The Learning Organization in a Global Context: Perceptions of HR Practitioners at UK and SA Tertiary Institutions

D.A.L. Coldwell
M. Williamson
S. Cameron

Abstract

This paper explores the comparative importance of learning organisation disciplines in generating effective work outcomes in HR employees in two different national cultural contexts. It is suggested that the importance of the learning disciplines in different countries may be influenced by prevailing cultural differences and prevailing organisational change situations. A survey of human resource practitioners' perceptions of the importance of the five disciplines in generating effective work outcomes in a single UK and South African tertiary educational institution undergoing differential types of change was conducted to explore these aspects empirically. A specific measuring instrument was devised to operationalise the five discipline model adapted from Senge's (1990) seminal work. Results reveal that although the ranking of the five disciplines is cross nationally similar, the influence of national culture appears to affect the emphasis put on specific aspects. Also, the generally higher scores obtained by the South African sample on the discipline dimensions suggests that the specific change circumstances faced by the two institutions may have a bearing on the perceived

importance of adopting core aspects of a learning organisation in achieving effective work outcomes. Implications of these findings are discussed in context of Hofstede's (1980) model and Senge's observations with regard to organisational change (Webber, 1999).

Key Terms: learning organisation, culture, change management

Introduction

Research Background

Many researchers and management theorists argue that a wide range of behavioural and management theories and models may not be universal and that many have been developed in industrialised countries and based largely on cultural assumptions predominating in that specific national cultural context (Alavi & McCormick, 2003; Hofstede, 1980; Leung and Bond, 1989). Despite the fact that the learning organisation model has been accepted by management practitioners and academics in many countries, its underlying theory and principles are grounded in the west, more specifically the USA (Thomas & Allen, 2006). Consequently, perceptions of the work outcome effectiveness of the five core disciplines of the learning organisation model in non- western countries may be influenced by cultural dimensions predominating in specific national contexts (Dymock & McCarthy, 2006). In addition, Senge (cited in Webber, 1999) has suggested that the learning disciplines flourish more readily in organisations undergoing organic change compared with those undergoing driven change such as that experienced by organisations in merger situations. Although, the literature reveals that the relevance of the five disciplines may be variable in different cultural contexts (Alavi & McCormick, 2003) and Senge (cited in Webber, 1999) has suggested that such core learning organisation values are most likely to be adopted in circumstances of organic rather than driven change, such propositions have generally not been subjected to rigorous empirical investigation (Alavi & McCormick, 2003; Argyris & Schon, 1996).

The purpose of the current study is to investigate these aspects more fully in an exploratory empirical study of HR staff in two cross-

national institutions of higher learning. The type of organisation and the specific staff function being investigated cross-nationally are thus similar. This was deliberate as it offered a more reliable base for comparison in affording a degree of control of the many confounding variables that may emerge or remain hidden in this type of study. As a result, it is expected that inferences made in the comparison are likely to be more meaningful than would otherwise have been the case (i.e. where such controls were not possible or had not been formulated as part of the research design).

Research Questions

Based on the extant cross cultural and learning organisation literature, the primary research questions have been developed to guide the study: 'Do cultural dimensions pertaining to a specific national context influence employees' perceptions of the importance of the learning organisation disciplines in creating effective job outcomes?' and, 'Do different change circumstances affect perceptions of the importance of the five disciplines in generating effective work outcomes?'

Overview of the Literature

Learning Organizations

Since Peter Senge (1990) popularised the concept of the learning organisation in his book: *The Fifth Discipline: The Art & Practice of the Learning Organisation*, there has been a plethora of definitions regarding the concept. In his book, Senge (1990: 3) defines the learning organisation as:

> organisations where people continually expand their capacity to create results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people continually learn how to learn together.

Pedler, Burgoyne and Boydell (1991: 1) define the learning organisation as:

> an organisation that facilitates the learning of all its members and continuously transforms itself in order to meet its strategic objectives.

Garvin (1993: 80) defines a learning organisation as

> an organisation skilled at creating, acquiring, and transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights.

