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**‘Culture’s Consequences’: Implementing  
Western ideas in an Asian Organisation**

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## **ABSTRACT**

This paper briefly reviews the connection between knowledge management and the learning organisation, argues that both concepts rely on culturally embedded theories and practices, and presents a case study of the use of Senge's learning organisation concepts in one large Singaporean organisation. The analysis of this case reveals the cultural challenges that emerged in the process of applying essentially Western management theories within an Asian culture. In conclusion we discuss the practical implication of these challenges for Singapore organisations, multi-national organisations, and for trans-national consulting advice. In particular, Singaporean respect for power, status and order impacts on knowledge management implementation strategies. Thus, for instance, we suggest same status groups be used for seeking feedback. At a more general level we discuss the choice knowledge management practitioners have between 'best practice' versus 'best fit' approaches to implementation.

## **KEY WORDS**

Knowledge Management, Learning Organisation, Singapore, National Culture,

## **KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND THE LEARNING ORGANISATION**

The concepts of knowledge and learning have long been linked in discussions in various disciplines. Learning is the mechanism by which knowledge is attained. Therefore it is no surprise that discussions of the contemporary concept of knowledge management have also been associated with another contemporary notion, that of the learning organisation. Call (2005) notes that “since 1987, when Peter Senge took 15 years of research...and defined learning organizations, the corporate world has been making strides to better manage its knowledge” (p.19). This paper traces the growth of the predominantly Western notions of knowledge management and learning organisation, then examines their cultural embeddedness. This is ultimately illustrated through a case study of the impact of national culture on the practice of learning organisation concepts in a Singaporean organisation.

### **From Knowledge to Knowledge Management**

Successive minds have pondered over the nature of knowledge and knowing. In the last fifty years of western thought, management and organisation studies have grown as academic disciplines, as has the body of professional managers working within an economic framework that favours competition. Hence as soon as something is recognised as having some potential value or contribution to competitive advantage, it then becomes seen as a resource of the organisation to be exploited - suddenly it becomes something which needs to be ‘managed’ and ‘owned’. For example, staff became regarded as human resources to be managed through human resource management policies and practices; the performance of staff and the organisation is also something to be managed through performance management systems; even the image, reputation, or brand of the organisation has become something which is managed through brand management strategies. By appending the word management to a concept we are changing that concept – focusing it, more often than not, in an organisational context, to serve the ends of the manager. In the case of knowledge, knowledge management is the means, while competitive advantage and achievement of business goals are the ends.

There has been an increasing literature on knowledge management over the past decade, with a blend of practitioner and academic input and appeal. The literature now reports two distinct generations of approach to knowledge management, and purports to be entering a third generation (Firestone & McElroy, 2003; Gorelick & Tantawy-Monsou, 2005; Metaxiotis, Ergazakis & Psarras, 2005; Scholl, Konig, Meyer & Heisig, 2004). Initial explorations of the knowledge management concept (the first generation) took a technological focus. In these works knowledge management is defined as a technical issue to be managed by developing intranets and other IT facilities through which organizational members can capture, share, store, and retrieve data and information.

More recent discussions recognised the increasing importance of knowledge to competitive advantage in organisations, and that knowledge management has at its’

core a social dimension. Decades after sociologists and psychologists have revealed a social construction perspective (Berger & Luckmann, 1967; Piaget, 1972), the knowledge management literature concludes that knowledge is socially constructed among communities of workers (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Lang, 2001). Thus the second generation of discourse has centred on the social and behavioural dimensions of knowledge management. This has drawn attention to individual and group behaviour in knowledge sharing, and creation. It broadened the focus from information technology and information management architecture to manage knowledge, to the organisational and behavioural change required to achieve knowledge management. This placed human resource management and organisation development as a central part of the solution alongside IT. In particular it picked up on organisational learning and the learning organisation concept, as a tool for knowledge management systems. As Carter & Scarbrough (2001) point out “for many writers the intersection between knowledge management and human resource management rests largely in the creation or management of learning processes. Human resource management is especially concerned with learning at the level of both the organisation and the community” (p.220).

The ‘generational’ development of approaches to knowledge management in the literature reflects a) the gradual integration of different disciplinary perspectives (from IT to behavioural science), and associated with that b) changing perspectives on the nature of knowledge and thus its management in an organizational setting (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Recently, it is claimed that third generation approaches to knowledge management are emerging (for example, Metaxiotis et al, 2005; Scholl et al, 2004). These approaches expand on both the first and second generation by attending to issues of IT and the social/behavioural dimension, through integration with business strategies and goals. As a consequence more serious attention has fallen on the impact and contribution of organisation culture to knowledge management.

### **From Learning to Learning Organisation**

Traditionally the concept of learning has been applied to individuals, learners, in different settings (for example, school or work). In recent times, much like knowledge has become managed, learning has become organisational. This has changed the focus of learning from a mechanism for achieving individual aspirations and well being, to a mechanism for contributing to competitive advantage and organisational goals. But more than this, the organisation not only facilitates learning, it is also a learner.

