organization, with quotations exemplifying responses to the constructs in each organisation.

Unpacking the Learning Organization Concept

The LO concept promotes an egalitarian environment that is based on self-realisation and good human relations. The findings show a common understanding by all participants that the LO is not a traditional authoritarian and controlling organization. The majority of the participants’ responses indicated that they were receptive towards the LO concept, as it promotes an egalitarian environment and focuses not only on efficiency but also encourages people to realise their learning potential. In spite of the positive feelings about LO a number of participants expressed their concern about pursuing the LO principles as it undermines the discipline and control that is necessary to run organizations in Singapore. This is strongly voiced by some participants such as:

LO techniques are good but may not be applicable for all situations. Ours is a direct and autocratic approach. It may take generations before we can totally think and work like a LO. [SSA]

We are Singaporeans. We need discipline and order at work. LO is good but letting people talk too much or treating our bosses on equal grounds will not work for us. [NMS]

Other responses from both organizations such as “not so practical”, “top management cannot lose authority”, “being a discipline organization” explains a quest for a generalised social discipline that appears important to participants in their work life. This shows the tensions between Singapore’s high power distance with its culturally inherent authoritative style and the LO concept that promotes a non-hierarchical management structure.

Learning versus Training

Learning is an important feature of the LO concept. All the skills of the five disciplines are necessary conditions for facilitating organisational learning in an organisation [Senge (1990)]. Both organizations were strongly drawn to the notion of ‘learning to learn’ and to a shift in emphasis from training to learning. This is evident from the efforts put in to encourage people to share their learning with others in the organization after a training programme/course. Findings show that training is viewed not only as an important factor in improving individual effectiveness but also from a broader perspective as a key lever for improving organizational performance through sharing knowledge with members.

Contrary to the positive learning experiences of most members, a few participants in the sample hinted that the traditional way of training is still highly preferred because:

When we come from training we have so much to catch up with our work. We have no time to share what we learn from the course or training session. Even if I have the time, other people will not have time for me. This is our working style. Learning is good but training is still the best for fast moving people like us. [NMS]

Learning is good but you need to find time to learn voluntarily. Training is more popular because people regard it as upgrading in terms of skills required in their daily operations. We are always thinking about solving problems quickly. So, learning will take place when time permits. [SSA]

The participants' expressions and the researcher's experience confirm that training is considered more important than learning as it primarily helps to performing one's job more effectively and allows opportunity to make visible incremental improvements in work performance. In general, training is linked to career advancement and this is probably the reason for organizational members' emphasis on training.

Leadership: Traditional versus Facilitator Style

Leadership takes on a new meaning in a learning organisation. Leaders are required to have new skills to facilitate their new roles as 'designer, teacher and steward' [Senge (1990)] in the organisation. The findings strongly suggest that leaders from both organizations have adopted a facilitative leadership style and most of the respondents appreciated the move away from the traditional type. But while they welcomed the idea of LO leadership style, the majority also held a conflicting view that the LO-style leadership is seen as 'unreal', while the 'authoritarian style' is seen as real, because it fits the 'Singapore style'. For instance:

Respect and reverence are important and bosses always expect people to look up to him for he has the final say in everything. LO says everyone must be treated with respect but he [boss] wants to feel that he is the man here [in command]. [SSA]

In Singapore, bosses, we don't offend them. Whatever they say, yes, yes, yes. And usually in terms of social life you won't see bosses and staff together. Staff won't go for lunch with their bosses because they won't feel at ease. They won't discuss anything. I have also heard from my friends about it in private sectors also. [NMS]

Participants are well aware of the expectations of the traditional style of leadership and most of them showed absolute importance to command and control management. But at the same time they appear to be appreciative of its bureaucratic efficacy and also they are conscious of the conflict between this and the LO style.