Garvin (1993) further notes that a clear definition of the learning organisation remains elusive. The researchers have found Senge's (1990) conceptual framework of a learning organisation insightful and have adopted it in this study. Senge (1990) argues that the fundamental difference between the traditional authoritarian organisation and the learning organisation is in its ability to master certain basic disciplines. He identifies these basic disciplines as: personal mastery, mental models, team learning, shared vision and systems thinking. These five learning disciplines form the fundamental framework of Senge's (1990) learning organisation model. *Personal mastery* is the essential cornerstone of the learning organisation and has been described as: 'the process of continually clarifying and deepening personal vision, focusing energies, developing patience and seeing reality objectively' (Senge, 1990: 7). Creating the right type of environment conducive to developing personal mastery in employees is as important characteristic of a learning organization (Alavi & McCormick, 2003). *Mental models* are:

> deeply ingrained assumptions, generalisations, or even pictures or images that influence how we understand the world and how we take action (Senge, 1990: 8).

Learning organisations should actively encourage employees to open their deeply held images and views to scrutiny. Rigorous debate that

balances inquiry and advocacy should be embraced. *Team learning* involves: 'aligning and developing the capacity of the team to achieve results that are desired by its members' (Senge, 1990: 236). Learning organisations embracing team learning should actively encourage dialogue and discussion among team members. Building a *shared vision* essentially entails: 'developing shared images of the future and guiding practices by which employees hope to achieve their desires' (Senge, Kleiner, Roberts & Ross 1994). It is noted that when people have shared visions, they may be more likely to collectively put effort into their activities to achieve their visions and goals (Alavi & McCormick, 2003). *Systems' thinking* refers to having a dynamic understanding of interrelationships rather than singular cause- effect chains (Senge, 1990). This discipline equips employees with critical thinking skills.

The manner in which change is initiated in organisations also has been associated with the extent to which the five core disciplines of a learning organisation are effective in generating positive organisational outcomes. The various kinds of change that organisations can be faced with and have to endure is extensively discussed in the voluminous extant literature (Ford, 2006; Carnall, 2003). Very briefly, there are three basic models of the change process (Burnes, 2003): the incremental model, the punctuated equilibrium model and the continuous transformation model. In the first instance, the incremental model of change suggests change takes place through '… successive limited and negotiated shifts' (Pettigrew, Ferlie & McKee, 1992:14) The punctuated equilibrium model of change maintains that organisations pass through short periods of radical change and transformation followed by long periods of stability (equilibrium) (Gersick, 1991). Finally, the continuous transformation model of change suggests that organisations need to continually change and develop a capacity to change regularly and fundamentally in order to survive (Greenwald, 1996). Senge (cited in Webber) appears to advocate a continuous transformation model of change when he suggests that to develop the core competencies of a learning organisation undergoing change effectively, it is best handled by business people thinking '…less like managers and more like biologists' (Webber, 1999:1); Senge goes on to say:

Companies are actually living organisms, not machines. That might explain why it's so difficult for us to succeed in our efforts to produce change. Perhaps treating companies like machines keeps them from changing, or makes changing them much more difficult. We keep bringing in mechanics-when what we need are gardeners. We keep trying to drive change, when what we need is to cultivate change (Webber, 1999: 3).

Senge (cited in Webber, 1999) suggests that change driven through formal change programs rather than through cultivation and growth as one would a living organism, are not likely to effectively nurture the five core disciplines of a learning organization. In short, Senge suggests that in situations approximating the punctuated equilibrium model of change that is initiated and driven by authority rather than cultivated by growth in learning is unlikely to create an environment where the five core disciplines are able to flourish and propagate.

Cross- Cultural Studies of Cultural Differences

The negative effects of mismanaging cultural differences in the workplace have been well documented in the organisational behaviour literature. Cultural differences however, when successfully managed, can lead to innovative business practices, faster and better learning within organizations, and sustainable sources of competitive advantage (Pheng & Yuquan, 2002). Clearly defining the term culture has proven problematic in cross- cultural studies. Besides having many definitions, some aspects of culture can take on different meanings with different people (Pheng & Yuquan, 2002). Consequently, researchers have argued for the adoption of a systems approach in order to help understand the complexities of culture. Hofstede (1980: 32) in his seminal work states that:

cross-cultural studies presuppose a systems approach, by which I mean that any element of the total system called culture should be eligible for analysis, regardless of the discipline that usually deals with such elements. At all levels of (national) cultures,

these are phenomena on all levels: individuals, groups, organisations, or society as a whole may be relevant.