The concept of organisational learning focuses on the ability of individuals and organisations to learn continuously. Its intellectual roots lie in the organisational development literature (for example, Argyris, 1990; Argyris & Schon, 1978; French & Bell, 1973). But, arguably, its most publicised exponent is Senge. He took the concept, blended it with other concepts (such as systems dynamics) and created a management tool. This tool, the learning organisation, is a set of principles and associated techniques to be applied in the management of organisations. He defined a learning organisation as an “organisation where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (Senge, 1990, p.14). This organisational

utopia is achieved through practising the ‘five disciplines’ of personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking. According to Senge the practise of these will enable organisations to truly learn because they are the necessary elements of innovation in human behaviour.

However the learning organisation, and in particular Senge’s recipe for it, is not without critics. For instance, the assumed mutuality of purpose and outcome of learning activity for individual and organisation has been questioned (Fenwick, 1998; Thomson, Mabey, Storey, Gray & Iles, 2001) as has the absence of the emotional dimension of learning (Ikehara, 1999). The usefulness of the concept has also been criticised for lack of clarity on how organisations can achieve it (Kilman, 1996), and for ignoring issues of power and politics (Coopey, 1995).

### **The Cultural Gap**

The learning organisation offers a tempting formula for those in pursuit of better knowledge management in their organisation. Both are concerned with the collective entity that is the organisation, and with the attainment of knowledge at an individual, group and organisational level to contribute to the goals of the organisation (Vera & Crossan, 2003). The learning organisation is an instrument for connecting learning and knowledge, and for understanding how knowledge is regarded, used and shared in organisations (Scarbrough & Swan, 2003). And, importantly, it aims to change the organisation culture in support of learning and knowledge (De Long & Fahey, 2000; Holden, 2002).

However, for knowledge management and the learning organisation, their combined strength of focus on the organisation, its culture and practices, may also be their combined weakness in some contexts. If, as we accept, knowledge is socially constructed, then it is embedded not only in organisational culture but also in national culture. That is, the culture in which individuals grow up or live their adult lives and in which they forge their personal values, beliefs and aspirations. It is also the larger culture in which the organisation culture is hosted. Delving into other social science disciplines we find that cultural theorists have examined the numerous mechanisms within societies that convey and reinforce a nation’s culture. Not least of these mechanisms are institutions such as education systems, political systems, religion, literature, television, newspapers and other mass communication media, family and community discourse, work (for example, Hall, 1978; Thompson, 1963; Williams, 1961, 1980).

Not surprisingly, when we enter the workplace we carry our national culture with us. Even the most distinctive organisational culture is not a closed system, it is populated with people who bring a lifetime of cultural experience with them. To date, knowledge management and the learning organisation have not fully incorporated this perspective into theorising. As Holden (2002) suggests “one of the problems in the knowledge management literature is that authors give the impression that knowledge management operates in a kind of unitary vacuum, in which diversity in terms of language, cultural and ethnic background, gender and professional affiliation are compressed into one giant independent variable, which is in any case pushed to the side” (p.81). Hence he approaches from a different angle by attempting to make sense of culture from a knowledge management perspective. Holden regards cross-cultural

knowledge, learning and networking as a key resource for international business and proposes redesigning cross-cultural management as a knowledge domain.

There is a growing body of research on cross-cultural issues in management and in organisational psychology. Much of this work rests on the recognition that concepts, theories and techniques from a predominantly Western tradition are not 'universalities', and therefore may not be directly applicable in other cultures (Pauleen & Murphy, 2005; Smith, Fischer & Sale, 2001). This issue first gained prominence in the management literature with the work of Hofstede (1980). While some may debate aspects of his research, there is no denying that it highlighted differences between western cultures and eastern or collectivist cultures. Hofstede's work is the most widely cited in cultural studies (Bing, 2004; Hoppe, 2004; Triandis, 2004) and his constructs provide insights when conceptualising the dynamics of national culture. Similarly, Hampden-Turner and Trompenaars (1993) distinguished between more self-seeking American styles of learning and knowledge sharing, and the more group based practices of Asian cultures.

Serendipitously, cultural differences are displayed in an international study of academic and practitioner knowledge management experts (Scholl, et al, 2004). The study sought opinion on theoretical and practical issues for knowledge management in the future. The findings focus on these issues, but they also analysed comparisons of responses according to geographical region of the respondents. Interestingly they found significant differences in the opinions of German respondents compared with all non-German respondents. Although, not intended as such, this is small evidence of the influence of national culture on priorities and emphasis in knowledge management. In the rest of this paper we report on a study that looked specifically at the issue of the impact of national culture on the implementation of Senge's learning organisation concepts. This is instructive for both knowledge management and learning organisation, whose literatures are increasingly entwined (Vera & Crossan, 2003).

## **THE CASE OF SINGAPORE AND SENGE**

### **The Case Study Organisation**

This case study explores the influence of national culture on the practice of Senge's learning organisation concepts in a Singaporean government organisation. In Singapore, the government relies on the public bureaucracy as the major vehicle for formulating and effecting social and developmental changes. Thus the public sector presents an ideal venue for studying the implementation of new policies or management concepts. In order to maintain confidentiality we have used the organisational pseudonym of Singapore Century (SC) throughout this case study report.