Experimentation - 'Gain or Pain'

Experimentation is an important feature of the LO theory. People are encouraged to take bold steps in experimenting in order to enhance organisational learning [Marquardt (2002)]. The findings show that the idea of experimentation has been widely encouraged and accepted as an important factor to organizational effectiveness. Comments such as “I can try new things”, “now we can experiment and show our thinking and talents” are indicative of the emphasis placed on experimentation in both organizations. On the other hand, almost all the participants, including those who were receptive towards experimentation expressed their fears of exposing their vulnerabilities. For example:

Experimentation is good but mistakes are very costly in our culture. It is not good to let your boss or colleagues know about your mistakes. [NMS]

There is strong desire in Singaporeans to succeed. But failure, we cannot imagine. Too much of consequences to face in our job. It is natural for us not to let our bosses and colleagues know our failures or mistakes. [SSA]

This quotation highlights that the idea that failure is associated with embarrassment and low self-esteem. While practitioners say they like experimentation, in practice it is not always so.

Dialogue – Danger Zone

The team learning discipline advocates the practice of dialogue and is one of the communication tools that would enable organisations to realise the vision of becoming a learning organisation [Senge (1990)]. The practice of dialogue in both the organizations was supported by the research findings. Nevertheless, the findings also show contradictory factors. Firstly, the participants resisted this technique as they found the process too slow for people who are used to quick solutions. Secondly, there is some indication from some participants that dialogue is not used in the same meaning or intention as advocated by LO principles. Many examples in the data show that it is regarded more as an opportunity or channel to express their dissatisfaction to the higher authority:

Dialogue is good but very long-winded. We don't have time to sit around in circles and think through like Red Indians. Sometimes it is still dangerous to speak what is in your mind. Also some people use the session or opportunity to express their dissatisfaction to the higher authority. [NMS]

Dialogue is good if you don't have your boss inside the discussion. Every time I go for dialogue, I become even more tense because I know we are going to sit in circles and talk even if I have nothing to talk. Sometimes people really talk nonsense to act smart. [SSA]

With such assumptions and mental models, it is not clear how a non-threatening environment could be created to facilitate the use of dialogue in both organizations.

Can we trust each other?

The development of a relationship is based on trust between management and non-management employees are critical to the success of a learning organisation. According to Senge [(1990)], a learning culture can only be created with trust.

Interestingly the notion of trust reveals several findings. Firstly, the leaders demonstrate significant trust and respect for employees that endorse and encourage open communication and trusting relations. Secondly, in spite of creating a trusting environment, the leaders are aware that there is no mutual trust as expected and desired. Thirdly, there seems to be processes and structure that foster a trusting and trustworthy relationship among staff. Fourthly, participants do acknowledge that it is difficult for them to trust their bosses or people. A significant number of respondents gave (a) similar comment(s) such as:

We are Singaporeans. And we don't trust people that easily. [NMS]

Our bosses themselves find it difficult to trust us, then how could they expect us to trust them. They are big-timers and do you think they want to trust small timers like us. Previously they don't smile or talk much and nowadays they try hard to smile and talk with us. They are always they [same]. So what's there to trust them. [SSA]

This and other similar descriptions support the findings that there is a low level of trust in the organizations. As the quotes suggest efforts to foster a trusting relationship is seen as superficial and openness is seen as a façade of nice behaviour. Findings show that superiors lack the credibility because members have always perceived them as someone separate from others and also who keep watch over them for disciplinary matters. How can Singaporean organizations implement LO with such a low level of trust?