Researchers have found the work of Geert Hofstede (1980) to be useful when exploring the influence of national cultural differences on perceptions of the importance of the learning organisation model in generating effective work outcomes. It has been noted that American management practices may not be appropriate or successful when implemented in societies with cultural values that differ from those held in the United States (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005). Hofstede (cited in Pheng & Yuquan, 2002) argues that people carry 'mental programs' that are developed and reinforced through their experience, and that these 'mental programs' contain a component of national culture. Hofstede (1980) identified four value dimensions to depict characteristics of national cultures. These dimensions include: power distance, individualism versus collectivism, masculinity versus femininity and uncertainty avoidance. Based on his extensive research, each country studied was characterized by a score on each of these dimensions. The current study draws on Hofstede's findings to delineate the national cultural characteristics of the UK and South Africa (refer to table 1) in particular, as it is these two countries that comprise the focus of the investigation.

Power distance is defined as: 'the extent to which the less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally' (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 46). *Individualism* is: 'a cultural dimension that pertains to society in which the ties between individuals are loose'. This implies that everyone is expected to look after himself or herself and his or her immediate family (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 76). *Collectivism* on the other hand

pertains to societies in which people from birth onward are integrated into strong, cohesive in- groups which throughout their lives continue to protect them in exchange for unquestioning loyalty (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 76).

A *masculine* society is defined as:

a society where emotional gender roles are clearly distinct. This implies that men are supposed to be assertive, tough, and focused on material success. Women, however, are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005:120).

It is noted that in a *feminine* society, there is an overlap in emotional gender roles. This implies that both men and women are supposed to be modest, tender, and concerned with the quality of life (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 120). *Uncertainty avoidance* is defined as: 'the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations' (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005: 167).

Method

Participants and Procedure

The UK sample consisted of 38 respondents while the South African sample comprised of 22 respondents. Respondents in each sample received a hard copy of exactly the same self- administered questionnaire. To ensure consistency, the same sample strategy was adopted to select the samples in the two different countries. The sample subjects were human resource practitioners employed at a single tertiary educational institution in the UK and likewise in South Africa. Both these institutions were undergoing change, with the UK institution undergoing organic, internally- driven change and the South African institution experiencing transformational change in the form of a government imposed merger. It was deemed appropriate to select human resource practitioners as subjects for this study as these subjects are often at the forefront of employee development, learning and knowledge management strategies in organizations. Sample subjects were selected by means of a convenience or accidental sampling technique. The researchers approached the human resource practitioners

with a request to participate in the survey. All responses were anonymous.

An examination of the characteristics of the two samples reveals some differences. The gender ratios between the two- country samples differed marginally: in the UK sample, males comprised 5% and females 95% whereas in the South African sample males comprised 18% and females 82%. The mean age of the UK sample was 46 years, the South African sample 41 years. The sample subjects in both countries have long tenures at their respective institutions: the mean tenures for the UK at 10 years and South Africa 12 years. Educational levels for both samples did not vary significantly, although there were two human resource practitioners in the UK that possessed doctorates.

Measuring Instruments

The instrument uses a 5- point Likert-type scale to collect responses to all items. The scale ranges from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Table 2 shows the means, standard deviations, and t – ratios for the differences in means of the variables between the UK and South African sample.

Personal mastery: Personal mastery was assessed using a 5- item scale. Sample items included: 'It is important for people to continually develop themselves to effective in their jobs' and 'To be successful at work people need to take responsibility for their own actions'. The internal alpha reliability obtained was: 0.657 for the UK sample and 0.662 for the South African sample.

Mental models: Mental models were assessed using a 5- item scale. Sample items included: 'To be effective at work, it is important to be open to new ideas' and 'Resisting new ways of doing things in a job makes people less effective at work' The internal alpha reliability obtained was: 0.374 for the UK sample and 0.307 for the South African sample.

Team learning: Team learning was measured using a 5- item scale. Sample items included: 'To obtain effective team outputs, it is necessary to listen carefully to other team members' inputs' and, 'All members of a team can become more effective in their jobs by learning from each other'. The internal alpha reliability obtained was: 0.716 for the UK sample and 0.495 for the South African sample.

Shared vision: Shared vision was assessed using a 5- item scale. Sample items included: 'It is important for people to understand how

their work fits in with the vision and strategic objectives of the organisation' and 'An organisation can be successful even when people in it share no common vision'. The internal alpha reliability obtained was: 0.488 for the UK sample and 0.279 for the South African sample.

Systems thinking: Systems thinking was assessed using a 5- item scale. Sample items included: 'To effective in their work, people need to understand the wider system within which they operate' and 'To be effective in a job, it is important to have a clear understanding of how one system impacts on another'. The internal alpha reliability obtained was: 0.425 for the UK sample and 0.657 for the South African sample.