SC is one of the largest government organisations and a key provider of public services in Singapore. Just like other public sector organisations in Singapore, SC consists of civil servants and bureaucrats who are vested with public authority. Typically public sector organisations in Singapore are bureaucratic in nature and employees are traditionally oriented. These characteristics produce inflexible, self-

preserving organisations, which makes it difficult for public officials to deal with rapid changes and challenges as the country embraces the knowledge economy. Thus the Singapore Public Service for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century (PS21) initiative was launched with an aim to increase efficiency, provide better service and promote learning in public sector agencies. In response to this SC introduced the learning organisation concept in 1997. Besides supporting the call by PS21 to promote learning in the public service, there were two other important reasons for implementing learning organisation concepts in SC. Firstly, the CEO was a strong advocate of the learning organisation concept after attending a conference on systems thinking where he met consultants from MIT (USA) who provide training on the concepts. Secondly, he took over SC in 1997 and made a break from the bureaucratic, authoritarian culture by promoting organisational learning using Senge's concepts of the learning organisation. Since then, SC has introduced various changes and has put in place structures to facilitate learning in the organisation. Today, SC is highly regarded and consulted by other organisations on the practice of learning organisation concepts.

### **Investigating Learning Organisation Concepts in the Organisation**

To explore the influence of national culture on the practice of learning organisation concepts this case study research was conducted using ethnographic methods. The ethnographic research process involves participating in the group or society to be studied ranging from everyday conversations to more formal, semi-structured, in-depth interviews, in order to understand observed phenomena. A distinctive feature of ethnographic inquiry is its explicit focus on the features of a given culture with the aim of exploring the relationship between culture and behaviour.

In this case ethnographic fieldwork was carried out for a period of six months in the SC organisation. Face to face interviews lasting about sixty to ninety minutes were carried out with twenty SC staff members. An interview guide was derived from both the literature, and a preceding pilot study to gather information on three key issues: the participants' understanding of learning organisation principles, the participants' perceptions of the importance of learning, and their perceptions of how the traditional Singaporean culture shapes or hinders the application of the learning organisation principles. The in-depth interviews were supplemented with observations of staff meetings, informal conversations with SC clients, analysis of company documents such as newsletters, printed internal and external publications, CD ROMs and brochures that were made available to the public.

#### ***How the Cultural Dimension was Explored***

The fundamental argument in the organisational literature on national culture is that each nation has developed some unique understanding of organisation and management through its history (e.g. Hofstede, 1980). The influence of national culture on organisations comes through societal structures (for example, education systems, political systems) and through values and behaviours of organisational participants (Adler & Doktor, 1990). The pervasive influence of national culture on human behaviour in organisations has prompted several researchers to develop studies that approach and classify national culture in different ways (e.g. Hall, 1960; Kluckhohn & Strodtbeck, 1961; Hofstede, 1980; Laurent, 1983; Trompenaars, 1984; Hofstede & Bond, 1988; Hampden-Turner & Trompenaars, 1993).

In this case study we used Hofstede's cultural dimensions to assist analysis. Hofstede's pioneering work was an attempt to compare national cultures in terms of broad value differences (Hofstede, 1980, 1983). In his extensive study of over 116,000 employees of IBM in 50 countries, Hofstede identified four cultural dimensions of work-related value differences. These four dimensions are power distance, individualism/collectivism, uncertainty avoidance and masculinity/femininity. A fifth dimension, labelled 'Confucian dynamism', was subsequently augmented to the cultural framework (Hofstede & Bond 1988). Confucian dynamism epitomises 'Asian values' and also shows the importance of Confucianism to all East Asian societies (Raltson, Egri, Stewart, Terpstra & Kaicheng, 1991). This case study used three of Hofstede's national culture dimensions and they are briefly explained below:

*Power Distance* refers to the extent to which people of a particular country are said to accept inequality in power as an irreducible fact in organisation. This influences the amount of formal hierarchy where subordinates accept that the superiors have more power and decisions made by them are unquestioned. In this dimension, Singapore was classified as high on power distance (Hofstede, 1980). *Individualism/Collectivism* means the concern for oneself as an individual as opposed to concern for the priorities and rules of the group to which one belongs. People in individualistic culture tend to think of themselves as 'I', distinct from other people. Collectivism refers to cultures where the interests of the group take precedence over the interests of the individual. Singapore scored low on Individualism in Hofstede's study. *Confucian Dynamism* refers to values such as respect for tradition, ordering relationships by status, protecting one's face (social reputation) and having a sense of personal steadiness and stability. Singapore scored highly on this dimension.

Hofstede (1983) noted that the most relevant dimensions for understanding leadership and management were power distance and individualism/collectivism. The values under these dimensions are helpful for analysing and understanding leadership style, dialogue and experimentation, which are key elements of the learning organisation principles. The Confucianism dimension was selected because it has a strong influence on the leadership style and work behaviours of east and south-east Asian societies. Singapore is a multicultural country with a population of 4.2 million, comprising 76.8% of Chinese, 13.9% of Malay, 7.9% of Indian and other 1.4% (Singapore census, 2000). As the majority of the country's population is ethnic Chinese, it is not surprising that many organisations in Singapore consist of managers and employees who may share cultural values influenced by Confucianism (Taormina, 1998). Also, Singaporean political leaders have frequently stressed the significance and relevance of Confucian ethics (Tan, 1989; Tu, 1999).