Good but a soft approach

Although the findings on the question of the applicability and usefulness of LO concept in Singapore organizations was overwhelmingly positive, all the participants claimed that it is a "soft approach" for a "tough country" like Singapore. Such responses appear to emanate from unequal structural relationships between people in society. On this basis, majority of the participants doubted the application within Singapore organizational context as argued:

LO is a soft approach and Singaporeans are not used to soft and open style of managing their people. We cannot be like the westerners, all the time nice to people. We are Singaporeans.
[NMS]

If we over indulge in LO the top management might loose its authority-its ability to keep its executive command because LO encourages a lot of questions, clarifications. I think command and authority is still very important. [SSA]

These and other responses appear to be an expression of Singaporeans characteristics and could be considered as the product of a hierarchical beliefs embedded in the wider culture. A major concern, that the practice of LO could reduce the bureaucratic system and power relations that senior management have enjoyed all these years. Taken together, it could be argued that organizational members automatically discourage learning and adaptation using the cultural attributes in order to encourage the status quo.

COMMENTARIES

First Commentary: A Singaporean practitioner

I spent a good part of my work life trying to understand why organizations could not provide an environment where meaningful learning and work can be simultaneously achieved. Now I can see the connection between why employees and employers do what they do. I also wonder now if I am given a chance to do things again as a practitioner in Singapore, would I subscribe to LO prescriptions? The answer is “I don’t think so”. I am only being fair to myself. How much could I do things differently in a culture that is deeply entrenched in its beliefs of hierarchy, authoritarianism and discipline? I have demonstrated in this study that the Learning Organisation concept is not culture-free, and that any assessment of its validity must be undertaken with recognition of the role of national culture.

Singapore’s high power distance culture, with its inherently authoritative style, is in direct contrast to the concept of the LO. There is a widespread critique of the traditional authoritarian approach and its impact on people and their practices. Seniority and status are seen as important for organizational effectiveness and respect for people in authority has produced an attitude of official subordination. The evidence shows that in spite of some efforts put in to minimise the effects of authoritative style of management, the difficulty of changing the behaviour of people is a tall order. This is owing to the strength of the inherited compliant mentality that is highly displayed in the day-to-day life of the participants. The change intended is not simply a matter of changes in management practices, but entails fundamental changes in how both the leaders and followers view power inequalities. Would the practice of servant leadership undermine the smooth efficiency of organizations? This question has profound implications for practitioners who want to create a learning environment through a facilitative leadership style.

The organizations’ effort in creating an environment for experimentation is also largely congruent with the nation’s intention of encouraging creativity and innovation. Again, this is a new kind of practice that is in sharp contrast to conventional practices. Tensions between experimentation and the fear of mistakes are evident. This is the outcome of a culture that promotes a type of psychological make-up that rationalises mistakes as a negative aspect in organizational life. Also there is a misconstrued notion that experimentation must result in big changes or innovation in the organizations and the consequences of failure may affect career advancements of employees. This is further compounded by the Singaporean concern for ‘face’ that limits the opportunities of developing the spirit of experimentation. For organizations to resonate with experimentation, it must transcend attitudes and beliefs that employees will not be penalised for anything less than perfection. The question to be asked is, can organizations move beyond a superficial endorsement of experimentation to one that truly demonstrate the learning from failures and successes? An alignment is needed between experimentation and cultural behaviour; otherwise experimentation will not achieve the desired outcome.

While systemic perspectives of LO are appreciated, there is a strong perception that ‘systemic thinking’ is for top management, as all important organisational thinking has been seen as emanating from top management. This attitude is the result of the cultural obedience to organizational and political authority that undermines the idea that employees

should also be involved. The assumption that ‘superiors know best’ would probably continue to be unchallenged as people are imbued into believing they are more ‘doers’ than ‘thinkers’. The critical issue then is not whether organizations are willing to involve employees in decision making, but whether employees are ready for such a conceptual change? Also, how far can government negotiate cultural values?

Although the LO practices introduced to the organization can be conducive to developing one’s personal mastery, the cultural background of Singapore inhibits its development, as employees still adopt a performance rather than a mastery goal. This attitude undermines the intrinsic value of learning. For Singaporeans learning is never a joy, it is for survival and is linked to a meritocracy system for individual rewards. This thinking is pervasive right up from the nursery to organizational level. Even the emphasis and call for lifelong learning is sadly mistaken as a route for only career advancement, and not an attempt to build the capacity to learn. This raises an important point. Is this the result of organizational or political insensitivity towards the learning needs of people? Intriguing, yet logical to question because the change is one of a fundamental shift, not a ‘today’s special’. How could a synergistic alignment of personal and organizational goals be achieved when the learning and thinking of political leaders who shape the beliefs of the people remain unchanged?