The combined scale consisting of 25 items for the two samples together (n=56) generated a Cronbach Alpha internal consistency coefficient of 0.74.

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

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

- A general component comprised of items from personal mastery, mental models, team learning and systems thinking dimensions. This component was interpreted as the perceived importance of interrelated individual (mental models and personal mastery) and collective (team learning and systems thinking) disciplines in effective work outcomes.
- Component two was interpreted as the perceived importance of systems thinking in effective work outcomes.
- Component five was interpreted as the perceived importance of team learning on effective work outcomes and
- Component six and seven were interpreted respectively, as the perceived importance of personal mastery and shared vision on effective work outcomes.

Thus the factor analysis generally supported the original model although there appeared to be a powerful general learning discipline component emerging from the rotated data.

Findings

Table 1 represents the cultural dimension scores of both the UK and South Africa based on Hofstede's (1980) study. These two countries vary in terms of their cultural contexts. The UK has higher scores on the cultural dimensions of individualism and masculinity than South Africa. South Africa, on the other hand, scores higher on power distance and uncertainty avoidance than the UK.

Cultural Dimensions	UK Score	South Africa Score
Power distance	35	49
Individualism	89	65
Masculinity	66	63
Uncertainty avoidance	35	49

Table 1: *Hofstede's Cultural Dimension Scores for the U.K. and S.A. (Source: Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005)*

Means and standard deviations for each scale are reflected in Table 2. Also included are the *t* – ratios examining whether the UK and South African samples differed significantly on any of the constructs measured.

The results of two- independent samples T- tests indicate that there are significant differences between the UK sample and South African sample on three measures: Personal mastery, mental models and shared vision. The South African sample reflects higher perceptions of personal mastery (mean 23.27, t = -3.641, df = 58, p = 0.001) than their UK counterparts. In the case of mental models, it is the UK sample (mean 20.13, t = 2.571, df = 58, p = 0.013) that has a higher perception than South Africa. Perceptions of shared vision appears higher in the South African sample (mean 17.27, t = -3.756, df = 58, p = 0.000) than the UK.

Scale	UK *Mean (SD)*	South Africa *Mean (SD)*	*t - ratio*	*p - value*
Personal mastery	20.92 (2.59)	23.27 (2.05)	-3.641	0.001
Mental models	20.13 (2.03)	18.64 (2.40)	2.571	0.013
Team learning	20.47 (2.69)	21.64 (2.68)	-1.616	0.112
Shared vision	14.37 (3.09)	17.27 (2.49)	-3.756	0.000
Systems thinking	20.00 (2.23)	20.68 (2.73)	-1.050	0.298

Table 2: *Independent samples t-tests of scale scores*

Table 3 reflects similarities and differences of the UK and South African samples in the mean ranking of scores in descending order of the various measures.

UK Scale Mean	South Africa Scale Mean

Personal mastery 20.92 Team learning 20.47 Mental models 20.13 Systems thinking 20.00 Shared vision 14.37	Personal mastery 23.27 Team learning 21.64 Systems thinking 20.68 Mental models 18.64 Shared vision 17.27

Table 3: *Ranking of scale mean scores*

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

Discussion of the Findings

The ranking of the five disciplines by the Human Resource practitioners in the South African and United Kingdom samples was found to be similar, suggesting that the relative importance of the disciplines in generating effective work outcomes was considered in much the same way cross-nationally.

Significant differences in cross –national mean scores were, however, found on specific disciplines suggesting the influence of cross-cultural factors. And, the South African HR respondents were found to score higher than their United Kingdom colleagues on four of the five disciplines perhaps indicating the difference in the change situations experienced by the two organizations. Although contrary to Senge (cited in Webber, 1999) who maintains that organic incremental change is necessary for the effective propagation of the five disciplines, the findings suggest that in forced (driven) change situations approximating the punctuated-equilibrium change model, may in fact increase the perceived awareness of the importance of these disciplines in generating effective work outcomes.