Hence these three national cultural dimensions were used to analyse the attitudes and behaviours reported by SC staff on core features of the learning organisation concept. In particular we report on: learning culture; shared vision; experimentation; team learning; dialogue; trust; and overall perceived usefulness of these learning organisation concepts.



## Research Findings

*Creating A Learning Culture* According to Marquardt (2002), the most important core element of the learning organisation is the learning itself as it has the power to change people's perceptions, behaviours, and mental models. This then facilitates, encourages and maximises learning at individual, team and organisation levels (Marquardt, 1996).

The case study discussions on the importance of learning in relation to individuals, teams and the SC organisation revealed different interpretations of learning. A significant majority of participants perceived learning as important for survival. This was explained in terms of their awareness of the economic changes that have taken place in Singapore over the years and the competitive atmosphere in which they now operate. For example, a junior manager commented:

I guess learning is important to do the job faster and better. Frankly, if you can't learn, you will not survive in the organisation. The learning organisation concept is introduced by the top management, so we must learn.

Viewed from this perspective, it appears to support Schein's (in Coutu, 2002) argument that "all learning is fundamentally coercive because you either have no choice or it is painful to replace something that is already there with some new learning". The environmental threats and the launch of the learning organisation movement appear to have created a high level of survival anxiety among the SC staff. According to Schein (in Coutu, 2002), some organisations increase survival anxiety in order to motivate employees to learn. The SC responses show that staff viewed learning as important owing to the changes initiated by the top management, and also for economic reasons.

A minority of the participants expressed different feelings about learning. They explained that more educated people are joining the organisation and it is important to keep abreast with knowledge:

As a leader, I need to improve myself intellectually as well as for the organisation. It is important because we are now having a lot of young managers and we need to maintain our respect as their superiors.

In part, the implied reason for the above quote is 'power'. The idea of superiors being perceived as more knowledgeable and intelligent than the lower-rung staff is located within the traditional cultural context. Being a traditional bureaucratic organisation, superiors are seen as people with more power which implies that they also have so-called 'superior knowledge'. In Hofstede's terms this reflects Singapore as a high power distance culture. Furthermore, there is an automatic expectation by junior staff that superiors must be looked upon as someone with higher or superior knowledge. This pattern of behaviour also reflects the Confucian ideology of governance in Singapore. The cultural values seemed to influence the notion of learning, in the sense that some senior managers acknowledged that they need to learn in order not to 'lose face' among new or junior staff. A senior manager summarised:

We cannot lose face with our new graduate managers. As superiors, we need to maintain our power and respect.

This is Confucius wisdom and this is the way our culture is and we still follow it in our organisation and at home.

The concept of 'face' plays a major role in shaping the thinking of organisations and people at large in Singapore. Briefly stated, 'face' refers to the "social reputation, which is achieved by getting on in life through success and ostentation" (Hu, 1944, p. 45). As a result, behaviours are controlled by the desire to enhance one's face in the community. In this context, superiors want to maintain their self-esteem among the juniors in order to feel good about themselves, while juniors want to learn to maintain 'face' with colleagues and superiors.

In sum, despite attempting to create an environment and processes that encouraged learning, it appears that staff in SC did not maximise their learning opportunities. Although all of them understood the importance of learning, the interpretation of learning was more associated with the nature of the task and also the kind of position they held in the organisation. It appears that Singapore's high power distance underlying the cultural behaviour of respect for hierarchy and position have limited thinking about the nature of learning at work. Learning viewed from this perspective is non-challenging, as it will only serve to preserve the existing order in the organisation. It is clear that these leaders needed to learn "how to learn" in order to move beyond this level to one that results in collective learning, that is, organisational learning.

***Collective Commitment and Collective Avoidance*** One of the much discussed elements of the learning organisation is the principle of 'shared vision'. Shared vision is building a sense of commitment in an organization by developing shared images of the future. This includes developing the principles and guiding practices used to reach the goal. In many organisations the mission or vision statement is often a tangible symbol of the shared vision (Senge, 1990). It is argued that without a shared vision an organisation cannot be called a learning organisation (Harvey, 1988; Senge, 1990; Stacey, 1993). According to Marquardt (2002, p. 74), it is difficult for any organisation to have great achievements without a "deeply shared vision".

Several interesting themes were raised in response to questions about the usefulness of shared vision to oneself and others in the organisation. All participants indicated their commitment to the "big vision" of becoming a learning organisation. They expressed strong support and enthusiasm towards this vision that was initiated by the CEO in 1999. This support was summarised by a manager:

I think it is really...hmm [great]. I know it's the CEO's ideas. Everyone is talking about learning organisation and people are working towards it. Though I did not participate in forming the vision I am committed to it.

Senge (1990) and other researchers (Wheatley, 1992; Watkins & Marsick, 1994; Marquardt, 2002) have pointed out the importance of collective participation in the process of visioning. However, the interviews and discussions show that the lack of a communal approach towards crafting of vision was not an issue for the participants, as can be interpreted from another manager's comments:

It is common in our organisations for vision to be from the top. If people don't like the vision, then [they] just take it as another instruction from top management.