In sum, my stance in these positions is to bring to the fore the anxieties and concerns that were evident, supported and validated by my research. I am not against the implementation of the LO concept, but concerned about the way it gets implemented and the superficial changes in organisations that takes place. The LO journey is impeded by the cultural traits and it is important to acknowledge that these cultural attitudes constitute a systemic barrier to effective learning and adaptation. In making this commentary, I agree that theoretically, the LO concept is compatible with human rights but incongruent culturally in a country that prides over its hierarchy and showcases as an epitome of a disciplined society. So, is LO a tool to bring about a cultural shift in Singapore? The question has practical importance to individuals, organizations and society.

Second Commentary: A New Zealand academic

In this section I present a commentary from an ‘outsider’ and theoretical perspective. I am an academic from outside Singapore, yet, as New Zealander, also ‘outside’ the dominant northern centres of management knowledge and practice. I propose to present a kind of reverse image of Kala’s commentary, by asking what her story about the Singapore experience tells us about the theory of the Learning Organization. There are also broader implications for Organizational Learning theory and practice.

I use the framework of the developing post-colonial critique of management knowledge . I use the term ‘post-colonial’ because it draws attention to the specific historical and geopolitical circumstances of a given organizational context and of the management practices that are used there. It also implies that knowledges and ways of thinking about a topic – such as management or learning –are based on these circumstances. For instance, the Singapore cases here make explicit the ways that Senge’s work implicitly locates systemic learning within an ethos of western democracy. Cross-cultural examples frequently bring cultural assumptions into clear definition, and like this case, are valuable for this reason alone. But while the post-colonial viewpoint intersects in this respect with

broader cross-cultural work in management, it also distinctively highlights the political consequences of such differences, both for practitioners and for scholars.

It should be freely acknowledged that the term 'post-colonial' is an ambiguous and often difficult one. It implies that the era of colonisation has ended with the emergence of 'new' nations in Asia, Africa and South America - such as Singapore [Banerjee (2000)]. It is useful to look back at the cultural and political residues of colonisation that often lay the ground work for the determined nation-building of the present – such as we find in Singapore. For instance, it is within this focussed process of nation building in Singapore that the LO concept takes its place as part of a planned and very explicit vision of modernisation, as this case shows. However the idea of the 'post-colonial' does not need to imply that colonisation is 'over': it also refers to the complex ongoing process of colonisation as it takes new forms – that is, as certain nations or groups of nations continue to achieve or maintain economic and/or cultural dominance.

One form of this domination can be clearly seen to be written into the literature of management and organization. Overwhelmingly, the 'official' management knowledge of scholarly and pop management publications is 'western' based – more precisely, it is based mainly on the experiences and beliefs of scholars and practitioners in the US, then British and (to a lesser extent) European and other English-speaking nations [Baruch (2001)]. North American theories of management are likewise assumed to be universal in their applications. Even in the literature of cross-cultural management, western theories dominate almost totally. The concerns of North American managers about 'how can *we* more effectively manage *them*' set the agenda , so that "existing published literature is heavily biased towards comparisons between North America on the one hand and Japan, Korea, China and Hong Kong on the other" [Smith (2001: 21)].