Significant differences in mean scores on several of the measuring instruments, with the South African respondents scoring significantly higher mean scores on the personal mastery and shared

vision dimensions and significantly lower mean scores on the mental models dimension compared with their UK colleagues, may be attributed to different national cultural orientations. The higher score for personal mastery in the South African sample may indicate a need for greater uncertainty avoidance than the UK sample (reflected in Hofstede's original analysis). It is an accepted fact in South Africa that education, skills and professional competence can reduce levels of uncertainty in terms of employment and remuneration in a highly uncertain employment situation where the unemployment rate is estimated as 25.5% (Statistics South Africa, 2006) of the economically active population. Similarly the significantly higher score of the South African sample on the shared vision dimension might be attributed to their greater collectivist cultural orientation and, the higher score of the UK respondents on the mental models dimension may be attributed to their greater individualist cultural orientation i.e. focusing on the individual per se rather than as someone belonging to a particular group or collectivity.

Several cautionary comments need to be made in the light of these tentative inferences. The first is that the sample was small and not randomly selected although it was reasonably representative of the HR function in the two institutions. Second, the measuring instruments require further modification and refinement, although generally supported by the reliability and validity analyses. Third, the investigation is limited to HR employees' perceptions of the *importance* of the five disciplines in generating effective work outcomes and *not the actual internalization of these disciplines* by the individuals concerned (although clearly these two aspects are likely to be linked, the degree and extent is not articulated in the study).

Conclusion

The investigation has tentatively indicated that although the rank order of importance of the five learning organisation disciplines is similar in cross-national samples of HR practitioners, specific cultural orientations may be associated with particular emphases.

Also, specific change situations may have a bearing on the perceived importance of the five disciplines, with forced, authority

driven changes possibly enhancing their adoption as a means for generating effective work outcomes.

Future investigations are recommended with larger controlled samples to expose the extent and type of cross-national differences in learning organisation disciplines and the effects of differential change circumstances on their perceived importance in generating effective work outcomes.

References

Alavi, SB & J McCormick 2003. Some Structural Considerations for Applying the Learning Organization Model to Iranian Organizations. (Accessed 23 July 2007) Available, http://www.members.tripod. com.

Agryris, C & D Schon 1996. *Organizational Learning II: Theory, Method and Practice*. New York: Addison-Wesley.

Burnes, B 2000. *Managing Change: A Strategic Approach to Organisational Dynamics*. London: Prentice Hall.

Carnall, CA 2003. *Managing Change in Organizations*. London: Prentice Hall.

Dymock, D & C McCarthy 2006. Towards a Learning Organization? Employee Perceptions. *The Learning Organization* 13,5: 525 - 536.

Ford, R 2006. Organizational Learning, Change and Power: Toward a Practice - Theory Framework. *The Learning Organization* 13,5: 495 – 524.

Garvin, D 1993. Building Learning Organizations. *Harvard Business Review* 10: 803 – 813.

Gersick, CJG 1991. Revolutionary Change Theories: A Multi-level Exploration of the Punctuated Equilibrium Paradigm. *Academy of Management Review* 16,1: 10-36.

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

Hofstede, G & GJ Hofstede 2005. *Cultures and Organizations: Software of the Mind*. New York: McGraw- Hill.

Hofstede, G 1980. *Culture's Consequences: International Differences in Work- Related Values*. London: Sage Publishing.

Leung, K & MH Bond 1989. On the Empirical Identification of Dimensions for Cross-Cultural Comparisons. *Journal of Cross-Cultural Psychology* 20: 33 – 151.

Pedler, M, J Burgoyne & T Boydell 1991. *The Learning Company: A Strategy for Sustainable Development*. New York: McGraw- Hill.

Pettigrew, AM, E Ferlie & L McKee 1992. *Shaping Strategic Change*. London: Sage.

Pheng, LS & S Yuquan 2002. An Exploratory Study of Hofstede's Cross-Cultural Dimensions in Construction Projects. *Management Decision* 40,1: 7 – 16.

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

Senge, PM, A Kleiner, C Roberts & G Ross 1994. *The Fifth Discipline Fieldbook: Strategies and Tools for Building a Learning Organization*. New York: Doubleday Publishers.

Statistics South Africa, 2006. *Statistical Release PO210: Labour Force Survey*. (Accessed 25July 2007) Available. http://www.statssa.gov. sa.

Thomas, K & S Allen 2006. The Learning Organization: A Meta-analysis of Themes of Literature. *The Learning Organization* 13,2: 123 – 139.

Webber, AM 1999. *Learning for a Change*. (Accessed 10 June 2007) Available: http://www.fastcompany.com.

D.A.L. Coldwell
School of Management Studies
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban, South Africa

M. Williamson
School of Management Studies
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Durban, South Africa

S. Cameron
Open University Business School
Open University
Milton Keynes
United Kingdom