Although it is crucial for leaders in a learning organisation to seek the participation of staff throughout the organisation in the visioning process, the research participants' responses do not support this. Two factors may have contributed to this situation. The first was clearly a cultural aspect. Singaporean employees are well known for their compliant mentality. Thus, not surprisingly, the communal approach to visioning may not be important to staff on the basis of traditional order where visions are exclusively carried out by the top management. The second factor was an assumption that top management officers were better thinkers than non-management staff. An example illustrates this line of reasoning by a junior staff member:

Vision is created by people who are paid highly for thinking and decision-making. Whether we are involved in it or not is not so important. We are ground people. We take the vision as a guide to do our work properly.

The assumption that people at the top in the hierarchy are more intelligent and capable of making decisions that are beneficial to the majority is still prevalent in Singaporean organisations and is consistent with Hofstede's concept of high power distance. It is also clear that this kind of cultural thinking among participants may well work against the process of visioning. Even if given the opportunity to contribute to visioning, it is uncertain that staff will genuinely participate. The visioning process is an important step towards becoming a learning organisation and the fact that this element was missing questions the compatibility of learning organisation concepts with a culture that is not able to reconcile personal and organisational goals. The learning organisation seeks synergistic alignment between the two. The overall impression from the interviews was that the majority of the participants were sceptical about a shared vision and the importance for staff to be committed to both personal and organisational development. Two contradictions emerged: one at the cultural level, the other at the individual. At the cultural level, the participants saw themselves as the recipients of a vision statement, not the creators of the vision. At the individual level, they were not sufficiently motivated to be involved in such processes, as they perceived that their involvement would make little change or contribution. This reflects the overall non-participative decision making process so characteristic of bureaucratic Singapore public service sectors.

According to Senge (1990), the significance of a shared vision lies in the idea that such a vision would represent a balance of competing interests in the organisation. However, this case study suggests that visioning by the top management is considered acceptable and natural in Singapore. The participants tended to see the efforts to promote shared vision as 'show only'. This scepticism is a reflection of their cultural preference for high power distance.

***Constraints over Experimentation*** An experimental culture is an important element and a basic requirement for a learning organization (Senge, 1990; Argyris & Schon, 1996; Gephart et al., 1996). According to Nevis, DiBella, and Gould (1995, p. 80) "If learning comes through experience, it follows that the more one participates in guided experiences, the more one learns". Therefore venturing into uncharted waters and

experiencing the failures that may occur is an important part of organisational learning. The major challenge in an organisation is to encourage members to experiment, innovate and learn in the process. According to Goh (1998), superiors must facilitate individuals and teams towards continuous improvement through work processes that result in new ideas. Special effort must be made to make people realize that risks or mistakes are a necessary part of achieving organisational learning and effectiveness (Marquardt, 2002).

The findings in SC showed that there was some awareness among people that experimentation is valuable to the organisation and staff. However, almost all the participants, including those who were receptive towards experimentation, expressed fears of exposing their vulnerabilities.

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

One main reason why Singaporean employees hesitate to make mistakes is the fear of failure and criticism by superiors. Staff are conscious that if a mistake takes place in the process of experimentation, it will be met with ridicule and reprimand. Comments such as “encouraged to experiment, but not to fail”, “mistakes can be very scary here” and “I don’t want to become a scapegoat” are indicative that failure is associated with embarrassment and low self-esteem. It also appears that staff place great emphasis on potentially undesirable outcomes and that this strongly inhibits experimentation.

Two factors contributed to the perceived low level of tolerance for failures in the organization. Firstly, some staff are risk averse preferring to use old, safe methods rather than trying something new that may “get them into trouble”. Secondly, Singaporeans’ “face saving” attitude (maintaining self respect), as explained earlier, was seen as a particularly important cultural factor, which explains the tensions between the idea of experimentation and staff members’ risk averse responses.

In sum, staff generally viewed experimentation in a positive light. At the same time, in practice, most of the participants did not feel safe to experiment. The fear of mistakes or failures was influenced by previous reactions in the organization when failure had occurred. This was further aggravated by the cultural preference towards ‘face saving’. These factors may seriously impede experimentation and recognising them is essential in reducing their effects. This is a critical challenge for Singaporean organisations to address in the journey to become a learning organisation.

**Team Learning** According to Senge (1990) teams are the key learning group of organisations. He saw team learning as “... the process of aligning and developing the capacity of a team to create the results its members truly desire” (Senge, 1990, p. 236). He noted that talented teams are made up of talented individuals and it is team learning, not individual learning, that adds to organisational learning (Senge, 1992).

Discussion in SC of the principle of team learning indicated a common understanding that it is characterised by a sharing of knowledge resulting from team projects and meetings. SC had structures and processes in place for intra-functional and inter-functional learning among members. This is consistent with the research of Pearn,

Roderick and Mulrooney (1995) which considered that cross training and continuous learning are indications of an organisation that is evolving to be a learning organisation.