Management theory tends to marginalise or ignore ethnic and cultural difference, except as problematic in implementing western management knowledge, which is seen as some kind of universal 'best practice'. International management consultants and practitioners tend to assume that they are bringing the light of modern management knowledge to the 'others', and tend not to see (or care?) how their own beliefs are the limited and potentially limiting products of their own national environments. As a result we management scholars do not know a lot about how North American theories play in local contexts, especially from the point of view of the 'locals'. We also tend to assume that any mismatch between 'global' management theory and 'local' practice is a question of, as Roy Jacques put it, "why don't they get it"? Jacques argues that this ethnocentrism tends to prevent the development of what he calls "indigenous management knowledges" [Jacques (1996: xiv)] which could be valued equally with the Anglo American brand - and perhaps even more valuable in specific local context. Which brings us to this case.

It is clear from this case that neither 'learning' nor 'organising' nor 'leadership' can be seen independently of national cultural values. In his analysis of post-colonialism, Banerjee points out that the "traces of colonialism in present 'postcolonial' histories of new nation states are often obliterated or retraced in terms of *progress* and *development*" [Banerjee (2000 : 5)]. It is clear that it is in the name of "progress and development" that the Singapore government, via the Singapore Civil service, have fixed on the concept of the LO to take the nation forward. This choice represents what Jacques calls the tendency of post-colonial nations to "accept western technologies and knowledge as representative of "development" or "progress" [Jacques (1996 : xv)]. Jacques argues

that “until management texts come with a product warning ‘caution: contents are historically and culturally specific’, let the buyer beware” [Jacques (1996: xiv)].

CONCLUSIONS AND QUESTIONS

How might we interpret the resistance of the Singaporeans in this case to the thorough implementation of LO principles? There is a tremendous ambivalence threading through the discourse of the research subjects here. On the one hand, an attraction to the ideas of dialogue, experimentation and facilitative leadership is evident. At the same time, appeals to Singapore identity are set up in opposition to these desired processes. It is clear that the legacy of the highly competitive Singaporean education system has left traces deep inside the Singaporean worker. They are also very tuned into what they see as the ultimately unchanging (perhaps unchangeable?) power relationships in Singaporean society.

As Senge’s own work shows, authoritarian leadership and rejection of critique are also reasons for failures of western companies to adopt LO principles [Senge et al. (1999)]. However we cannot assume without further investigation that phenomena such as authoritarian leadership and rejection of critique work in the same way on Singapore – or any other country – as they might in a US company. What can be seen as dysfunctional in one context may be seen as a mark of valued traditions in others. Singaporean leadership models or ideas about learning are not necessarily dysfunctional. Singapore has after all been economically successful for many decades under what can be seen as an authoritarian government. If economic success is seen as the critical goal, then the current Singapore experiment with LO is based on the premise that a new kind of knowledge-based culture is essential to the continued economic development of Singapore, and to its continued modernisation. However while this link is an article of faith in contemporary western management knowledge, it has not yet been proved, especially beyond the bounds of designated ‘knowledge-based’ industries.

One possible interpretation of this case could be that the Singapore authorities have ‘bought’ a product with political implications that are unintended and in practice unwanted. The LO concept could be seen as a kind of Trojan horse for western-style democracy. It could be argued that if, as intended by government planners, the culture of the Learning Organization begins to diffuse through national culture, then would transform the political culture of Singapore. Currently the critical dialogues, non-hierarchical structures and open public communication that are hallmarks of the LO idea are not seen as desirable. In this sense it is tempting to see LO as a vector of democratisation. Alternatively, it could be argued that any such pervasive influence would be rapidly opposed, and in fact that the kinds of cultural values and assumptions that we see operating in this case will gradually render any thorough-going adoption of LO principles to be impossible.

Perhaps it is important here to give local practitioners credit for understanding their situation, and for the ability to take what works in their situation from LO and leave the rest. Having said this, practitioners need to pay specific attention to the cultural values of the employees when adopting western gospels of management to non-western organisations.

We argue that LO theory as promoted by Senge and his colleagues [Senge (1990); Senge, et al., 1994; 1999)], cannot be culturally neutral or universally applicable. Rather, it includes a number of assumptions about both 'learning' and 'organisation' that are embedded in certain specific western cultural contexts.

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