While team learning was portrayed as a characteristic of the organisation by a significant majority of the respondents, some of them felt that the team learning practiced in the organisation was not the same as that advocated by Senge (1990). For example, a manager explained:

Teamwork, teambuilding are not new to us. We are doing it all the time. Our kind of team learning is the same old way of discussion and learning from the more experienced staff. The team learning that I learnt from the learning organisation course is different. It requires lots of open discussion and learning from each other without the fear of offending anyone in the session.

This indicates that participants gained a new and different understanding of team learning associated with learning organisation principles. At the same time, there was some awareness of the difference between teamwork and team learning. For instance, when participants were asked to explain their process of team learning, one manager summarised it as:

We have the daily review meeting (DRM) for all of us to learn from each other. Every team reports about its customers/problems and what happened and what it did. Though members are encouraged to question or disagree most of the staff prefer not to voice their opinions in the presence of their managers. I am not sure whether any real learning takes place in our team learning sessions.

This quote and other discussions with participants show no sign of the intellectual, emotional, social and spiritual challenges that constitute Senge's concept of the process of team learning. A significant number of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the way it was practiced in the organisation. Two reasons were highlighted throughout the interviews. One was that the staff did not feel comfortable to engage in open communication in the presence of their team leaders, who were their immediate superiors. Second, the team learning sessions did not generate interest or open up possibilities for learning through inquiry. These explanations highlight the predicted relationship between a high power distance culture and the preferred behaviour of staff members. Comments such as "surely we can't really question other senior members during the session" and "how to explain things in front of team leaders" show the influence of a bureaucratic system that explains the inability of the organisation to learn effectively (Senge, 1990). In the case of SC there seems to be more collective avoidance than collective learning.

***Muddled Distinctions – Discussion versus Dialogue*** Dialogue is defined as "sustained collective inquiry" into everyday experience that we take for granted (Isaacs, 1999, p. 357). The learning organisation advocates the practice of dialogue to understand the context of daily interaction and experience and become aware of the processes of thought and feeling that created that experience (Senge et al., 1994). Also the purpose is to honour the development of individuals, ideas and organisation at a very deep level. It opens paths to change and clears space for organisational transformation (Brown, 1995). Thus, it is argued that, dialogue is one of the

communication tools that enables organisations to realise the vision of becoming a learning organisation (Senge, 1990; Schein, 1993; Kofman & Senge, 1994).

Participant responses to questions about the practice of dialogue and its importance to organisational learning and effectiveness, showed that there was a general understanding that dialogue was regarded as a tool to facilitate discussions and meetings without prejudice to status and power. The objective was to promote open discussion and communication that resulted in effective problem solving among members. Despite this understanding, the respondents receptiveness was not reflected among most of the middle managers. A supervisor forcefully expressed it:

Dialogue is good as it promotes open communication among staff. But this is difficult for us because it is dangerous to speak what is in your mind. Also, it not polite to point out that someone's idea is not right, especially if they are in a higher position than you.

This quote and other discussions with middle managers show the dilemma associated with the practice of dialogue in the organisation. Firstly, it shows the difficulty of changing the culturally entrenched communication practices among SC staff members. Secondly, most of the participants found it 'unsafe' to speak or relate their feelings about issues in the presence of their superiors. Employees in Singapore accept the high power distance between superiors and subordinates, and this cultural norm inhibits the process of dialogue from taking root in the organisation.

The findings also reveal that although the cultural context in which dialogue took place was important, it was the way it was "carried out" in the organisation that really mattered for the participants. Traditionally Singaporeans in lower level positions are accustomed to the behaviours expected of them, such as listening and supporting superiors and others during meetings. Having worked for years under rigid authority, junior staff have difficulty transforming themselves into speakers, and as a result, they miss out on the opportunity for deep thinking and exploration. It is clear that these conservative values inhibited attempts at dialogue in the organisation.

***Trusting Relationships*** According to some researchers trust is an essential element in a learning organisation (Senge, 1990; Davenport & Prusak, 1997; Pillai, Schriesheim & Williams, 1999). The development of a relationship based on trust between management and non-management employees is critical to the success of a learning organisation. West (1994) contends that the concept of the learning organisation demands a greater recognition of the importance of trust, which influences both individuals and organisational learning. Trust, in this sense, is a necessary condition for creating a learning culture (Senge, 1990).

Several themes emerged from the interviews and discussions on the importance of trust among SC staff. Firstly, some managers acknowledged that a low level of trust did exist among staff in SC, and also affirmed that trust is necessary to achieve the vision of becoming a learning organisation. One senior manager declared:

I must say that without trust, we cannot hope to be called a learning organisation. All leaders must know that they need to put much effort in building trust among their men (i.e., junior staff). High level appointments can do wonders but not without trust.

As this quote suggests, there seems to be some evidence that the organisation has low levels of interpersonal trust between management and non-management members. All leaders interviewed commented that it was a difficult and time-consuming task to develop trust among members. These senior managers also explained that they could not delude themselves by expecting the junior staff to trust them because of their status in the organisation. The findings show that the majority of the staff understood that developing a climate of trust takes much time and commitment and is also dependent on consistent behaviour, mutual respect and shared expectations among people. This is in line with Taylor and Easterby-Smith (1999) who claimed that trust is generally earned slowly and leaders cannot expect trust from their members solely based on their status or position. In spite of efforts being put in by these managers to create a trusting environment, there was no mutual trust as expected or desired. This was clearly indicated by a middle manager's comments:

I have worked here for 12 years. Just because my boss is trained in the learning organisation now does not mean that I can trust him totally. It is not easy for a leopard to change its spots. Those who have power cannot change so easily. You can ask anybody, the answer will be the same.

Similar comments were voiced during other interviews. This suggests that the lack of trust in superiors is a widely held view among participants. Comments, such as, "trust is important, but not with top management", "we pretend to trust each other", "actually they don't trust us as individuals", are examples that show that trust cannot be assumed to exist within SC. The findings also show that the source of the problem lies in the top-down control dominating the organisation. Fear of authority and hierarchy appears to have generated a low level of trust throughout the organisation. Seen from this perspective, it can be argued that the lack of trust among SC staff has its roots in the authoritarian and hierarchical culture of Singapore.

***Usefulness of the Learning Organisation Concept*** Responses to questions about the applicability and usefulness of the learning organisation concept were generally positive with some reservations and concerns in relation to SC. Though most of the respondents favourably viewed the learning organisation as an opportunity for personal and organisational growth and development, they still expressed concerns that it was not in the interest of a hierarchical organisation to effect wide sweeping cultural changes, which were critical for pushing the learning organisation concept forward. As commented by a senior manager:

If we over indulge in the learning organisation concept, the top management might lose its authority, its ability to keep its executive command ... because learning organisations encourage a lot of questions, clarifications... I think command and authority is still very important. We have to be careful and not over do it.

This quote points to a major concern, that the practices of the learning organisation could reduce the bureaucratic system and power relations that senior managers have enjoyed all these years. It appears that for the senior managers, the feeling of losing control over employees was a strong motivator in opposing the learning organisation concept. At the middle management level, the usefulness of the learning organisation

concept was consistent with senior staff thinking which favoured “good working relationships” as the desired means for open communication and team learning. Some comments such as “I am more receptive to my staff’s ideas” and “it helps me to look at the bigger picture” show that some transformation was taking place in the realm of “everyday practice”, which had an effect among organisational members. While this tends to be a positive portrayal of the acceptance of the learning organisation concept, more than a few managers were sceptical about its usefulness in the long run. For example, one manager, with a tinge of frustration elaborated:

Quite typical, in that sense that even though we are beginning to learn and change through learning organisation principles but there are still a lot of underlying strings or attachments in it. In SC, still a lot of top down things. I really can’t see much difference in people’s behaviour.

The directive style of management seems to have been a major obstacle for people who were sceptical about the usefulness of the learning organisation. Similar comments such as “we still cannot push our ideas to top management”, “they still think we are not any better than they are” and “we need a new set of people in SC to see the difference” illustrates the traditional working culture that permeated the organisation. The characteristic of good working relationships between superiors and subordinates appeared to lie principally within the national cultural context of the organisation.

While the overall view of the usefulness of the learning organisation concept did not deny that traditional behaviours and beliefs are dominant inhibiting factors, participants saw it as essentially a “soft approach”. They feared its potential effect on the overall organisation would erode other valued practices such as respect for senior managers and the paternalistic relationship to employees. A junior manager summed up this concern:

Learning organisation is a soft approach and Singaporeans are not used to a soft and open style of managing their people. We cannot be like the westerners. We are Singaporeans.

Participants claimed that the learning organisation style of management may not be “appropriate” for a “tough country” like Singapore. Such responses appear to emanate from unequal structural relationships between people in society. Again this is reflective of Singapore’s high power distance. On this basis, they doubted its effective application within the Singapore organisational cultural context.

### **Views on Singapore Organisations and the Learning Organisation Concept**

Singapore has been a successful country to date, and its future success will depend upon its ability to become a “Learning Nation”, according to Goh (1997). Hence the Singapore government aspires to the broad integration of learning organisation principles in its organisations. Many organisations in Singapore have implemented the learning organisation concept and the number doing so appears to be increasing. However, the findings in this case study show that many traditional Singaporean values and behaviours are in conflict with learning organisation principles, which after all were developed in a North American context. As Pauleen & Murphy (2005)



note “information and knowledge management models that exclude the influence of national and regional culture seriously undercut their potential effectiveness, particularly in global applications” (p.22).

A key related issue of how Singapore organisations will respond to the learning organisation concept was discussed with all the participants in the case study. The majority of participants strongly pointed out that the current reality of the work relationship is an expression of Singapore’s culture, emanating from the unequal structural relationship between people in society. The following example illustrates a manager’s perceptions of employee attitudes and behaviour toward hierarchy and his concern over the clash with the practice of learning organisation:

Organisations in Singapore are all the same. People are conscious of their status and position in the organisation and they behave accordingly. It is the same as our family. Learning organisation can only work if we can change this belief in hierarchy.

This highlights the indoctrination of employees into organisations and the importance employees give to power relationships in organisations. A respectful attitude, obedience and decorum were represented as ‘appropriate’ behaviour among employees in organisations. The majority of the participants claimed that the learning organisation and Singapore organisations represent two opposing ways of being. This suggests that the source of the issue lies in the beliefs, attitudes and values of Singapore society – the national culture. These have a strong impact on the behaviour of employees in the work place. The case study shows that despite the many positive examples cited for the changes taking place in relation to the practice of learning organisation principles, the respondents concern over its continuity and success indicates that the nature of the traditional style of management with its cultural traits may threaten the entire process of the learning organisation.

## **IMPLICATIONS OF NATIONAL CULTURE FOR KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT**

Learning organisation 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 learning organisation. It is not easy because our government must change first, then our people can change.

Junior manager

This case study shows that national culture can play a major and influential role in constraining the practice of learning organisation concepts. Knowledge management and learning organisation principles share common ground in promoting learning and a knowledge based culture. They both seek to achieve this by creating structures, processes, and behaviours for capturing, sharing and using knowledge for effective organisational performance. As Alavi and Leidner (2001) noted “knowledge management consists of a dynamic and continuous set of processes and practices embedded in individuals, as well as in groups and physical structures” (p.123). Hence

the cultural barriers that were identified in the case organisation are instructive at a number of levels for practitioners and researchers. At a specific country level the case study provides a useful set of insights for practitioners considering implementing knowledge management strategies in Singapore. At a more general level it provides further evidence of the impact of national culture on organisational behaviour, and raises issues for multinational organisations, trans-national consulting advice and practices, and any organisation considering implementing ideas based on different cultural assumptions (refer Table 1).

**Table 1: Specific and general implications for implementing western management strategies**

|   |   |
|---|---|
| <p><b>Singapore-specific: Cultural drivers</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Maintaining face</li> <li>• Respect for power, status, order</li> </ul> | <p><b>Singapore-specific: Impact on implementation strategies</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Strategies tailored to specific cultural drivers</li> <li>• Feedback groups need to contain similar status staff</li> </ul>  |
| <p><b>Generalised point</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• National culture can drive organisational behaviour</li> </ul>                             | <p><b>General impact on implementation</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Importance of understanding nuances of national culture</li> <li>• Best practice versus best fit approaches (ignore and override, or acknowledge and work with national culture)</li> </ul> |

In the specific instance of Singapore, the case starkly illustrates how this national culture conceives of organisations, organisational membership, and all the activities that occur in relation to organisations. In common with the findings of Hofstede (1980) the SC case reveals an intellectual sympathy with new ways of doing things but an unwillingness to follow through in changed behaviour due to high power distance, low individualism, and Confucian dynamism. One could even argue that the expressed sympathy with new ideas is merely another way of maintaining ‘face’ which emerged as such an important driver of behaviour. A key tension in the case was the fear of expressing something that offended or went against the thinking of superiors in the organisation. It is inherent among Singaporean employees to protect themselves from any loss of self-esteem or image that has been achieved in one’s position or status in the organisation. As Senge et al. (1994) suggested, organisational members are capable of organising and operating in ways that are incredibly efficient at keeping themselves from learning. These case study findings are in line with Senge’s interpretation that cultural factors are the main inhibitor of the organisation’s ability to learn effectively. Practitioners working with Singaporean organisations to introduce knowledge management strategies will need to be mindful of these cultural drivers. The respect for power, status and order will impact on implementation strategies, and on the ability to get good feedback on issues. For instance, to address this, feedback groups may need to be made up of similar status employees so that people feel free to speak.

More generally, organisations seeking to implement knowledge management initiatives in non-western and even different western cultures must understand and pay specific attention to the dynamics of cultural behaviour and values of the employees. An understanding of the nuances of cultural traditions is important before an institutional implementation is attempted. Organisational culture is highly influenced by national culture and institutional change must take this into account. Essentially practitioners have two main options: a) to try to apply a 'best practice' approach to knowledge management, changing the organisation and behaviours to fit; or b) to adopt a more contingent approach recognising and embracing the national culture and creating knowledge management strategies to fit the culture. The 'best practice' option has had appeal for a number of years to practitioners in other management fields, for instance human resource management, and to some consulting firms. Often this has been fuelled by the desire to replicate the strategies employed by successful companies. Sometimes it has also been encouraged by an aversion to risk or experimentation, and even by lack of in depth understanding of the organisation. Adopting a more contingent approach requires the imagination and courage to do things without a best practice template. Instead, to develop the practices that will be best for that particular organisation. For example in international businesses Holden (2002) suggests valuing cross-cultural knowledge and networks, and indeed we would argue that they may be helpful in arriving at the best knowledge management practices for those particular businesses.

We recommend that research on management and organisational change must take into account the national culture in which the organisation exists. This is particularly important when the change is being guided and driven by concepts imported from another culture. An understanding of national culture holds the potential to be a powerful analytic tool with which to lay foundations for developing models and concepts. Thus, an extended approach to cross-cultural comparative studies in learning organisation and knowledge management practice across countries is suggested. The broader management research literature, particularly human resource management, is rich in critiques of 'one best way' or 'best practice' versus contingent or 'best fit' approaches (for example, Purcell, 1999). The knowledge management literature should be mindful of, and learn from, this existing academic debate of the issues associated with the implementation of management and organisational strategies.

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